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New Trade Union World Briefing Bulgaria -12 pages

"Bulgaria's accession to the EU: still giant steps needed to bridge the social gap!"

Brussels, 27 October, 2005 (ICFTU OnLine):: In the wake of the European Commission's adoption on 25 October of a report reviving Sofia's hopes of joining the European Union on 1 January 2007, the ICFTU today publishes a new briefing (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991222989&Language=EN>) on the worrying social situation in this country that has just passed another stage in the EU accession process.

The European Commission did, however, insist that the pace of reform in certain areas will have to pick up if Bulgaria hopes to meet the 2007 deadline. If it does not, its accession will have to be postponed until 2008. Among the top priorities singled out by the Commission were the fight against corruption and organised crime, but it also highlighted the need to improve the defence of human rights and the protection of minorities in Bulgaria.

Bulgaria's robust economic growth record has clearly played in Sofia's favour. Yet the economic shock therapy deployed to achieve this - structural reforms, mass restructurings and factory closures - has come at a very high social price. Poverty, unemployment, the casualisation of labour ... whilst Bulgaria may be almost ready to join the European market, its workers are still far removed from any hopes of enjoying the dividends of the "European social model". The average salary in Bulgaria is far lower than in any other Member State, lower even than in its neighbouring country, Romania - also on course for accession in 2007. The absence of social dialogue is alarming, as witnessed by the country's trade unions in this latest briefing.

"The progress made in terms of social legislation is obvious, but in practice it is not working... very serious efforts have to be made in terms of workers' rights, the fight against discrimination, public health, social dialogue or even equal opportunities for men and women," explains Ekaterina Ribarova, head of European Integration Affairs at CITUB.

Supported by first-hand accounts and field investigations, this latest briefing takes a close look at the boom in the textile and garment sector, the champion of foreign investment. This sector, accounting for a quarter of all industrial jobs, with a largely female, non-unionised workforce, owes its record development to the comparative advantage of low wages. Whilst battling to shed its poor reputation in terms of social conditions, the industry is also struggling to find its ground in the new global trade environment emerging from the lifting of quotas (ATC) last January to the advantage of the Chinese textile giant. "Chinese competition? It is textile employers' major fear and the pretext for doing nothing to improve social conditions", explains Ivan Neykov, former trade unionist, former Labour Minister, and current director of the Balkan Institute of Employment and Social Policy (*).

This latest Trade Union World Briefing also denounces the growing marginalisation of the Roma community, particularly its younger members. The alarming indicators for the large Roma minority led us to school no. 6 in Silven, where virtually all the pupils are Roma and 90% of their parents are unemployed. "Many Roma work as seasonal labourers and, whether we like it or not, they take their children with them. So we have to negotiate with the parents to limit the damage," explains Nadia Georgiova, a teacher at school no. 6 in Silven. She also insists on the

challenge presented by the young girls "often taken out of school by the parents at the age of 12 or 13".

This Trade Union World Briefing also lifts the curtain on the scene behind the tourism boom on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast, revealing the appalling conditions of the workers in the tourism and construction sectors.

(*) Read the complete version of the spotlight interview with Ivan Neykov published today on the ICFTU site at
<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991222978&Language=EN>

Download the Trade Union World Briefing ""Bulgaria's accession to the EU: still giant steps needed to bridge the social gap!" from the ICFTU web site at
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