

## **The ILO at the XVI International AIDS Conference Toronto, 13-18 August 2006**

The International AIDS Conference takes place every two years: it was held in Canada this year, and will take place in Mexico in 2008. Originally a meeting of scientists and technicians, the Conference now brings under one roof community organizations, researchers and pharmaceuticals staff, health administrators, donors and politicians. Numbers have grown and the agenda has broadened over the years.

The ILO first took part in the Barcelona Conference in 2002, the year after we became a cosponsor of UNAIDS. In 2004 the Conference was in Bangkok, and ILO/AIDS a more established programme with a consolidated presence. As the count-down to Toronto approached, we decided to invest as much energy as possible in bringing the world of work to the attention of the diverse and significant AIDS community that would gather in the city.

We organized a delegation with a broad representation of ILO constituents and staff. It consisted of eight headquarters staff (six from ILO/AIDS plus ACTRAV and ACT/EMP), seven field staff / project coordinators, one government representative, and 14 social partners from all regions; there were slightly more women than men. We ensured the participation of people living with HIV in the workplace programme and are deeply appreciative of their contributions to our activities. We examined every opportunity to develop activities that would not carry a cost, at least in financial terms. ILO constituents in over 20 countries were helped to apply for scholarships and to draft abstracts: 40 were submitted in all. Guidance was extended to a broader public with an interest in the world of work via the ILO/AIDS website and its network of contacts. In parallel, the trade unions also invested in ensuring greater representation than in previous years. The Canadian Labour Congress organized a Labour Forum on AIDS just before the Conference, with ILO support, the Global Unions Programme on HIV/AIDS made it a priority activity, and over 30 trade unionists took part. The ILO also helped secure the participation of highly-placed officials from companies with strong AIDS programmes, including Levi Strauss and Unilever.

The ILO was centrally involved in the organization of one satellite, one press conference, two non-abstract sessions, three skills-building workshops, and 15 poster presentations. The Office and/or constituents supported or participated in four more satellites, two more skills-building workshops, two other press conferences, one abstract session, and a number of informal meetings and receptions. Key activities included a joint satellite meeting with UNAIDS on poverty, inequality and AIDS, and a mainstream session specifically on the world of work as an entry point to HIV care and prevention. Other central issues examined in a range of forums were health workers, health systems and AIDS; other sector-specific responses (notably in education, transport and mining); outreach from formal to micro and informal enterprises, and from the workplace to the community; prevention through behaviour change; and increasing access to treatment, including through the workplace.

We also took a risk and proposed a new initiative which had no precedent in Conference programming but which gained strong support from the organizers. This was to set up and run a workplace action centre for advice and information exchange. The main purpose of the centre was to offer practical help (information, advice, contacts, references) in developing policies and setting up programmes in and related to the workplace, as well as a space where workplace practitioners could meet and share experiences. Over 20 organizations, from the UN system and donors to associations of people living with HIV, joined us to provide a broad-based and experienced pool of resource persons. Great appreciation was expressed not only for the opportunity to discuss issues in more depth, and for the quality of available materials, but also for the oasis of calm offered by the centre, tucked away at the back of the Global Village.

What was the impact of this combination of activities, as well as all the informal contributions and conversations we had over five days? We are carrying out an evaluation, with an emphasis on follow up and applying lessons learned. However the reaction of our delegation, as well as of the other trade union participants, was overwhelmingly positive in two main ways. All felt they had personally gained insights, ideas and a renewed sense of purpose that would benefit their work and their organizations. We also had the sense that workplace action has claimed a new place in the AIDS agenda, with recognition that universal access can never be achieved without the full engagement of the world of work.