

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

## ITUC OnLine

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### Spotlight on Irakli Petriashvili (GTUC-Georgia)

"The new Labour Code only helps the oligarchs"

Brussels, 19 May 2008 (ITUC OnLine): Whilst the Georgian government has been creating an environment in which unbridled capitalism can thrive, the trade union movement has been modernising and improving its image in order to survive. Irakli Petriashvili, President of the Georgian Trade Union Confederation (GTUC), describes these developments.

What is the lifeblood of the GTUC nowadays?

The GTUC has 330,000 members, 57% of whom are women. That represents roughly half of all workers employed on a contractual basis (the active population of 1.7 million workers includes 1.1 million employed in the informal economy). 27.7% of our members are young people under 35, compared to 9% in 2004. This increase in young members is partly due to the many seminars and training courses we have held to explain what the GTUC was like in the past and what we want to do now. We have a strong policy on welcoming young members, which means for instance that at GTUC seminars we expect 90% of the participants to be young people. The leaders are getting younger too, with 7 of our 26 federations having presidents and vice-presidents under 35.

The GTUC is reforming its ways of working to become a modern trade union. How far have you got with that?

You can make all the reforms you like, but it is still hard to change people's attitudes. We were under the influence of the USSR for a very long time and many people still think the way they did then. That is also true in the unions: many people don't know what a real union is and still think it's just another kind of government department, as it was during the Soviet period, when the GTUC leaders tried to keep close relations with the governing party rather than with workers. Some trade unionists still want to stay close to the authorities and that is doing nothing to improve our image with people. We argue, on the contrary, that trade union leaders should not have close relations with the government or employers, since that makes it hard to express different views to theirs. A real trade union is built from the grass roots upwards. If they are very close to the authorities or employers, unions become lazy and when people see trade unionists taking joint decisions with an employer can only harm their public image.

Recently, I took part in a TV programme in which the viewers could ask questions directly. As I was complaining about all the problems caused by the new Labour Code, a lady called in to say that in her opinion this was not the sort of issue that the GTUC should be discussing, and that we should instead be providing cheap holidays in health resorts as we did in the past! We are struggling to change such attitudes.

What measures is the GTUC taking to improve its image?

We started by adapting our Constitution to make our management practices very transparent and ensure the leaders are elected democratically. We also did some cleaning up of the practices in our federations: in the past certain federations only had members on paper but still sent representatives to the GTUC congresses. These people voted for the GTUC leaders who, in return, did not ask any questions about these "ghost" federations. After a long series of mergers we cut the number of federations from 34 to 23, and then 3 new ones joined us. The rationalisation process is not yet over and we are thinking, for instance, of merging the 6 federations in the transport sector.

Apart from that we set up three regional offices in Tskhinvali (South Ossetia), Batumi (Adjaria) and Rustavi. In Tbilisi, the capital city, many people know the unions and our activities. That is less

common in the other regions and we hope to open up some other regional offices in the future.

Our image is also improving thanks to our public actions and demonstrations. Many Georgians were not aware that the GTUC's duty is to fight for improvements in wages, maternity leave, etc. Our actions show that we are concerned to get improvements for workers. In addition to the major demonstrations, we have organised a number of more "theatrical" events. For example, when protesting against a law that would impose equal working hours for men and women, even where the latter have young children, we transmitted some babies' cries over loudspeakers outside the Health and Labour ministries.

Is the GTUC managing to get its messages across in the Georgian media?

We have good relations with journalists, but it is not always in their employers' interests to let them write about the issues we are addressing, such as the problems raised by short-term contracts or black wages. To try to bypass the censorship by media owners, we have held a number of theatrical demonstrations. For instance, at the Kazbegi brewery where the management had sacked our activists we brought along some large metal dustbins to a press conference, where we called for the brand of beer to be boycotted. We used some strong images, claiming that this beer tastes of the workers' sweat. We would not manage to get our message across in the press without using such dramatic effects.

Another example was in 2007, when the government decided to drastically reduce the wages of women workers on maternity leave. We mobilised women, who carried cabbages to the Parliament building and chanted our slogan that "children are not born in cabbages". That attack on maternity leave can have a very serious social impact, partly since couples wait longer before having children, which can lead to demographic problems. Then some women workers are also afraid of taking all their maternity leave and work right up to the ninth month, even when they are doing heavy work. That can cause health problems for both the babies and their mothers.

The government is doing all it can to attract investors, even by sacrificing the fundamental rights of workers ...

The Georgian government is implementing an extremely liberal policy. Georgian leaders see the market as our god and ignore what the people want by focusing on what the market wants. They want to imitate the USA and the European Union but forget that even in those countries some social protection systems remain whilst in Georgia there is nothing left. That was clear with the 2006 Labour Code, which only helps the oligarchs, not those people interested in the long term. By adopting that labour code the government aimed to attract investors and give a major boost to the economy, but this form of growth is not providing any decent new jobs. Whilst certain businessmen are making the most of it and earning a lot in a short time, the social conditions of most people are stagnating or worsening.

That image of oligarchs makes one think of mafia members investing money to make enormous profits. Is that still happening?

We have an expression that goes like this: "don't ask me how I earned the first million and I'll tell you all about the other millions". In countries like Georgia, Ukraine, Russia and so on, many people became millionaires quickly in the years after the end of the USSR. In the past Georgian legislation protected workers and some employers used criminal means to get round it. They no longer need to do that since today's legislation is totally in line with their interests.

What has been the impact of the adoption of this fiercely liberal Labour Code in 2006?

An employer is now free to sack a worker at any time, without having to provide any justification. So people can be sacked for their trade union activities, religious affiliation, refusal to endure sexual harassment, or for any other reason. The Labour Code does not explicitly authorise dismissals for those reasons, but does not forbid them either. We have lost around 20,000 members owing to the harassment and dismissals facilitated by this Labour Code, but overall we have definitely attracted more: workers realise that they have to stand together to defend their rights as they cannot rely on the government to protect them. They realise that even though our efforts are not always rewarded we

will never give up defending workers.

The new Code has also brought a worsening of working conditions and a loss of jobs. Before 2006, for instance, overtime hours were paid at double the rate of normal wages. The current Code merely states that wages for overtime cannot be lower than normal wages. So some employers force their staff to work 60-hour weeks instead of the normal 41 hours. If those employees had been able to work normal hours the employer would have had to recruit more workers.

Were the social partners consulted before the adoption of the Labour Code?

When the Code was still at the proposal stage we managed to convince the employers' association that the changes would be negative and that whilst employers could definitely earn more money in the short term it would lead to bankruptcies. Both the trade union movement and the employers' association warned the government about the risks of destabilisation if such a code were adopted. The government did not want to listen, doubtless owing to its lack of experience but also as it was being driven in that direction by some of the international financial institutions such as the World Bank.

In November 2007, the world media covered the huge demonstrations organised by the opposition parties that were violently suppressed by the police. Is it right to assume that the thousands of demonstrators were more concerned about the economic situation than the political demands?

Absolutely: the opposition parties kept insisting that the demonstrators supported their political demands, but the vast majority wanted to complain about the economic problems they faced on a daily basis. These demonstrators were disappointed since no politician denounced the exploitation of workers, the sackings that were made easier by the new Labour Code, the awful wages, etc. So some of these workers turned to the GTUC for help. These included journalists and self-employed market vendors, for instance. So at the end of 2007 we set up a union for self-employed workers.

Did the GTUC take part in these demonstrations in November 2007?

No. We did criticise the violent repression, of course, but we did not want to join the demonstrations which were being politicised. Several opposition parties that joined in the demonstrations are even more hostile to workers' interests than the government. Oligarchs are leading some of the parties and we simply don't share their views on social issues. They never opposed the ultra-liberal reforms by the government, indeed they strongly supported them.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

- Please also see Union View: Georgia: labour code tears fundamental rights to shreds:  
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The ITUC represents 168 million workers in 155 countries and territories and has 311 national affiliates. Website: <http://www.ituc-csi.org>

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