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NEWS FROM THE GENERAL CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

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GCTU COMMISSION FOCUSES ON CRISIS STRATEGIES

The GCTU Commission for the Protection of Workers' Social and Economic Interests and for Legal Issues met 16 February 2009 to discuss the social and economic situation in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and trade union strategies in the economic and financial crisis.

Speakers from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus said that, in order to mitigate the negative consequences of the crisis, trade unions maintain cooperation with the state authorities and business communities of their respective countries, and support constructive measures aimed at overcoming the difficulties. On the initiative of the FNPR, a working group was set up within the Russian Tripartite Commission (RTC) to conduct a weekly monitoring of the labour market situation. The find-

ings of the monitoring are reviewed at RTC meetings, and negotiations with the social partners are presently underway.

Participants in the meeting were concerned over the fact that proposals for changing the criteria for minimum wage calculation had been lately voiced in a number of CIS countries. The Commission supported the GCTU's proposition that at this stage the minimum wage rates should be based on the subsistence minimum (minimum consumer budget).

Members of the Commission were informed of the GCTU attitude to draft laws on private employment agencies. It was owing to the Confederation's representatives in the Permanent Commission for Social Policy of the CIS Inter-Parliamentary Assembly that the provisions on the use of contract and agency labour and paid employment services, and also several other unac-

ceptable clauses had been excluded from the draft framework law.

GCTU: YOUNG UNION LEADERS MEET IN MOSCOW

The Second International Meeting of Young Union Leaders of the CIS countries was organised by the GCTU 24-26 March 2009 in Moscow bringing together representatives of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine, and young union activists from Moscow and the Moscow Region.

The meeting was timed to coincide with the 90th Anniversary of the Higher School of the Trade Union Movement, now the Academy of Labour and Social Relations. The young trade union leaders took part in different events organised to celebrate the Anniversary of the Academy.

The young trade unionists met with the leaders of the GCTU and the FNPR, and with the heads of GCTU departments. GCTU General Secretary Vladimir Scherbakov and a FNPR Vice-President Tatiana Frolova spoke to the meeting. There was a broad discussion on the challenges facing the trade union movement involving such issues as union membership motivation, trade union strategies in the context of the current economic and financial crisis, enhancing the

role of young people in solving the entire spectre of trade union tasks.

In accordance with the proposal put forth at the first such meeting in October 2008, an informal session of representatives nominated by affiliated organisations as members of the future GCTU Youth Council took place as part of this event.

ARMENIA: UNIONS REJECT ANTI-WORKER CRISIS SOLUTIONS

The Confederation of Trade Unions of Armenia (CTUA) made a statement 19 January 2009 expressing its concern that the economic and financial crisis may create serious problems for the Armenian economy and undermine workers' social and economic situation. In particular, the unemployment level may raise sharply as a result of redundancies in the mining, chemical and building industries.

The CTUA rejects any attempts to solve the crisis-related problems at the expense of workers. To avoid a negative impact of the crisis, it is essential to take such steps that would not result in the burden of consequences being shouldered by workers and their families.

“We are confident that unless concerted actions are taken the crisis will have a strong overall effect on

the living standards of workers and their families”, the Statement says.

The Armenian trade unions believe that solutions to major problems should be sought through negotiations between the Government, the Armenian Employers’ Union and the Confederation of Trade Unions of Armenia. Simultaneously, the role of social partnership should be enhanced at all levels, something that would facilitate a national collective agreement.

BELARUS: TRIPARTITE SEMINAR REVIEWS UNION RIGHTS

A tripartite seminar on “Freedom of association and social partnership in the Republic of Belarus: improvements in the light of recommendations contained in the report of the ILO Investigation Committee “Trade Union Rights in Belarus”.

In the presence of ILO and ITUC representatives, the three parties: trade union federations, employers’ associations, and the Government reviewed the progress made in implementing ILO recommendations.

The above recommendations were adopted in 2004 following an investigation by a group of ILO experts into complaints about alleged violations of the rights of independent trade unions in Belarus.

Most speakers at the seminar agreed there was no longer any ground for continued review of the Belarus case in the absence of facts pointing to infringements on trade union rights and freedoms in the country.

According to employers’ representatives, the main reason why workers prefer to join FTUB-affiliated trade unions is that they do not see any concrete activities by other trade unions which often use the trade union pad to accomplish their own end that are far from the aims of the trade union movement.

One of the main conclusions of the seminar was voiced by ILO Executive Director Kari Tapiola who pointed that in any situation it is essential that trade unions pool their efforts in defending workers’ rights.

GEORGIA: TRADE UNIONS PROTEST

The Georgian Trade Union Confederation (GTUC) held a mass protest action 3 February 2009 in front of the Parliament House in Tbilisi.

The protesters demanded that Parliament amend the current legislation. The unions believe it essential to establish unemployment benefits, raise monetary compensation for redundant workers, increase the maternity leave benefit and make

public health services and insurance coverage accessible to all.

Participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the legislative authority by rhythmically banging spoons on metal bowls and cries “We are hungry!” According to reports, Parliament reportedly examined the draft documents submitted by the GTUC and referred them to the appropriate committees for consideration.

“The Confederation’s initiative has found a response from 84 thousand people. All working people are in solidarity with the unemployed. In a situation when the State budget is being increased by 250 million laris to cover the administrative expenses and the salaries of government functionaries, another 115 million laris must be found to establish unemployment benefits so that our citizens could have at least minimum subsistence means”, said the GTUC President Irakli Petriashvili.

KAZAKHSTAN: UNION ANTI-CRISIS STRATEGIES

The leaders of the affiliates of the Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Kazakhstan (FTURK) met 26 February 2009 in Almaty to discuss the social and economic situation prevailing in the regions and anti-crisis strategies of the trade unions.

FTURK President Siyazbek Mukashev informed the participants of the progress made in implementing the resolution adopted by the Federation’s General Council 10 December 2008 on “The position of the Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the global financial crisis and the steps being taken by the Kazakhstan Government to stabilise the economy and social sphere in the country”.

He said that labour market monitoring was underway, measures to reduce unemployment were being undertaken in all the regions, and the prosecution authorities had established strict control over the settlement of wage arrears. The memoranda signed by the leaders of local executive authorities, the employers’ associations and trade union organisations were yielding positive effect.

Speakers highlighted the stabilising role of regional and industrial accords and collective agreements in protecting workers’ labour and socio-economic rights and interests.

KYRGYZSTAN: DIALOGUE TO OVERCOME DIFFICULTIES

At its plenary session held 26 February 2009 in Bishkek, the Council of the Kyrgyzstan Federation of Trade Unions (KFTU) adopted an appeal to the country’s government and employers in connection with

the developing crisis. In particular, the appeal says:

“The global economic and financial crisis creates serious problems for Kyrgyzstan and has a negative impact on the workers’ socio-economic situation. There are already alarming reports of production shutdowns, reduction in output, introduction of a shortened working week, termination of labour relations, workers being forced to take unpaid leave, evasion of established social guarantees, and forced outflow of labour, including highly qualified specialists, seeking employment abroad.

The trade unions called upon the Government to find necessary material and political resources to preserve the production volumes and jobs, adopt a development programme for industries, pursue tariff-setting policies taking into account the real incomes of the low-paid categories of workers especially as they make the majority of the total able-bodied population; and prevent curtailment of the State’s social commitments to the citizens of the country.”

MOLDOVA: UNIONS PROMOTING DECENT WORK AGENDA

The General Council of the National Trade Union Confederation of Moldova (CNSM) met on 28-29 January 2009 to review the results

of the Confederation’s activity in 2008, and, in particular, the accomplishment of the objectives set forth in the CNSM Programme “Trade Union Movement in 2008-2012”.

In his report, CNSM President Leonid Manea said that the Confederation’s priorities lay in the spheres of consolidation of the trade union movement at all levels, mobilisation of human and financial potential for more effective protection of the socio-economic and labour rights of union members, and guarantees of decent work and social security for workers.

The General Council believes that a major trade union task consists in promoting the decent work agenda in line with the ILO concept where decent work implies: a secure job, decent work remuneration, adequate health and safety at work, social protection, and constructive social dialogue and partnership.

The CNSM General Council adopted a resolution “On the role of trade unions in securing decent work”, where it formulated a number of demands to the social partners and outlined unions’ fields of activity in promoting the decent work agenda.

RUSSIA: UNION LEADER MEETS RUSSIAN PRESIDENT

President of the Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev met with

FNPR President Mikhail Shmakov
11 January 2009.

President Medvedev informed the union leader of his intention to enhance the role of public prosecution in supervision over the observance of labour laws in the nearest future. "In the present situation, the public prosecutor's office must have an effective set of instruments to supervise the adherence to labour legislation so that everybody acts within the rules. Therefore, without such normal full-fledged monitoring, it is impossible to influence the situation", he stressed.

"Within the framework of trade union monitoring, we identify critical situations and undertake concerted actions to immediately remove violations of laws, such as, for example, improper dismissal inconsistent with the Labour Code. In this way, people's rights are defended", said Mikhail Shmakov.

RUSSIA: TRADE UNIONISTS MEET WITH PRIME-MINISTER

Trade union representatives from different Russian regions headed by FNPR President Mikhail Shmakov met with Prime-Minister Vladimir Putin 25 March 2009.

"Employers should not take advantage of the crisis to dismiss workers or cut down their wages", Vladimir Putin told the participants.

"If an employer just kicks people out into the street, then during the economic recovery period (and it will inevitably come!), good specialists will be hard to find. That is why our major objective today is to preserve the labour collectives, and wherever impossible, provide re-training to the people if we expect the enterprise to reach a new level of technological development", stressed the Prime-Minister.

The federal budget will allocate 43.7 billion rubles to support specific enterprises to help them preserve their jobs and wage rates.

According to Vladimir Putin, the pensions in 2009 will increase by about 20 per cent in real terms. He said that this figure was still subject to revision to take account of the inflation, "but in general we should achieve approximately such a level." The Prime-Minister said that, by the end of 2009, the average social pension would not be lower than the pensioner's subsistence minimum, and the federal budget for 2009 is firmly oriented to the implementation of all the earlier social commitments.

FNPR President Mikhail Shmakov said the FNPR would submit its proposals for adjustment of the Government anti-crisis programme. "The unions are preparing their proposals for amending the anti-crisis programme and specifying priorities outlined in the document",

he said. "In general, trade union organisations approve of the seven priorities of the anti-crisis programme; however, they believe it essential to complement and specify them". Mikhail Shmakov expressed his regret that the programme lacks "a section devoted to pay raises for employees".

TAJIKISTAN: TU GENERAL COUNCIL DEFINES OBJECTIVES FOR 2009

The General Council of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Tajikistan (FITUT) met 11 February 2009 to review the results of the Federation's activity for 2008 and the objectives for 2009.

In his report, FITUT President Murodali Salikhov gave a comprehensive analysis of work carried out by trade union efforts in the preceding year. He said that practically all the items of the General Agreement signed by the Government, the Federation of Independent Trade Unions and the employers' associations of Tajikistan had been rigorously observed.

However, the General Council expressed its great concern over the problems, aggravated by the world economic crisis – price rises, inflation, the situation of migrants. These problems directly affect the interests of all the workers and their families.

"The emerging problems compel the trade unions of the republic to change dramatically the methods of their work. To address the current problems, it is essential to strengthen cooperation with state authorities in what concerns the development and implementation of a national anti-crisis programme and active protection of workers' interests", said Murodali Salikhov.

The FITUT General Council adopted an appeal to the Tajikistan government, employers and entrepreneurs, outlining proposals aimed at mitigating crisis consequences, creating new jobs, preventing mass dismissals of workers and pay reductions, and carrying out the earlier approved social programmes.

TAJIKISTAN: IN MEMORY OF HERO VETERANS

The FITUT Executive adopted a resolution "On Preparations for Celebrating the 65th Anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945".

Given the enormous importance of the heroic deeds accomplished by the peoples of the USSR and the contribution of Tajikistan citizens to the victory over the Nazi Germany, and also with a view to bringing up the younger generation in the spirit of patriotism, based on the striking examples of the Great Patriotic War heroes, the Executive support-

ed the decision of the Tajikistan Government to declare 2010 the Year of Veterans of the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945.

The FITUT Executive jointly with the War and Labour Veterans Council of Tajikistan adopted an "Appeal to war and labour veterans and trade union organisations in connection with preparations for the 65th Anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945".

UKRAINE: GREAT COUNSEL WITH GRASS ROOTS

An All-Ukraine meeting of leaders of primary trade union organisations was called 23 February 2009 in Kiev to discuss the ways of improving and consolidating trade union actions at all levels, strengthening the role of grass-roots organisations in protecting the labour rights of union members in the crisis situation. President of the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine (FTUU) Vassyl Khara addressed the delegates.

The meeting adopted a resolution supporting the FTUU's decision to enter into a collective labour dispute with the Cabinet of Ministers over its failure to fulfil the General Agreement for 2008-2009 to secure workers' labour and socio-economic rights in the crisis situation.

Speakers referred to the mass shut-downs of enterprises and entire industries, the growing number of redundancies, the decreases in pay and social benefits, the lack of an integrated and coordinated state policy at these hard times, and the inactivity of the government.

Attempts by the trade unions to establish social dialogue with the authorities in overcoming the crisis consequences have yielded no result. The Cabinet of Ministers ignore trade union demands, and neglect their proposals and standards set forth in the General Agreement. For example, the provisions of the draft State Budget for 2009 concerning the amount of the subsistence minimum, minimum wage rates, and minimum pay guarantees for workers in the budgetary sector have not been negotiated with the trade unions. Moreover, the draft laws submitted for consideration by the Supreme *Rada* (Parliament) shift the entire burden of the economic and financial crisis entirely onto the shoulders of the population.

In order to make the Government meet its obligations to observe the socio-economic rights and guarantees of union members, as set forth in the General Agreement, the FTUU has decided to enter into a collective labour dispute with the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers. Under the law in force, the solution of such a dispute shall be sought

through a conciliation commission, labour arbitration, or the National Mediation and Reconciliation Service whose decisions are of advisory nature. Should the reconciliatory procedures fail to resolve the collective labour dispute, trade unions will resort to the extreme measure, i.e. calling a strike, including a national one.

APPEAL BY THE FEDERATION OF TIMBER AND RELATED INDUSTRIES WORKERS' UNIONS OF THE CIS

At the meeting of its Central Council held 19 March 2009, the Federation of Timber and Related Industries Workers' Unions of the CIS adopted an appeal to the heads of state and government of the Commonwealth countries which, in particular, says the following.

"The Central Council of the Federation of Timber and Related Industries Workers' Unions of the CIS affiliating trade unions of timber industries workers from Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan and Ukraine expresses its concern over the increasingly strong impact of the global financial crisis on the economic situation in the timber industries of CIS countries.

"The measures being taken by the Governments of CIS countries to achieve economic recovery do not

bring any stabilisation to the real economies, as the banking systems in the overwhelming majority of the countries use the money they receive to purchase foreign currencies instead of crediting enterprises that are in a desperate need of financial support. The governmental anti-crisis programmes do not envisage priority support to the timber sector, not even through commercial banks with state participation. The current anti-crisis measures have so far failed to reverse the negative trends in the timber industries.

"The Central Council of the Federation calls upon the heads of state and government to adopt a concrete plan of meeting the challenges of the crisis and improving the economy of major industries in CIS countries, which should include such vital industries as the timber processing complex and forestry.

"We urge you to consider measures to raise the efficiency of anti-crisis activities within the framework of the existing mechanism of inter-state and inter-government relations, such as the Inter-Government Council for the Timber Processing Complex and Forestry, which makes it possible for every country to actively promote mutually beneficial integration processes that help develop timber industries and create conditions for decent work and living for forestry workers."

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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.

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DEAR READERS

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