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INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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New Trade Union World Briefing (12 pages)

Chernobyl still killing 20 years on

Brussels, 20 April 2005 (ICFTU Online): Belarus, Ukraine, Russia: Drawing from eyewitness accounts and analyses, ICFTU has published a new Trade Union World Briefing (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223708&Language=EN>) condemning the fact that 20 years after the fateful day of 26 April 1986, the biggest industrial catastrophe ever is still under way.

In the days following the explosion of reactor No. 4 at the Chernobyl nuclear power station, dozens of firemen and personnel at the power station died from acute radiation exposure. Since then, however, the human toll has continued to grow. Firstly, in an effort to "liquidate Chernobyl", the Soviet authorities sent some 600,000 to 800,000 people to the site of the disaster without taking the measures needed to ensure their safety. Many of them have died, while others are dying every day, often in criminal anonymity somewhere in the former Soviet Union. Secondly, at least five million people live, study and work in areas which are contaminated, and which will remain contaminated for thousands of years.

In Belarus, a country which, with every passing month, has justifiably earned the title of 'last dictatorship in Europe', implacable union repression allows the government to implement a policy to economically revive the contaminated areas, and to do so without any accountability. This policy is based on forced labour and the exploitation of migrants. "Enticed by propaganda, migrants are flowing into the contaminated areas. Many young Belarus graduates are also required to spend two years working in the contaminated areas", says Alexander Yaroshuk, President of the Belarus Congress of Democratic Trade Unions.

In Russia, the Chernobyl Union is fighting to defend the rights of liquidators in an increasingly ultra-liberal context. In 2005, unfair social reform led to an unprecedented mobilisation of civil society.

Although at the time he was working as a miner in the Tula region, Vladimir Naumov was one of the 'liquidators' sent to the disaster zone in the immediate aftermath. "We ruined our health in 1986. Of the 450 miners from Tula, 170 are dead. All of the others are invalids. In Tula, the mortality rate among liquidators is 25%. The suicide rate is ten times higher than the national average." Today president of the Chernobyl Union for Tula and the Centre Region, he explains his union struggle against efforts to play down the impact of Chernobyl on those who helped clean up the mess.

In Ukraine, the trade union activists defending the last 4,000 workers in the exclusion zone are fighting against the indifference of the authorities, which have allocated a pittance to radiation protection programmes, thus compromising the health of personnel and the population at large. Sergiy Budianskiy, president of the Chernobyl Territorial Union, an affiliate of the Union of Nuclear and Energy Industry Workers of Ukraine (Atomprofspilka), adds: "Under a 2001 government programme, the closure of the power station was supposed to be offset by the creation of 3,750 new jobs by 2008 with a forecast budget of €2.43 million, but the funds were never paid out. The Slavutich free zone only allowed the creation of 700 jobs and the salaries are much lower than those in the exclusion zone.

Read also the Spotlight interview with Vladimir Naumov (Chernobyl Union - Russia), "The mortality rate among the liquidators from Tula is 25%.", at <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223709&Language=EN>.

The ICFTU represents 155 million workers in 236 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. <http://www.icftu.org>

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