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NEWS FROM THE GENERAL CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

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GCTU EXECUTIVE MEETS IN ST.PETERSBURG

The development of cooperation between the General Confederation of Trade Unions (GCTU) and the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (IPA) of the Commonwealth of Independent States was discussed at a meeting of the GCTU Executive Committee held in St.Petersburg 15 April 2005. Participants characterised the relationship as both productive and dynamic. Since it was granted observer status with the IPA in 1993, the GCTU has consistently maintained cooperation with its governing bodies and agencies.

The Inter-Parliamentary Assembly has always been willing to listen to the opinion of workers' representatives on what concerns pressing problems affecting the CIS countries. The Confederation has drafted, or has been involved in drafting, many framework laws and other IPA documents. Today the GCTU and the IPA build their rela-

tions on the principles of social partnership. In this way, they contribute to achieving a legislative rapprochement among the CIS states in the sphere of social and economic policies, promoting their integration in general, and strengthening their friendship and mutual understanding.

Such cooperation has had a positive effect on the IPA law-making process, and has been instrumental in finding civilized solutions to vital issues of workers' social protection. The Executive called on the trade union centres in the New Independent States to do their best in order that provisions of the framework laws and other IPA documents be incorporated in their national legislations.

The Executive Committee examined the progress of the international solidarity campaign "Minimum Wages Not Lower Than the Subsistence Minimum" that is being waged in the Commonwealth of In-

dependent States. In compliance with the decision of the GCTU Council of 3 November 2004, the trade union centres in CIS countries and the industrial Trade Union Internationals had formulated plans of collective action and started their implementation. The Executive recommended that the key slogans for the demonstrations and meetings to be organised by GCTU affiliates on May Day should be "Minimum Wages Not Lower Than the Subsistence Minimum" and "Decent Minimum Wages Lead to Poverty Eradication".

As required by the GCTU Constitution, the membership of the former President of the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine (FTUU) Olexander Stoyan in the GCTU Executive Committee was discontinued, and the membership of the newly elected FTUU President Olexander Yurkin confirmed.

GCTU ADDRESSES ECONOMIC FORUM

The 9th St.Petersburg International Economic Forum was held from 14-16 June 2005. As follows from its motto, "Efficient Economy for Decent Life", the main objective of the event was to look for effective forms of economic management that would be able to secure decent life for people.

Structural reform and the development of innovation in Russia and

other CIS countries were among the major topics discussed.

Speaking to the forum, GCTU General Secretary Vladimir Scherbakov drew the attention of its participants to such an issue as the price to be paid by Commonwealth states for their joining the world economy, particularly for entering the WTO. So far, the economic performance of Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Georgia, the three CIS countries that are already members of the WTO, had not been impressive.

For the CIS states to be able to make good use of the advantages offered by globalisation, the governments must diligently formulate their economic and social strategies. Part of the state's responsibility is to provide all citizens with free access to health service, education and social protection. The state must also restrict the effect of globalisation on the growing gap in citizens' incomes with the help of its work remuneration policy and progressive taxation. The situation when the minimum wages in most CIS countries are below the subsistence minimum cannot be tolerated, Mr Scherbakov stressed.

AZERBAIJAN UNIONS ANGRY WITH TNCs

The Azerbaijan Trade Union Confederation, ATUC, called a meeting of leading trade unionists to consider violations of workers' rights in

transnational companies operative in the country. ATUC President Sattar Mehbaliyev told the gathering that the number of foreign investors in Azerbaijan had increased. However, most attempts to set up trade union organisations at the transnational enterprises had met with bitter resistance put up by management. The meeting adopted a statement saying that local workers in such enterprises are exposed to insults, with their labour and social rights being systematically violated. Some of the work agreements signed are at variance with the Labour Code, while the health and safety situation leaves much to be desired. The wages paid to local workers are several times less than those paid to foreign specialists.

The meeting demanded that such practices of infringing workers' rights be stopped immediately.

FTUB DETERMINED TO FURTHER UNIONISE BELARUS

According to President of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, FTUB, Leonid Kozik, 408 trade union organisations have been recently built in the country's private sector, embracing over 22 thousand workers.

The Presidium of the FTUB Council decided to redouble their efforts to set up trade union organisations in enterprises of all forms of ownership, particularly those situated

in the free economic zones. The unions are now drafting a bill that, if adopted, would oblige the owners of union-free enterprises to place monthly a part of their income equal to three per cent of their payrolls to the bank account of the FTUB.

BELARUS: UNEMPLOYMENT SHRINKING

The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection has reported that as on 1 June 2005 the unemployment rate in Belarus amounted to 1.8 per cent of the economically active population, compared with 2.6 per cent for the same period in 2004. In the early five months of the current year, 87.8 thousand people were officially registered as unemployed, which is 6.4 thousand less than in the same period of 2004. In January-May 2005, 44.7 thousand people were involved in paid public works that were financed from the State Fund for the Promotion of Employment.

KAZAKHSTAN: TRADE UNIONS HOLD CONGRESS

The ordinary 20th Congress of the Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Kazakhstan, FTURK, was held 31 May 2005. It was 80 years since the country's first trade union congress was convened 31 May 1925 in the town of Kyzylorda.

In his message to the congress, President of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev said “the trade unions have now become authoritative institutions of civil society”. He expressed the hope that “Kazakhstan trade unions will continue in all possible ways helping the government to implement the state course for accelerated modernisation of the country, build a competitive economy, and raise the people’s welfare”.

Speaking to the congress, Kazakhstan Prime Minister Akhmetov dwelt particularly on the problem of occupational health and safety, admitting that the injury rates in the country remained very high. “Every workplace accident must be examined thoroughly and carefully. The government will support the unions in this activity”, he said.

The congress approved the policy document “Strategy for Trade Union Activity in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2005-2010”, amended the Constitution of the Federation, and formed the new composition of the FTURK General Council. Siyazbek Mukashev was re-elected President of the FTURK.

The congress adopted a number of statements on the protection of employees’ rights and interests. An appeal addressed to President and the government warns that the new draft Labour Code presently under consideration ‘does not fully agree with Constitutional provisions about the social state’. The draft “strips

the workers of whatever rights they enjoy now under current legislation”. It “does not stipulate the right of workers to join a trade union, nor does it contain any provisions prohibiting discrimination against union members”. The draft document disregards the ILO Conventions ratified by Kazakhstan and the recommendations made by the ILO experts who analysed it. The FTURK proposed that the draft Code should increase the employer’s responsibility for infringement of workers’ rights.

Among the guests of the congress were the GCTU General Secretary Vladimir Scherbakov and the ICFTU representative for the CIS Vadim Borisov.

KYRGYZSTAN: UNIONS CONDEMN DESTRUCTIVE FORCES

The Kyrgyzstan Federation of Trade Unions, KFTU, expressed its deep concern over the aggravation of the political and social situation in the country caused by “reckless anarchist actions being committed by people who place their personal or group ambitions above public interests”. “Exploiting the difficulties of the transition period, they are trying to stir up discontent with the new state power”. This is evident from the social disorders instigated locally, and from the attack on the House of Government organised 17 June in Bishkek.

The KFTU Council called on all union members and workers not to yield to provocation from the destructive forces, but, on the contrary, join in the efforts to build a stronger state. "What people need today is stability, jobs, wages, and confidence in tomorrow". The Federation appealed to all authorities to secure fair Presidential elections, and urged trade union members to take an active part in the polls.

MOLDOVA: CLOSING UNION RANKS

A session of the Council of the Confederation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Moldova, CSRM, held 21 April 2005 considered the question "On the consolidation of ranks and on the unity of action by the Confederation aimed at the protection of occupational, labour and socio-economic rights and interests of union members".

Addressing the meeting, CSRM President Petru Chiriac said the Confederation was going through a hard period of "consolidating its independence and establishing the democratic values at the levels of its primary, territorial and industrial structures".

Over the last few years, the CSRM has lost a considerable part of its membership. However, Petru Chiriac was satisfied that, owing to the efforts taken, the organisation

had survived. Today it has over 400 thousand members in 5 749 primary organisations.

The Confederation issued an appeal to the country's government, associations of employers, and public and political organisations. It called on the President of Moldova to put an end to the attempts to split and divide the trade union movement that had already caused serious damage to the Confederation and marred the country's image.

Members of the CSRM Council expressed the hope that Parliament would adopt the necessary amendments to current legislation to create normal conditions for trade union activity. So far the legal levers stipulated by the Law on Trade Unions have proved ineffective.

The CSRM expects that the government will pay more attention to the efficiency of social dialogue institutions at all levels, and the employers' associations will be more responsive to the needs and interests of workers.

The Confederation spoke in favour of cooperation with all political forces and civil society institutions, based on the principles of equality and independence.

The next ordinary congress of the CSRM will take place in October 2005.

MOLDOVA: CSRM ADVOCATES LEGAL LABOUR

The CSRM organised a round table 24 June 2005 as part of the campaign to reduce the scope of the informal economy under the slogan “Legal Labour Benefits You and the Nation”.

Over the last five years, the CSRM has been carrying out special measures to raise the degree of the social protection of workers employed in this sphere.

In 2005, the CSRM held press conferences and seminars on this problem, and set up a hot line to render practical assistance to trade union leaders and activists, and direct to informal sector employees.

The main objectives of the campaign are to:

- make the social partners aware of the serious challenge presented by the informal sector phenomenon;
- encourage the organising of informal sector employees; and
- promote cooperation with the social partners and non-governmental organisations that are interested in the development of legislative acts aimed at improving the status of this category of workers.

The CRSM believes the State must undertake to coordinate all measures to be taken within the framework of this campaign, as it corre-

sponds directly to the tasks of “modernising economy and reducing poverty among the population” proclaimed by the Government.

RUSSIA: DANGEROUS GROWTH OF RATES

The growing rates for housing and public utilities were a key issue at the meeting of the FNPR Executive Committee 12 April 2005. According to statistics, in the first two months of the current year the growth of the utility price and service index was almost equal to the growth of such tariffs for the entire previous year. And this against a background of an extremely low paying capacity of the population. Such a process could not but trigger civil discontent. Mass protest actions had been organised by trade unions in Voronezh, Perm, Nizhny Novgorod, Khabarovsk, and Volgograd.

The Federation’s leaders were instructed to demand that the government agencies should check whether the rates introduced in the regions were well-grounded and reasonable. The Executive also suggested that union leaders start negotiations with the above bodies to establish that the maximum permissible share of housing and utility expenses should not exceed 15 per cent of the total family income.

RUSSIAN UNIONS STAGE PROTESTS

The Automobile and Agricultural Machine-Building Workers’ Union of

Russia organised a picket 17 May 2005 outside the House of Government in Moscow. The picket line was built by representatives of trade union committees and work collectives that had come from the industry's largest enterprises.

The unions are concerned over the drop in production, reduction of jobs, and decrease in pay. The wage arrears have reached 700 million roubles (about US\$ 25 million). According to the Union's Vice President, Viktor Gorenkov, expert estimates indicate that with Russia joining the WTO its automobile and agricultural machine-building industry will lose from a third to a half of its output, which may cause the collapse of enterprises. Participants in the action put forward demands whose satisfaction could help improve the situation in the industry, and sent an appeal to the Government on behalf of the 807 thousand union members. None of government officials came out to meet the picket participants. The FNPR issued a special statement supporting the action by the union.

The Federation of Trade Unions of Employees in the Armed Forces of Russia held a protest rally outside the House of Government 25 May 2005 involving approximately 900 participants. The reason for action was that, despite the Presidential decree, the Government had failed to raise the wages of civil personnel of the Armed Forces by 20 per cent, as had been done for employees in

other budgetary sectors. The protesters demanded that the Government increase the wages of civil personnel in the Armed Forces by 100 per cent in 2005, simultaneously with the employees in other budgetary industries.

RUSSIA: UNIONS WANT MINISTRY BACK

In an interview to the Radio "Mayak" 14 May 2005, FNPR President Mikhail Shmakov said there were no authorities in today's Russia that would encourage the employers to engage in effective bargaining with the trade unions. Should such a situation continue, one might ask: why do we need such a social partnership? Must we really try to solve all problems through negotiation, or wouldn't it be easier to take tougher measures, such as strikes, work stoppages, or demands for Government change? Mikhail Shmakov pointed out that most claims put forward by workers and trade unions were simply ignored.

Mikhail Shmakov was of the opinion that the negative processes in the development of social partnership resulted largely from the abolition of the Ministry of Labour and from the merger of different activities regulating the social sphere into a Ministry of Public Health and Social Development. The issues of collective bargaining were overlooked in the process of building new government structures.

“The State remains a major employer in the country. Making believe it does not care for labour relations is at least immoral”, said Mikhail Shmakov. “For effective solution of social and labour issues we need the Russian Ministry of Labour back, with all the functions it used to have in the sphere of settlement of labour disputes”

RUSSIA: FNPR CONCERNED OVER STATE OF TRAINING

The number of the unemployed in Russia has reached six million. The data have been published by the FNPR, with reference to the Federal Service for State Statistics.

The FNPR believes that nowadays quality vocational education is an important factor in workers' social protection against unemployment and poverty. It is equally important for the employers to have competent and trained personnel. Meanwhile, trade unions estimate that only six per cent of the unemployed annually receive state-financed vocational training through employment services. Most employers, too, show little concern for the matter. Organisations spend an average of only 0.3 per cent of their wage funds on job training for workers. The system of vocational education is in a plight, with the material basis of training institutions being ruined, and the instructors' salaries extremely low. This

has a direct impact on the quality of vocational training. The FNPR believes that the future development of occupational education will require active social partnership and committed teamwork involving the State, the educational establishments, the employers and the workers.

UKRAINE: SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP TO BE REVIVED

Ukraine's President Viktor Yushchenko met with President of the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine, FTUU, Olexander Yurkin 18 May 2005 to discuss the prospects for social dialogue in the country.

Olexander Yurkin proposed to the head of state that a national tripartite conference should be convened in the autumn of 2005, based on the European Union's experience and ILO recommendations. He also suggested that the National Council for Social Partnership resume its activity by calling a meeting of its renewed composition under the chairmanship of Viktor Yushchenko. The President supported the trade union proposals and issued the necessary instructions.

UKRAINE: NEED TO ELIMINATE POVERTY

Head of the Parliamentary Committee for Economic Policy, S.Gurenko,

warned that the impoverishment of the population had placed on the agenda the issue of the future of the Ukrainian people, and the prospects for its remaining within the national frontiers. Over seven million Ukrainians are presently seeking jobs abroad. In Ukraine, he said, a large section of population lived on about one dollar a day, while the number of starving people had not diminished. Mr Gurenko noted that Ukraine had not made any visible progress in reducing poverty, despite the commitment undertaken in 2002 to cut the poverty rates by two times. Although the new power in Ukraine promised to create five million jobs, no concrete programme for implementing this task has so far been developed.

Mr Gurenko emphasised that the first priority for the Supreme Rada (Parliament) should be the adoption of a State Programme for Eliminating Poverty to be followed by laws essential for its implementation, including a law on super-income taxation.

UKRAINE: FTUU PRESIDENT REVIEWS SOCIAL SITUATION IN THE COUNTRY

Addressing the International Labour Conference 9 June 2005 in Geneva, FTUU President Olexander Yurkin said the trade unions were doing their best to help implement measures aimed at eliminating pov-

erty among the population, particularly among the working population. This can only be achieved by securing decent pay provided its growth will outstrip the consumer price rises.

In the first half of the year, the average monthly wage grew by 30 per cent as compared with the corresponding period of the previous year. This sum exceeds by more than 52 per cent the subsistence minimum established for able-bodied persons. The growth of the average wage has been in advance of the consumer price rises.

Nevertheless, some 28 per cent of Ukraine's population remain below the official poverty line. These are, primarily, agricultural workers and public service employees.

According to the ILO calculation technique, the unemployment level constitutes 8.6% of the economically active population (the level of officially registered unemployment is 3.5%). Today in Ukraine, one vacancy is claimed by five registered unemployed persons. Apart from that, according to different estimates, between two and seven million Ukrainians have to work outside the country.

Olexander Yurkin added that the Ukrainian trade unions insisted on the adoption of a new Labour Code that would guarantee decent job to anybody who is willing to work diligently.

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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 22 SEPTEMBER 1993, THE THIRD CONGRESS OF THE GCTU 18 SEPTEMBER 1997, AND THE FIFTH (EXTRAORDINARY) CONGRESS OF THE GCTU 26 MARCH 2004.

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, AZERBAIJAN, BELARUS, GEORGIA, KAZAKHSTAN, KYRGYZSTAN, MOLDOVA, RUSSIA, TAJIKISTAN, UZBEKISTAN, AND UKRAINE, AS WELL AS 32 BRANCH TRADE UNION INTERNATIONALS.

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 COUNCIL AND THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.

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

*PRESIDENT OF THE GCTU IS MIKHAIL SHMAKOV,
GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE GCTU IS VLADIMIR SCHERBAKOV*

DEAR READERS

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