



AFTINET
Australian Fair Trade
& Investment Network Ltd

AFTINET Ltd
Level 1, 46-48 York Street
Sydney NSW 2000
Phone: 02 9299 7833
Fax: 02 9299 7855
Email: jbailey@piac.asn.au
Website: www.aftinet.org.au
ABN 83 659 681 462
ACN 097 603 131

MEDIA RELEASE

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China FTA decision is rushed and ignores workers' rights

“John Howard has announced a decision to begin negotiations on a China Free Trade Agreement, without proper community or parliamentary debate on the impacts on workers' rights or the environment in Australia or China,” said Jemma Bailey today. Ms Bailey is the Trade Justice Campaigner with the Public Interest Advocacy Centre and the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network of 90 community organisations (AFTINET).

“The Government has not allowed any opportunity for public scrutiny of the Feasibility Study on the impacts of the China Free Trade Agreement before formally announcing negotiations. This is contrary to the Government's previous commitments that the Study would be released for community scrutiny *before* any decision to commence negotiations,” explained Ms Bailey, “This ‘decisions first, evidence later’ approach is unacceptable in a democracy.”

“PIAC and AFTINET have serious concerns about the lack of workers' rights and environmental protections in China,” added Ms Bailey. “Transnational companies subcontract work to local firms in China's Special Export Processing Zones and accept the lowest bids. Workers often have to work 12-16 hours a day, seven days a week to complete contracts without proper payment. Studies show that real wages have actually fallen, health and safety is often appalling, environmental pollution is rife and workers do not have effective rights to bargain for improved conditions. Free Trade Agreements without workers' rights or environmental protections mean a global race to the bottom.”

“We will continue to raise our concerns about workers' rights, environmental standards and the Government's lack of community consultation and transparency” said Ms Bailey. “There is a current inquiry by the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee into Australia's relationship with China, including the China FTA. This may be the only opportunity for proper consideration of these issues, and we urge the government to respond to community concerns about human rights.”

**Contact Jemma Bailey on 9299 7833 or 0401 666 434 (after hours)
or Dr Patricia Ranald (AFTINET convenor) on 0419 695 841**