

EU/WTO: SERVICES FORUM HITS BACK ON GATS TALKS

The European Services Forum (ESF), the group representing Europe's service industries, has hit back at non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that have waged a vigorous campaign against the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). The ESF said the NGO campaign was hypocritical, complaining of a lack of democracy in the GATS talks, but boycotting open dialogue meetings with trade negotiators and other civil society actors. The ESF also accused the campaigners of misrepresenting the talks and falsely pretending that public services were at risk. "WTO and GATS is about tradable services, not about public services. It is neutral on the issue of privatisation", the ESF said in a statement. "Should any sector of public services be contracted to private companies, the national legislator always keeps the right to regulate and impose obligations on the services suppliers, whatever the nationality of the services supplier."

The group added that services account for more than 70% of EU GDP (some Euro six trillion), and provide more than 60% of EU employment, or over 110 million jobs. And it said the GATS talks could help poorer nations, speeding up the development process. "Access to high-quality services, in particular infrastructure-related services such as telecommunications, transport, energy and modern financial and professional services, benefit the whole economy by increasing productivity in all sectors and are crucial for economic development", the ESF added. "NGOs who try to persuade developing countries not to actively participate in the GATS negotiations are in fact acting against the interests of the developing countries themselves."

Post group backing. At the same time, **the Free and Fair Post Initiative (FFPI)**, which campaigns for a more liberalised and competitive postal market, has welcomed Mr Lamy's comments on how the GATS negotiations worked. FFPI President Philippe Bodson said it was essential that all the stakeholders involved in the debate were aware that no WTO member can be obliged to open its services market to competition. "As regards the postal sector in particular, I am concerned, as are the European postal users that I represent, that the anti-liberalisation camp is using the GATS as an excuse to delay the planned further liberalisation of the EU postal sector", he said. "The debate on GATS has recently been dramatised and confused by some actors that have linked issues like improving international trade and the liberalisation of public services. This, I fear, has been done with the purpose to slow down the EU liberalisation process that has already proved as bringing benefits to both the users of postal services and to the competitiveness of the EU market." The FFPI says it represents more than 7.1 million companies, and aims to secure full liberalisation of postal services by 2009 at the latest and a fair playing field in the postal sector to prevent public postal monopolies turning into private ones. (LC)

Copyright Europe Information Service (EIS). Copying, reproducing or transferring without authorisation is strictly prohibited.