Opening Address from Mr Gilbert Houngbo, ILO Deputy Director-General

(Delivered by Dan Cunniah, Senior Adviser)

Mr Chen Hao, Vice Chairman and First Secretary, ACFTU

Mr Jiang Guangping, Vice-chair and National Secretary, ACFTU, and Member of the ILO Governing Body,

Representatives of International, Regional and National Trade Union Organisations,

Delegates,

I am pleased to deliver this address on behalf of Mr Gilbert Houngbo, ILO Deputy Director-General for Field Operations and Partnerships, who had to leave very early this morning to attend another important meeting in Europe. I convey to you the greetings of the ILO Director-General, Mr Guy Ryder, who is currently in New York, attending the UN General Assembly.

I congratulate the ACFTU for providing an opportunity to trade union leaders from all quarters to discuss issues relating to economic globalisation and the challenges it poses for the trade unions. As Stiglitz (2003) has expressed it, although globalization did not often produce the promised benefits, the issue is not whether globalization can be a force for good which benefits the poor of the world, but that globalization needs to be managed in the right way – and too often this has not been the case. As documented in a review of the literature on globalisation by colleagues in the ILO a few years ago, most of the details regarding the size, implementation and financing of national and international policy to manage the process of globalisation remain controversial. However, there seems an emerging consensus that governments need to invest in education and training, adopt core labour standards, provide and improve social protection, tackle rising national inequality, promote employment-intensive growth and provide space and opportunity to discuss globalization.

As trade unions, you are naturally more interested in the social dimension of globalization which relates to the impact of globalization on the life and work of people, their families, and their societies. Concern is often raised about the impact of globalization on unemployment, working conditions, income and social protection. This is understandable. Your concern is also the concern of the ILO, which developed, with tripartite consensus, some fifteen years ago the Decent Work Agenda which is still valid and relevant.

Decent work is a term which describes a set of conditions that all workers should be able to enjoy. Decent work involves: opportunities for full and productive work that delivers a fair income; health and safety in the workplace and social protection for families; freedom for
people to organise themselves as workers and employers and to participate in the decisions that affect their lives; and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

It is acknowledged that the huge increase in economic activity taking place across the world has had an enormous impact on the lives of workers and communities everywhere. Living standards in some parts of the global south have risen significantly over the last few decades, lifting large numbers of people out of poverty, such as in China.

But this good news masks massive global inequalities. Thomas Piketty’s best-selling book - Capital in the Twenty-First Century - has also reawakened the debate on wealth and inequality. Still, 839 million workers in developing countries earn less than US$ 2 a day and thus remain poor. More than half of the developing world workers (i.e. 1.5 billion people) are in vulnerable employment. Over the next five years, there will be an estimated 213 million new labour market entrants – 200 million in developing countries alone. Thus, we are facing a severe job crisis.

Targeting only an increase in economic growth is not enough. Governments should adopt growth policies which generate jobs, i.e. job-rich growth instead of jobless growth. The ILO has already developed a number of strategies and policies to promote employment creation. These are embodied in the Global Jobs Pact adopted at the ILO in June 2009 to address the economic and social impact of the crisis. It promotes a well-thought strategy, devised through a tripartite consensus and founded on evidence-based research and on international labour standards. But there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Our technical assistance is available to our constituents who ask for it. We have a duty and a responsibility to work with you and address the job crisis and tackle it.

Colleagues,

I should stress, however, that our success depends to a large extent on the support and commitment from our constituents including the trade union movement and trade unions acting at national level, at regional level as well as globally. The Director-General of the ILO has welcomed commitments made recently by the G20 Ministers in Melbourne to tackle the global jobs crisis with a package of measures to support the creation of decent jobs that can lift working families out of poverty and drive sustainable development. In their closing Declaration the Ministers said there was a need to generate hundreds of millions of decent jobs that can lift working families out of poverty and drive sustainable development. “Promoting and creating quality jobs, and tackling the economic and social consequences of unemployment, underemployment, inequality and social exclusion, are priorities for all our economies,” the Declaration states. Your role and our role now are to ensure that Governments translate these commitments into actions.

In 2008, the ILO adopted the “ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalisation” as a tool to guide its actions to attain its objectives. This landmark Declaration is a powerful reaffirmation of ILO values. It is the outcome of tripartite consultations that started in the wake of the Report of the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization. By adopting this text, the representatives of governments, employers’ and workers’ organizations
from 182 member States emphasize the key role of our tripartite Organization in helping to achieve progress and social justice in the context of globalization. Together, they commit to enhance the ILO’s capacity to advance these goals, through the Decent Work Agenda. The Declaration institutionalizes the Decent Work concept developed by the ILO since 1999, placing it at the core of the Organization’s policies to reach its constitutional objectives. Next year the Conference will review the progress made in the implementation of this major Declaration. We look forward to your full participation in that discussion. Our mandate – to secure lasting peace through social justice – has never been more contemporary and it echoes also the historic mission of trade unionism. We need your full engagement in it.

Colleagues,

We have a duty to combat abuses of human and trade union rights. There are still 168 million children working in the world when they should be at schools and 21 million victims of forced labour. While the ILO is the custodian of the international labour standards and we are responsible for their application, we are facing serious challenges in doing so. I am referring to the major dispute we have in the ILO concerning the right to strike. This matter is going to be discussed further in the forthcoming session of the Governing Body and we know that you will do your very best to find an acceptable solution.

Social dialogue should be central to tackling the challenges in the world of work. It provides a means to bring all parties to the discussion table and find solutions that uphold the rule of law, generate fair, balanced and sustainable outcomes and safeguard social peace. It is a fact that where social dialogue takes place in good faith, long-term solutions can be found.

Let me say a few words on the current discussions on the post-2015 sustainable development agenda. The final report to the UN General Assembly sets forth a comprehensive framework of ambitious goals and targets, which provides a suitable blueprint for negotiating and approving the final post-2015 framework document later next year.

ILO issues are prominent in it. The focus of proposed sustainable development goal 8 is “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”. Several key items of the decent work agenda are encompassed as targets under such goal, while others are mentioned under other proposed goals. A target on implementing “nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors”, for instance, is suggested under goal 1 - End poverty in all its forms everywhere.

The ILO will continue to be involved in shaping (in the words of the General Assembly President Mr John Ashe) “the biggest generational challenge of the United Nations: crafting an inclusive, participatory, people centred post-2015 development agenda”.

During the past 22 months that the Director General has been in his job, he has led a process of change and reform in the ILO which is designed to make it more effective, more relevant, more useful, closer to the realities on the ground and indeed, more efficient. Change is not always welcome but it is necessary to adapt to new realities and sometimes harsh ones. The
first phase of this reform at Headquarters has been completed and implementation is on-going. The second phase which relates to the field has also been completed and the implementation measures will be announced soon. Five years from now, the ILO will celebrate its centenary. It needs to be prepared to face new challenges- and some old ones too. As you may be aware, the ILO has launched a global initiative to examine the Future of Work as the centrepiece of the ILO’s centenary in 2019. Your contribution is crucial to make this exercise fruitful. The challenge is to equip the ILO to do its work in the second centenary of its existence.

Dear friends,

Since globalisation does not respect national frontiers, the solutions to the problems it creates need an international dimension. I am convinced that the trade union movement will continue to provide a powerful international response in order to safeguard workers’ rights and ensure globalisation is fair and a force for good in the world. We stand with you in this struggle.

On our part as ILO, we have made great strides in supporting countries, for instance in social protection, employment intensive investment programs, youth employment, rural development, migration, gender equality, climate change, public works programs, etc. – which efforts make our work central to the attainment of decent work for all.

I wish you all fruitful discussions at this Forum.

I thank you.