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**NEWS FROM THE GENERAL CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS**

N 31

October-December 2000

## **GCTU Pledges Support for Belarussian Unions**

Belarus state authorities continue their attacks on the trade unions. Recently, the state has blatantly interfered in the trade union election campaign, in an attempt to remove some unruly union leaders.

Vladimir Goncharik, President of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, FTUB, appealed to the ILO and national and international trade union bodies urging them to exert pressure on the country's authorities in order to make them stop their unlawful action against the workers' organisations.

Responding to the call, the General Confederation of Trade Unions, GCTU, issued a statement on the tense situation in Belarus that follows below.

«The General Confederation of Trade Unions expresses its grave anxiety over the interference by the authorities of the Republic of Belarus in the internal affairs of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, FTUB, and its affiliated organisations.

«According to information received from the Federation, its bank accounts have been blocked only a couple of weeks before the opening of its congress, and there is the threat of bringing legal action against FTUB leaders. Pressure is being put on trade union

committees in a number of industrial enterprises aiming to split the trade union movement, which we regard as direct encroachment on trade union rights and freedoms.

«The Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, a major and highly respected affiliate of the GCTU, carries out its activity, based on the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus and the country's law on the trade unions, and in conformity with ILO Convention No 87 concerning Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise and Convention No 98 concerning the Application of the Principles of the Right to Organise and to Bargain Collectively, both ratified by the Republic of Belarus.

«We believe that the state authorities and trade unions of the Republic have one aim in common, and that is to turn Belarus into a prosperous nation. However, the unions may have their own vision of how certain social and economic problems must be solved. To have an own opinion, and to be able to identify and protect freely workers' interests and achieve these goals by every possible legal way and means, all this is the inalienable right of trade unions in a democratic society.

«The General Confederation of Trade Unions pledges its support for, and solidarity with, the FTUB in its efforts to defend

workers' interests, voices its protest against the violation of trade union rights and freedoms, and expresses the hope that the Republic of Belarus will ensure the necessary conditions for normal trade union activity.»

### **Belarus: Congress Rejects Pressure on Unions**

The Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, FTUB, was determined to stand up for its independence, as it gathered for its 3rd Congress in Minsk from 10-11 October 2000.

In his report to the Congress, FTUB President Vladimir Goncharik stressed that the unions were ready to fight for their independence and rebuff any encroachment by the state authorities. He was bitterly critical of the state authorities for their treatment of trade unions in a manner ignoring the principles of social partnership, and for the unprecedented pressure aiming to split the industrial unions.

He described the FTUB ideology as follows: «Trade unions have every reason to disagree with quite a few aspects of the Government's economic and social policy, insist on higher living standards, and oppose any attempts to turn the workers' organisations into a voiceless companion of the State machinery, deprived of any rights».

The Congress adopted three major documents, including a resolution on FTUB activity for the period under review and on the measures to strengthen the unions, a resolution on the unity of the Belarus trade union movement, and a Platform of Action for 2000-2001.

Protecting the constitutional right to free labour, securing decent work remuneration, and rendering social support to the least protected categories were identified as the top priorities for the coming five years. The Congress commissioned the FTUB leadership to continue working for a

democratic and law-abiding society, a socially oriented market economy, and cooperation with the State and employers on the principles of equality and lawfulness. The 3rd FTUB Congress condemned outer interference in trade union affairs, warned the authorities against any such practices, and called on them to pay more attention to creating conditions for a more efficient economy.

Congress appealed to all union members to withstand pressure or threats, and resist the attempts to frustrate and split the trade union movement. The Council of the Federation was instructed to make the necessary preparations for a nationwide action in support of the trade unions and their pay rise demands.

The Congress reiterated the FTUB willingness to develop cooperation with other national and international workers' organisations. Links with the General Confederation of Trade Unions should be made even stronger, which will help raise the efficiency of integration processes and living standards in the Commonwealth of Independent States. It was also decided to hold consultations on eventual affiliation with the ICFTU.

Vladimir Goncharik was re-elected President of FTUB by an overwhelming majority of votes.

### **Georgia: TU Congress Faces Up to Challenges**

The 5th Congress of the Georgian Trade Union Amalgamation, GTUA, was held in Tbilisi 24 November 2000. The event was preceded by the congresses and conferences organised by the 34 industrial and territorial unions affiliated with the GTUA.

The congress took place in a highly tense and nervous climate. Up to the last moment, trade union leaders and congress delegates

had been exposed to threats and psychological pressure exerted by political parties, ministries and local authorities. There had even been cases of fist-law punishment. One principal aim of the massive anti-union drive was to prevent today's leaders of the national trade union centre from being elected for another term.

As he spoke at the opening ceremony, GTUA President Irakly Tugushi reported on the trade union activity in the period under review, and drew up the guidelines for the future. On several occasions, he had to intervene in the debate in order to curb the attempts at frustrating the Congress made by intruders, such as Members of Parliament and leaders of political parties who had not been invited to attend.

Despite all the difficulties, the Congress appraised the work done as satisfactory. Delegates adopted a Constitution, a Programme of Action, Regulations on District and Urban Trade Unions, and other documents.

After a message from President of Georgia was read out, Minister of Labour and Social Protection took the floor. Both the President and the Minister stressed that trade unions had an important role to play in building democratic institutions in the country. To achieve the goals they have in common, trade unions and the Government must maintain cooperation and social dialogue.

Irakly Tugushi won a contested election and remained President of GTUA.

Among the Congress participants were representatives of the GCTU, the ICFTU, the ILO and the Caucasian Office of the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center.

### **Georgia: Battle to Stop Impending Darkness**

The Board of the Georgian Trade Union Amalgamation, GTUA, called an

extraordinary session to discuss its course of action following the raising of electricity rates. The latter have gone up by 63.5 per cent this year, which has further aggravated the plight of workers, particularly as most of them have not been getting their wages or pensions for many months in succession. The union leadership passed a vote of no confidence in the National Energy Commission, NEC, and appealed to President of Georgia to stop the electricity rate rises.

Faced with lack of response from the Government, GTUA organised a protest action on 11 October 2000 outside the State Office Building. Speaking to the rally, Irakly Tugushi described the NEC decision as socially unacceptable and economically unjustified. Participants of the action signed a protest petition that was sent to the country's President.

### **Kyrgyzstan: Closing Union Ranks**

The 19th Congress of the Kyrgyzstan Trade Union Federation, KTUF, was held in Bishkek 29 September 2000.

Delegates discussed the report on KTUF's activity in the five years that preceded the Congress, outlined the new measures to protect workers' rights in 2000-2005, and approved a Programme of Action for the period. The KTUF Constitution was amended, with the aim of strengthening the unity, organisational structure, and financial solidarity of the Federation's affiliates.

The Congress adopted a statement warning against further drops in living standards and social guarantees, together with two appeals, one calling for a just pension scheme and social security system, and the other protesting against labour law breaches. The texts of the documents were forwarded to the Government and the National Employers' Organisation. The Congress also called on

union members to support President Askar Akayev's bid for being elected for another term of office.

Delegates elected the Council of the Federation comprising 35 members, and a new President, Sagyn Bozgunbayev, 51, former KTUF Vice-President.

### **Moldova: Wind of Change**

The General Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Moldova, FGSM, held its 3rd Congress in Chisinau 26 October 2000.

FGSM President Ion Godonoga presented the activity report. The Congress adopted 15 resolutions on problems such as «Trade Unions in the Context of Rising Civil Society in Moldova», «Human Security in the Republic of Moldova and Trade Union Strategies for Overcoming Social Inequality», «Trade Unions' Role in the Protection of Local Producers», «Developing a System of Social Partnership and Dialogue». Other resolutions cover the issues of legal protection, personnel policies, training, youth, women, information, etc.

Beyond that, the Congress adopted a declaration on the economic and social situation in the country and a statement on the 10th anniversary of the independent national trade union centre in Moldova.

The Congress decided to change the name of the organisation for the Confederation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Moldova, CSRM. Delegates elected the Council and the Executive Committee of the Confederation. Ion Godonoga was re-elected President of CSRM.

The Congress listened to the addresses by Moldova's President, Chair of Parliament and Prime Minister.

### **Russia: Unions Take Upper Hand**

The Government has lost its battle with trade unions for influence on public opinion. This

is how we can describe the decision taken by the State Duma 19 December 2000 to postpone deliberations about the new draft labour code till sometime in 2001.

The current labour code, adopted 30 years ago, has grown hopelessly obsolete, which prompted the Government to prepare its own draft code. Meanwhile, the Duma had already received three more alternative drafts for consideration. One of them, developed by a trade union group of MPs together with the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, FNPR, had become a favourite. It was the Government and the union versions that a real battle raged about.

The Government version, quickly nicknamed a «code of human misfortunes», contains quite a few discriminatory provisions. Suffice it to mention the proposed wide-scale use of fixed-term contracts of employment, permission to extend the work day up to 12 hours without paying overtime, increase in the number of cases when workers could be sacked without the union's consent, and the lack of mechanisms of protection against pay delays, etc. Besides, the guarantees for women workers are to be cut down substantially. According to Valery Saikin, Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for Labour and Social Policy, the Government draft code reduces the relations of social partnership between the worker and the employer to a mere master-servant model.

Should the Government version be approved, the unions will be stripped of any possibilities to protect workers. The employers will no longer be obliged to assist the union in the enterprise. When taking decisions concerning labour relations, the management will not need to seek the trade union committee's approval, it will be enough to «consult» them. The draft code does not provide for the obligation to conclude and fulfil collective agreements.

The attempt by the Russian Government to rob workers of many social rights stirred up a

storm of indignation all over the country. FNPR called on its member organisations to mobilise for killing the Government's bill. Responding to the initiative of the trade union centre, a series of collective protest actions rolled through Russia, calling for approval of the trade union version of the labour code and for rejection of the Government one.

It was a long time since Russia has seen such massive and target-pointed protest campaigns. Rallies and demonstrations were organised in 69 administrative regions, involving over 500 thousand people. The unions launched a genuine psychological attack on MPs, showering each of them with hundreds of letters and wires demanding that the union version be taken as the basis.

The result was that the Government version was rejected by all deputies, even by right-wingers who are normally eager to support any decision favouring the employers. Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov was obliged to ask Parliament to postpone the issue till 2001. A special commission comprising representatives of the Duma, the Government and the unions will be set up to help achieve common consent.

### **Russia: Moscow Unions Set Objectives**

The activity of Moscow's trade unions in the new economic and social environment over the period 1996-2000 and their tasks for the forthcoming five years were discussed at the regular Conference of the Moscow Federation of Trade Unions, MFTU, held 30 November 2000. The 297 delegates represented the capital's three million union members.

Summing up what had been done in the five years, MFTU President Mikhail Nagaitsev said the Federation had focused on the settlement of pay debts, regular payment of wages, and decent work remuneration. Efforts have also been made to prevent mass unemployment and secure

the observance of labour and social protection laws.

There were some positive changes to show. The unemployment rates have been cut more than twice and brought down to a mere 0.65 per cent of the economically active population. Moscow's Mayor Youry Luzhkov, a guest speaker at the Conference, pointed to considerable production growth that amounted to 8.2 per cent in 1999 and 13.2 in the ten months of 2000. Over the same period, the average pay had increased by 47 per cent, far ahead of the price rises. Pay delays in the budgetary sector were no longer existent.

Trade union legal services have restored 9,520 workers to their rights, with the lost income compensation totalling 3,200 thousand roubles. Every year, over 400 thousand school children spent their holidays in summer or winter camps. Almost a thousand workplace unions have been formed over the last two years.

Narrowing the gap between male and female average wages (as big as 30 per cent at some enterprises), eliminating pay imbalances in the health sector, and rendering support to domestic producers were identified as the priority tasks. Delegates criticised bitterly the attempts by state authorities to interfere in the internal affairs of trade unions, particularly in their finance, and the shady practices of transnationals operative on the Russian market.

In its Appeal to FNPR and all Trade Unions of Russia, the MFTU Conference called on them to use preparations for FNPR 4th Congress and formulate a development strategy for Russia's trade union movement, one that would enable the unions to exert real influence on social processes. It would be expedient to reform the trade union structure to bring it in line with the transformations that have taken place in the political system. As a first step, a campaign

might be launched under the slogan «Allied Trade Unions, Merge!». The world trade union organisations must oppose the anti-union policies of the TNCs by pooling their efforts to achieve «global trade union solidarity in a globalized economy».

Other appeals and resolutions issued by the Conference demanded the adoption of the trade unions' draft labour code and a law on the minimum wages that would envisage sanctions for pay delays. The Conference called on the Government to retain obligatory social insurance for all workers. Moscow unions are determined to get the single social tax cancelled.

The Conference re-elected Mikhail Nagaytsev President of MFTU for a new term.

### **Russia: Health Care on Standby**

The prestige of the medical profession, with its miserable pay equal to an unskilled worker's wage, has been falling with each passing year. In the first half of the year 2000, the average salary in the sector amounted to 1,245 roubles, or \$44 a month. This negative process depends largely on the chronic underfunding of health care. The means earmarked for the needs of the sector constitute less than 2 per cent of the gross domestic product. Because of the wear and tear of medical equipment and facilities amounting to 80-90 per cent, and the shortage of essential drugs and preparations, doctors are unable to take adequate care of their patients in hospitals.

Soon, it will hardly be possible to staff hospitals and clinics with qualified personnel because of the work force drain, as increasing numbers of medical college graduates choose to work in sectors other than health care.

Challenges facing the sector were on the agenda of a national conference organised

by the Russian Union of Health Care Workers in Moscow on 8 December 2000.

The future of medicine in Russia, the conference said, depends not on the medical profession, but on moneybags, while the country's political leaders turn their indifferent backs on the sector. Participants stressed that the shrinking role of health care had been a major factor of the demographic crisis in the country. Over the last ten years, the average life span for men has dropped by seven years, and for women by four.

The union urged the President, Government and Duma to take immediate steps towards increasing the health care expenditures by 2.5 times, settle all pay arrears, raise the minimum salary to the subsistence minimum level, improve the pension scheme in the sector, and speed up the adoption of a health care law.

The Conference decided to call a strike standby in health-care institutions. A collective action committee was set up to deal with preparations for a nationwide protest.

### **Russia: Duma Versus McDonald's**

McDonald's, a transnational notorious for its blatant anti-union conduct, keeps true to its principle in Russia.

Soon after the financial crisis in August 1998, a conflict broke out at Moscow McDonald's. The company decided to solve its financial problems by infringing the rights of its personnel. This gave the employees the idea to set up a trade union.

The response by the management revealed their sheer contempt for Russian law, and manifested they would go to any lengths to keep the union out. The union members were exposed to all kinds of harassment, such as rebukes, reprimands, bonus denials, smear, threats, boss-instigated retirements, etc. And, on the contrary, all kinds of benefits

and incentives started to shower upon those who had kept away from, or left, the union. The management dismissed the union's demand for collective bargaining. The interference by the Moscow commercial workers' union or even the district attorney failed to get the management-union dialogue going.

The open attack on labour rights in Moscow McDonald's grew so defiant that 27 October 2000 the State Duma had to call a special session of its Commission for the Settlement of Industrial Disputes and Conflicts to consider the situation in the company.

The Commission has established «facts of violating the right of citizens to creating a trade union» and ruled that, within a week, the McDonald's management start negotiations with the trade union aiming to sign a collective agreement. The Commission instructed the Federal Labour Inspection to check on all McDonald's enterprises in Russia to see if they observed labour relations legislation. The inspection must be carried out not later than 15 February 2001, jointly with trade unions.

### **Ukraine: Constructive Dialogue Suspends Strike**

Leaders of Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine, FTUU, met with Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko and some of his Ministers for a frank discussion of social protection issues.

FTUU President Alexander Stoyan informed the Government members of the trade union concerns. He dwelt, in particular, on the problems of employment and works remuneration, major factors of tensions in society. Today only 12-13 million out of the 18.5 million economically active people have a full-time job. The unemployment swells by half a million annually. The State cannot ensure jobs even for the graduate specialists who were trained by Ukrainian Universities on the special Government order. The

Government has no programme of job creation.

FTUU does not believe work remuneration is in any better state. More than a half workers get less in pay than the subsistence minimum. The commitments to raise the real wages, as provided for in the General Agreement, have not been met, and the wage arrears persist.

As the Prime Minister promised to give thorough consideration to all demands the trade union representatives had put forward during the constructive talk, the FTUU leadership decided to suspend preparations for the all-Ukraine protest action due to have taken towards the end of the year.

### **Ukraine: Empty Saucepan March**

Banging spoons on empty saucepans, pensioners marched through central Simferopol, the capital of the Crimea, in protest against the Government's economic reform.

The action was provoked by a 30 per cent rise in housing and utility rates. The decision, protestors claimed, «had again shown that the authorities are bent on solving their problems at the expense of the low-income people». A resolution adopted by the protesting pensioners says «the cut-down in the social programmes proves that the Government economic policy is nothing but bankrupt». The document reminds that Simferopol, where the death rates are five times as high as the birth rates, is slowly dying out, as is the whole of Ukraine whose population has decreased by three million over the years of reform.

The pensioners urged the deputies of Crimean Parliament to revoke the Government decision to raise the utility and housing rates. They also insisted that the minimum wages should be increased up to 270 hryvnias (USD 50) a month, and the minimum pension up to 118 hryvnias a month, and that the prices of bread and sugar should not be raised.

PUBLISHED BY  
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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*

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