

ICEM Turkish Affiliates Gather to Discuss Contract and Agency Labour

In August 2007, 13 ICEM affiliates created an ICEM Turkish Coordination Committee. At that time, Contract and Agency Labour (CAL) was defined as one of the priorities on which joint activities would occur.

In cooperation with Germany's Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), a Turkish national conference of those affiliates was held on 31 January – 1 February, 2008, in İstanbul on CAL. Some 80 trade unionists, journalists, and university professors attended.

The conference opened with a speech by Mustafa Kumlu, an ICEM Executive Committee member and President of the Turkish Electricity, Water, and Gas Workers' Union, Tes-İş. He is also the current president of the country's biggest national labour centre, Türk-İş. The meeting also saw the active participation of ICEM General Secretary Manfred Warda, and FES's İstanbul representative, Bettina Luise Rürup.

After presentations by ICEM Chemicals and Rubber Officer Kemal Özkan on the the Global Union Federation's CAL Project, by the ILO's Slava Egorov on ILO actions on contract labour, the employment relationship, and agency work, and by EMCEF General Secretary Reinhard Reibsch on the European situation, the conference heard national experiences from Germany, Sweden, and The Netherlands.

In Germany, IGBCE's Michael Wolters reported there are now 630,000 agency workers employed by 19,000 labour agencies in the country. This constitutes 10-15 % of the total workers in industries in which the German union operates. Agency workers earn 30 % less than permanent workers.

According to Hans Palmqvist of Swedish IF Metall, there is an Authorisation Board in Sweden that controls 450 private agencies, employing 43,000 workers. A Swedish trade union has managed to reach a collective agreement with one such agency, C&L.

The agency labour issue is also a burning issue inside The Netherlands. Celil Coban and Osman Elmaci from FNV Bondgenoten, both Turkish-originated trade union officials for the union, reported that only 1,200 agencies out of 12,000 are operating with official certification. Even when FNV Bondgenoten negotiates with employment agencies for collective agreements, wages remain low and working conditions are sub-standard for agency workers.

The three examples from Germany, Sweden, and Holland clearly shows that the unionisation rates for agency workers are far less than those for permanent workers.

The conference also heard detailed reports and analyses on Contract and Agency Labour in Turkey. During the conference, a major explosion at an unregistered factory operating in the black economy resulted in 23 deaths.

According to statistics, the number of workers employed in the informal economy in Turkey is 4.7 million, according to Mustafa Öztaskin of ICEM affiliate Petrol-İş. Dating to the 1980s, the problem in Turkey is that new owners in privatised sectors have used subcontracting in order to eliminate union representation.

Metin Bozkurt, Organising Secretary of Cement Workers Union, Çimse-İş, reported that multinational companies in the cement industry use subcontractors in all facets of production.

Privatisation has also caused problems in energy, reported Murat Aytemiz, Vice-President of Tes-Iş. According to Aytemiz, some 50% of the workforce in the energy sector is employed by subcontracting firms.

The situation in the mining sector was defined as thus by Dr. Fikret Sazak, Director of Education Department of Mine Workers Union, Maden-Iş: “Our mining areas have become mole holes after privatisation and subcontracting.” He reported that contract labour in pits is overwhelming, for example, in a main coal mining area, 2,750 out of 10,500 miners are subcontractors. In public services as well, subcontracting and agency labour is a major factor in lowering salaries and weakening the working environment. Ismail Hakki Kurt of Belediye-Iş pointed out that “trade unions have real difficulties in bargaining because permanent workers are the minority, while agency workers are not unionised.”

In the glass industry, according to Can Safak, Director of the Collective Bargaining Department at Kristal-Iş, subcontracting first appeared in nonqualified and side jobs. Kristal-Iş tried to tackle the problem through reclassification of positions. The union also managed to get language in the sectoral level collective glass agreement, stating that no subcontractor can be employed at the production level.

At the end of the discussions, it was agreed that a series of joint activities on organising, in general, would be undertaken. And then, specifically, the issue of Contract and Agency Labour in Turkey will now come under the ICEM’s global project.