

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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Spotlight interview with Evgeny Sivaykin (Russia - FNPR)

"Young people want proper protection at work, not Christmas presents!"

Brussels 24 July 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): Whilst union membership amongst older workers is dwindling, young Russians are turning towards the movement in ever greater numbers. Their chief demand is protection more in keeping with the recent developments in the world of work. Mentalities are changing, partly thanks to the work of the Youth Committees in the regions. Evgeny Sivaykin (FNPR) speaks to us about the strategies developed by this young generation of trade unionists.

What are the objectives of the various programmes directed at young workers?

Russia's unions have come to the realisation that they cannot exist, or survive even, without the influence of the youth, which is why the recruitment of young people is one of our chief concerns at the moment. The most critical sectors are those where the number of employees is on the rise, such as the services and the retail sectors. That's why our programmes are primarily geared towards these sectors. The old system of incentives used during the Soviet era was no longer having any impact on this target group. Young people are not interested in the gifts distributed by the trade union at Christmas or New Year. They're more interested in proper protection for their rights at work, which are very often violated in our country. Young workers see trade unions as a vehicle for protecting their working conditions. They want trade unions to serve as a means of ensuring that employers respect their rights. We have noticed that although overall membership levels are falling, the percentage of young members is on the rise. They accounted for 21% in 2001. Now, in 2006, they represent over 30%.

What was the idea behind the car rally organised by the FNPR in 2005?

The car rally was organised as part of the activities marking the centenary of the trade union movement in Russia and the 15 anniversary of our Federation. The aim was twofold: firstly, to take advantage of these symbolic anniversaries to disseminate information about the trade union movement in general and, secondly, to draw people's attention to the practices deployed by Russian carmakers. We covered 14,000 kilometres in 14 days, making stopovers in over 40 towns between Kaliningrad and Valdivostok. We not only met with ordinary people, but also the local officials and leaders. We had exchanges about trade unionism in 2006. They talked to us about their everyday lives, formulated demands, and gave us advice on what trade unions should be today.

The Youth Section of the FNPR took an active part in the rally and were able to meet up with many young people and discuss the problems specific to young workers. They also promoted trade unionism, of course, and presented the activities of the Youth Section and the other trade union structures where young people are represented.

The FNPR also held an extraordinary Congress during the rally. It was an

opportunity to welcome international guests, our regional affiliates, and members from the different sections, as well as getting the media to talk about trade unions.

What are the main trends in youth employment in Russia?

According to the figures, everything is relatively normal. In terms of numbers, youth unemployment has, in fact, fallen by 400,000 over the last five years. At the same time, however, the percentage of young people out of work has risen by 5%. The unemployment rate among young people now stands at 55%, so the proportion is growing.

The new Labour Code is trying to adapt to the situation, particularly in relation to first jobs and trial periods. There are also plans to establish a "Registration Book" in the services sector. The bill hasn't been passed yet (it's on its second reading in the Russian parliament), but employers will be required to affix an entry and exit stamp to prove the duration for which a person is contracted. It has practically been adopted already, given that all the parties agree with it.

I would also like to point out that the national youth policy is entering its final phase. This policy applies to all young people aged under 25. Most of the strategy is related to youth employment. Young people wanting to set up their own businesses, for example, are given substantial assistance. Our Youth Committee took part, of course, in the project's conception. We also have numerous regional Youth Committees and there are regional laws concerning young people that have been drawn up with the support of our affiliates. Unfortunately, it is not always the case at national level, which is more influenced by old practices. But we're working towards improving the process of drawing up legislation.

What are the problems specific to young people on the labour market?

Given their age, they are often young parents with young children and therefore need access to education and accommodation. This is one of the problems specific to them. But, other than that, they also have advantages: they are more energetic and more mobile. They are able to move around more easily and are sometimes sent on missions far from their homes. So there are two facets to young workers. Consequently, employers can perceive hiring young people either as a problem or as a source of dynamic. Those employers who value the dynamic offered by young people and their mobility can offer interesting working conditions, assisting them with accommodation or their children's education.

Trade unions try to include youth sections in collective agreements, including specific provisions such as subsidies for education and the rental or purchase of apartments. There are also financial bonuses linked to childbirth or holidays, and parents are entitled to extraordinary leave. Training opportunities are also provided to build on their skills, leading to wage increases.

The union does everything it can, through measures such as those mentioned, to ensure that employers are more attentive towards their workers, as it is not the unions, of course, who create employment. The national collective agreement also stipulates that employers must invest in the technical training of their staff, so that they can aspire to the jobs currently available in Russia. There is, in fact, a shortage of specialised technicians in Russia.

The trade unions will also benefit if employers train these people, who will be able to occupy these posts in the long term and boost trade

union membership levels.

Interview by Pierre Martinot

Read also Spotlight on Erin Polaczuk (NZCTU - New Zealand):

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