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NEWS FROM THE GENERAL CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

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GCTU EXECUTIVE REVIEWS ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

The regular session of the GCTU Executive Committee held 9 April 2009 in Moscow's Palace of Labour was opened and chaired by GCTU President Mikhail Shmakov.

High on the agenda were the problems of environmental protection in the CIS region and proposals for its improvement. The Executive noted that most national governments were taking steps to realize their own environment protection policies, adopt the basic laws required, build a respective regulatory environment, and exercise state control over the implementation of current legislations. However, an unfavourable and tense situation persists in a great numbers of areas and industrial centres of the Commonwealth states.

The GCTU and its affiliates cooperate with interstate bodies, and par-

ticipate in the legislative activities of the inter-parliamentary assemblies of the CIS and the Eurasec in the sphere of natural protection and ecological security. Thanks to the industrial collective agreements signed in CIS countries, public control has been established over the observance of ecological legislation, and trade union participation has been ensured in the development of environment improvement projects.

The Executive adopted the *Report on the Environmental Protection in the Member-Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and on the Proposals to Improve the Ecological Situation*. Upon its finalisation based on the debates held at the session, the document will be forwarded to the CIS heads of government and to the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of the Commonwealth. The leaders of the affiliated national trade union centres

and industrial Trade Union International were called upon to take into account the provisions of the Report in their everyday activities.

As they considered the progress made in the ratification and observance of ILO Conventions in CIS countries, Executive members stressed that in the context of the global financial and economic crisis, the compliance with the fundamental principles and rights at work and the advancement of international labour standards were an additional guarantee against the present-day recession resulting in enhanced exploitation of workers and a steep decline in their working and living conditions.

The GCTU Executive Committee decided to intensify the trade union monitoring of the ratification and observance of major ILO conventions in Commonwealth states. The affiliates were asked to take more energetic steps in the future to get the ILO conventions ratified and strictly respected as soon as possible. The Executive approved of a *GCTU Statement on the 90th Anniversary of the ILO* (see article below).

For the first time in many years, the GCTU Executive discussed trade union participation in organising summer recreation for children. Participants heard information on the results of GCTU affiliates' participation in this kind of activities in

2008 and on further work to be done by the unions in this direction.

GCTU CONCERNED OVER WORLD CRISIS

The GCTU Council met in Moscow 10 April 2009 to review the activity of the Confederation in the period since its last session in April 2008.

Presenting the activity report, GCTU General Secretary Vladimir Scherbakov stressed that "the unions were among the first civil organisations to draw the attention of the authorities and the business community to the negative consequences of the financial and economic crisis for working people".

The GCTU and its affiliates, first of all, the national trade union centres, have taken concrete measures to mitigate the consequences of the crisis for their members and for all workers. They have issued statements and appeals to their governments, discussed the problem at the sessions of their elected governing bodies, participated in the work of anti-crisis commissions and groups, organised national and regional actions to protect workers' socio-economic rights and guarantees.

The GCTU maintained constructive cooperation with interstate bodies of the CIS, the Eurasec, and the Union of Belarus and Russia. Spe-

cial emphasis was placed on the situation of migrant workers in Commonwealth countries.

The session discussed the impact of the world financial and economic crisis on the situation in CIS countries, based on a report presented by GCTU Deputy General Secretary Natalia Podshibyakina. The debates were wound up with adopting a *Declaration on the Economic and Social Situation in the CIS States and Actions by Trade Unions in the Context of the World Financial Crisis* that gives trade union evaluation of the situation.

The Council also considered the criteria for determining the minimum wages, and the attitudes of trade unions to the problem.

The session decided to establish a GCTU Youth Council and approved of its Regulations. The council will consist of young trade union leaders delegated by GCTU member-organisations.

As it will be 25 years since the Chernobyl disaster on the 26th of April, 2009, the GCTU Council adopted an appeal to the heads of government of the CIS states expressing deep concern over the low pension rates, the lack of conditions for normal rehabilitation and recreation of children from the affected zones, and the tendency towards cutting down social benefits and in-

demnities for the “liquidators” and their families, and also for all population of the contaminated areas.

GCTU HAILS ILO ON ITS 90TH ANNIVERSARY

On the 9th of April 2009 the GCTU issued a statement on the 90th Anniversary of the International Labour Organisation.

“Over the years, the ILO has made a huge, truly invaluable contribution to the establishment of social justice principles in social policies and labour relations”, the Statement reads. “The role it has played in the struggles for elimination of forced and child labour, respect for employees’ rights and trade union freedoms, genuine gender equality in labour relations, and against ethnic, religious and political discrimination in the world of work can hardly be challenged. Taken together, the 188 ILO conventions and over 200 recommendations make a world labour code whose strict observance by state authorities, employers and workers can guarantee finding successful solutions to all conflicts and differences arising in the sphere of work”.

“Today the ILO conventions and recommendations have become a global benchmark, and provide the starting point for law-making and standard-setting activities at na-

tional and international levels. For this reason, the General Confederation of Trade Unions has been conducting regular monitoring of ratification and observance by CIS states of major ILO conventions, and their embodiment in the national legislations. We are positive that, proceeding from its vast experience, the ILO will further develop and improve its standard-setting activity, and broaden and enrich its body of standards, bringing it up to a level where it can better meet the challenges of the globalisation era”.

“We are positive that in the decade to come the ILO, with the assistance of its tripartite constituents, will get its ideals and values to underlie all national, regional and global action programmes aiming to improve labour relations and social policies, and promote the ILO’s social and economic goals in the interests of workers and their families, enterprises, and nations”.

GCTU: SAFE WORK A UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHT

On the occasion of the World Safety and Health Day, the GCTU issued a special Statement 22 April 2009 that says, among other things, the following .

“On the eve of the World Day for Safety and Health at Work and the

International Commemoration Day for Dead and Injured Workers observed annually by the world community on the 28th of April, the General Confederation of Trade Unions, on behalf of its 50 million union members in the CIS countries, pays a tribute of sorrow to the memory of all who died from occupational accidents, and expresses a deep sympathy with workers injured at work”.

“The growing number of occupational injuries that often cause death of able-bodied people is of great concern to the GCTU and its affiliates”.

“The Commonwealth trade unions share and support fully the motto of this year’s World Day for Safety and Health at Work as proclaimed by the ILO – “Health and life at work: a fundamental human right”. Ensuring the right of workers to safe and healthy work conditions is a key component of the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda that has won wide support in the trade union movement of the CIS countries”.

“Speaking for its member-organisations, the General Confederation of Trade Unions states that, even in the context of a crisis, the demand for an environment excluding occupational injuries and diseases at every workplace remains a major strategic goal in the sphere of health and safety for Common-

wealth trade unions. Exercising their legitimate rights, trade unions in the CIS states will firmly and consistently work for the attainment of this strategic goal”.

GCTU PARTICIPATES IN IPA SESSION

A delegation headed by GCTU General Secretary Vladimir Scherbakov took part in a session of the CIS Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (IPA) held in St. Petersburg 14 May 2009.

The discussion centred around the problem of formulating a legislative framework for current youth policies in the CIS countries.

In his contribution to the debate, General Secretary Vladimir Scherbakov highlighted two interdependent challenges facing legislative activity in the Commonwealth states, the need to protect the rights and interests of the younger generation at national and interstate levels, and the necessity to provide young people with increasingly ample opportunities for their social development and personal self-fulfilment. He called on state authorities and public and civil organisations to consolidate their efforts in promoting the moral and patriotic education of youngsters, and support the youth and children’s organisations.

The GCTU delegation also participated in the Neva International Ecological Congress held in St. Petersburg 15 May 2009. The event gathered together high-ranking representatives of legislative and executive authorities, local administrations, noncommercial organisations, business structures, and scientific and educational establishments from CIS countries and CE states, and also international organisations. The congress adopted a final Declaration on the Solution of Ecological Problems in the New Economic and Social Environment.

ARMENIA: COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT SIGNED

Prime Minister Tigran Sarkisian, President of the Confederation of Trade Unions of Armenia (CTUA) Eduard Tumasian, and Chairman of the Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers Arsen Kazarian signed a national collective agreement 27 April 2009.

The agreement establishes additional guarantees regulating the social and labour relations, and specifies joint actions to be taken by the signatory parties to implement them.

CTUA President Eduard Tumasian described the agreement as historic. “An agreement like this was signed for the first time in this

country, he said. It aims to broaden the involvement of the social partners in the development of health and safety and social policies. If we jointly meet the commitments taken under this agreement, we'll promote decent work, help the development of the civil society, and contribute to social solidarity and the country's stable progress"

The Prime Minister said the agreement was welcome and particularly necessary in the conditions of the world financial and economic crisis when the threat of unemployment was the main concern for the whole world. The economic recession deepens social tensions, which explains why such an agreement is particularly necessary.

Chairman of the Employers' Union Arsen Kazarian also called the date of signing the agreement a historic day.

The agreement specifies the following areas of cooperation for its signatory parties – health and safety, wages and living standards, the labour market and employment, and social insurance and social protection. A special commission comprising equal numbers of participants from all the parties will be set up to help fulfill the obligations taken. The agreement came into force as from the moment of its conclusion and is valid till 30 June 2012.

KAZAKHSTAN: FTURK EXECUTIVE SESSION VISITS PAVLODAR

On the 29th of June, 2009, the Executive Committee of the Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Kazakhstan (FTURK) held its visiting session in the city of Pavlodar. Local trade unionists were also invited to attend.

The session chaired by FTURK President Siyazbek Mukashev decided to convene the General Council of the Federation 22 October 2009 in order to discuss the question of convoking the FTURK 22nd Congress, and review the work done by trade unions to protect workers' socio-economic interests in the context of crisis.

A plan of activities was approved for trade unions' participation in the preparations for the 65th Anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45 that will be marked 9 May 2010.

MOLDOVA: PROMOTING REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP

A round-table meeting was held in Chisinau 21 May 2009 to discuss the role of the intersectoral councils of trade unions in the development of territorial social partnership. Its participants included the leaders of the above trade union

structures and Bureau members of the National Trade Union Confederation of Moldova (CNSM).

According to CNSM President Leonid Manea, 34 territorial intersectoral councils of trade unions were set up in the country's administrative areas in accordance with the Regulations approved by the CNSM Confederal Committee. Their aim is to consolidate the ranks of trade unions in the areas, and coordinate their efforts in protecting the union members' economic, social, professional and labour rights.

The union leaders believe the role of the intersectoral trade union councils will increase with the administrative decentralisation implying broader autonomy in local administration management, including financial decision-making.

RUSSIA: PRESIDENT MEDVEDEV SUPPORTS FNPR INITIATIVE

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and President of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, FNPR, met 18 May 2009 to discuss an important initiative concerning protection of people losing their jobs.

Mikhail Shmakov drew the President's attention to the fact that

workers at enterprises undergoing bankruptcy proceedings were often not paid for long periods of time, and sometimes never got the money they earned. For this reason, already at the early stage of parliamentary readings the unions had proposed that the notion of "first-priority creditor" be introduced into the current law on bankruptcy. Unfortunately, this proposal went unheeded.

Therefore, in conformity with ILO Convention No. 95 concerning the Protection of Wages (which has not yet been ratified by Russia), the unions suggest that the principle of priority settlement of wage debt be established, and that at the stage of bankruptcy proceeding the worker be treated as a privileged creditor. In such a case workers will be paid in full before ordinary creditors, including state and social funds, may establish their claim to the assets of the bankrupt enterprise.

The FNPR has prepared such an amendment to legislation and intends to submit it to the State Duma through friendly MPs. "We wish the state authorities supported the concept of recognising the worker as a privileged creditor," Mikhail Shmakov concluded.

President Medvedev promised to give the necessary instructions directly to the structures concerned.

“We’ll analyse the ILO convention with a view to its subsequent ratification”, he promised. “But if the procedure takes too much time, we might think of preventive amendments to the laws before the basis for ratification has been prepared”.

RUSSIA: FNPR EXECUTIVE REVIEWS URGENT ISSUES

The FNPR Executive met 24 June 2009 to discuss the Federation’s ongoing activities including the current situation in the country and trade union actions in the context of the economic crisis; the outcome of the May Day union campaign in 2009 “Jobs! Wages! Decent Living!”; the results of the All-Russia meeting of primary union organisations’ leaders, and other issues.

The Executive noted that recession tendencies continued to prevail in the Russian economy. Further prospects of socio-economic development are so far uncertain. The country experiences high latent unemployment, the problem of non-payment of wages is becoming more acute and their real level is still dropping.

It was emphasised that it is only the pressure exerted by trade unions that can draw the attention of the authorities and business to this situation and compel them to take responsible decisions. A direct and

effective contribution to this end is provided by FNPR and its affiliates who have initiated trade union monitoring of the situation in the labour market across regions and branches of economy, which is regarded by independent experts as the most accurate in the country.

Trade union organisations, however, do not always use all available means to defend the rights of union members, though in the crisis situation, Russian workers particularly feel the need for the protection of their labour rights and socio-economic interests. Such protection can only be guaranteed by strong, effective and democratic trade unions.

A major step in this direction will be the implementation of measures worked out in May 2009 by the All-Russia meeting of primary union organisations’ leaders, which underlined that the country’s dynamic socio-economic development in the previous decade was largely the result of consistent policies of interaction based on the principles of partnership and actual realisation of collective accords and agreements.

In considering the outcome of the All-Russia meeting of FNPR-affiliated primary union organisations’ leaders held 26 May 2009 in Moscow, the Executive highlighted the importance of the discussions re-

lating to the issue of internal trade union activity and the adopted resolution “For Strong, Effective and Democratic Trade Unions!” reflecting the necessity of modernising the entire union work.

The Executive also supported the proposals by the Meeting’s participants regarding further improvement of the organisational structure of trade unions and the need for strengthening human resources and centralising financial means, and the desire to hold broad-based round tables within branch unions.

In reviewing the results of the May Day action by trade unions in 2009 under the slogan “Jobs! Wages! Decent Living!” and their participation in the World Day of Actions “For Decent Work!”, the Executive noted that the May Day trade union activities held across the country brought together over three million workers. FNPR affiliates and youth councils carried out extensive work in preparing and holding regional May Day events. The marches and rallies organised by trade unions involved 920 thousand people among the working youth and students, which is twice as much as in 2008.

TAJIKISTAN: NEW LABOUR CODE IN FORCE

A new Labour Code came into effect 19 May 2009 in Tajikistan. The

law establishes a legal basis for regulating relations between the employers and the employees in the labour protection area and is aimed at creating working conditions consistent with the requirements for the conservation of workers’ life and health during labour activity.

The adopted law clearly defines the distribution of functions and responsibilities in labour protection between the trade unions and the state supervisory authorities. The trade unions retained the necessary rights and guarantees ensuring their active participation in the efforts to create healthy and safe working conditions. At the same time, the important task of improving the system of supervision and control over the compliance with the labour protection legislation is being solved in close and effective cooperation between the employers, the workers and their lawful representatives (trade unions), all government services and private organisations involved in preventing occupational accidents and diseases.

The role of trade unions in solving these problems, as defined in the Law on Labour Protection, is fully consistent with the provisions of ILO Convention 155 concerning Occupational Safety and Health and the Working Environment, ratified by Tajikistan in 2009.

The law was adopted with due account for the fact that the number of transnationals operating in various spheres of the Republic's national economy was growing. The provisions of this law cover foreign citizens and stateless persons, something that has not been envisaged before.

Following the adoption of the law, a number of measures were undertaken to explain its main provisions to citizens. Media facilities were widely used for this purpose. Specifically, a round table was organised on the republican TV with the participation of representatives from the Tajikistan Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population, the State Labour Inspectorate and the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Tajikistan (FITUT), where detailed explanations were provided concerning the procedure for the application and implementation of this law.

UKRAINE: JOINT EFFORTS TO CURB CRISIS

A Memorandum of Cooperation and the Plan for its implementation for 2009–2011 were signed 25 May 2009 in Kyiv between the Federation of Trade unions of Ukraine (FTUU) and the Ukrainian National Committee of the International Chamber of Commerce (UNC ICC).

The objective of the Memorandum is to study and disseminate international experience in overcoming the consequences of the global financial and economic crisis. This includes implementing international social standards, preparing proposals concerning the contents and realisation of state policies in the labour and socio-economic sphere, the population's employment, motivation of legal employment and labour remuneration, promoting social responsibility of business and industrial democracy, and introducing decent work principles.

In order to achieve the goals set, the FTUU and the UNC ICC have worked out and intend to sign the Plan of Joint Actions that provides for establishing working groups by lines of cooperation and determining coordinators for the whole scope of activities. The areas involved include promoting social dialogue at all levels; international activity; youth policies; and promoting small and medium businesses.

It is planned to hold an international round table on the problem of unshadowing economies within the framework of the Annual Social Forum, carry out targeted search for foreign business partners using the network facilities of National Committees in 90 countries of the world and those of the

UNC ICC foreign offices, organise business meetings for the management of national and foreign enterprises and disseminate information materials.

LEADERS OF THE “ELEKTROPROFISOYUZ” TUI’S AFFILIATES MEET IN MOSCOW

The Council of the International Trade Union Association “ELEKTROPROFISOYUZ” affiliating power engineering and electro-technical industry workers’ unions in the majority of the CIS countries held its session 13 April 2009 in Moscow under the chairmanship of TUI President Vassily Bondarev.

The session discussed the issue of “The experience and creation of common principles of activity by “Elektroprofsoyuz” affiliates in the area of protecting social and labour rights of the youth at enterprises and organisations in the power engineering and electrotechnical industry” and “The progress in implementing the Main Guidelines of the TUI “Elektroprofsoyuz” activity in protecting union members’ socio-economic interests in 2006-2010”, and other problems.

Following the discussions, the participants adopted Recommendations for trade unions in the power engineering and electrotechnical

industry of the CIS countries, where the major objective was to mitigate the negative impact of the global financial and economic crisis on the membership and secure effective resistance to the attempts to solve the emerging problems at the workers’ expense.

OIL AND GAS TRADE UNIONS ARE SET FOR ACTION

Over a hundred of grass-root union leaders and activists from oil and gas enterprises in the CIS countries took part in the seminar “The CIS oil and gas complex in the context of the global economic crisis and priority lines of activity by trade unions in the oil and gas industries and construction workers’ unions in the oil and gas complex in overcoming its social consequences.

GCTU General Secretary Vladimir Scherbakov addressed the participants with a report on “The socio-economic situation in the CIS countries and practical actions by the Executive of the GCTU and its member organisations in overcoming the crisis”.

The participants in the seminar noted that during the crisis situation in the CIS economies, coordination of trade union activity in the oil and gas industries was becoming ever more imperative.

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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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