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NEWS FROM THE GENERAL CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

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GCTU SOCIAL COMMISSION MEETS IN MOSCOW

The GCTU Commission for the Protection of Workers' Social and Economic Interests held its session in late December in Moscow.

Addressing the session, GCTU General Secretary Vladimir Scherbakov said that the Confederation had launched preparations for its regular Congress to be held 14 September 2007, and in the meantime will mark its 15th anniversary in April 2007. Protection of workers' socio-economic interests in CIS countries is given high priority in the activity of the Confederation. It was on these issues that the Commission focused its deliberations.

Participants discussed with great interest a draft framework agreement between an industrial Trade Union International and a transnational corporation. Details have been specified as to the need for concluding such agreements, the powers of its signatories, trade union tactics in establish-

ing dialogue with TNCs, and the correlation between the regional agreements and the global agreements negotiated by Global Union Federations.

They also considered how the unions should treat the draft model law "On State and Private Employment Services (Agencies)" submitted earlier to the Permanent Committee of the EurAsEC Inter-Parliamentary Assembly. As is known, ILO Convention No.181 on private employment agencies provides them with powers to recruit workers for hiring out to a user enterprise, that is to deal in contract and agency labour. Two principal observations made in the course of discussion were that: (a) state and private employment agencies must have different rights and responsibilities; and (b) no fees or other charges, direct or indirect, can be imposed on the workers.

The Commission also discussed the activities of union legal services in the CIS that play an important role in protecting workers' lawful rights and interests in social and labour legal rela-

tions, exercise public control over the implementation of law in that sphere, and supervise the observance of collective agreements and accords.

LABOUR MIGRATION: TOP-PRIORITY CONCERN FOR UNIONS

The GCTU held a workshop in February for the leaders and specialists of its affiliates on labour migration in the CIS countries.

In his opening address, GCTU President Mikhail Shmakov emphasised the importance for trade unions to be involved in regulating labour migration. That was crucial both for the observance of rights and interests of the population of the receiving state, including the working population, and for the protection of migrant workers' rights and interests.

GCTU General Secretary Vladimir Scherbakov told the workshop that the CIS Region was becoming increasingly attractive for labour migration. In terms of immigrants received, Russia ranks second in the world list, after the USA, with Ukraine being fourth and Kazakhstan ninth.

Vladimir Scherbakov believes migration can be effectively managed only through international cooperation. The development of just and rational policies and practices in the sphere of labour migration will require dialogue between governments at all levels, with the involvement of social partners – the trade unions and the employers.

The workshop was also addressed by representatives of the migration agencies of Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, the ILO and the International Organisation for Migration.

Participants pointed out that trade union coverage of migrant workers and direct participation of the unions in the development and implementation of migration policies in the CIS countries were a long overdue problem. It is essential for trade unions to make wider use of agreements on co-operation between national trade union centres, as well as industrial trade unions of the Newly Independent States. Such arrangements can facilitate the establishment of information and legal centres for giving advice to union members who seek a job in another CIS country or migrant workers who are already employed in one country or another.

Migrant workers should be encouraged to join the trade unions, and such a right should be provided for in the statutory documents of industrial trade unions, while the coverage of collective agreements and accords should be extended to include migrants.

AZERBAIJAN: TRADE UNIONS APPEAL TO GOVERNMENT

The Confederation of Trade Unions of Azerbaijan, CTUA, appealed to the Cabinet of Ministers requesting it to revise the minimum wage rates, the subsistence minimum, the basic amount of pensions and the target-oriented social assistance.

The trade unions explain their appeal by the need to adjust the volumes of social payments to the new prices of electric power and communal services established by the Rates Council.

AZERBAIJAN LAUNCHES RESORTS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliiev has signed a decree launching the development of a state programme "Resorts of Azerbaijan".

The Programme, which is to be worked out with due regard for the trade union opinion, must aim to attract both local and foreign investment in building an up-to-date infrastructure for medical treatment and recreation of Azerbaijan citizens and foreigners, and contain a step-by-step strategy for the development of rest homes and health facilities, irrespective of their subordination or form of ownership.

BELARUS: TRADE UNIONISTS JOIN DEPUTY CORPS

Almost 1,500 FTUB activists were elected deputies of local and regional councils, including the Minsk City Council.

The wide representation of trade unions in the councils gives them additional opportunities to improve social partnership relations and increase their influence on the life in the regions.

The union deputies see their main task in tackling social problems and fulfilling the mandates they received from their voters.

GEORGIA: UNIONS REJECTING PLANNED MASS DISMISSALS

The Georgian Trade Union Confederation, GTUC, has issued a statement calling upon the government to abstain from mass dismissals in public health establishments, and urging the unions to resort to all methods envisaged by Georgian and international law to protect their rights.

The Confederation considers it inadmissible to carry out such public health reforms as will cause mass dismissals of medical workers.

"The government must undertake social responsibility before the citizens in what concerns employment in the public health sector, and develop a system of training and re-training for health personnel", the statement says.

KAZAKHSTAN: GENERAL AGREEMENT SIGNED

A General Agreement for 2007-08 between the Government of Kazakhstan, Republican trade union centres and national employers' associations was signed in December 2006.

The agreement includes such important aspects as the development of the labour market and labour re-

lations, growth of employment, improvement of professional training, promotion of social policies, and the provision of social guarantees, labour protection and public health services.

KYRGYZSTAN: UNIONS READY TO FACE UP TO CHALLENGES

The Council of the Kyrgyzstan Federation of Trade Unions, KFTU, held a session in January 2007 in Bishkek. KFTU President Sagyn Bozgunbayev presented a report on the results of trade union activities in 2006 and on the tasks for 2007. He said the GDP growth for the past year constituted 102.7%, which means a failure to reach the target figures set by the National Development Strategy for 2006-10. The average monthly wages hardly cover the minimum consumer budget, while the minimum wages amount to a mere 11.8% of the subsistence minimum.

According to estimates made by international organisations, at least 600 thousand Kyrgyzstan citizens have left the country in search of jobs, with part of them having already found full-time or partial employment. The socio-economic development is exposed to the pressure of the external debt that has reached nearly US\$ 2 billion, or 66% of the GDP. The process of union membership reduction is underway.

Despite these difficulties, the KFTU has been actively looking for solu-

tions to the challenges the country faces in the spheres of employment, migration, housing, municipal services, tariff and rate policies, and child labour.

Session highlighted the need for gradual establishment of a new type of trade unions that would be better adapted to a market environment and meet the international standards. In this connection, the KFTU is strengthening its international links, being affiliated with the GCTU and maintaining fraternal relations with trade unions in the post-Soviet countries.

Participants thought it necessary to enhance the motivation of union membership. Industrial unions should seriously consider strengthening their ranks by mergers. Trade union bodies of all levels should constantly and purposefully work for better consolidation, stronger unity and cohesion, and stricter discipline while developing union democracy.

“Today, we are facing a very crucial challenge, and that is to rally around the GCTU and help our countries strengthen their political and economic ties and eventually build a common economic space. This will be of benefit to all our nations and, in the long run, to all common people”, said Bozgunbayev.

MOLDOVA: AUTHORITIES MUST KEEP PROMISES

The Confederation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Moldova,

CTURM, organised a protest rally 22 February 2007 involving about seven thousand workers from the budgetary sector. The action was triggered by the changes in Law No. 355 on the system of work remuneration in the budgetary sector.

The law had envisaged an increase in pay for teachers, doctors and scientific workers as from 1 January 2007. Addressing the rally, CTURM President Petru Chiriac described the steps taken by the country's leaders as irresponsible and confirmed the unions' intention to boycott the Law on Amending and Supplementing Law No. 355 as adopted by the Parliament.

"We say with all responsibility that unless our demands are met the CTURM will continue its actions of protest in accordance with current law", stressed P.Chiriac.

RUSSIA PLUNGING INTO PENSION CRISIS

An architect of the current pension scheme confessed that, unless something was changed in the near future, the situation of Russian pensioners would keep aggravating, and their pensions will keep depreciating in relation to wages.

The present-day mechanisms for pension indexation are not efficient, they only lead to relative impoverishment as the scale of pensions

vis-à-vis the average wage is steadily decreasing.

Whereas in 2000 the average pension was roughly equal to one third of the average wage, in December 2006 it fell below 0.2 of the average wage – for the first time in Russian history. If the tendency persists, about one third of Russians may find themselves below the poverty line.

The current method of poverty evaluation based on a decreed subsistence minimum ignores the actual expenses of citizens on medical treatment and municipal services, and for that reason poverty evaluation based on the living standards would be more accurate.

According to experts of the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, at least 20% of population may be classified as being poor. Those include people who are only able to meet their essential daily needs in foodstuffs and clothing, and can avail themselves of educational and public health services only within the social security schemes.

Pensioners account for 40 per cent of the poor. Another 15 per cent of the population belong to the so called "floating" category of low-income citizens who can any moment join the poor as a result of reduced social guarantees or a relative decrease in the pension size. Therefore, the share of the poor in Russia can soon rise from 20 to 30%.

RUSSIA: FNPR PRESIDENT NOT HAPPY WITH PAY, PENSIONS

Speaking in the radio programme "Trade Union News", FNPR President Mikhail Shmakov said that "we can't be happy with the current rates of pay. They lag behind the real rates that should be at least 2-2.5 times higher.

Thanks to trade union pressure, the growth of wages for the last five years has been considerable, and amounted to 20-25 per cent a year. However, the wages that most workers in Russia receive today are insufficient.

The pension rates remain rather low too, and the rate of lost income compensated by the pension has fallen over last few years from 32 to 27 per cent".

RUSSIA: UNIONS DEMAND DECENT LIVING FOR PENSIONERS

The Russian Association of Trade Unions in the Basic Industries and Construction has addressed their compatriots with an appeal against the low pensions that says:

"We appeal to those who have already experienced the injustice of the current pension scheme, to those who will soon taste its fruit, and to those who are now young enough not to think about their pensions!

We, representatives of trade unions in the basic industries and construction of Russia - metallurgists, miners, chemical workers, oil workers, builders, electric power workers, atomic power workers, forestry workers, machine-building workers, and geologists – can no longer tolerate the indifference displayed by the authorities to the plight of people who toiled hard to create the wealth and might of Russia and who have found themselves in dire straits in their old age.

We want to draw the attention of the state powers to the problems of Russian pensioners who are compelled to drag out a miserable existence because of the extremely low pensions at a time when the country has a huge frozen Stabilisation Fund, an enormous gold and foreign currency reserve and a federal budget surplus!

We believe that the pension should not be less than 40 per cent of the earnings, which will be in keeping with the international standards.

We demand an end to the pension genocide that dooms our fellow-citizens to extinction.

We propose that to the insurance principles of the pension fund scheme be reinstated, and we are ready to exercise public control over Pension Fund expenditures.

We insist that the basic work pension be established by law at the level of the local subsistence minimum.

Our principal demand is that Russian pensioners should have decent living standards!

We want our voice, supported by you, to be heeded by the State authorities!

We call upon you to join us in defending the constitutional right of Russian citizens to a decent old age life and support our demands and actions!"

RUSSIA: PROSECUTOR-GENERAL, FNPR TO SUPERVISE RULE OF LAW

The Prosecutor-General's Office and the FNPR have signed a plan of joint actions to enhance Prosecutor's supervision and trade union control over the compliance with labour legislation.

A regular exchange of information will be established between the Prosecutor-General's Office and the FNPR concerning the observance of citizens' constitutional rights to work and occupational health and safety in order to promote the rule of law in that sphere.

In conjunction with regional public prosecutor's departments, the FNPR intends to study the experience accumulated by local trade union organisations in co-operating with the public procurator's offices and government agencies responsible for supervision and control over the observance of labour rights, with a view to improving joint work regionally.

The regional public prosecutors were advised to invite, as necessary, specialists from FNPR affiliates for conducting joint audits of compliance with labour legislation, primarily in what concerns wages and health and safety.

The plan envisages holding joint seminars, conferences and round tables on pressing issues relating to the application of labour laws.

UKRAINE: SUBSISTENCE MINIMUM TO BE RAISED

The Ukrainian Government intends to revise the rates of the subsistence minimum and the minimum wages in the first quarter of 2007. Work has already been started on elaborating guidelines for shaping the subsistence minimum and determining its amount in accordance with the Ukrainian legislation and international standards. A draft law on amendments to the 2007 State Budget providing for raising the minimum pay to 420 hryvnias as from 1 May 2007, 430 hryvnias as from 1 August 2007, and 460 hryvnias as from 1 December 2007.

MIKHAIL SHMAKOV ELECTED PERC PRESIDENT

The Pan-European Regional Council of the ITUC was set up at a founding assembly held in March 2007 in Rome. GCTU President Mikhail Shmakov was elected President of the PERC.

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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

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