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NEWS FROM THE GENERAL CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

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GCTU Ten Year Old: Summing Up

The General Confederation of Trade Unions marked its 10th anniversary on the 16th of April 2002. In this connection, GCTU President Vladimir Scherbakov held a press conference for mass media representatives. The summary of what he said follows below.

Together with the industrial trade union internationals (TUIs), seven national trade union centres from Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan founded the GCTU at its First Congress in April 1992. Soon after that, trade union centres of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine joined the Confederation.

Today, the Confederation affiliates 10 national trade union centres in CIS countries and 37 industrial TUIs, with a total membership of 85 million people.

Over the years, the workers' organisations in the Commonwealth have managed to survive in a climate of economic reform and political change, build jointly an up-to-date legal basis for their activity, and decide on the models of their development. With their direct involvement, the laws on trade unions have been adopted in most of the CIS countries, as well as the labour codes and

laws on collective bargaining, collective disputes, etc. A mechanism of social partnership has also been elaborated. What is essential, the unity of the trade union movement has been preserved within the CIS confines, and conditions have been created for common action by trade unions in defence of workers' interests.

Backed by the GCTU, the national trade union centres have secured their legitimate rights as the legal successors to the former unions and their property. This has made them competent and independent organisations. Today, the GCTU affiliates are either the only, or the largest and most influential, trade union organisations in their countries. All attempts by the state authorities to destroy the unions or reduce them to a new type of transmission belt have failed. However, even now the desire to split the movement or restrain the rights of workplace trade union committees is persistent in some CIS countries.

Over the past 10 years, the national trade union centres have developed adequate forms and methods of work in a market economy. They concentrate their current attention on the issues of employment, decent pay, collective bargaining, and health and safety. Although their efforts have resulted in a certain increase in the average

wages, the work remuneration rates, particularly the minimum one, are still far from satisfactory. Therefore, the problem will remain in the list of priorities for the unions.

According to Vladimir Scherbakov, promoting integration processes in the CIS should be viewed as a cornerstone of the GCTU's policy as an international organisation, because it believes the integration to be a most important prerequisite for economic growth and the improvement of workers' conditions in the Commonwealth.

The GCTU has identified its co-operation partners among the CIS interstate bodies, and got firmly established as a recognised plenipotentiary representative for CIS workers' organisations in such bodies. The unions participated in the working out of the Programme of Development of the CIS for the Period to 2005.

Particularly efficient relations have been established with the CIS Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (IPA) where the GCTU actually enjoys the right to legislative initiative. The Confederation has contributed to the drawing up of more than 50 international normative acts aiming to enhance CIS citizens' social protection. These model acts have been widely used by legislators at national level. In 1996, responding to an appeal from the GCTU, the IPA issued a recommendation that the parliaments of all the CIS countries ratify the basic ILO conventions. The progress is obvious, considering that over 73 new ratifications have been sent to the ILO since then.

Speaking of globalisation as the dominant trend in the world development, the GCTU President said it had made the need for better social protection of workers even more pressing.

The GCTU and the International Association of the CIS Academies of Sciences organised an international conference on economic globalisation, regional integration, and their impact on workers' conditions in the Commonwealth countries (for more information about the conference, see our previous issue). The conference considered a wide range of questions and came forth with new proposals as to their realisation.

The enhanced influence of transnational capital is another characteristic feature of globalisation. In October 1997, yielding to the GCTU's pressure, six CIS countries, i.e. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Tajikistan, signed an agreement regulating the social and labour relations within TNCs operative in the Commonwealth.

«We are part and parcel of the world trade union movement, Vladimir Scherbakov concluded. Our Confederation acts on the international scene as a regional trade union centre authorised by its members to represent their common co-ordinated interests»

Pursuant to this policy, the GCTU has established relations with the World Confederation of Labour, the World Federation of Trade Unions, the European Trade Union Confederation, the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions, and the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity. The Confederation believes there is also a possibility of maintaining a dialogue and an exchange of opinions with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.

As a regional organisation, the GCTU enjoys permanent status with United Nations agencies, such as the Economic and Social Council, the Department of Public Information, and the International Labour Organisation.

GCTU Supports Pensioners

The Commission for Social Development of the UN Social and Economic Council is presently preparing for the Second World Assembly on Ageing to be held in Madrid in 2002.

In this context, the problem of state support for older people became the object of scrutiny in the countries of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) founded by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. These states had contributed to the events organised within the framework of the International Decade of Older People held in 1992-2001 as recommended by the First World Assembly on Ageing (Vienna, 1982).

The GCTU and the International Union of Veterans' Organisations in the CIS Countries had jointly prepared a Concept of State Support of Older People and submitted it for consideration by the EurAsEC Inter-Parliamentary Assembly. The aim of the document is to achieve compliance by the above countries with the international principles of state support of pensioners. This means they should allow for the problems of ageing when compiling their national plans or interstate development projects, and give support to the municipal programmes of care for the elderly.

The Concept provides for measures to protect pensioners' interests in employment, income security, housing, health care, social support and family. Special concern should be given to the depreciation of pensioners' savings and pensions, old-age poverty, and the status of elderly women who normally live longer than men while enjoying smaller resources and social benefits. The document stresses the special role this category of citizens can play. They can be helpful in the development of small businesses and co-operatives,

share their knowledge and experience with the younger generations and render them consultative services, work as mediators and advisers, and help the younger people prepare psychologically for the later stages in their lives.

The Concept stipulates that national legislation concerning employment, social insurance, investment, consumption, and savings should be amended with due regard for the demographic tendency towards an ageing population.

GCTU Calls to Defend Union Rights

GCTU President Vladimir Scherbakov has sent a letter to President of the Canadian Labour Congress Ken Georgetti.

The letter informed the Canadian labour leader of the situation that had evolved in the relations between the trade union organisation and the management of the Nefteorgsyntez Plant in Chimkent, Kazakhstan. This plant, one of the biggest in the country, with a 2000-strong trade union organisation, has been managed by Canada's Hurricane Hydrocarbons Ltd since March 2000.

Three years ago, following a protracted struggle by the union and the work collective, the enterprise agreed to start negotiations with the aim to sign a new collective agreement. However, all attempts to amend the collective agreement so as to improve the workers' conditions have failed. The result is that, over the last three years, the workers' wages have not been raised, although the inflation rate in the period 1998-2001 amounted to 133 per cent.

The bargaining reached a deadlock after the Hurricane's management had rejected even the paragraphs providing for maternity allowances to women workers. Moreover, in defiance of Kazakhstan legislation and ILO conventions, the management started

cutting the jobs of women who were on maternity leave, and sacking elected union leaders. The announced restructuring plans might make redundant almost two-thirds of the personnel, without any alternate jobs offers. The company managers made the employees believe that their resistance is a vain thing. The workers were blackmailed and intimidated into quitting their jobs «at their own free will».

The company management rejected all demands and proposals by the trade union organisation. The interference by the National Union of Workers in the Chemical Industry and the Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Kazakhstan had produced no results.

Speaking for the GCTU, Vladimir Scherbakov appealed to his Canadian counterparts to use whatever possibilities they may have to exert pressure on the central management of Canada's Hurricane Hydrocarbons Ltd and thus help the employees of its Kazakhstan subsidiary defend their legitimate rights and get a normal social dialogue going.

CIS Teachers Debate Reform

Education reform was discussed in detail at an international trade union seminar jointly held in Moscow from 19-21 June 2002 by the GCTU-affiliated Trade Union International (TUI) of Education and Science Employees and the World Confederation of Teachers (WCT). The seminar was attended by the TUI leaders, WCT President Lois Van Beneden, and representatives of teachers' unions from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine and Tajikistan.

The debates revealed that the current reorganisation in education had objective reasons. Its aim is to bring education in line with the new realities, such as the changed conditions of life and the global processes

in the world. Participants expressed their satisfaction with the positive aspects of reform, including the democratisation of education, the use of new education technologies, e.g. the Internet, and the stronger links with science and research.

Simultaneously, the unions are concerned that in most CIS countries the statutory priority of education development is but a declaration. The insufficient funding undermines its material and technical base. The salaries in education are about the lowest in the budgetary sector, often less than the subsistence minimum. The result is that the teaching personnel have been growing older, while the prestige of the profession in society has been dropping.

The unions called on the legislative and the executive authorities to tackle the problems urgently. The seminar warned against infringing upon the rights and interests of education employees, and called for an education accessible to all and for its further democratic change.

Participants believed the unions should step up their efforts to improve social partnership, enhance the role of collective bargaining, and ensure legislative guarantees for education workers. Therefore, they thought that sharing trade union experience was important both at international and Commonwealth levels, and the unions should consolidate their unity and solidarity.

The seminar asked the Council of the TUI to sum up the trade union experience and practices discussed, analyse the situation in the education field in the CIS, and, based thereupon, produce proposals for common trade union tactics in the sector.

Trade Unions and Globalising Forestry

The impact of globalisation on the timber and forest industries was discussed at a

regular meeting of the Executive Council of the Federation of Timber and Related Industries Workers' Unions in the CIS (TUI of Timber Workers) that took place in Moscow 23 May 2002.

Opening the meeting, Viktor Karnyushin, President of the Federation informed those present of its activity over the period since its Second Congress (12 September 2001).

The Executive members agreed that globalisation had an actual impact on the sector, which would tell on the nature of trade union activity in the years to come. They were of the opinion that globalisation had given a useful impetus to the forestry and timber industries and accelerated structural changes. On the other hand, it has adverse effects on employment, health and safety, income rates, and the right to work. In other words, while offering new possibilities, globalisation is fraught with various risks.

In its final resolution, the Executive Committee pointed out that only rightly chosen policies could secure manageable processes of globalisation in the CIS states and make them serve the goals of progress. Trade unions must take an active part in formulating such policies, alongside the state power structures.

The Executive discussed and approved the activity of the General Confederation of Trade Unions, of which the TUI of Timber Workers is a member, and elected delegates to the GCTU 4th Congress to be held 12 September 2002.

Georgia: Common Problems to Solve

On 5 April 2002, the Georgian Amalgamation of Trade Unions, GTUA, met with 22 national non-governmental organisations to discuss the ways out of the hard socio-economic situation, and joint actions to be taken by public organisations to protect the population of Georgia.

Participants cited numerous violations of human rights and the Constitution of Georgia, and of unlawful actions that had resulted in an increasingly glaring income gap among the people. Particularly heated were the debates about the relations between the employers and wage workers.

GTUA President Irakly Tugushi told the meeting that the NGOs and trade unions should unite their efforts to help relieve the country's current social and economic plight. «We're not going to build any alliance or political movement, said the union leader, we'd rather try to solve the problems through dialogue, which doesn't exclude any other civilised methods, if this be necessary».

The meeting decided to set up joint working groups to deal with pension legislation, index-adjusting of the domestic debt, calculation of optimal social insurance benefits, energy issues and other questions.

Moldova: Unions Count on Youth

The two-year-old idea that the Confederation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Moldova (CTURM) should have a youth structure of its own was implemented 26 April 2002 as a trade union conference in Chisinau decided to set up a CTURM youth organisation.

According to participants, young people do not occupy the place they deserve in the unions, and they must have a louder say. Therefore, the purpose of the youth organisation is to make the image of trade unions more attractive to the younger generation.

The new organisation will bring together the youth structures of five industrial unions affiliated with the CTURM, organising workers in the agro-industrial complex,

culture, electronics, health care, and commerce.

Russia Marks May Day-2002

Almost everywhere in Russia, the May Day events were held under the motto «Social Policy to Social State», with over three million people taking part in the marches and rallies.

An unparalleled massive rally involving 140 thousand workers took place in Moscow. Thousands upon thousands of people marched through St.Petersburg, Voronezh, Volgograd, Saratov, and many other cities and towns.

This year's May Day was offensive by nature, and the marchers' demands were specific and clear-cut. Participants in the mass actions demanded that the country's burning issues should be addressed immediately. Workers were most concerned with the growing unemployment, arrears in wages and salaries, inadmissibly low pay rates, unjustified rises in the utility rates, and planned privatisation of strategic industries, such as defence enterprises, railways, energy, etc. Some demanded that President Putin should end corruption, crime and drug abuse, and tackle the problem of stray and homeless children. Participants in the manifestations rejected the Government's policy in health care, education and social insurance.

The protests will continue even after the 1st of May. In a resolution summing up its May Day actions, the FNPR Executive Committee urged its affiliates to step up their struggles to get the social tax cancelled, the solidarity principle in social insurance restored, and the deductions to the Social Security Fund raised. The Executive also called on FNPR members to assist and support the Russian Education Employees' Union in collecting signatures under their open letter to President Putin.

Russia: Teachers Correspond with President

The two years of Vladimir Putin's Presidency have not changed the situation in Russian education for the better. The state has neither settled its arrears in teachers' salaries, nor created the conditions for the timely and full remuneration of their work. Teachers are paid much less than workers of the manufacturing industries. The Government has not kept its promise to raise students' scholarships. There are hardly any state schools left in Russia, and the Concept of Modernising Russia Education adopted some time ago has not been realised.

The Central Committee of the Russian Education Employees' Union called a nation-wide protest action from 1 May to 1 June 2002 urging the union members to give active support to the initiative. The action has taken the form of collecting signatures under an open letter to President Vladimir Putin. The signatures thus collected will be handed to the President's plenipotentiaries in all the seven federal districts.

Not an Inch of Russian Land to Sell

On the 17th of May 2002, the Union of Workers in the Agro-Industrial Complex organised an action of protest against the adoption of a law on free purchase and sale of land to legal or natural persons, including foreign subjects. A large meeting was held outside the House of Government in Moscow as part of the action.

The union action was supported by the Agrarian and the Communist Parties and other left-wing political and public movements. Over three thousand people representing 20 regions of Russia took part in the event.

Speakers supported the position held by most Russian peasants (according to some estimates, almost 80 per cent) that no sale of land must be allowed. The final resolution of the meeting demanded that the federal authorities should hold a referendum on this crucial issue. Otherwise, participants argued, the obedient centre-right majority in the State Duma will vote for the Government's draft law ignoring the interests of land toilers.

As they met with the Minister of Agriculture, spokespersons for the protesters stressed that no official arguments could prevent the Union of Agricultural Workers from fighting to the last ditch for the interests of Russian peasants rather than for those of moneybags and Western investors.

Ukraine: FTUU to Hold Congress Next November

The 4th ordinary Congress of the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine, FTUU, will be held in November 2002.

The decision was taken at a session of the FTUU Council that also summed up the results of the parliamentary and local elections held 31 March 2002. The common opinion was that the elections had been victorious for the left-wing forces. Five union representatives, and among them FTUU President Alexander Stoyan, had won MP mandates. Another 32 trade union candidates had been elected deputies of regional councils, and over 3,200 union officials and activists had become members of city, district and local councils.

Ukraine: Pooling Efforts to Safeguard Union Rights

Observance of trade union rights and fundamental labour standards is still an acute problem in CIS countries.

The issue was discussed at an international conference organised in Kiev in late April 2002 by the ILO, the ICFTU and the AFL-CIO in conjunction with the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (AFL-CIO). The Ukrainian participants included representatives of the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine, the Confederation of Trade Unions of Ukraine, and the All-Ukraine Organisation of Free Workers. Trade union delegates from other CIS and Eastern European Countries also attended.

Participants reviewed the situation in the sphere of trade union rights and freedoms in the region, first of all in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. They also considered the possibilities for the unions to share their legal work experience with one another, particularly through electronic means of communication, and enlist efficient solidarity at national and international levels with the aim of protecting union rights and observing international labour standards.

As he addressed the conference, FTUU President Alexander Stoyan stressed that his Federation paid special attention to the development of social partnership and improvement of labour legislation. He reminded that all FTUU achievements in the legislative sphere were the common property of all workers in Ukraine, irrespective of their being members of FTUU-affiliated unions or other trade union organisations.

Alexander Stoyan met Harry Kamberis, Executive Director of the American Center for International Labor Solidarity who had arrived in Kiev to attend the international conference. Their talks concentrated mainly on the plans to open an office of the above Center in Ukraine.

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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

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