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NEWS FROM THE GENERAL CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

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A GCTU delegation took part in the 7th St.Petersburg International Economic Forum held from 18-20 June 2003.

Addressing the Forum, GCTU President Vladimir Scherbakov said CIS trade unions were deeply concerned over the increasingly insufficient social protection of the region's workers and population in general. Today, over 60 million people in CIS countries live below the poverty line. In Russia, the proportion of workers earning less than the subsistence minimum level has exceeded 42 per cent of those employed, and in Ukraine 70 per cent. Wage rates in the CIS range from 0.5 to 5 US dollars a day. Social stratification has been growing, with the income gap between the rich and the poor being the biggest in Russia.

The low living standards of most people, the widening gap in incomes, and the lack of means to ensure sufficient nutrition, quality health service and adequate education were the cause of the growing civil discontent and social instability.

The CIS unions believe a package of urgent measures should be taken to

prevent further impoverishment of the population in the region.

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A session of the GCTU Executive Committee took place at Kostanai (Kazakhstan) 1 July 2003.

The Executive members examined the practices of cooperation between the Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Kazakhstan, FTURK, and the Republic's Parliament. They also studied the experience accumulated by FTURK in the sphere of collective bargaining and social partnership in various sectors of the economy.

The very fact that the Republic could build a solid legislative basis for regulating labour relations was largely due to the efforts undertaken by the national trade union centre. The trade union federation takes an active part in election campaigns, and has even formed a deputies' group of its own in the Majilis (national parliament). The Executive Committee approved of the work being done by the Kazakhstan trade unions, and recommended that other GCTU affiliates make extensive

use of this experience in their activities.

Participants also discussed the ways to improve GCTU information activity. They decided that a single information net should be built for trade unions of CIS countries within the framework of the GCTU, and that measures should be taken to enhance its efficiency based on high technologies.

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On the 4th of August 2003, the GCTU Executive Committee issued an appeal to the Heads of State, Heads of Government, and Parliament leaders of the CIS countries.

The message draws their attention to the fact that the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families came into force 1 July 2003. The observance of this international instrument by the CIS states will help migrant workers on their territories to protect their rights more efficiently, particularly by joining the trade unions. Such a demand has for a long time been supported by the world trade union movement.

It is to be regretted, though, that none of the CIS countries has so far ratified either this UN Convention, or ILO Convention No.97 concerning Migration for Employment (1949) and Convention No.143 concerning Migrations in Abusive Conditions and the Promotion of Equality of Opportunity and Treatment of Migrant Workers (1975). The poor compatibility of national legislation on migration with the universally accepted international standards results in violations of migrant workers' rights, their ruthless

exploitation, and irresponsible and arbitrary behaviour by employers.

The GCTU appealed to the national executive and legislative authorities to take the necessary measures for their states to join the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families and the ILO Conventions. "This will help create the necessary legislative base and build civilised conditions for labour migration in CIS countries, which, in its turn, will contribute to economic growth and higher living standards in our states", the GCTU appeal says.

ARMENIA

The Metro in the country's capital, Yerevan, stood still on the 1st of July 2003 because of the strike called by the engine drivers who demanded a double pay raise. The management had been warned two months before the action started.

Following negotiations the parties agreed on an average pay increase of 10-15 per cent for all Metro workers. The wages of engine drivers currently amount to 60-90 thousand drams (102-155 US dollars) a month.

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At its session 11 July 2003, the Council of the Confederation of Trade Unions of Armenia considered the tasks to be coped with as follow up to the latest CTUA congress held in 2002.

As they addressed the session, CTUA President Martin Harutyunian and other speakers pointed out that, as actors in social dialogue, trade union organisations were often faced with

the reluctance of private employers to negotiate or cooperate with the unions. Given this situation, the unions must press more vigorously for a revision of national laws on labour relations and trade unions. "In the context of democratisation and development of civil society, our unions intend to strengthen their cooperation with the state authorities, particularly in the sphere of legislation", said Martin Harutyunian.

The National Assembly (Parliament) is currently discussing the draft Law on Trade Unions which it had approved at the first reading in 2002. Over the period, the unions have proposed 217 amendments to the law. It is their task now to get the amendments included in the text of the law at its second reading in Parliament.

BELARUS

The Standing Council for the Problems of Social and Economic Development set up by the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, FTUB, held its first meeting in Minsk 24 June 2003. The Council is composed of economic analysts, experts from the National Academy of Sciences, and representatives of research institutions, public organisations and state administration bodies, as well as FTUB affiliates.

According to FTUB President Leonid Kozik, the main task of the Council is to follow the economic situation in the country and give recommendations as to the solution of burning issues of economic and social development the Republic may be faced up with. The Council intends to submit its proposals and recommendations to the Government. The first session

considered the pay situation in Belarus. The unions do not believe the current work remuneration scheme is able to meet the present-day requirements, as the pay rise dynamics is only loosely linked with the economic performance, and the wage differentials between the economic sectors, industrial enterprises and various groups of employees are still quite marked.

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The Supreme Court of Belarus ruled 7 August 2003 that the Belarussian Union of Air Traffic Controllers (BPAD) affiliated to the Belarussian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions should be disbanded. The news was broken by BPAD President Y.Migutzky who said the reason the Supreme Court had given for its decision was that the union's membership was not strong enough.

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A delegation of the General Federation of Workers' Trade Unions of Syria headed by its President Mohammad Shaban Azuz paid a friendly visit to Belarus from 19-26 August 2003 on the invitation of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, FTUB. As he met FTUB leaders, Mr Azuz stressed that Syrians took a keen interest in Belarus and its trade unions. That explained why the newly elected leadership of the Syrian trade unions, whom he represented, had chosen Belarus for their first mission abroad.

In a joint communique, the parties said they had agreed to maintain more active cooperation at bilateral, regional and international levels. They will also exchange delegations, keep in

information contact, and organise joint events on an annual basis. The leaders of the Belarussian and the Syrian trade union centres pledged to help each other in establishing contacts and cooperation with trade union organisations of other countries in their respective regions.

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The Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus reviewed the fulfilment of the General Agreement between the government, the trade unions and the employers at a session of its Presidium that took place 28 August 2003. The conclusion was that the country's economy was not efficient enough.

The Agreement provision adjusting pay rise rates to the growth rates of the gross domestic product has not been respected. In the first six months, the gross payroll rose by 28.2 per cent (real wages by 2.2 per cent), whereas the GDP increased by 40.8 per cent. The result was that the proportion of work remuneration in the GDP volumes had decreased.

The obligation to raise the average monthly pay in the budget sector has not been met either. Wages have not been paid on time, with the pay arrears totalling 30.5 million US dollars, as of 30 June 2004. Besides, the General Agreement provision forbidding to increase housing and utility rates and municipal transport fares without a matching rise in citizens' incomes has been violated.

Unemployment remains an increasingly acute problem in Belarus. It has risen by 0.5 per cent against the same period in 2002. In late July 2003, the state employment service registered

140 thousand unemployed, which makes 3.2 per cent of the economically active population.

The FTUB Presidium demanded that the government and the employers' union of the Republic take specific measures to secure fulfilment of the tripartite agreement.

KAZAKHSTAN

President of the Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Kazakhstan, FTURK, Siyazbek Mukashev gave an interview to the local newspaper "*Golos-Edilet*". He said the period of building an independent national state in Kazakhstan had not been an easy period for the country's trade unions who kept fighting for their independence and identity in the novel social conditions. "The trade union movement has survived, it has not given up its niche to anyone else, it has been recognised, and it is being reckoned with", he said.

Siyazbek Mukashev particularly mentioned the unions' active involvement in lawmaking activity since the early 1990-ies. It was due to their efforts that the laws on trade unions, collective bargaining, health and safety, and social partnership had been adopted.

Improvement of the union organisational structure is also a prime task. Allied trade unions that suffer, as Bro. Mukashev has put it, "from organisational and financial weakness" must not hesitate to unite. Which does not mean they must *merge*. There is the positive experience of building sectoral associations of trade unions. For example, the aviation workers have established a sectoral federation

consisting of four formerly autonomous trade unions.

The FTURK personnel policy must be reviewed, as the whole corps of trade union officials needs to be rejuvenated, with more young people being involved in the work of collective bodies at all levels of the trade union structure.

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The Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Kazakhstan, FTURK, together with its district and industrial affiliates, decided to take an active part in the next elections of local authorities, or maslihats.

Their participation in the election campaign will help the unions publicise their goals and tasks in the sphere of protecting workers' social and labour relations, and win new supporters. By mid-June the unions had already nominated 223 candidates. Most of them represent the unions of science and education employees, and mining and metallurgical workers. In some electoral districts union leaders were nominated by political parties.

The trade union slogan for the election campaign is "A Decent Life to Workers".

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At a session of the Republican Tripartite Commission for Social Partnership and Regulation of Social and Trade Relations, FTURK President Siyazbek Mukashev and President of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Kazakhstan, CFTUK, S.Belkin issued a joint statement on common action. The document signed by the leaders says they will:

- coordinate their positions in the process of development and implementation of the General Agreement signed by the Government, the employers and the trade unions, as well as in the efforts to protect workers' guarantees and labour rights;

- submit joint proposals on working conditions, work remuneration, employment and social guarantees for consideration by the Tripartite Commission;

- coordinate their work in Parliament committees in the process of formulating new laws and normative acts on social and labour relations and other issues affecting trade unions' interests.

KYRGYZSTAN

In an interview for the press media, President of the Kyrgyzstan Federation of Trade Unions Sagyn Bozgunbayev outlined the priorities in the activity of the national trade union centre.

Following the KFTU 19th Congress held 29 September 2000, the primary concern was to enhance the role of grass-root organizations, step up the efforts by trade union bodies at all levels and promote social partnership. According to Bro. Bozgunbayev, today trade unions are an integral part of the social and political system and a factor of social stability in Kyrgyzstan. The membership dynamics shows the growing confidence in trade unions: while in 1990-1996 the trade union membership shrank from 1.5 million to 700 thousand members, this year it has exceeded 1 million.

The FKTU places much emphasis on promoting the role of collective

agreements and setting up tripartite commissions and councils in industries and regions to settle social and economic labour disputes. The collective agreements coverage has been expanded, and their contents and quality have been improved. What is most important, is that some of the agreements include obligations to raise wages and improve working conditions, and other social guarantees not provided for in the legislation, Sagyn Bozgunbayev said.

On the initiative of the trade unions the Legislative Assembly of the Kyrgyz Republic adopted on 5 June 2003 a law "On Social Partnership". This will also contribute to the development of the collective bargaining system.

Efforts are underway to build a legal basis for trade union activity. To this end, several acts, including laws "On Trade Unions" and "On Labour Protection", have already been adopted. A reform of the labour legislation, which is lagging behind the requirements of a modern market economy and international standards, is yet to be undertaken. At present a new draft Labour Code has been sent to the International Labour Organization for expertise.

Speaking of the practical assistance rendered to workers in the protection of their rights, Sagyn Bozgunbayev cited the following data: while in 2001 the total number of those who appealed to the trade unions for protection of their labour rights was 3042 people, in 2002 this figure reached 4417. The share of workers whose labour rights have been restored has increased by 70 per cent. The support they received from trade union experts in court proceedings played an important role.

MOLDOVA

The situation in the labour market remains extremely difficult. This conclusion was made at a meeting of the Council of the Union Confederation of the Republic of Moldova (UCRM) held 26 June 2003. The employment problem stems from the lack of acceptable jobs, low incomes of workers and the absence of opportunities for professional training and retraining. The employment level of the able-bodied population continues to drop. As of 1 January 2003, the number of officially registered jobless reached 24 thousand, with only ten per cent of them receiving unemployment benefits.

The trade unions believe that the State should pursue a consistent policy to encourage internal and external investment in job creation, and promote small and medium businesses. The Government should exercise a more effective influence on employers to secure timely pay and liquidation of wage arrears.

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At a press conference 18 July, the UCRM accused the Government of ignoring trade unions' claims aimed at improving workers' social and economic conditions.

The Government has ignored the trade union demand for pay rises in the budgetary sector. In response to an appeal by trade unions to increase the temporary incapacity benefits and maternity and childbirth allowances, a law was passed that actually reduced the sums. The Government violates the terms and procedures for coordinating positions with trade

unions on legal acts that affect workers' interests. At its meeting held on July 17, the UCRM Executive decided it was pointless for the trade union centre to participate in the work of the Republican Tripartite Commission. The UCRM reserved the right to resort to legal protest actions until the trade union demands are met.

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UCRM President Petru Chiriac said in August 2003 that the Government of Moldova would settle pay arrears for all the budgetary sector workers in the near future. The appropriate funds had already been allotted. The trade union center had earlier warned it would organize mass protest actions if this demand remained unmet.

On 17 September 2003, the Government of Moldova decided to raise the wages of budgetary sector workers by 15 per cent. Beginning from September 1, this wage teachers, health personnel, employees in the cultural, arts, sports and social spheres will receive their pay rises and from December 1, other categories of workers.

Petru Chiriac stressed that the trade unions believe the 15 per cent increase to be insufficient and "will resume negotiations with the Government over this problem during the discussion of the draft national budget for 2004".

RUSSIA

The Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR) made a statement reporting that the Council of the Federation (Upper Chamber of Parliament) had voted down the bill on the minimal wage rate (MWR) that

provided for the MWR to be increased to 600 roubles as of 1 October, and empowered regional legislative authorities to set higher MWRs than the federal one, based on their local budget funds. The bill had been approved by the majority of the State Duma (Lower Chamber of Parliament). The FNPR described the rejection by the Council of the Federation as absurd. Previously, individual regions could set the MWR at a higher level because of the absence of federal regulatory standards. Now the Council of the Federation declares that the MWR is not to be exceeded even if regional budgets can afford it.

The FNPR believes that the Council of the Federation is blatantly demonstrating disrespect for the Constitution which defines Russia as a "social state" and for the position of the RF President who referred to the struggle against poverty as a primary objective for state authorities.

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10 September 2003 the FNPR held an all-Russia protest action against the above-mentioned decision by the Council of the Federation.

Protest actions took place practically in all regions in the form of picket lines outside the buildings of executive authorities and local Legislative Assemblies, rallies and meetings. According to the FNPR, the events brought together some 77 thousand people.

Chairman of the Council of the Federation Serguey Mironov addressed the trade union representatives who were picketing the Legislative

Assembly building in St.-Petersburg and promised that the upper chamber would adopt a law raising the minimum wages.

In Novosibirsk, the pickets demanded that action be taken to enforce the Labour Code providing that the minimum wage should not be lower than the subsistence minimum.

In the Amur Region, work stoppages lasting from one to two hours were organized at 24 enterprises.

Participants in the pickets, rallies and meetings came out with other demands as well:

- curtail price and tariff rises for goods and services;
- prevent any amendments to the Labour Code that could deteriorate the workers' position;
- eradicate poverty in “the resource-rich Russia”.

The Conciliating Commission of the State Duma and the Council of the Federation involving trade unions have managed to overcome the differences between the upper and the lower chambers about the right of the Federal Subjects to set higher minimum wages. On 24 September the bill “On Minimal Wage Rate” won the approval of the Council of the Federation.

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The FNPR submitted its comments and proposals on the draft federal budget for 2004 to the State Duma. The FNPR believes that the draft fails to meet in full the principal state obligations in the sphere of social protection, poverty reduction and the improvement of living standards.

The budget for 2004 should allocate funds for settling the arrears in wages, including the debt indexation. As of 1 July 2003, the number of the unemployed increased by 22.5 per cent against the same period in the previous year. However, the draft budget has no funds to support the territories with tense labour markets. The share of the employment policy expenses in 2004 will decrease from 0.32 to 0.14 per cent of the GNP as compared to 1998. The sums needed for protection against unemployment should be increased by at least 4.4 billion roubles (US\$ 150 mln).

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The Independent Miners' Union of Russia (IMU) held its congress in Vorkuta from 15-16 September 2003. The Congress discussed the situation in which the IMU has to work today as “extremely difficult”. Relations between interregional organizations have been undermined and the trade union training system has been stagnating.

The main issue that the IMU has to manage is the social protection of coal miners and veterans of the industry. Congress discussed the problems faced by miners' collectives when dealing with the new owners of coal enterprises, the IMU statutes and the issues of trade union property management. A new wage agreement was approved.

Alexander Sergeyev was elected IMU President replacing former President Nikolay Shtyrkov.

UKRAINE

Yury Kalyuzhny, leader of the trade union organization in the joint stock

company "Alchevsky Metallurgical Plant" was brutally beaten by unknown assailants in the doorway of his house 21 July 2003. As a result, he had to undergo a neuro-surgical operation at a hospital in Alchevsk.

Vice-President of the Lugansk regional organisation of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine T.Kislaya told the local police that the attempt on the union leader's life was related to his union activity and his intolerance to embezzlements and abuses at the enterprise. The Company management had repeatedly applied unlawful sanctions against Yury Kalyuzhny (repremands and deprivation of bonuses) that were later on cancelled by court. He kept drawing the attention of the law enforcement authority to the violations of law at the enterprise. Vice-President Kislaya was convinced that the Company management were doing their utmost to crush the trade union organisation lead by Yury Kalyuzhny.

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The Cabinet of Ministers approved a new national Labour Code. The draft law was submitted to the Supreme Rada (Parliament) for consideration and sent to the International Labour Organization for expertise. This news was made public by the Minister of labour and social policy M.Papiyev. The Minister emphasized that the document had been prepared by a working group comprising representatives of the Government, the trade unions and the employers "on the conditions of compromises".

The Supreme Rada of Ukraine introduced amendments to the current legislation following the adoption of the law "On Trade Unions, Their

Rights and Guarantees of Their Activity".

The law provides for trade union stewards to stand proxy to individuals whose rights and interests are subject to protection by trade unions.

The grass-root trade union organisation representing its members' interests should be a party to the collective agreement.

The laws envisage that, in case of any delay in pay, the employer or his/her authorised representative obliged to provide, if requested by the elected trade union body, written permission to obtain information from the banks about the funds available on the enterprise's accounts. The elected body of the grass-root trade union organisation has the right to represent the employees' interests in the process of the debtor enterprise bankruptcy.

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5 - 6 August 2003, the workers of the "Hammer and Sickle" machine-building plant staged a strike and picketed the Kharkov regional administration. They demanded an end to the violations of the labour legislation, repayment of wage debts and replacement of the enterprise management. Due to the reduced output, the enterprise has been experiencing huge losses.

Following negotiations with the city and regional authorities and the plant's administration an agreement was reached providing for a representative of the workers' collective to be elected on the creditors' committee where he could defend workers' interests. A sanation plan will also be prepared for the enterprise.

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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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