

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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Georgia: Life Toll to Neo-liberal "Success" Policies

Brussels, 4 February 2011 (ITUC OnLine): Georgian authorities are often very proud with the evaluation of the business climate in their country in the annual report "Doing Business" of the World Bank Group. Currently Georgia ranks 12th of 183 countries (2011), up one place from last year, just in front of Finland (13), Sweden (14) and much ahead of Germany (22nd). The tragic events in the mines of Tkibuli in the last several months, however, reveal a staggering picture about the social impact and human costs of the "success" story.

On 22 January 2011 an explosion in the Tkibuli Mindeli mine took the life of one of the miners and sent several others with heavy injuries into intensive care. The accident did not come as much of surprise, as there was information of a concentration of methane gas of over 6%. The miners refused to go down the mine but were forced by the company management. In the preceding days, two other brigades were similarly forced down the pits despite the obviously dangerous conditions.

The grim record of this way of operation of the company sends chilling signals for the future: nine lives lost in the last nine months and many more injured. It also reveals the deeply embedded cynicism and lack of any sense of responsibility in the conditions of "doing business" in Georgia. This is a hardly surprising result when one takes into account the unique labour law that cuts across workers and trade union rights, that discourages collective bargaining and has erased any monitoring and control of conditions of work along with the specialised institutions for that purpose. Georgia is a unique case of a country where labour inspection has been abolished. Also, not surprisingly the labour law is the focus of complaints and of criticism by the ILO since it was adopted in 2006.

After the last case at the Tkibuli Mindeli mine, the workers went on strike for protection of their rights and of the victims of the reckless policy of the management.

The ITUC is very concerned about the developments in Georgia, which are beginning to influence the emerging labour relations system in other countries in the region. The ITUC strongly supports the actions of the workers of Metallurgical, Mining and Chemical Industry Workers Trade Union, a member of affiliate GTUC, to make the management and authorities respect the rights of all workers in Georgia. The ITUC is also continuing to apply pressure in support of ILO recommendations to bring the labour law and related legislation into conformity with international labour standards. At its second meeting the ITUC Human and Trade Union Rights Committee included Georgia as the country where workers' rights are at risk.

"While the unions have been recognised and an agreement signed in Tkibuli, this happened only after the workers took radical industrial action. There are plenty of other companies in Georgia where workers are denied their rights," said Sharan Burrow, ITUC general secretary. "This situation must be changed. The labour laws must be brought into conformity with Georgia's international obligations, pressure on unionists must be stopped and the special agency supervising labour conditions must be reinstated," she added.

The ITUC represents 176 million workers in 301 affiliated national organisations from 151 countries and territories. Website: <http://www.ituc-csi.org> and <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

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