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NEWS FROM THE GENERAL CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

No 32

January-March 2001

GCTU Supports Belarus Trade Unions

In connexion with the protest action held 14 February 2001 in Belarus, the General Confederation of Trade Unions, GCTU, issued a statement that says:

«The General Confederation of Trade Unions is concerned over the recent reports from Belarus.

«According to our affiliate, the Belarussian Federation of Trade Unions, the Republic has experienced high price rises and a sharp drop in the real wages. The result is that a growing number of people find themselves below the poverty line.

«In this context, the authorities are planning to make a wider use of contractual labour and restrict collective bargaining law, which follows from the Government's reluctance to sign the General Agreement for 2001-03.

«The Law on Trade Unions is being hastily revised, without even consulting the unions themselves. Should the Government's amendments be adopted, the trade unions' chances to protect the interests of workers, students and pensioners will be much slimmer. Moreover, the authorities intend to establish new representation bodies for waged labour at industrial enterprises, with the aim of counterbalancing the trade unions.

«All this is a blatant violation of international legal standards, including ILO Conventions 87, 95 and 98, ratified by the Republic of Belarus.

The measures taken by the Republic's legislature have been widely condemned by the world's trade unions that have joined the protests by their Belarussian counterparts.

«The General Confederation of Trade Unions pledges its support for the just struggle waged by trade unions in the Republic of Belarus to protect workers' vital interests and inalienable trade union rights. We call on all the GCTU affiliates to express solidarity with the Belarussian Federation of Trade Unions in its struggles, and, particularly, with the protest action on 14 February that will be demanding «Wages to Match Prices!»

Unions Stage Protest in Belarus

On 14 February 2001, a mass rally was held in Minsk protesting against the Government's social and economic policy. The event was organised by the Belarussian Federation of Trade Unions, BFTU, as part of the nationwide protest against the dramatic drop in the population's living standards.

The action took place in an extreme political climate that has had no parallels in Belarussian history. As they prepared for the action, the trade union activists and workers came under enormous pressure from state authorities and government-owned media.

Despite all that, almost nine thousand Minsk citizens defied the threats and attended the rally. The speakers stressed the necessity of uniting trade union ranks in the drive for a healthier national economy and higher wages.

The meeting condemned strongly the Government attempts to discredit the country's trade unions, set them on to fight, and split the trade union movement.

The protesters launched a nationwide campaign of signature collection in support of the trade union demands, such as: «Wages to Match Prices!», «Minimum Wage Equal to Subsistence Minimum!», «Sign General Agreement Now!», «Stop Government Interference in Union Affairs!», and «End Smear Anti-Union Campaign in State-Controlled Mass Media!».

BFTU is determined to stick firmly to its position as it continues fighting for workers' rights. New protest actions have been planned for the forthcoming spring.

Belarus: Pressure on Unions Mounting

President Lukashenko's Administration have instructed several state power bodies to take measures that would further curb trade union rights and freedoms. In particular, they have come up with the idea that other bodies of workers' representation, such as work collective councils, should be endowed with trade union functions. Without consulting the country's leading trade union centre, the Belarussian Federation of Trade Unions, they have prepared discriminatory amendments and supplements to the current Law on Trade Unions. If those are accepted, a large category of citizens will be stripped of their right of association, while representatives of higher trade union bodies will not be able to visit their members at industrial enterprises or offices.

The Government has been told not to sign the tripartite General Agreement till the amendments have been ratified. When concluding collective agreements for 2001, the executive power bodies have been strongly recommended to insist on a wider use of contractual employment and prevent part of the collected dues from being sent up to the higher trade union bodies.

Given all this, the BFTU issued a statement describing the Presidential instructions as a direct infringement of citizens' right to the

protection of their socio-economic interests. They also run counter to Articles 14 and 45 of the country's Constitution, the Law on Trade Unions, and the Labour Code. Thus, Article 356 of the Labour Code forbids state authorities to bargain and sign agreements on behalf of their employees. According to Article 3 of the Law on Trade Unions, the unions are free to choose their own structure and the ways of spending their membership dues.

These directives, the statement goes on to say, prove once again that there was every reason for us to send a complaint to the ILO about the violations of trade union rights in Belarus.

Rapprochement Between Russian & Belarussian Trade Unions

The Belarussian Federation of Trade Unions, BFTU, and the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, FNPR, signed a cooperation agreement in Moscow on the 30th of January 2001.

FNPR President Mikhail Shmakov told a press conference that the agreement provided for setting up a Coordinating Board to promote a more efficient cooperation of the two trade union centres within the Union State of Belarus and Russia. The leaders of the two Federations will in turn chair the Board.

The FNPR leader also said that Russian trade unions «have been following with anxiety the developments in Belarus concerning the violations of trade union rights and freedoms». He condemned «the decisions by the Belarus authorities aiming to destroy the existent unions and build "yellow" ones instead».

BFTU President Vladimir Goncharik added that the BFTU and the state authorities in Belarus had «a different vision of the role to be played by trade unions». The Federation believes that trade unions must be independent organisations of workers, whereas «the authorities' idea is that everything and everyone must be under their control». The BFTU is against strict centralisation of power. According to Goncharik, the authorities got particularly nervous as they learnt the unions had nominated their own candidate to run in the

presidential elections. Meanwhile, this decision by the unions might be the most realistic attempt to change the country's social and economic course.

GCTU Sends Solidarity to India

GCTU President Vladimir Scherbakov sent a message of solidarity to the major Indian trade union centres in connexion with the earthquake in western India that had taken dozens of thousands of lives and caused enormous demolition.

The message offers sincere condolences and sympathy to the relatives and near relations of all who died in the disaster, and to all workers and trade unions in India. The GCTU confirmed its immutable solidarity with the Indian trade unions, and its desire to continue cooperation with them, in the interests of working people, peace and social progress.

Last Tribute to Indrajit Gupta

The GCTU sent its condolences to the All-India Trade Union Congress in connexion with the decease of Indrajit Gupta, an outstanding political, public and trade union figure.

«A true son of the Indian people, the message says, Brother Indrajit Gupta was a founder of the trade union and democratic movements in India, an active organiser of the struggle for the national independence of his Motherland.

«Whatever his position was, whether the longtime leader of the All-India Trade Union Congress, a member of Parliament, or Home Minister, Brother Indrajit Gupta devoted all his efforts and knowledge, energy and experience to the struggle for workers' rights and interests, for equality and social justice.

«Bro Indrajit Gupta won an indisputable world reputation as a true internationalist and a prominent leader of the international trade union movement. For many years in succession, he was Vice-President and President of the World Federation of Trade Unions.

«The world trade union movement has lost an outstanding leader who made an invaluable contribution to the struggles for trade union unity, for the freedom and independence of the world's peoples, and for social progress, peace and international security».

CIS Oil & Gas Workers Hold Congress

The International Trade Union Confederation of Oil and Gas Workers can offer a vivid example of what is normally done by any of the 37 industrial trade union internationals affiliated with the GCTU. On 22 January 2001, the Confederation held its 3rd Congress in Moscow that was marked with the spirit of solidarity in the struggle for the social rights of the sector's workers.

Over the five-year period that elapsed between the Congresses, the Confederation had organised mutual support and solidarity actions on many occasions, such as:

- the struggle of its Russian affiliate for a higher minimum wage and against the introduction of a single social tax;
- the protest campaign against the introduction of a contractual employment system that was waged by its member union in Belarus;
- the bitter opposition organised by Kazakhstan's oil and gas workers to stop a new labour law that could do away with many workers' rights;
- the struggle of Ukrainian oil and gas workers for social insurance, higher wages and trade union rights and guarantees.

Congress appreciated the fact that the Confederation had regularly analysed the situation in the oil and gas sector, and the socio-economic conditions of workers in CIS countries. Much attention had also been devoted to trade union training. In addition to that, the Confederation had helped its affiliates to maintain relations with transnational corporations operating in Commonwealth countries.

Addressing the Congress, GCTU President Vladimir Scherbakov stressed that the unions

must compel the transnationals in CIS countries to work within a strict legal framework, respect the local laws, and take care of workers' social welfare.

The priorities established for the industry by a Congress resolution include employment, timely and fair work remuneration, law-based labour relations, development of social partnership, and a universal introduction of collective bargaining.

The Congress reelected Melik Mirzoyev President of the Confederation.

CIS Transport Workers Display Solidarity

The social consequences of reform and restructuring in the transport industries were high on the agenda of the international conference of transport workers' unions of CIS and Baltic countries held from 25-28 March 2001.

The Conference ended with the adoption of two resolutions, one on the solidarity and unity of transport workers, and the other on social interaction. Both documents note that the hard situation in the region's transport is «the result of the disrupted economic ties between enterprises in the now independent states, and the economic reforms providing for no compensation for the negative social consequences». The degradation in the living standards of transport workers has become almost universal, as have the deterioration of health and safety, and the growth of unemployment. Other common problems include the spreading fixed-term labour contracts, pay delays, and the attempts to undermine the trade union movement.

Participants called on the transport workers' unions in the region to promote social dialogue with the international organisations of employers in the CIS. The interaction between the CIS Council for Railway Transport and the TUI of Railway Workers was quoted as a positive example to follow. One concrete result of such interaction was the development of social standards for railway workers and the solution of several problems relating to their working conditions.

The Conference emphasised the need for the international organisations of transport workers to pool their efforts in an attempt to add a strong social component to globalisation. The role of the ILO in promoting social dialogue was greatly appreciated.

While hailing the efforts by the International and the European Transport Workers' Federations to establish and maintain dialogue with the international financial institutions, participants urged the General Confederation of Trade Unions to make similar approaches to the International Monetary Fund, and international and European banks.

Kazakhstan: Unions Cooperate With MPs

The Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Kazakhstan, FTURK, and the Group of MPs «Yenbek» discussed the prospects of their joint legislative activity. The Yenbek Group consists of 19 union-friendly members of Kazakhstan's Parliament.

Upon summing up their cooperation in the country's legislature in 2000, the FTURK Executive members and the deputies specified a range of social and economic issues that, according to the unions, would need legislative support. They decided they would work together to get the labour law amended and a law on a new social insurance scheme adopted. Special attention will be paid to raising the statutory subsistence minimum, index-linking of pensions, and increasing salaries in the budgetary sector.

Kazakhstan: Defending Union Rights at TNCs

A conference of trade union leaders from major enterprises controlled by foreign investors, held in Astana from 13-16 March 2001, attracted 20 trade unionists representing 200 thousand Kazakhstan employees.

The Conference, which was organised by the Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Kazakhstan jointly with the ICFTU, examined the state of labour relations at the transnational enterprises. Participants reviewed specific cases of encroachment on trade union rights

and freedoms, and made a comparative analysis of the Kazakhstan legislation on trade unions and the international labour standards. They shared experience with one another, and studied in detail the ways of monitoring trade union rights at the workplace.

The final memorandum stresses the need for creating favourable conditions for free and unobstructed trade union activity at each enterprise, securing their rights and guarantees, and providing them with all the information they require, as stipulated by the law. The document expresses anxiety over the increasingly widespread practice of signing short-term labour agreements with the employees, and the discrimination against Kazakhstan employees of TNCs in the sphere of work remuneration. It also pays attention to the fact that the problems of pensions for people employed in hazardous jobs and of social security for disabled workers remain unsettled.

Participants called on foreign and domestic employers to respect the laws of Kazakhstan and the principles of social partnership, and create new jobs.

The Conference appealed to Parliament and the Government urging them to consider the problems, and make the necessary amendments to the labour laws. It called upon trade unions to launch a nationwide campaign to win support for the proposals.

Russia: FNPR Starts Moving Towards Congress

On 27 February 2001, the Executive Committee of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, FNPR, decided to start preparations for the 4th FNPR Congress, due to open on November 28 2001. The Executive approved the agenda and the representation quota, which will be one delegate from each 90 thousand union members.

By the time the decision was taken, 88 affiliated organisations had already held their congresses or conferences. Towards the end of the year, the remaining 31 industrial and

regional organisation will follow suit. The FNPR has already received about 400 proposals for the amendments and supplements to the Constitution and the Regulations on the Auditing Commission.

Russia: Teachers Say No to Education Breakdown

Education workers and students staged an all-Russia action on 27 February 2001, defending the state education system and demanding improvement of teachers' financial status. The strikes, work stoppages, manifestations and picketing involved about 800 thousand people. The protest was organised by the Union of Education and Scientific Workers that does not agree with the Government proposals for reforming the national economy, amending the labour legislation, and restructuring the education system.

In early March, the Government owed the education sector 5.6 billion roubles, or 197 million US dollars. Out of the total sum, the unpaid salaries accounted for 1.1 billion roubles. The sector's employees demanded that the pay debt be settled immediately, and the salaries be raised at least by 50 per cent by the end of the year. Today, a teacher's salary is miserable, and amounts to 1 126 roubles, or USD 39, a month.

Meanwhile, the authorities seem quite indifferent to the education's sore points. In 2000, the state received 300 billion roubles in additional income, but only a million-odd was allocated for the needs of the teaching profession.

Such a situation can no longer be maintained in a sector that is crucial for Russia's future, says an appeal to President Putin signed by millions of teachers. Above that, almost two million signatures supporting the union's demands have been collected and submitted to the State Duma.

Leading representatives of the trade union met Vice-Premier Valentina Matviyenko. They signed a common protocol that says all pay debts to the sector's employees will have been settled by 1 May 2001.

Russia: New TU Association Set Up

An association of trade unions in the basic industries was set up in Russia on 2 March 2001. It has incorporated nine sectoral trade unions affiliated with the FNPR, namely the Union of Atomic Industry Workers, the Union of Geologists, Geodesists and Cartographers, the Union of Metallurgical Workers, the Union of Workers in the Forest Industries, the Union of Oil and Gas Workers, the Union of Workers in the Building and Building Materials Industries, the Union of Miners, the Union of Chemistry Workers, and the «Electrounion». The constituent conference voted Presidents of all the nine unions into the Association's Board. The leader of the Oil and Gas Workers' Union, Lev Mironov, was elected President of the Association.

Vitaly Budko, a Vice-President of the FNPR, believes that «much in Russia's trade union movement will now depend on the activity of this most powerful association of trade unions embracing the industries that are crucial for the country's development and, to a large extent, for budget-making».

The Association will participate in the solution of quite complicated problems. The wear and tear of capital assets in the basic industries have reached 55-80 per cent, the developed deposits of oil and gas have been nearly exhausted, the coal shipments have to be increased significantly, and the country's unified energy system needs a radical reform. The unions are seriously concerned with the industrial injury and death rates: in forestry alone, 1,770 workers died in accidents during the last five years.

The newly established organisation intends to demand an increase in the cost of labour, stop the bills infringing the rights of workers and trade unions, and make the authorities preserve the state guarantees for people working in the Far North of Russia. The trade union leaders were bitterly critical of the Minister of Labour, Alexander Pochinok, for his stand on the Labour Code, proposal to raise the pension age, abolition of the progressive tax, etc., and insisted on his resignation.

Vyborg: Conflict Yields to Partnership

The reader will have remembered from our previous issues (InformContact No 27-28) of the events that took place at the Vyborg pulp and paper plant (Leningrad Region) in 1998-1999. The protracted bitter conflict between the workers and the enterprise owner resulted in the intervention by the police who used firearms against the workers and even took hostages. The confrontation came to an end on 15 January 2000, as the plant owner, Alcem UK Ltd (Britain), signed an agreement with the strike committee.

What has happened after that?

Over the year, the number of trade union members at the plant has risen dramatically, from 1,100 to 1,900 out of the 2,500 workers. This breakthrough can be explained by the enhanced role of the trade union that has gained real power at the enterprise. The workers appreciate that and join the union willingly.

The plant management has learnt to respect the opinion of the trade union committee whenever they consider pay rises, working conditions, or any other social issues. Under the agreement signed the previous year, union members have advantages over the nonorganised workers. They receive free meals at the plant canteen, their children are sent to the recreation camps at reduced prices, etc.

The observance of the collective agreement also helps expand the production. Over the year that passed, the output volumes have been rising, and the average wages (which are paid on time) have doubled.

Ukraine: Subsistence Minimum and Wages

In its constant struggle for workers' higher living standards, the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine, FTUU, uses all means available to it, such as collective protest actions, negotiations within the framework of social dialogue, and participation in lawmaking.

The adoption in July 1999 of the Law on the Subsistence Minimum, drafted with the

involvement of trade unions, was a real breakthrough for the FTUU. The law has specified the adequate minimum of goods and services that are necessary to meet the basic requirements of a human being. Based on it, the Council of Ministers announces the subsistence minimum amount for each coming year (for 2001, it was fixed at 311 hryvnias, or USD 56). Proceeding from the statutory subsistence minimum, a separate law establishes the national system of social standards.

The main concern for the Federation is now to get the social standards fulfilled, as provided for by the country's Constitution. To draw attention to the issue, the FTUU organised a round table conference «The Subsistence Minimum and Social Guarantees for Ukrainian Citizens» which was attended by representatives of the Presidential Administration, Parliament, and the Government.

Addressing the session, FTUU President Alexander Stoyan pointed to the fact that, with the official subsistence minimum being 311 hryvnias, the statutory minimum wage was 118 hryvnias, and the pension 58-102 hryvnias. Even the average wage in 2001 was below the subsistence minimum line. According to statistics, it accounted for a mere 36 per cent of the family income, which means the population had considerable sources of shadow income.

According to participants, the situation calls for a radical reform of the wage system involving substantial pay rises. Over the last nine years, consumer prices have been increasing 3.8 times faster than the wages. The FTUU believes such a development must be attributed to the fact that the state authorities and employers have ignored the legislation.

The Federation demands that the statutory wage guarantees be strictly observed. In particular, by January 2002 the minimum wage must reach the subsistence minimum level, whereas the average wage must be 2.5-3 times as high. Wage arrears in all sectors of the economy must be cleared by the end of 2001.

These priorities should be borne in mind as the FTUU affiliates negotiate their collective agreements and, later on, supervise their fulfilment.

Ukraine: Disabled Workers Protest

The plight of Ukrainian citizens who were crippled as a result of industrial accidents or occupational diseases gets worse with every passing year.

When it was adopted in 1999, the law on their obligatory social insurance raised hopes that the problem would finally be solved. The law stipulates that a special fund should be set up to settle the arrears of workers' compensations for health damage that have exceeded 800 million hryvnias, or USD 144 million, and are still growing. Besides, the law provides for many other problems to be solved, such as accident prevention, rehabilitation of injured workers, and damage compensation. For the law to become effective on 1 January 2001, as was originally planned, it was necessary to pass a law on the procedure and amounts of insurance deductions.

However, the Parliamentary Finance and Banking Commission insisted successfully that the debates over the bill be postponed to a later date. The reason they gave was the proposed change of the damage compensation philosophy that would imply a switch-over from the principle of solidarity to the principle of individual and collective insurance. Given such an approach, the chances of the debts being repaid become rather poor.

This has been vigorously rejected by the Ukrainian Miners' Union, as most of the disabled workers, and exactly speaking 187 thousand, are to be found among the miners. Responding to the union's call, disabled workers in all economic sectors staged a protest on 17 January 2001. They posted picket lines outside the houses of Parliament, the Government, and the Presidential Administration. The miners' appeal was read out at the meeting by FTUU President Alexander Stoyan. Their main demand was that the principle of solidarity be maintained in the insurance of disabled workers and that the respective law be made effective without delay.

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

DEAR READERS

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