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NEWS FROM THE GENERAL CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

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CALL FOR CELEBRATION OF GCTU ANNIVERSARY

The Executive Committee of the General Confederation of Trade Union (GCTU) held a regular session in Moscow 17 November 2016. Its participants heard a report on the advance of the GCTU campaign “Minimum Wage at Least Equal to Subsistence Minimum!” The discussion revealed that in most countries of the region the unions had failed to win an indexation of the minimum wage that would keep in line with the current price rises. In some states, the minimum work remuneration had not been revised for years. Nor had any methods been designed for calculating the cost of the minimum consumer basket, and this fact hampers the formal approval of the minimum wage rate.

GCTU member organisations had rejected proposals by some economists that the minimum pay should be calculated by a percentage of the average wage. They also dismissed as unacceptable the persistent attempts

to unlawfully incorporate all kinds of compensation, incentive and social payments into the minimum wage. The Executive Committee decided to carry on the campaign in the coming year.

The meeting also reviewed the contribution made by the GCTU affiliates to the World Day for Decent Work. The Confederation had proposed that this year’s WDDW be observed under slogans closely linked to the specific problems and circumstances in each of the countries or industries. Participants noted that the solidarity actions held by trade unions in the region had once again confirmed the impressive potential they have for mobilising their members. The Executive Committee called on the affiliates to continue promoting the principles and objectives of the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda, and make bolder use of international labour standards in their work.

The Committee approved in principle the proposed amendments to

the GCTU Constitution, and decided to continue working on the draft, so that the results could be presented to the next meeting of the Executive Committee in April 2017.

The session ended with the adoption of a special Appeal on the 25th Anniversary of the General Confederation of Trade Unions to be marked in April 2017 (see below).

TOGETHER WE ARE STRONGER!

Appeal by the GCTU Executive Committee in Connection with the 25th Anniversary of the General Confederation of Trade Unions

In the forthcoming year, 2017, our international trade union organisation, the General Confederation of Trade Unions, will mark its 25th Anniversary.

The GCTU was founded at the inaugural congress held in Moscow 16 April 1992 of the own free will of trade union centres in the Newly Independent States and the industrial Trade Unions Internationals of the region, following the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The establishment of the GCTU came as an opportune and adequate response by trade unions to the challenges of the moment, in full accord with the radical political and socio-economic changes that took place in the region. It was a time of breaking the old ties built over decades of living together in a single economy, a time of a steep decline in production accompanied by an all-out offensive

on workers' basic rights and interests, and by migration of huge masses of people.

The unification that brought together national and international trade union centres of our region met the vital needs and aspirations of workers and trade unions. For this wise and courageous decision we must sincerely thank those who stood at the helm of the region's trade union movement in those fateful years.

From the earliest days, the GCTU and its affiliates declared their commitment to the ideals of international solidarity and the world brotherhood of working people. In our ranks, there are men and women, veterans and youths, and mental and physical workers of different nationalities and political outlooks. The region's unions have become the core of public resistance to reforms at the expense of ordinary people, insisting on a greater social dimension to be added to the policies of their states.

Over the whole period, the GCTU and its affiliates have been intensely looking for the role trade unions were to play in a totally novel historical situation. This creative search was conducted with full respect for the best traditions of the home and the world trade union movements, with the desire to keep intact all positive that has been amassed during the years of living in a common homeland. We have particularly cherished and preserved carefully the spiritual bonds of mutual respect and friendship that have linked our peoples for centuries.

Our Confederation and its affiliates have made it their priority to help the unions fully master the skills of operating in a market environment. The GCTU has been persistently collecting, summarising, and publicising the experience of its member organisations, while coordinating their joint solidarity actions aimed at the protection of workers' legitimate rights and interests, and trade union rights and freedoms.

The General Confederation of Trade Unions has made its contribution to the establishment and development of trade unions in the New Independent States. Today, the GCTU affiliates have a strong standing in the political systems of their countries as influential civil society institutions enjoying international recognition. Simultaneously, the GCTU-affiliated Trade Union Internationals have played an important role in consolidating the sectoral trade union movement in the Commonwealth of Independent States.

During this period, a solid foundation was laid, and best practices accumulated, for the GCTU's interaction with a great number of newly-built agencies of interstate cooperation. The Confederation has always supported integration efforts in the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Economic Community, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Union State of Belarus and Russia, viewing integration as a major avenue that leads to higher living standards, and the entrance of our countries into the world economy on an equal footing. Based on the principles of social partnership, the GCTU and its affiliates have been

fruitfully cooperating with the inter-governmental bodies of the CIS and the EAEC where they represent and uphold the trade union view on social and labour relations.

The fight for decent work, implying productive employment, decent wages, safe jobs, and social guarantees, is currently a top priority for the GCTU. We totally reject the glaring social divide as a shameful fact of the contemporary reality, and will do our best to do away with it. In the conditions of crisis and stagnation, particular attention will have to be devoted to the preservation and development of our earlier social gains.

In this just struggle, we are encouraged and empowered by the trust of ordinary union members that gives us confidence in the future.

We are eager to continue working tirelessly to make each member of our trade union family feel an equal among equals, surrounded by friends and comrades who are always ready to help out and support.

Our motto is "Together We Are Stronger!" Our goal is the well-being of those who live by their work.

As we approach the 25th Anniversary of the GCTU, the Executive Committee calls on all member organisations to strengthen their unity, and develop coordination and cooperation in formulating concerted responses to the challenges and social issues of our time.

The Executive Committee is positive that the holding of the planned

events, as well as further activity of the GCTU will help achieve greater unity in our ranks, and give a new impetus to our common efforts to protect workers' rights and interests.

Moscow, 17 November 2016

GCTU COUNCIL CONCERNED ABOUT LOW PENSIONS AND SCOPE OF INFORMAL ECONOMY

The Council of the General Confederation of Trade Unions met in Moscow 18 November 2016.

GCTU General Secretary Vladimir Scherbakov reported on the activity of the Confederation since the 6th session of the GCTU Council in April 2016. "Today our trade unions are facing several tasks, he said. First, maximum efforts should be made to uphold the gains of the previous years and frustrate any attempts to roll them back. Second, specific protective measures will be needed to win more authority for the unions, bolster up their influence among the masses, and increase their memberships. Third, we must lay the foundation for a powerful social offensive to be launched when the economic situation starts recovering."

The meeting heard a report on the involvement of the region's trade unions in the implementation of pension reforms. During the discussion, speakers noted that the pension systems in their respective countries had lately been repeatedly subjected to reform, but failed to meet internation-

al standards. The pension rates are still low, the financial standing of the pension systems is unstable, occupational pensions grow slowly, while the elderly remain a most needy category of the population.

The Council recommended that member organisations, together with their governments and employers, take extra measures to gradually raise the wages of workers, which will help secure their pension rights within the insurance system, without any subsidies from the state budget.

Participants also discussed the scope of the informal economy in the countries of the region, and how the unions view and act on the problem. The GCTU is concerned about the fact that the informal economy in all its forms prevents increasingly workers from fully exercising their rights, undermines their social protection, and reduces the number of decent jobs. The Council recommended that the member organisations be more insistent in their attempts to achieve the transition from the informal to the formal economy in their respective countries.

The Council set the amount, procedure and terms of payment of membership fees by the GCTU affiliates in the coming year, and approved the GCTU budget for the year 2017.

GCTU HAILS VETERANS' CONGRESS

The GCTU Executive Committee sent a message of solidarity to the delegates and guests of the 6th

Congress of the Commonwealth of Public Organisations of Veterans (Pensioners) of the New Independent States, held in Moscow.

The message says the GCTU and the international union of veterans have been constant and reliable partners when commonly addressing social issues in the CIS Council of Heads of State, the Council of CIS Heads of Government, the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, and the Commonwealth Executive Committee.

Trade unions and veterans stand together for raising the minimum pensions to a level not lower than the real subsistence minimum, for their regular indexation, for paying in full pensions to all working pensioners, for maintaining the benefits and guarantees provided for by interstate agreements. A lot has been done, but even more needs to be done to make the lives of elderly people worthy of their merits to society.

The GCTU expressed its confidence that the 6th Congress of the Commonwealth of Public Organisations of Veterans would develop an action programme enabling the veterans' organisations to actively solve the problems of concern to the older generations.

GCTU PARTICIPATES IN HIGH-LEVEL CIS EVENTS

GCTU General Secretary Vladimir Scherbakov participated in the meeting of the CIS Council of Heads of Government held 28 October 2016 in Minsk (Belarus). The meeting con-

sidered 20 draft documents, with the emphasis on the problems of economic cooperation of the CIS countries. Particular attention was devoted to the fulfilment of the Free Trade Zone Agreement.

A month later, on the 25th of November, a GCTU delegation headed by Vladimir Scherbakov attended the 45th plenary session of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (IPA) of the CIS member states that took place in St. Petersburg. With 18 points on the agenda, participants focused on the issues of cooperation in the spheres of education and social policy.

The autumn session was the last in a series of events organised over the year to mark the 25th Anniversary of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Summing up the results at the closing press conference, the Chair of the IPA Council Valentina Matviyenko noted that "over the years, the Assembly has adopted more than 500 acts, including model laws. More than 100 of them have been developed and evaluated with the involvement of trade union representatives. They have helped us bring together and harmonise the national legislations of the member states in the social and labour spheres. The main thing is that we have managed to preserve the common economic space, and thanks to this we have such a result."

GCTU AFFILIATES OBSERVE WDDW-2016

The General Confederation of Trade Unions called on its affiliates to ac-

tively observe the World Day for Decent Work in 2016 under the umbrella slogan: "End Corporate Greed!" Responding to the call, millions of people took part in events organised by trade unions.

In Kazakhstan, various activities were held by trade-union organisations in Astana and all capitals of the country's regions. Participants in the work collective meetings were briefed by union activists on the problems of compliance with the Labour Code and other laws relating to the regulation of labour relations.

In Kyrgyzstan, a press conference was held to mark the WDDW-2016. The union leaders stressed that the key task of the country's trade unions was to struggle against informal employment and the domination of transnational capital imposing its brutal rules of the game on the labour market.

The National Confederation of Trade Unions of Moldova (CNSM) organised outreach and education campaigns in Chisinau and other cities and towns. CNSM representatives informed people of the unions' activities, and of the measures they were taking to protect workers' rights and interests.

As part of activities to observe WDDW-2016, a nation-wide campaign was carried out in most regions of Russia, mostly in the form of holding special sessions of tripartite commissions on regulation of social and labour relations. Participants in the sessions analysed the results of social dialogue, with a view to im-

proving the efficiency of the commissions.

The Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine (FPU) organised informational picketing outside the Parliament and the House of Government. The aim of the action was to draw the attention of the Government to the problems of decent work in Ukraine, and inform the public at large of the unions' demands and activities.

BELARUS: FPB ENCOURAGES UNION MERGERS

At its regular session 3 November 2016 in Minsk, the Presidium of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FPB) considered a number of issues, including the need to bring all collective agreements in conformity with the General Agreement.

The FPB insists that the following provisions should be included in the collective agreements: payment of wages at least twice a month, extension of the contracts with conscientious employees for the maximal term, and protection of pre-retirement age workers and other vulnerable categories of employees.

In addition, the FPB suggests that a special system of insurance against insolvency of the employer be introduced as soon as possible, as it is a matter that concerns dozens of thousands of workers at faltering enterprises.

The Presidium encouraged FPB affiliates to continue with their efforts to integrate and consolidate related and

allied trade unions. A whole number of mergers had already been accomplished by trade unions in the spheres of industry, transportation, energy, environmental management and geo-technologies. For instance, in December 2016, the Congress of the Belarus Trade Union of Public Education and Science Employees had outlined and adopted the principles of their merger with the related trade union of the National Academy of Sciences.

GEORGIA: SOLIDARITY WITH PIPELINE UNION MEMBERS

Delegates of the 17th Congress of the Georgian Oil and Gas Industry Workers' Union representing over 4,000 members expressed support for the primary organisation of the *Pipeline Union* in their ongoing legal battle with the *British Petroleum* management.

The trade union was built in 2015, following the company's refusal to grant Georgian workers the same working conditions as were provided to other *BP* workers in the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey region.

The *BP* management had in every possible way prevented the workers from organising, and even sent out an e-mail warning them against joining the union. The managers also tried to bully the workers by sending them SMS-messages or talking them out of this step in private "friendly" conversations. As a result, most members left the union, and today it numbers only 10 out of former 30 members.

Deputy Chair of the *Pipeline Union*, Vakhtang Pirmisashvili, had been disciplined for months until dismissed under the pretext of restructuring. The legitimacy of his dismissal is currently being checked by the Civil Court.

Congress participants expressed solidarity with the members of the *Pipeline Union* organisation and, in particular, with their Deputy Chair.

KYRGYZSTAN: CENTRAL ASIAN WOMEN DISCUSS INFORMAL EMPLOYMENT

Women representatives of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan took part in a sub-regional seminar on challenges of informal employment organised in Bishkek 10-11 November 2016 by the Women's Network of the Central Asian countries, with the technical assistance of the ILO.

Participants said their trade unions were worried about the spread of unprotected employment in the region. They believe the development of the informal sector was an induced response to the current socio-economic situation that makes people agree to the hard terms and conditions of unprotected employment.

Following the debate, participants exchanged views on which of the national experiences presented at the seminar was successfully applicable in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Participants developed the Plan of Measures to Combat the Informal Economy for 2017.

MOLDOVA: CNSM REJECTS PENSION REFORM

Trade unions resented bitterly the Government's decision of 5 December 2016 approving the draft law on the reform of the pension system, and demanded its amendment.

The National Trade Union Confederation of Moldova (CNSM) believes most Government proposals to be discriminatory against workers, and for this reason, disagreeable to the interests of the bulk of the population.

The unions regard as utterly unacceptable the way the draft law interprets the issues of increasing the retirement age and the qualifying insurance period; recalculating the amount of pensions for those who continue working after the retirement age; linking pensions to the consumer-price indexes, exercising the right to early retirement, and establishing the basic pension amount for all recipients.

On the 9th of December 2016, the unions put picket lines outside the House of Parliament, demanding that the MPs include the CNSM amendments in the draft law on the reform of the pension system.

Participants in the protest action, who represented national industrial trade union federations, chanted slogans "We want decent pensions!", "Away

with illegal employment!", "Social equality now!", "Raise the minimum wages!", "Recalculate pensions for all pensioners!" etc.

RUSSIA: TRIPARTITE AGREEMENT EXTENDED

The General Council of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR) met in Moscow 26 October 2016 to consider, among other things, the tasks facing the unions in the current social and economic conditions.

The session was critical of the Government's anti-crisis policy that had led to the continuous industrial stagnation, reduction of investment in the economy, a curb on the wage growth, a drop in the incomes of the population, a fall in the retail trade turnover, and a growing number of poor people in the country.

To observe the previously made arrangements, participants proposed that the current General Agreement between the national organisations of trade unions, the national associations of employers, and the Government of Russia be extended for the year 2017.

On the 23rd of December 2016, the three parties to social dialogue signed a document on the extension of the current General Agreement for another year. FNPR President Mikhail Shmakov said that "this measure was necessary given the present-day crisis, especially as budgetary framework had not yet been finalised."

UKRAINE: MASSIVE TRADE UNION PROTEST ACTION

On the 8th of December 2016, the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine (FPU) organised an all-Ukraine protest action in support of the trade union demands for enhanced social protection of workers and other categories of the population in a context of rising energy prices and utility rates.

The action held under the main slogan “Unions demand decent life for people!” was launched to prevent a further drop in the living standards. The FPU protestors were joined by representatives of the Joint Representative Body of the Trade Union Associations, the All-Ukrainian Public Organisation of Disabled People “Chernobyl Union of Ukraine”, the National Academy of Sciences, and veterans.

More than 10 thousand union activists from all the regions of Ukraine and representatives of work collectives of all industries took part in a rally held at the walls of the Supreme Rada (Parliament).

Participants in the rally demanded that MPs:

- raise the minimum wages to the level of the real subsistence minimum calculated on the basis of the updated consumer basket of 3,200 hryvnias, and allocate the funds needed for the purpose in the State Budget for 2017;
- reduce the prices of gas and utility services to an economically justified level, with due regard for the population’s paying capacity;

- carry out work remuneration reform, etc.

The rally was wound up with the adoption of a resolution.

CIS PUBLIC SERVANTS MEET IN JERUSALEM

Ms Natalia Podshibyakina, a Deputy General Secretary of the GCTU, spoke to the 8th session of the Council of the International Trade Union Federation of State and Public Employees held 26 November 2016 in Jerusalem (Israel).

The Council reviewed the following issues:

- the Report on the Federation’s activity in 2016 and the Plan of actions for 2017;
- the advance of the solidarity campaign “Minimum Wages at Least Equal to the Subsistence Minimum!”, and revitalisation of the affiliates’ involvement in the campaign, etc.

The activity report was delivered by President of the Federation Vladimir Savchenko who dwelt on the challenges facing the Federation.

The Council adopted an appeal urging the Prime Minister of Armenia to respect international law when making decisions on massive reductions of civil servants.

In conclusion, Natalia Podshibyakina presented the Vice President of the Federation, Nikolai Gavva, with the GCTU Silver Badge of Honour “For the contribution to the development of the trade union movement”.

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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 AND UKRAINE, AND ALSO 28 INDUSTRIAL TRADE UNION INTERNATIONALS.

THE GCTU IS READY TO CO-OPERATE WITH ANY OTHER NATIONAL TRADE UNION FEDERATIONS, IRRESPECTIVE OF THEIR AFFILIATION WITH OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS.

THE CONFEDERATION ENJOYS OBSERVER STATUS WITH THE CIS AND EURASEC INTER-PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLIES, 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 , THE UN DPI AND THE ECOSOC.

THE GCTU SUPREME BODIES ARE THE CONGRESS, CONVENED 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.

PRESIDENT OF THE GCTU IS MIKHAIL SHMAKOV,
GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE GCTU IS VLADIMIR SCHERBAKOV

DEAR READERS

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