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NEWS FROM THE GENERAL CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS

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GCTU EXECUTIVE MEETS IN MOSCOW

The GCTU Executive Committee met in Moscow 5 November 2009 to hear information from its affiliated organisations on the current situation in CIS countries and on trade union activities in the economic crisis conditions.

Following an exchange of opinions, the Executive recommended that the member organisations proceed with their efforts to minimise the negative consequences of the crisis for workers, prevent encroachment on their rights and curtailment of their previous achievements, and carry out the monitoring of socio-economic and labour market developments.

In formulating their proposals for national post-crisis development strategies, the GCTU affiliates in CIS countries will stress the necessity to build a new, more efficient, socially

just, and ecologically sustainable economy. As part of this demand, they will insist that the governments pursue active labour market policies, keep the traditional forms of employment and create new jobs, raise the real wages, and observe ILO conventions and respective labour legislations.

The Executive Committee approved the Report on the Health of Population and on Organising Public Health Systems in CIS Countries prepared jointly by the General Confederation of Trade Unions and the CIS Interstate Statistical Committee. The paper will be sent to the Heads of State and the leaders of the Inter-Parliamentary Assemblies of the CIS and the Eurasec.

As they reviewed the progress of the solidarity campaign "A minimum pension not lower than the pensioner's subsistence minimum!", participants discussed the steps taken by trade unions to improve the living

conditions of retired persons. They noted that over the period 2007-09 the unions in CIS countries had been purposefully pressuring their governments for concrete measures to improve the pension insurance schemes. Solving these problems must remain a priority on trade union agendas till the final goal has been attained, i.e. till the earnings replacement rate has reached at least 40 per cent.

The session summed up the results of the World Day for Decent Work (WDDW) in the CIS. In response to the GCTU appeal to mark the Day under the common slogan "Decent Work, a Safe Way of Overcoming the Economic Crisis!", mass rallies, public meetings, enlarged sessions of trade union bodies, meetings of union activists, conferences, round tables, and other events were organised in the Commonwealth countries. The main aim for the unions was to warn the governments and employers against further attempts to solve economic challenges of the crisis by restricting basic labour rights, worsening the socio-economic conditions of workers, and encroaching upon trade union freedoms.

The Executive Committee called upon all GCTU affiliates to continue their struggles for the development of socially oriented anti-crisis programmes in their countries, closely linked with the struggle for implementing the decent work agenda, and building a more just and socially

oriented world order, in the light of opinions and proposals contained in the Washington, London, and Pittsburgh Declarations by the Global Unions.

GCTU HAILS UN CLIMATE CHANGE SUMMIT

In connection with the UN Climate Change Conference held in Copenhagen in December 2009, the General Confederation of Trade Unions (GCTU) issued a statement which says, among other things, that:

"The global warming, the pollution of the atmosphere with harmful emissions coming primarily from manufacturing, the growing danger of man-made accidents and disasters, the shrinking reserves of drinking water, the expanding deserts and ever-frost zones unfit for usage by human beings, the destruction of the ozone layer - all these and other challenges endanger seriously human life on this planet, and, therefore, common and coordinated approaches will be needed to address them at international level.

"The problem of climate change and environment degradation has a strong social dimension. Improvement of the ecological situation goes hand in hand with raising the workers' living standards and the quality of their work environment. For example, estimates sug-

gest that transition to a green economy would generate a sizeable number of new jobs. It is not by accident that ILO Convention No. 148 on the protection of workers against occupational risks caused by air pollution, noise and vibration (ratified by only five CIS countries) is entitled the Working Environment Convention. We call on the parliaments of CIS states to ratify this convention, and on the trade union movement of such countries to urge their authorities to do so.

“In this light, it is logical that the global unions, as well as the entire world trade union movement and the GCTU as part of it, demand the right to participate in the discussion and realisation of ecological decisions, including those that will be taken at Copenhagen. The GCTU confirms its readiness to contribute to the common efforts being made by the world’s trade unions to enhance ecological security. We regard the struggle for a healthy environment as a crucial task for trade unions, as an integral part of their drive for decent work.

“The General Confederation of Trade Unions extends its sincere wishes of success to the UN Climate Change Conference. We hope participants will successfully reach common understanding as to what measures must be taken at national and global levels to speed up a radical improvement of the world ecological situation and,

thereby, of the working conditions for hundreds of millions of workers in all countries.”

AZERBAIJAN: ATUC PREOCCUPIED WITH MOTIVATION

The Executive Committee of the Azerbaijan Trade Union Confederation (ATUC) assembled 8 October 2009 in Baku to consider the work being done by two of its affiliates, the union of construction workers, and the union of employees in the research and production sector and in private enterprises, to enhance the motivation of trade union membership in small and medium-size businesses.

Participants noted that the world economic crisis and the socio-economic problems it had entailed for the republic had made the need for collective protection of workers’ rights and interests particularly urgent. In this context, the unions remained the only real force able to rebuff successfully employers’ attempts to infringe upon employees’ rights.

The session also discussed in what way trade unions could contribute to the struggle against human trafficking, and promote occupational health and safety. The Executive approved a plan of work to be done in preparation for the signing of the General Collective Agreement for 2010-11 by the gov-

ernment, the employers' confederation and the trade unions.

BELARUS: FTUB SETS TASKS FOR 2010

The Council of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus (FTUB) held its 6th plenary session in Minsk 9 December 2009 to do the annual review of its activities, and analyse the performance of its affiliates over the year.

In his report to the meeting, FTUB President Leonid Kozik touched upon a number of important issues. He said, for instance, that at workplaces with several active trade union organisations, the most representative of them is now liable to form a joint trade union delegation for the collective bargaining commission. If an enterprise lacks a trade union, the collective agreement for its workers can be signed by a higher union body.

There are currently 17.5 thousand collective agreements signed in Belarus. "However, Leonid Kozik said, some enterprise managers take the liberty to ignore the provisions of their collective agreements. More than that, sometimes they try to challenge agreements concluded at industrial and regional levels. The problem of contract labour agreements still remains acute".

The session set FTUB tasks for the period till its ordinary 6th Congress scheduled for September 2010.

KAZAKHSTAN: EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF LABOUR MIGRATION

A round table debate on "Effective management of labour migration processes in Kazakhstan: the role of trade unions in promoting decent work and migrant workers' rights" was held in the headquarters of the Federation of Trade Unions of the Republic of Kazakhstan (FTURK).

The event brought together representatives of the FTURK, Parliament, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, other state agencies, and the mass media.

Kazakhstan is a party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and ILO Convention No. 87, both providing migrant workers with the right to build trade unions and participate in their activities. Kazakhstan has also ratified ILO Convention No. 98 under which workers, including migrant workers, enjoy the right to organise and to bargain collectively.

As part of the project "Stable Partnership as a Means of Securing Effective Management of Labour Migration in the Russian Federation, the Caucasus, and Central Asia", funded by the European Union, the FTURK has developed a national guidance for involving migrant workers in trade union activities. The pa-

per is based on the relevant ILO documents.

Round table participants stressed the need of solving migration problems through improved legislation, closer coordination of efforts by all government and public agencies active in this sphere, and raising the responsibility of executive authorities.

KYRGYZSTAN: UNIONS REJECT GOVERNMENT PLANS

“The KFTU cannot agree with the decision by Government of the Kyrgyz Republic to raise electricity rates twofold, as well as with the sharp manifold rise in heating rates, which, we believe, will lead to a considerable drop in the living standards of trade union members and all citizens of this country”, reads a statement issued by the Kyrgyzstan Federation of Trade Unions 2 December 2009.

“While accepting the necessity to raise the rates, the unions believe this must be done gradually, with a due allowance for the paying capacity of the population; as 35 per cent of people in the country live below the poverty line, 60 per cent of workers draw wages below the national average, and the jobless rate, including hidden unemployment, amounts to 20 per cent, according to trade union estimates”.

MOLDOVA: NEW CNSM PRESIDENT ELECTED

The General Council of the National Trade Union Confederation of Moldova (CNSM) met in Chisinau 5 November 2009, with 148 Council members and two representatives of the General Confederation of Trade Unions and the International Trade Union Confederation attending the session.

The two principal items on the agenda were: 1) organisational issues, and 2) the socio-economic situation in the country and trade union activity in the context of economic crisis.

Following the debate on the first item, new Regulations for the Election of CNSM President were approved and replacements were made in the composition of the General Council.

However, the main event was the election of a new CNSM President. The majority of votes went to Oleg Budza, formerly a CNSM Vice President and Chairman of the Federation of Trade Unions of Workers in Construction and the Building Material Industry.

RUSSIA: FNPR TO CELEBRATE ITS 20TH ANNIVERSARY

“This year, with the negative impact of the world financial and economic crisis on the country’s economy, Russian trade unions concentrated

their efforts on the protection of workers rights, employing all means provided by labour legislation to save the maximum number of jobs and keep up the purchasing power of wages”, FNPR President Mikhail Shmakov told a meeting of the General Council of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR) held in Moscow 25 November 2009 to review the activities of trade unions in today’s economic situation.

Yielding to trade union pressure, the state authorities had to make a broader use of retaliation measures against employers breaking labour legislation. A federal law was adopted giving the public procurator’s offices additional powers to protect workers’ rights, particularly in the sphere of work remuneration and full observance of employment legislation, including the hiring and dismissal procedures.

The FNPR believes it necessary to establish, as from 1 January 2010, a minimum wage that will be equal to the subsistence minimum for the able-bodied population of the first quarter of 2008.

The General Council proposed that the government’s anti-crisis programme should incorporate additional measures stimulating the domestic demand, promoting higher employment, and supporting the buying capacity of wages and salaries. The state authorities must be more insistent in finding solutions to the

problems that have not been fully considered in the current programme.

The Executive Committee was commissioned to approve a plan of events to be held in connection with the 20th Anniversary of the FNPR that will be marked in 2010.

FNPR LEADER MEETS WITH PRIME MINISTER

President of the Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR) Mikhail Shmakov met with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in Moscow 24 December 2009.

In the course of the talk, the Prime Minister expressed his great satisfaction with the work done by the government in conjunction with trade unions to normalise the situation in the labour market.

The monitoring carried out by the Russian Tripartite Commission on the initiative of trade unions had helped identify the painful points on the labour market and take measures for their removal. As Mikhail Shmakov sees it, the programmes of stabilising the labour market situation have yielded a great positive effect. The Tripartite Commission were unanimous in their desire to proceed with such programmes aiming to mitigate the negative consequences of the crisis for workers and trade union members.

The FNPR leader raised the problem of setting quotas for foreign workforce in Russia. In his opinion, the number of guest workers approved by the government (two million) is too high, and must be reduced by half. There are regions with a high percentage of unemployed that insist on granting them quotas for inviting foreign workers. The unions believe it would be more correct to concentrate on retraining and placement of domestic unemployed and on organising public works for them.

Vladimir Putin agreed that, given the protracted nature of the economic and financial crisis, it would be necessary to take a new and closer look at the quota set for foreign workers for 2010, and optimise it.

TAJKISTAN: UNIONS FOR DECENT JOBS, FAIR PAY

Like the rest of the world community, Tajikistan has fully experienced the negative impact of the world financial and economic crisis which has primarily told on working people's living standards. For this reason, providing safe social protection for workers, creation of new jobs, securing fair wages, and setting up a barrier to employers' dominance are among the priorities on the agendas of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Tajikistan (FITUT) and its affiliated organisations.

The unions stress that all their claims must be settled via social dialogue as provided for by Tajikistan laws. In particular, all the above problems have been fixed in the General Agreement concluded by the country's government, employers' organisation and trade unions for 2009-10. A special task schedule for their implementation was prepared by the Tripartite Commission, specifying the deadlines and the persons responsible for execution.

UKRAINE: MAIDAN SAYS NO TO POVERTY

A nationwide action of protest against poverty in Ukraine was held by the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine (FTUU) on the 17th of October 2009 to mark the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty as proclaimed by the United Nations.

The action was organised as part of the autumn offensive by trade unions. About 15 thousand trade unionists from all over Ukraine assembled on the capital's *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* (Independence Place) to take part in a mass rally that attracted also thousands of Kyiv's inhabitants.

Speaking to the rally, FTUU President Vasyl Khara reminded its participants that since January 2009 the Federation had been in labour dispute with the country's Cabinet of

Ministers. All conciliation bodies that arbitrated in the conflict have found the FTUU claims to be just and recommended that the authorities should pay heed to them. However, the government has refused to do so.

The main demands put forward by the FTUU are as follows:

- the minimum wages cannot be lower than the subsistence minimum, while the latter must be revised and upgraded; and
- the government must take steps to settle the wage arrears that have risen by 30 per cent this year.

As the trade union leader put it, the Cabinet of Ministers has actually declared a war on the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine. In this connection, he attacked the so called “independent” trade unions who, in this situation, give their consent to the freezes of wages and salaries, pensions, stipends and social benefits. Simultaneously, oceans of dirt are being slung through the media at the FTUU and its President, together with disinformation about the alleged sell-out of trade union property.

“If the Cabinet of Ministers rejects our constitutional, just claims and refuses to sit down at the negotiation table to work out a schedule for the implementation of our demands, we’ll have nothing else to do, but start preparations for an all-

Ukraine strike involving political demands, including resignation of the government”, warned FTUU President.

Protesters expressed their concern over the growing unemployment, unjustified pay cuts, record-high wage arrears, reduced health and safety at workplaces, and, what really matters, the unfounded size of the subsistence minimum. All this strips millions of Ukrainians of their right to proper social guarantees.

The protest action has demonstrated the unity of the FTUU and its affiliates, as well as their resolution to insist that the government and employers secure decent and safe working conditions and fair pay in Ukraine. They also intend to press for decent social security for veterans, young people and women. In a word, the country’s workers are determined to eliminate poverty and win better living standards for themselves and their families.

UKRAINE: FTUU SATISFIED WITH SOCIAL LAW SIGNED

The Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine (FTUU) has been waging a consistent struggle against the reduction of social standards and further impoverishment of working people in the crisis conditions. Its complete rejection of any drops in the living standards of working families, pensioners, and students was once again confirmed by the Federation

during the nationwide protest action held from 7-17 October 2009 (*see above*). The resolution of the final protest rally in Kyiv containing workers' demands was turned over to President of Ukraine, the Supreme Rada (Parliament), and the Cabinet of Ministers.

The unions called on the supreme authorities to take account of the FTUU proposals when making respective state decisions. On the 20th of October, 2009 the Supreme Rada approved in the second reading the law "On setting the subsistence minimum and the minimum wage for 2010" which was signed by Ukraine's President 30 October.

The presidential decision was taken under the influence of a call by Vasyl Khara to abstain from vetoing the law on raising the social standards. Although it does not fully provide the level of state social standards and guarantees as specified by national legislation, the new law is nevertheless oriented to the support of socially vulnerable citizens and prevention of growing poverty among workers in the situation of a financial and economic crisis.

The unions are aware, however, that the fact of signing the law by President is not to be seen as a firm guarantee of its implementation. For it to be implemented, it will be necessary to amend the State Budget for the current year and allocate appropriate financial resources in the budget - 2010.

FORESTRY UNIONS COOPERATE WITH EMPLOYERS AND MANAGEMENT BODIES

A delegation of the Federation of Timber and Related Industries Workers' Unions of the CIS headed by its President Viktor Karnyushin took part in the session of the CIS Interstate Council for the Timber Processing Complex and Forestry held 12 November 2009.

Participants in the session included Council members from Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine, representatives of the CIS Executive Committee, and invited guests from the Forestry Ministry of Belarus, and the Research Centre for Biological Resources of the Belarus National Academy of Sciences.

The two main points on the agenda were "Functioning of Timber and Forestry Enterprises of CIS Countries in the Conditions of the Economic Crisis" and "Cooperation of Trade Unions with Employers and Management Bodies in the CIS Timber and Forestry Industries in the Conditions of the Economic Crisis".

To minimise the negative consequences of the world economic crisis, the Council recommended that its member organisations give support to the industry's trade unions in what concerns social protection of timber and forestry workers, and take all possible legal steps to save jobs.

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GCTU INTERNATIONAL DEPARTMENT AND
GCTU PUBLIC RELATIONS CENTRE

42 LENINSKY PROSPEKT
119119 MOSCOW, RUSSIA
TELEFAX +7(095) 938-2155
PHONE +7(095)952-2782
+7(095)938-8649
Web site: www.vkp.ru;
E-mail: inter@vkp.ru

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.

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

DEAR READERS

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