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ITUC OnLine

059/270410

Belarus Promoting Foreign Investment but Violating Workers' Rights

Brussels, 27 April 2010 (ITUC OnLine): Although the government of Belarus is continuing to engage in widespread and significant violations of workers' rights, that has not stopped it organising a high-profile event with the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) on 27-28 April 2010 at the Palais des Nations in Geneva – Belarus Investment Days – aimed at attracting potential foreign investors to Belarus by enabling them to engage in meetings at the highest level with Belorussian officials.

Indeed, the background document for the event prepared by UNCTAD concedes that there is a significant lack of compliance with the ILO's internationally recognised core labour standards and a lack of respect for the rule of law and contractual obligations in general. The UNCTAD review underlines that the economy still "maintains the key features of a planned economy", which inevitably requires centralised patterns of political power, institutions and decision-making processes.

"These are not simply technical or legal matters but represent direct and targeted infringements of the principles and respect of the fundamental labour rights enshrined in ILO standards," said ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder.

Although Belarus carried over the Soviet Union's 1956 ratifications of the ILO's key Conventions #87 and #98 when it became independent, that has not produced any change in long-standing violations of labour rights. Persecution of independent trade unions has continued even while ILO monitoring processes have been in place. The government's occasional signs of goodwill in the past have not made up for the continuing and familiar litany of violations, and currently the government's position is characterised mainly by inaction. The ITUC is therefore seriously concerned about the nature and timing of this initiative by UNCTAD together with the Belarus authorities, in view of its possible effects diminishing pressure on the government of Belarus to implement ILO recommendations.

"As long as ILO recommendations are still not acted upon, extreme caution should be exercised with regard to the impact on the working people of Belarus of any initiative of this nature," concluded Ryder. "Belarus must firstly respect labour rights and establish genuine industrial relations, and then would be able to attract foreign investment that can really benefit its working people."

The ITUC represents 176 million workers in 155 countries and territories and has 312 national affiliates.

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