

We Demand Transparency and Democracy in the RCEP Talks and Negotiations

23 July 2018, Bangkok

I am very happy to be here and speak on behalf of public sector unions in Korea, which are affiliated to Public Services International (PSI). PSI is a global union federation which represents over 20 million public sector workers globally.

Many of you are probably familiar with the following two sentences.

“This document is confidential and is intended for use and circulation by RCEP Officials only and should not be disclosed to any other person. Information contained in this document may not be reproduced in whole or in part by any other person for any other purpose without the consent of the relevant RCEP Officials.”

This is a special confidentiality notice on the first page of a leaked document on intellectual property chapter I found in the website. It quite sounds like a secret society with very exclusive membership. Here we could clearly notice the reluctance, unwillingness or flat refusal of the governments to make public the RCEP negotiating text and all the relevant information.

As public servants, trade negotiators and key decision-makers in the government are naturally expected to represent and protect “public interests”. We cannot possibly understand how they could protect “public interests” without sharing and putting in the public domain the relevant and critical information on the RCEP talks and negotiations which are all going to make a profound impact on the life and work of ordinary working men and women and their families. Understandably, our next question would then be “Whose ‘interests’ are you representing and protecting in the RCEP talks and negotiations?”

As is well-known, business groups have secured a channel to put their demands into the RCEP talks and have been allowed a privileged access to trade negotiators and key decision-makers in the government, which the general public and civil society have not been allowed. This is a totally unacceptable situation in democratic societies.

As unionists, we know something about and many years’ experience of collective bargaining processes with the employers. If it’s an independent and democratic one, trade union leadership and negotiators are expected to regularly report back to and disclose all the relevant information to union members before, during, and after the collective bargaining with the employers. If you don’t do this, you might have to step down as union leader or might be impeached in due course of time.

Defending and sticking to secrecy in the name of an effective negotiation strategy is actually threatening the political legitimacy of the whole RCEP processes. RCEP and

other trade agreements are not just a technical matter left to be discussed and decided among trade experts and negotiators, but a political issue of grave concern to the general public, civil society, and working men and women like us.

In Korea, we know from our recent experience that when the government is keeping something secret, there are terrible consequences for the public.

We strongly demand the following transparent, participatory and democratic processes to be fully recovered and implemented in the RCEP talks and negotiations. These demands are published this month, exactly speaking two days ago, in a small booklet (*RCEP A Secret Deal – Trade talks fail the transparency and public participation test*) by joint efforts of civil society organizations in this region.

- There should be open and inclusive public consultation before trade mandates are formulated.
- National parliaments must approve the mandate before the negotiations begin
- Independent environment, human rights, health, and economic assessment of the risks and benefits of RCEP should be carried out and published
- Transparency and meaningful public participation in RCEP negotiations should be secured from start to finish.
- National parliaments must be able to give directions during the negotiating process.
- It is quite critical to ensure balanced stakeholder input at all stages of RCEP negotiations. This includes actively seeking input from underrepresented groups and limiting interaction with over-represented groups
- There should be public debate and national parliament approval of trade agreements before signing and ratification.
- We must ensure cancellation clauses in the RCEP agreements that enable future governments/public participation to modify parts of the agreement and/or leave the deal at any time.

It's not too late to start reforming the RCEP talks and negotiations, turning them into transparent and participatory trade-policy making. Until that happens, we believe there should be a moratorium to the RCEP negotiations.

Thank you very much for your kind attention!

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Submission to the RCEP Stakeholder Consultation held in Bangkok on 23 July 2018