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NEWS FROM THE GENERAL CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

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GCTU CONGRESS TO BE HELD IN SEPTEMBER 2002

The 4th Congress of the General Confederation of Trade Unions, GCTU, will take place 12 September 2002.

The decision was taken by the GCTU Executive Committee at its session held 4 October 2001 in the Crimea (Ukraine). The report «On the Current Role of the General Confederation of Trade Unions in the CIS Region and in the World Trade Union Movement» was presented by GCTU President Vladimir Scherbakov.

The session dwelt on the role the GCTU had been playing in the building of a single social space on the territory of the CIS that was to mark its 10th anniversary in December 2001. The speakers noted that the united trade union movement of CIS countries, which is a powerful public force, had always come out in firm support of economic and social integration in the Commonwealth. It regarded the integration as an instrument for dynamic development of the region and for raising the people's living standards. The leaders of the national trade union centres and industrial trade union internationals believed it necessary to enhance the work «for turning the CIS into a common home for all citizens and workers in the region».

In a special Statement on the 10th Anniversary of the GCTU, the Executive Committee pointed

that over the decade the Commonwealth had proved its viability, and its integration potential could develop even more efficiently (See the full text in «Document» below).

The Executive debated the pension schemes in the CIS countries and the prospects for their development. While supporting in principle the idea of reforming the pension systems, the unions expressed their concern that the reforms tended to curtail workers' rights and guarantees. Participants approved the draft model law «On the Guaranteed Health Care and Treatment in Sanatoria and Spas for Citizens in the Countries of the Commonwealth» prepared by the GCTU for submission to the CIS Inter-Parliamentary Assembly.

President of the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine, FTUU, Alexander Stoyan briefed the session on the FTUU's legislative activity. The Executive Committee recommended that the GCTU affiliates should avail of the Ukrainian experience in their struggles for the rights and interests of their workers.

The Session devoted much attention to the relationship of the GCTU and its affiliates with the outside trade union world. Participants spoke in favour of a more active involvement of CIS trade unions in the struggle waged by the international trade union movement to protect the workers' rights in the globalising world. The GCTU and its member organisa-

tions will jointly take steps to harmonise the affiliation of CIS trade unions to world trade union centres with the goals and tasks they set for themselves within the GCTU.

As globalisation produces an increasingly strong effect on the situation in the Commonwealth countries, the Executive Committee decided to hold, in Moscow in February 2002, an International Conference «Economic Globalisation and Regional Integration: Their Impact on Workers' Conditions in CIS Countries».

GCTU MEETS ACFTU IN MOSCOW

A Chinese trade union delegation headed by a Vice Chairman of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, ACFTU, Xu Xicheng visited the GCTU headquarters 29 October 2001.

GCTU President Vladimir Scherbakov gave a detailed account of the economic and social development in the CIS countries, the integration processes in the Commonwealth, the impact of globalisation on workers' conditions, and the role the GCTU was playing in the situation.

Bro Xu Xicheng, in his turn, stressed it was important that trade unions help establish more active co-operation between China and CIS countries. As he spoke of globalisation, he said the unions were afraid that China's entry into the WTO might whip up the negative tendencies in the country's socio-economic development. Thus, the ACFTU believes that the anticipated imports of cheap foodstuffs and consumer goods from Western countries will undermine many domestic industries and cause a rise in unemployment.

The meeting has, once again, shown that China's trade union centre is willing to continue co-operation with GCTU affiliates and enhance the interaction with them within the framework of the international trade union movement and the ILO.

GCTU, GSEE HOLD SEMINAR

A joint seminar was held in Athens from 2-9 December as part of the traditional co-operation between the GCTU and the Greek General Confederation of Labour, GSEE. The CIS participants in the seminar, organised with the assistance of the GSEE Institute of Labour, were the leaders of the national trade union centres of Armenia, Georgia and Tajikistan, and several industrial trade union internationals affiliated with the GCTU.

The union leaders from CIS countries studied the Greek experience in the spheres of collective bargaining and social partnership, the GSEE's role in the formulation of the country's economic and social policies, and the system of health and safety in Greek enterprises.

The seminar paid particular attention to globalisation and its impact on the employment, labour relations, work remuneration rates, and workers' social protection. As they discussed the problem of countries' imbalanced development in an increasingly globalized world, participants were of the opinion the unions must rebuff resolutely the attempts by the governments to impose lower social standards. They also stressed that the chances for TNCs to exert pressure on the workers must be legally restricted.

The GCTU delegation met GSEE leaders for an exchange of opinions on the burning issues of socio-economic development and workers' situation in Greece and CIS countries.

ARMENIA: NEW PAY LAW ADOPTED

The National Assembly of Armenia has passed a law on work remuneration regulating the pay relations between the employers and workers in enterprises and institutions of all forms of ownership, and in the state and local power bodies. The law

prescribes a procedure for estimating wage rates for all categories of workers.

A separate article of the law lays down that the minimum wages cannot sink below legally established level. To set up this level, the law introduces such notions as the contents, structure and cost of the so called «minimum subsistence basket» that is to be composed based on the appropriate international standards. The law has also set the rules for calculating the cost of the basket and for its index-linking.

The law stipulates that the first thing enterprises declared insolvent (bankrupt) must do is to pay out the arrears of wages. A special article provides a system of state guarantees for work remuneration and measures to protect the wage expenses in the national budget.

As it welcomed the adoption of the law, the Confederation of Trade Unions of Armenia said it would be helpful in putting the country's work remuneration system into order.

BELARUS: GOVERNMENT PROVOKING CONFLICT

14 December 2001 the Government of Belarus decreed that the check-off system of paying union dues could no longer be used, and the sums collected in this way were not to be transferred to the trade unions' accounts.

Upon receiving the news, the Belarussian Federation of Trade Unions, BFTU, appealed to all trade unions in the country. It said the real aim of the Government's move was to undermine the trade unions and hinder them from carrying out their functions, which was quite opportune, given the forthcoming massive privatisation and extensive use of contractual labour.

Before the decree, 75 per cent of the dues were spent on the floor by primary organisations for material support of their members,

health improvement measures, and cultural work. Today, there is the danger that hundreds of trade union facilities, such as libraries, Houses of Culture, sporting schools etc. might be closed.

The Government document violates the General Agreement, industry accords and local collective agreements, and is at variance with the Constitution and the law on trade unions. Besides, it actually tramples on the ruling of the Constitutional Court of 21 February 2001 that confirmed the legality of the check-off system.

The BFTU expressed a resolute protest against the brazen violation of workers' rights and interference in the unions' affairs, and demanded that the illegal decree be annulled immediately. Relevant appeals were sent to the President and the Constitutional Court. The Federation found it necessary to inform foreign trade union centres and international organisations, including the ILO.

GCTU President Vladimir Scherbakov sent information about the continued infringements on union rights in Belarus to all the member organisations of the Confederation, urging them to display fraternal solidarity with Belarussian workers and send their protests to the country's Government.

GEORGIA: UNIONS DETERMINED TO FIGHT

The National Commission on Energy Regulation decided to raise the electricity rates in Tbilisi by 9 per cent as of 1 November 2001, although the current rates are the highest in the CIS.

The Georgian Trade Union Amalgamation, GTUA, regarded the Commission's decision as lacking both convincing calculation and legal basis. Its purpose was to make the population pay for the debts of unknown origin that had accumulated over the last few years. The GTUA believes increases in electricity rates inadmissible in the present-

day situation. A considerable part of the country's population lives below the poverty line, the token wages are not paid for months if not for years, while the Government is unable to ensure social protection for the population.

24 October 2001, the GTUA published a protest in the mass media, and appealed to Parliament, the Ministry of Justice, and the Mayor's Office of Tbilisi to halt the illegal decision of the Energy Commission. Simultaneously with the mass trade union actions, the GTUA conducted several meetings with the heads of the above mentioned state bodies. The GTUA leader Irakly Tugushi addressed a rally organised outside the House of Parliament.

The union protest actions stopped only after a special parliamentary commission had been set up, and the decision to raise the electricity rates had been suspended by the Ministry of Justice.

GEORGIA: ICFTU CONDEMNS ATTACKS ON UNIONS

On the invitation of the Georgian Trade Union Amalgamation, GTUA, the General Secretary of the ICFTU visited Georgia 9 October 2001 to meet the country's leaders for discussing the numerous encroachments upon trade union rights and the measures to remove them.

Bill Jordan had talks with the Deputy-Minister of State, the Vice Speaker of Parliament and other high-ranking officials of Georgia. President Eduard Shevardnadze could not meet the ICFTU leader for health reasons.

In a letter sent later to President Shevardnadze, Bill Jordan put forward his claims against the infringement of trade union rights in Georgia. He was worried that, against its own will, the GTUA had become involved in the endless lawsuits that make a mere mockery of independent justice procedures. They discredited the efforts by the

country's leaders to build a law-governed state, which might have serious repercussions for Georgia on the international scene.

Bill Jordan expressed his confidence that President would use his influence to return the confiscated property to the GTUA, recognise officially the trade union centre as the successor to the former Council of Trade Unions of Georgia, and stop the interference in the affairs of the GTUA wherever it was coming from.

RUSSIA: UNIONS CLOSING RANKS

Over two million people participated in the nation-wide trade union action «For Labour Rights and Workers' Social Guarantees» conducted by the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, FNPR, 14 November 2001. Rallies and marches took place in 160 cities and towns, while over 40 thousand meetings took place in work collectives. Dozens of enterprises organised strikes and work stoppages. In many cities, the tripartite commissions on regulating social and labour relations held their sessions, and trade unions met with the employers and representatives of the local authorities.

The action held in St.Petersburg deserves particular mention. As he addressed a five-thousand-strong rally, President of the regional trade union federation Harry Lysiuk said the unions were warning the legislative power that the new Labour Code must serve the interests of workers. The rally adopted a resolution warning that the unions intended to supervise the process of passing the new Labour Code and reserved the right to the most resolute actions if necessary.

RUSSIA: CONGRESS OVER, STRUGGLE ON

The 4th Congress of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, FNPR, held from 28-30 November 2001 in Moscow, has opened new prospects for the country's trade union movement. Eight hundred and

four delegates representing 43 industrial unions and 78 regional organisations took part in the event.

The Congress guests included President of Russia Vladimir Putin, Members of Government and both Parliament Chambers, and representatives of the Presidential Administration, employers' associations, and Russian trade unions not affiliated with the FNPR were present as guests. There were also foreign participants representing 59 national trade union centres from 53 countries, 9 international trade union organisations, and the ILO.

Addressing the Congress, President Putin accentuated that, while the state and the unions shared the responsibility for the country's economic development, the responsibility for the consequences of such development should be borne by the state alone. He thinks the period of the «massive state guardianship» was over, and today the aim of the state was to provide each citizen with equal chances for honest work and decent pay. President thanked the FNPR «for the co-operation in improving labour legislation and developing the new Labour Code».

In his summary report to the Congress, FNPR President Mikhail Shmakov said the present-day state authorities were open for dialogue. To support his opinion, he reminded that the country's leaders had met a considerable part of trade union demands, and some major issues were about to be settled.

The prime task for the FNPR in the forthcoming period, he stressed, would be to make the minimum wages and the subsistence minimum meet. He said to applause, that the budget sector employees should no longer be divided into paupers and nobility (i.e. civil servants whose salaries and pensions are ten times as high as those of other budget sector employees). The FNPR was bitterly critical of the aftermath to the introduction of the single social tax, and would

insist on its abolition. The unions consider it necessary to step up opposition to the draft law on pension reform. Mikhail Shmakov pointed to the potential danger Russia's entry into the WTO posed to its workers.

The Congress devoted much attention to the problems of strengthening the Federation's organisational structure. The facts that the national unions of metallurgists and railway workers had joined the FNPR, the unions had resumed their activity in Chechnya, the shrinkage of the union membership base had been stopped, and some unions had merged into larger ones were cited as positive signs.

As he spoke of the GCTU, FNPR President said: «We believe all the trade union centres affiliated with the GCTU must be interested in enhancing its efficiency. The FNPR must help the GCTU to gain a new profile and become an up-to-date international regional organisation capable of facing up to the challenges of a changing world».

The debates centred around labour remuneration, trade union struggles, and the social sphere. In particular, delegates thought the pay rises were only nominal, as they could not keep up with the price rises. They also believed the decisions taken by the Russian Tripartite Commission must have the force of law.

The Congress passed resolutions on the main lines of activity, such as the Resolutions «On the Wages», «From the Mass Unemployment to Efficient Employment», «On the Attitude to the Social Reforms», and «On Social Insurance», and adopted several appeals and statements.

The Programme Document approved by the Congress outlines the strategy and tactics of the Federation for the next five-year period in such spheres as the economy, work remuneration, employment, social protection, health and safety, workers' rights, social partnership, etc.

The Congress formed a General Council of 128 members. For the first time ever, three candidates were running for FNPR President in a contested election. Mikhail Shmakov was the winner. Vitaly Budko, Vyacheslav Goncharov, Andrey Isayev, Viktor Pugiyev, Alexei Surikov and Tatyana Frolova were elected as the six Vice Presidents.

RUSSIA: DIFFERENCES STILL THERE

At its session 19 October 2001, the Russian Tripartite Commission on Regulating the Social and Labour Relations considered the questions of rationing the services the state renders free of charge to the population.

The Commission rejected the draft federal law «On the State Minimum Social Standards». In the opinion of the trade union delegation of the Commission, expressed by FNPR Vice President Vitaly Budko, a country proclaimed a social state by the Constitution, is obliged to provide its citizens not with a scant collection of services, but with a clear-cut system of social guarantees, including the minimum standards of work remuneration, housing rates, public utilities, etc. Meanwhile, the draft law does not stipulate anything of the kind.

The agenda included also a point about the preparation of a draft General Agreement for 2002-2004 and the settlement of differences. The main source of difference was to be sought in the Section «Incomes, Wages and Living Standards». The union delegation insisted that the minimum sum of work remuneration should not be less than the subsistence minimum. The demand is the more important as a third of the country's population lacks tolerable living conditions. The parties had not managed to reach agreement on the issue.

RUSSIA: GENERAL AGREEMENT SIGNED

A General Agreement for 2002-2004 has been concluded by the national trade union

centres, employers' organisations and Government of Russia 20 December 2002.

Simultaneously, a statement of differences was signed embracing all the unsettled issues. Those are the three basic trade union demands that:

- the minimum wages at least equal to the subsistence minimum be introduced already in 2002;
- the pay raises outrun the price rises in 2002-2004; and
- the parties agree on joint proposals that the state guarantees for inhabitants of the Arctic areas of Russia should be financed from the national budget.

RUSSIA: UNITY IS STRENGTH

Over the last few years, the employers have been trying to ignore the labour legislation and have even set up, in defiance of the ILO conventions, «pocket» trade unions to oppose the militant organisations that are really defending the wage workers' interests.

The Savings Bank of Russia, the country's largest banking institution with dozens of thousands of employees, provides a glaring example.

The infringement of trade union rights by the Bank's branches in North-West Russia, which covers eight regions (oblasts) and the city of St.Petersburg, has become much too defiant. This made the Union of Civil and Public Service Employees of the area call a meeting of union leaders and activists in St.Petersburg 16 October 2001 to discuss the situation in their work collectives.

Participants said the rights of Savings Bank employees were violated systematically. The length of the working day was set arbitrarily. There was no compensation for overtime, and the system of paying out bonuses was difficult to understand. The employees who

had actually flooded the union with complaints begged not to reveal their names, which tells a lot about the climate in the work collectives.

For many years, the Savings Bank management has been evading the proposal made by the sectoral union to start collective bargaining and sign a wage agreement. Moreover, the directors of the Bank's branch have established their own, more servile trade union and had since been urging the employees to join it.

Those employees who defect to the easily manipulated union set up by the management, a statement adopted by the meeting says, not only help the employer infringe upon their rights, but also leave their colleagues without the solidarity support in putting forward their legal demands. If they do not want to be oppressed and humiliated, the employees have but one way to go, and that is to preserve and strengthen the organisation of the Union of Civil and Public Service Employees throughout the Savings Bank structure. This is the only way to get a sectoral wage agreement signed and stop the arbitrary rule.

UKRAINE: MINERS GO ON STRIKE

As they called a new strike 22 October 2001, the coal miners of Ukraine had again shown they were a most militant contingent of the working class not only in their own country, but also in the CIS.

According to a Vice President of the Coal Miners' Union of Ukraine, Valery Mamchenko, 148 out of the country's 180 coal pits were on strike refusing to ship their coal to the customers.

The main demand of the strikers was that their current wages be paid in time and the pay arrears be settled as prescribed by the Presidential decree. By 1 October 2001, the total sum of all wage arrears to the coal miners amounted to 1.6 billion hryvnias, or USD 297 million.

The union demanded that the Government amend the country's budget proposal for 2002 to ensure the funding for the coal mining industry as provided for by the Ukrainian Coal Programme. «The minimum we need, Valery Mamchenko said, is three billion hryvnias, and they have allocated only 2.3 billion hryvnias for the purpose».

Disturbed with the union's resoluteness, the Government held a conference with representatives of the coal mining industry 14 November 2001. The result was that the authorities pledged to start paying current wages in time, prepare a schedule for the settlement of the arrears of miners' wages, and allot three billion hryvnias for the re-equipment of coal mines and for industrial safety aims in 2002. The union, in its turn, promised to stop the action from 16 November. The commitments were recorded in an agreement signed by the Government and the Union of Coal Mining Workers.

The all-Ukraine conference of representatives of coal-mining work collectives specially convened to discuss the issue approved the accords reached and instructed the union leaders to consider the possibility of resuming the protest action next winter unless the Government and Parliament complied with the provisions of the agreement.

CIS DEBATES GLOBALISATION

In co-operation with the International Association of the Academies of Sciences of CIS Countries, the General Confederation of Trade Unions organised an International Conference «Economic Globalisation and Regional Integration: Their Impact on Workers' Conditions in the CIS Countries» in Moscow from 7-8 February 2002. Almost a thousand participants from 18 countries took part in the Conference, including delegates of national trade union centres, governments, employers' unions, national Academies of Sciences, trade union guests from several countries outside the CIS, and representatives of regional and world trade union organisations.

Participants discussed such issues as the social consequences of globalisation and their impact on labour relations and workers' conditions, employment and decent work, activities of TNCs in the CIS countries, health and safety, environment protection, etc. Special attention was devoted to trade union activity in a changing world, wages, and social security.

The Conference stressed that international legal instruments, such as the ILO Conventions and Recommendations, together with the experience gained by trade unions in European works councils, International Trade Secretariats, European Trade Federations, and the ETUC should be better used to protect workers' interests. Participants proposed that a special Code of Conduct for TNCs in the CIS be developed and adopted (See the full text of the Final Communiqué in the «Documents» below. For more details, please visit our web-site www.vkp.ru).

GCTU TO STEP UP FIGHT AGAINST WOMEN DISCRIMINATION

The General Confederation of Trade Unions issued a Statement on the 8th of March, the International Women's Day.

The Statement notes the increased activity of the women's movement in all trade union structures. Special resolutions on gender equality had been adopted by the congresses of the trade union centres in Moldova and Russia. The GCTU has noticed that the Governments of CIS countries are doing more to observe the international instruments, including UN and ILO conventions proclaiming equal treatment of men and women in the sphere of labour.

However, the insufficient funding has considerably impeded the fulfilment of the national programmes to improve women's conditions. The recommendations of the Copenhagen Summit and the Beijing World Conference on Women have not

been implemented to the full extent. The rates of unemployment among women workers are still high, while the wages in the predominantly «female» sectors are lagging far behind.

The GCTU said it would insist on the fulfilment of the international documents, including the Beijing Platform. The Confederation urged all its affiliates to oppose resolutely any forms of discrimination against women in the labour market, and work towards equal pay for equal work, towards genuine gender equality.

BELARUS: BFTU ELECTS NEW LEADER

The Council of the Belarussian Federation of Trade Unions, BFTU, elected Frantz Vitko President of the BFTU at its extraordinary session 27 December 2001. Before the election, he was a Vice-President of the Federation.

Former BFTU President, Vladimir Goncharik, was elected a Vice-President of the General Confederation of Trade Unions.

BELARUS: DANGER RALLIES UNIONS

The Belarussian Federation of Trade Unions appealed to President Lukashenko urging him to cancel Government Decree 1884 «On Measures to Protect the Rights of Trade Union Members» banning the check-off system of collecting union dues.

The BFTU made the move following the demands from many work collectives that had literally flooded the trade union centre with their letters of protest.

Union members believe the Decree violates, rather than protects, their right to dispose of their pay as they think fit. Besides, the Government's decision contradicts the country's Labour Code that says «the employer is obliged to make deductions from the wages of an employee upon the latter's written application».

In their struggle against the Government interference, the Belarus trade unions received solidarity and support from many national and international trade union organisations, and, in the first place, from the General Confederation of Trade Unions (See the GCTU Statement in «Documents» below).

President Lukashenko's response to the protests was quite peculiar. «We are not going to collect the union dues any longer», he said. «This is a firm and uncompromising position, and I support it».

BALTIC UNIONS RAISE PROTEST VOICE

A Baltic Conference of Trade Unions held in the Russian port of Kaliningrad 2 March 2003 adopted a statement protesting against the continued blatant interference by Belarussian authorities in the unions' internal affairs that tramples on workers' right to free association and trade unions' right to legal activity.

Trade union centres from 11 Baltic countries called on the Belarussian Government to stop the actions incompatible with the democratic principles of social partnership. Participants expressed their solidarity with the struggles waged by trade unions of the Republic of Belarus, and urged the country's leadership to find a way out of the current situation through negotiations.

BELARUS: UNIONS PROTESTING

A Day of Trade Union Action was held in Belarus 28 March 2002 under the banners «No to Price Rises! Yes to Decent Life and Workers' Rights!». The open trade union meeting that took place in the head office of the Belarussian Federation of Trade Unions, BFTU, was the main event of the day. It brought together, in Minsk, leaders of the Federation and its industrial trade unions, and representatives of work collectives and workplace union organisations from all over the country. Participants adopted a state-

ment demanding that the utility rate rises be halted, wages and salaries in the budgetary sector be raised, the social guarantees for working pensioners be retained, and the interference in the unions' affairs be stopped.

The unions of workers in the radio-electronic, automobile, and agricultural machinery industries organised picket lines in the capital. Protest actions were held in Brest, Mogilev, Novopolotsk and other cities and towns.

The Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, FNPR, posted a picket line outside the building of the Belarussian Embassy in Moscow. Andrei Isayev, a FNPR Vice-President and MP who participated in the picketing, presented an Embassy official with the text of a statement by the Russian trade union centre protesting against the union right violations in Belarus.

KAZAKHSTAN: SPLITTERS OUSTED FROM FTUK

The Federation of Trade Unions of Kazakhstan, FTUK, is going through a difficult period, faced with a smear campaign against it in the mass media.

The campaign was instigated by the leaders of seven FTUK-affiliated sectoral unions organising workers in the automobile transport and road industry, co-operatives and small businesses, utility and municipal service enterprises, aviation, the agro-industrial complex, fishery, and the oil and gas industry.

They maintained that Kazakhstan's trade unions bore the main responsibility for the «catastrophic impoverishment of the population», acted as alms beggars, etc. They doubted the practice of social partnership, and demanded that the unions engage more actively in political activity and build their own political party. The FTUK leadership were accused of misusing trade union property for personal gain. FTUK President Siyazbek Mukashev was the main target of their attacks as they insisted he should retire.

To consider the situation, the FTUK General Council gathered for its session in Astana 23 November 2001. Although they had been invited to participate in the session, the leaders of the opposition unions ignored the event.

The General Council agreed that the unions were deeply indebted to the workers, as they still lacked genuine prestige and influence in society. However, being aware of the current hardships, they had been trying to act jointly. They had organised actions in support of a revision of the unfair labour standards, repayment of the multibillion wage debt, higher pay for budgetary sector workers, and against the violation of union rights and freedoms.

The General Council dismissed as groundless the accusations that the FTUC leadership had misused trade union assets, expressed its support for FTUK President Siyazbek Mukashev, and denounced the dissenters' actions. For gross violations of the Constitution, the above unions had been expelled from the Federation, and their leaders from its General Council.

The 19th Extraordinary Congress of the Federation of Trade Unions of Kazakhstan held 24 January 2002 considered the appeal lodged by the seven expelled unions, and confirmed the decision of the General Council. However, the Congress amended Article 9 of the Constitution. From now on, responsibility for Constitution violations will be borne exclusively by the leaders of affiliated organisations rather than by the organisations themselves.

The Congress called on all union members and activists to strengthen the unity and solidarity of trade union ranks in their strive for social justice.

UNION RIGHTS MAJOR CONCERN

Trade union rights were high on the agenda of a session of the Coordinating Council of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR) and the Belarussian Federa-

tion of Trade Unions (BFTU) held 12 February 2002 in Smolensk, Russia.

The final communiqué warns against union rights violations in Russia and Belarus, and expresses a protest against the actions of Belarussian authorities infringing on trade union rights and imposing restrictions on BFTU activity.

Participants also adopted an appeal to the Permanent Committee of the Union State of Belarus and Russia stressing the importance of involving trade unions in the expert appraisal of draft documents and normative acts necessary for unifying legislation in the social and labour sphere and bringing into line the social guarantees for citizens in both countries.

RUSSIA: DOWN WITH SOCIAL TAX

At its session 13 March 2002, the General Council of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, FNPR, discussed the progress made in the fulfilment of decisions taken by the 4th FNPR Congress.

FNPR President Mikhail Shmakov reminded participants that the Congress had decided to conduct annual pressure campaigns to support the collective bargaining process. Such campaigns, he emphasised, must be public and open for the mass media, they must involve street action, publication of lists of «enemies of labour», etc.

The General Council adopted a plan to carry out the decisions of the 4th FNPR Congress. It demanded that the State Duma establish the minimum wages at 60 per cent of the subsistence minimum in 2003, and at 100 per cent in 2004. The FNPR has also called on its affiliates to step up the struggle for the abolition of the single social tax and for the restoration of obligatory social insurance of working families.

RUSSIA: METALLURGY WORKERS AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

On the 6th of March 2002, Russia's Union of Workers in the Mining and Metallurgical In-

dustries issued a statement protesting against the decision by US President to impose a 30 per cent additional duty on imported steel. The move, which the union described as discriminatory, has ousted Russia and several other countries from the market of the biggest steel consumer.

The forcible measures by the US Administration will further aggravate the already tense economic and social situation in Russia. They may result in enterprise closures, increased unemployment, and a drop in the real wages. The damage the US protectionist policy may cause to Russian iron and steel plants can reach 1.5 billion dollars in the coming two years.

The union called on the Russian Government to find mutually acceptable decisions at negotiating table. Should the attempts fail, adequate measures must be taken to protect the Russian interests and support the country's metallurgists.

DOCUMENTS

STATEMENT

by the Executive Council of the General Confederation of Trade Unions on the 10th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Commonwealth of Independent States

8 December 2001 the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States will mark the tenth anniversary of their amalgamation. Over this historically short period, many changes have taken place in the life of workers and all citizens of the Commonwealth, and in the status and activity of the trade unions affiliated with the General Confederation of Trade Unions.

The Commonwealth has developed a mechanism of state and interstate relations that makes it possible for each country to contribute to the integration processes.

The CIS countries have strengthened their sovereignty over the years, and won corresponding positions on the world arena. They have built their national economies whose growth rates have been rising. Most CIS countries have legally secured human rights in the political and socio-economic spheres, including trade union rights. The foundations of civil society have been laid, and, in particular, tripartite bodies for social dialogue and co-operation have been established.

On the other hand, it is evident that, in almost all CIS countries, the reforms have led to the substantial drop in workers' living standards, and to the loss of social confidence. Unemployment is still high. In most Commonwealth countries, the workforce price has dropped, which resulted primarily in sharply reduced real wages. The real wage rates do not provide most workers with sufficient means for them to enjoy a decent living, support their families, and give education to their children. Some states have not settled the arrears of wages. The health and safety conditions have worsened. The death and sick rates have jumped up catastrophically. The pensioners are in a plight. All this is the result of the hasty break-up of the long-established economic ties and the ill-conceived reforms that has created social tensions, generated population migration, and increased crime. In some CIS countries, trade union rights are under attacks, and attempts are being made to interfere in the internal affairs of trade union organisations.

As it was founded ten years ago to help resolve all arising problems, the Commonwealth of Independent States was a response to the expectations of workers and most people in the countries that had appeared on the territory of the former Soviet Union. However, the way to integration has turned out to be neither straight nor easy, and the integration has gotten a multi-level and multi-speed character; to achieve the aim, it is necessary to surmount many obstacles of an objective or subjective nature. We should not forget that almost everywhere in our countries people are suffering from common troubles and rigours, and it is better to solve the problems together. The process of integration was from the outset supported by the trade unions of our countries that had built their own regional structure in April 1992, the General Confederation of Trade Unions (GCTU).

As a regional trade union centre enjoying status with the governing bodies of the Commonwealth, the GCTU has been promoting integration processes in the CIS industrial committees, Commissions of the CIS Executive Board, and the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of the Commonwealth.

The GCTU Executive members believe this work must be continued, and they intend to do their utmost to make it successful.

The trade unions are facing great challenges, including the need to build and develop a single labour market and harmonise social and labour legislation within the CIS, based on the world standards. We must do all we can to add an appropriate social dimension to the integration, ensure decent working and pay conditions for our workers, and make the reforms people-centred.

Proceeding from the positive international experience, we believe it expedient to establish a regional

tripartite body to deal with social and labour issues where the GCTU could represent workers' interests in social dialogue at the Commonwealth level.

In a globalizing world economy, joint actions by trade unions on the international arena become increasingly important. As an organisation enjoying permanent status with the International Labour Organisation and other UN agencies, the GCTU is called upon to express our co-ordinated viewpoints at world level, and develop mutually beneficial relations with world, regional and major national trade union centres.

It is important that the GCTU affiliates do their best to promote internationally our common solidarity-based positions concerning the collective protection of workers' socio-economic interests in this region. Trade union solidarity and workers' brotherhood must be put at the head of the list.

The GCTU affiliates must take advantage of their membership in other international trade union organisations to supply the foreign counterparts with more detailed and objective information about the GCTU's activity with the aim of bringing closer their positions and building businesslike co-operation with them. It is essential that the outside world treat each GCTU affiliate not only as a representative of their own union, but also as a representative of our common organisation, the General Confederation of Trade Unions.

We shall do our best to enable the GCTU to make a further contribution to strengthening the Commonwealth of Independent States and turning it into a common home for all citizens and workers of our region.

Members of the Executive Committee of the General Confederation of Trade Unions

COMMUNIQUE

on the Outcome of the International Conference «Economic Globalisation and Regional Integration: Their Impact on Workers' Conditions in the CIS Countries»

An International Conference «Economic Globalisation and Regional Integration: Their Impact on Workers' Conditions in the CIS Countries» was held in Moscow's House of Trade Unions from 7-8 February 2002. The Conference was organised by the General Confederation of Trade Unions (GCTU), the International Association of the Academies of Sciences of CIS Countries, and the national Academies of Sciences of most countries of the Commonwealth.

The Conference brought together representatives of the executive power bodies and legislatures of the Commonwealth of Independent States, CIS interstate and integration bodies, national Academies of Sciences, chief executive officers of major corporations and enterprises, employers' and public organisations, prominent scientists,

experts, and mass media workers. There were many trade unionists among the participants, including leaders of the national trade union centres of CIS countries, international and national industrial trade unions, regional and workplace trade union organisations, including trade union committees of some transnational corporations, and international guests. All in all, almost a thousand people took part in the Conference, representing 18 countries and four international trade union organisations.

The keynote speeches were presented by GCTU President Vladimir Scherbakov and Vice-President of the Russian Academy of Sciences Academician Alexander Nekipelov. At its plenary sessions and six workshops, the Conference discussed topical issues relating to CIS countries' entry into the globalizing world. The broad and open discussion dwelt on both the positive and the negative consequences of globalisation processes for workers, and on whether the regional integration in the CIS countries could help alleviate their adverse effects.

Speakers pointed that globalisation, as an objective factor of world development, opened new prospects for the world economy as it stimulated contacts and links between states in the economy, trade, technologies, culture, information and other spheres, and lifts restrictions impeding labour and capital transfer across national boundaries. On the other hand, globalisation aggravates international competition often providing unequal opportunities for its participants, and widens the gap not only between the rich and the poor countries, but also between different sections of the population.

What can make this process manageable and oriented towards the universal objectives of progress is the right choice of national policies by independent states, participants stressed. Opinions were voiced that, apart from the state structures, the business quarters, academic circles, and public organisations, including trade unions, should be actively involved in the formulation and accomplishment of such policies. This could ensure access to the positive results of globalisation for the broadest possible sections of the population, reduce the economic and social costs of the world community's transition to a new quality, and help retain the integrity of cultures and national sovereignty.

While not denying that CIS countries may profit from joining the WTO, participants voiced their concern with the low competitiveness of many industries and enterprises, and with the lack of resources needed for a quick introduction of the strict WTO standards. Should their markets be opened, this may lead to sizeable cuts in jobs and rises in unemployment figures. Given this situation, more balanced approaches must be taken towards the problem of CIS countries' entry into the WTO, with due regard both for economic and social expediency. It is also necessary to build up competitive advantages and enhance the role of state regulation.

Particularly heated were the debates about the changes in the production pattern of the world economy where a

symbiosis of transnational corporations and small enterprises is playing a dominating role. As they noted the growing influence of TNCs and finance-industrial groups in the process of globalisation, Conference participants pointed to their dual nature. On the one hand, they are the vehicles of technological progress, while on the other, they are eager to take advantage of, and even conserve, the differences between the states in the spheres of labour remuneration and workers' social protection. To achieve the goal, they bring their own social ideology to the territories of other states.

Transnational enterprises often violate national social and labour legislation, and block the establishment and activity of trade union organisations, or collective bargaining. This calls for a more thorough analysis of the role TNCs are playing in the forming of new social and labour relations, from the viewpoint of their impact on the emerging world labour market, and on the structure of trade unions and on the forms and methods of their activity.

Many examples were cited to illustrate the negative effect of globalisation on the social conditions and living standards of most of the able-bodied population. Participants noted the impact of the scientific and technological revolution, including the wide-scale introduction of new information and communication technologies, on job reduction, increased migration flows, the curtailment of social protection schemes, environment degradation, and the growing inequality in the spheres of culture, health care and education. This causes widespread antiglobalist sentiments, and calls for a more active struggle for decent conditions of work and life.

Participants stressed the need to develop a social policy in the globalizing world. This involves job creation, decent working conditions, and better legal, economic and organisational conditions for labour migration. Priority issues must include increasing citizens' real incomes and, above all, wages, retaining the principle of social solidarity in pension and social security reforms, and ensuring better health care for all, general education and vocational training based on labour market requirements, access to cultural achievements, and equal treatment of men and women.

Many speakers believed that the process of CIS countries joining the global world could be made easier through their regional integration that makes it possible for them to expand efficiently their common economic space without waiving their sovereignty. In doing so, they will need to co-ordinate, within the CIS, their approaches to problem solution, make a maximum use of the positive potential of globalisation, and reduce its negative social consequences. All public forces and state authorities must jointly work towards the establishment of a common labour market, and the development and realisation of programmes in the fields of employment, stable economic growth and increased living standards of the population.

The Conference highlighted the role of trade unions as organisations representing and defending workers' interests, and stressed the importance of a more vigorous struggle against the negative consequences of globalisation, and for the observance of international labour standards, including those set by UN and ILO instruments. The problems of securing the rights and freedoms of trade unions, and bringing their structure in line with the labour market structure must be solved. The need for solidarity and trade union unity was also debated.

Participants spoke in favour of continued co-operation to investigate and discuss the problems raised at the Conference in order to promote the development and accomplishment of a social model that could add humane social contents to globalisation in the interests of working people.

STATEMENT by the General Confederation of Trade Unions in support of the trade unions of the Republic of Belarus

The General Confederation of Trade Unions, as an organisation interested in the development of trade union movement in the CIS countries and in securing trade union rights and freedoms based on the universally accepted standards of international law, is concerned with the abnormal situation that has evolved around the trade unions of Belarus over the last few years. They have been hindered from performing their normal functions, while the social dialogue with the workers' organisations have actually been blocked at the national level.

The decree issued by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus last December banning the check-off system of collecting union dues is nothing else but an attempt to suffocate financially the Belarussian trade union movement and destroy its organisational structures. This normative act runs against the core ILO Conventions and the standards of the national legislation of the Republic of Belarus, and is at variance with the common practice of collecting union membership dues.

The General Confederation of Trade Unions has repeatedly expressed its solidarity with the struggles waged by the Belarussian Federation of Trade Unions against any such actions by authorities. The GCTU has also supported the complaint lodged by the BFTU and other trade union organisations of the republic with the International Labour Organisation.

While expressing its hope for a speedy restoration by Belarussian authorities of legality in what concerns trade union rights and freedoms, the General Confederation of Trade Unions reiterates its full solidarity with the Belarussian Federation of Trade Unions, and calls on the GCTU affiliates and all trade unions in the world to defend the independent trade union movement in the Republic of Belarus.

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THE GENERAL CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS, GCTU, IS AN INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION ORGANISATION THAT WAS FOUNDED AT ITS FIRST CONGRESS ON 16 APRIL 1992.

ITS CONSTITUTION, WHICH WAS APPROVED BY THE FIRST CONGRESS, WAS AMENDED AND SUPPLEMENTED BY THE SECOND CONGRESS OF THE GCTU ON 22 SEPTEMBER 1993, AND THE THIRD CONGRESS OF THE GCTU ON 18 SEPTEMBER 1997

THE BASIC OBJECTIVES OF THE GCTU ARE:

- CO-ORDINATION OF ITS AFFILIATES' ACTIVITIES ON THE PROTECTION OF SOCIAL RIGHTS OF WORKERS, STUDENTS AND PENSIONERS;
- ASSISTANCE IN THEIR PROTECTION OF TRADE UNION RIGHTS AND GUARANTEES;
- AND
- ORGANISING TRADE UNION SOLIDARITY AND CO-ORDINATION OF ITS AFFILIATES' INTERNATIONAL POLICIES.

THE GCTU BUILDS ITS ACTIVITIES IN CONFORMITY WITH THE UNIVERSALLY RECOGNISED STANDARDS OF INTERNATIONAL LAW, WITH FULL RESPECT FOR ITS AFFILIATES' COMPLETE INDEPENDENCE AND THE EQUALITY OF THEIR RIGHTS AND DUTIES.

THE GCTU AFFILIATES NATIONAL TRADE UNION CENTRES OF ARMENIA, BELARUS, GEORGIA, KAZAKHSTAN, KYRGHYZSTAN, MOLDOVA, RUSSIA, TAJIKISTAN, UZBEKISTAN, AND UKRAINE, AS WELL AS 37 BRANCH TRADE UNION INTERNATIONALS. BESIDES BILATERAL AGREEMENTS ON CO-OPERATION WAS SIGNED WITH THE TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION OF AZERBAIJAN .

THE GCTU IS READY TO CO-OPERATE WITH ANY OTHER NATIONAL TRADE UNION FEDERATIONS, IRRESPECTIVE OF THEIR BEING MEMBERS OF OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS. ON THE OTHER HAND, THEIR PARTICIPATION IN GCTU ACTIVITIES DOES NOT IN ANY WAY RESTRICT THE INDEPENDENCE OF ITS AFFILIATES.

THE CONFEDERATION ENJOYS OBSERVER STATUS WITH THE CIS INTER-PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY, THE CIS COUNCIL OF HEADS OF STATE, THE CIS COUNCIL OF HEADS OF GOVERNMENT, THE CIS INTERSTATE ECONOMIC COMMITTEE, ETC.

INTERNATIONALLY, IT IS IN CONSULTATIVE RELATIONS WITH THE ILO , UN DPI AND ECOSOC.

THE GCTU SUPREME BODIES ARE THE CONGRESS, CONVENED ONCE EVERY FIVE YEARS, AND, IN THE INTERVALS BETWEEN THE CONGRESSES, THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.

CONTROL OVER FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES IS EXERCISED BY THE GCTU AUDITING COMMISSION.

PRESIDENT OF THE GCTU IS VLADIMIR SCHERBAKOV

DEAR READERS

The GCTU information bulletin "Inform-Contact" is also distributed by E-mail. Apart from that, the English and French versions of our publication are available on our web site: www.vkp.ru