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NEWS FROM THE GENERAL CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

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Union Leaders Meet in Minsk

Promotion of speedier integration in the Commonwealth of Independent States and the current situation in the region's trade union movement were the two main items on the agenda of a meeting held by leading trade unionists from CIS countries. The meeting that took place from 24-25 August 2000 in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, was attended by leaders of the GCTU and the eight national trade union centres it affiliates.

The union leaders called on the Heads of State of the CIS countries to take urgent steps to broaden the legislative basis that will help closer integration, freer contacts between the peoples and the solution of acute socio-economic, labour and humanitarian problems. CIS unions are willing to make their tangible contribution towards the end. The participants proposed that a tripartite Social Council be set up to deal with economic and social policies and labour relations in the Commonwealth. Trade union experts should be more actively involved in

the work of such a Council, as well as of the CIS Executive Committee and Inter-Parliamentary Assembly.

The final communique pledges the unions' commitment to the principles of social partnership, and stresses the need to make their protective functions more efficient. The document cites cases of trade union rights and freedoms being violated in some CIS countries. State authorities keep interfering in the unions' affairs, while the basic ILO conventions concerning freedom of association, and the right to organise and bargain collectively are not always observed. The problem has been particularly acute in Belarus recently.

The meeting expressed support for and solidarity with Belarussian trade unions in their struggle for union rights and workers' interests.

Belarus: Unions Fighting for Independence

The friction between the state authorities and unions in Belarus, of which we reported in our previous

issues, has grown into an open nationwide conflict today.

The aggravation has primarily come as a result of the militant actions by trade unions that are making increasingly strong demands against the background of a deteriorating economic and social situation, and the official attempts to curb the trade union movement as the parliamentary elections draw nearer. The pressure being put on the workers' organisation takes the form of refusal to register them, attempts to confiscate their premises, intimidation, interference in their election campaigns, and stripping them of the right to strike.

Belarussian trade unions have lodged a complaint with the ILO against the violations of workers' fundamental rights. Vladimir Goncharik, President of the Belarussian Federation of Trade Unions, BFTU, sent an open letter to the country's President Alexander Lukashenko drawing his attention to the union rights violations.

The letter presents the facts of restricting the constitutional and universally recognised right of workers to build freely trade union organisations. In fact, the very establishment of a trade union is dependent on the employer's whim. This makes it possible for government functionaries to divide the country's trade unions into «agreeable» and «disagreeable» ones.

This arbitrary treatment of trade unions has recently acquired massive

proportions. For instance, the Presidential Administration issued a directive instructing the Government Ministers to come forward with their own (!) candidates for the presidents of industrial trade unions, and press for them being elected at the congresses. Similar instructions went down to local authorities who are expected to get their proteges elected as leaders of district and community unions. There were numerous cases of pressure being put on union congress delegates. The state-owned media have launched government-inspired campaigns to smear the trade unions and their leaders, and to twist their aims and practices.

Vladimir Goncharik confirmed the BFTU's adherence to the principles of social partnership and called on President Lukashenko, who is the guarantor of the Constitution, to stop the lawlessness and arbitrariness.

ILO Sends Mission to Belarus

An ILO mission headed by ICFTU General Secretary Bill Jordan visited Belarus in mid-July just to conclude that Belarussian trade unions had good grounds for the complaint they had earlier lodged with the ILO. The delegation discovered quite a few facts of open noncompliance with the ILO conventions ratified by Belarus. According to BFTU President Vladimir Goncharik, «what we're facing now is an attempt to put the trade unions under Government control».

Participating in the mission was President of the Federation of

Independent Trade Unions of Russia, Mikhail Shmakov, who brought the message of full support from the Russian trade union centre. «The situation now evolving in Belarus, he said, worries Russian trade unions, as it may spread to other countries in our Commonwealth».

Speaking to a press conference on 17 June, Mikhail Shmakov voiced his apprehension that, with the union treaty already signed between Russia and Belarus, there appears a real danger that the legislative systems of the two countries might be unified, based on Belarussian standards.

Andrei Isayev, head of «Solidarnost», a group of trade union MPs in the State Duma, said that as part of solidarity with Belarussian unions FNPR had started preparations for parliamentary hearings on the situation in the Belarussian trade union movement.

GCTU Shows Solidarity With Protestors

The nationwide protest staged by Russian motor transport workers on 15 August 2000 was the largest action organised so far by the country's workers this year. The protestors demanded settlement of wage arrears, decent pay, the fulfilment of the collective agreement, and renewal of the public transport fleets. Thousands of workers were involved in the rallies, meetings, picket lines, etc. The most massive actions took place in Moscow and St.Petersburg, while in the Primorski Territory (the Far East), all motor

transport enterprises closed down for the day.

President of the Russian trade union Viktor Mokhnachev warned that the motor transport workers were ready to start preparations for an all-Russia strike on 1 January 2001 if the Government failed to take concrete measures to mend the situation before the end of the year.

The General Confederation of Trade Unions supported the decision to organise the action, and expressed its solidarity with the industry's workers. The GCTU Executive were confident that the nationwide action of protest by motor transport workers would tangibly contribute to a successful struggle for their rights and interests.

GCTU: Say No to Fixed-Term Jobs

The GCTU is worried over the wide spread in the CIS of fixed-term and civil-law labour contracts that are gradually supplanting the traditional open-end labour contracts. The process undermines the stability of labour relations, tells adversely on the use of workforce, and denies workers their basic rights and guarantees. Moreover, this hampers organising, which leaves the workers without trade union protection.

With the problem growing increasingly urgent, the GCTU Legal and International Departments prepared, and submitted to the Executive Committee, a special memo on the issue. The Executive approved fully the conclusions and proposals it contains.

The document reveals that concluding individual employment contracts for a specified period is widely practised throughout the Commonwealth. In Belarus, where employers have the right to sign such contracts, they number in the dozens of thousands. In Russia, whole enterprises and even industries often switch over to terminal employment schemes. Quite a few Ukrainian enterprises have actually imposed three-to-twelve-month contracts on their workers. In Kazakhstan, fixed-term contracts are particularly characteristic of joint ventures. The employees will normally work 10-12 hours a day, without paid leave or sick pay.

Labour legislation in CIS countries favours open-end employment contracts, with individual labour contracts for a fixed term being allowed only in the cases specified by law. However, employers ignore the fact, and they are never called to account for such conduct.

Despite the bitter trade union opposition, the number of fixed-term labour contracts has been growing. The GCTU believes such a development unacceptable, the more so as several CIS countries have ratified ILO Convention No 158 that provides for guarantees against fixed-term employment.

In line with the draft concept of the CIS Labour Code adopted by the GCTU Executive, the memo recommends legislative measures to restrict the use of fixed-term labour

contracts. It proposes that the trade unions undertake a large-scale revision of fixed-term employment practices in their countries, run regular courses on the fundamentals of labour legislation for their activists, and work for the adoption of a law on trade union organisations at workplaces.

GCTU's International Links

The GCTU played host to the delegations of the World Confederation of Labour (WCL), the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (AFTU), and the General Federation of Labour of Belgium (FGTB) that visited Moscow in June 2000.

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The visit to Moscow of the WCL delegation, which was headed by General Secretary Willy Thys, ended with the agreement to hold regular consultations between the two Confederations, and to broaden the exchange of information through electronic media. Next year the GCTU and the WCL will conduct a joint seminar to discuss the problems of organising trade union activity at multinational and privatised enterprises. Both parties stressed the need of united actions by the world trade union movement to combat the negative effects of globalisation.

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AFTU Secretary Su Liqing, who headed the Chinese delegation, spoke high of the cooperation with the GCTU and said they had good

perspectives. The Chinese delegation showed a keen interest in the GCTU's relations with the CIS inter-parliamentary and interstate bodies, especially in what concerns the development of model legislative acts. The Chinese union leader spoke in favour of resuming training courses in Moscow for trade unionists from China. Both sides said they were ready to continue coordinating their efforts in the international trade union movement and in international organisations.

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The FGTB delegation headed by President Michel Nollet was in Moscow on a return visit. The main accent in the talks with GCTU leaders was made on the exchange of opinions about the present situation in the world trade union movement and further cooperation between the GCTU and the FGTB.

Kazakhstan: War on Want

The longstanding efforts by the Kazakhstan Federation of Trade Unions, KFTU, has finally brought fruit. The country's Government has approved a Programme to Combat Poverty for 2000-02. In doing so, the Government has officially acknowledged that the problems have grown out of any reasonable proportions. The principal challenge now facing the unions is to insist on a state-financed system of economic and social security.

The KFTU was actively involved in the development of the Programme that specifies the tasks, the means

of financial and legal support, and the expected effects. A special chapter deals with the estimating of poverty rates, social policy and state support for socially vulnerable sections of the population, such as pensioners, disabled persons, invalids, and children. The document establishes the methods of determining the poverty line and target-oriented social assistance.

New jobs are to be created in industry and agriculture. Priorities have been set for the state policy concerning small business, the provision of jobs for the unemployed, and the buildup of public works.

The World Bank opposed bitterly the adoption of the Programme reasoning that the social expenditure it involves would place too heavy a burden on the state budget. In this context, the 18th Congress of the KFTU held on 24 May 2000 called on the country's President and Government to resist the pressure, approve the Programme, and combine the efforts by the Government, trade unions and employers in its implementation.

The Federation and its affiliates intend to put the realisation of the Programme under public control.

Russia: FNPR Marks 10th Birthday

The largest GCTU affiliate, the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, FNPR, marked its 10th anniversary on 18-19 September 2000. As he spoke to a

press conference on the occasion, FNPR President Mikhail Shmakov summed up the activities of the trade union centre for the period.

Despite the sizeable drop in membership (from 60 million in 1990 down to 38 million today), the FNPR remains the largest trade union organisation in Russia that both the employers and authorities have to reckon with. It has successfully adapted to the new situation and is now fully independent in defining its policy. In the aftermath of the financial crisis of August 1998, the FNPR managed to make the Government pay serious attention to the wage nonpayment problem and improve the situation.

Mikhail Shmakov believes the FNPR to be part and parcel of the world trade union movement. Being a GCTU affiliate, it intends to join the ICFTU, while maintaining good contacts with other world trade union organisations and many national trade union centres on all the continents.

The forthcoming ordinary FNPR congress in 2001 is expected to consolidate the positive changes that have taken place in the member organisations. Bro Shmakov stressed that the Federation should strive to retain its democratic principles and, simultaneously, enhance centralisation in such spheres as finance, training and collective actions.

The anniversary session of the FNPR General Council held on 19

September featured several personalities, including the ILO representative Manuel Simon, Vice-Premier Valentina Matviyenko and Minister of Labour and Social Development Alexander Pochinok.

A GCTU message issued on the occasion says the Federation has managed to stand up to all attacks and overcome all crises just to emerge from the ordeals as strong and dynamic as never before. The FNPR's insistence combined with the collective actions of its affiliates have helped to bring down the social costs of reform, reduce unemployment, and get the Russian Tripartite Commission going. The message praises the FNPR contribution to the establishment and development of the General Confederation of Trade Unions and to the consolidation of the trade union movement in the CIS.

Russia: Duma to Scrutinise Privatisation Conflicts

The wave of industrial conflicts caused by redistribution of ownership, often accompanied by the use of force against the workers, has compelled the State Duma to consider the problem more closely.

Responding to an initiative by the group of trade union MPs «Solidarnost», Parliament held special hearings on the problem in April. Participants of the debate proposed that a special Parliamentary commission be set up to study such situations and prepare draft laws excluding the

possibility of their recurrence in future.

13 September 2000 such a commission was formed, composed of seven deputies from different factions. The public movement Union of Labour, which represents the political wing of the FNPR, called on its regional branches to render assistance to the Parliamentary commission.

Russia: Gref or Grief Programme?

The Russian Government has approved the long-range economic and social programme drawn up by a group of economists headed by Minister of Industry and Commerce Herman Gref.

A special statement issued by the FNPR gives a trade union appraisal of the programme. It says the measures proposed by the Government will produce the diametrically opposite results: instead of well-being workers will get lower living standards.

The programme provides for removal of state guarantees for workers' incomes. Without specifying any distinct measures to raise the population's living standards, the Government proposes a switch-over to paid services in the spheres of education, culture, and health service. Employers' rights have been broadened without any justification, in particular, through the extensive introduction of individual labour contracts. The Government seems to be willing to dismantle the present-day

system of social partnership, in fact, to refuse the practice of concluding a General Agreement, curb the powers of the Russian Tripartite Commission, and restrict the rights of trade unions.

The FNPR described the Gref Programme as an attempt by the Government to withdraw from the economic and social spheres, and abandon the idea of building a socially oriented state that would require pursuing a people-centred policy securing a decent standard of living for the population. All this is nothing but an attempt to revise the Constitution of Russia.

Ukraine: ILO Demands Back Wages

The ILO labour standards committee considered, for the second time in the last three years, the question of violating ILO Convention No 95 by the Government of Ukraine. The complaint was lodged by the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine, FTUU.

Addressing the session, FTUU President Aleksandr Stoyan said the problem of repaying the wage arrears was still there, and millions of workers in the country have to suffer the consequences. He called on the ILO to exert pressure on the Government and make it comply with the Convention Ukraine had ratified.

The labour standards committee took a decision that obliges Ukraine to correct the situation and do away with the wage debts.

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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 39 BRANCH TRADE UNION INTERNATIONALS. BESIDES BILATERAL AGREEMENTS ON CO-OPERATION WAS SIGNED WITH THE TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION OF AZERBAIJAN .

THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE GCTU-AFFILIATED ORGANISATIONS TOTALS APPROX. 100 MILLION.

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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