

Declaration of the International Meeting “ Defending and Expanding Labour Rights in Central Asia: Challenges, Trends and Prospects”

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, November 4th, 2016.

The system of labour relations in Central Asia has undergone significant changes in the decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the first years of their independence, the five new Central Asian states had their legislation following the principles and social protection standards of the Soviet times. Besides, all five countries, driven by a desire to gain international recognition, rushed to ratify the fundamental ILO Conventions enshrining workers' rights to organize and bargain collectively. All the eight fundamental ILO Conventions have been ratified by these five states. These Conventions are intended to protect workers from discrimination in the workplace, they guarantee children's right to go to school rather than go to work, and ensure workers' rights to organize and involve employers in negotiations over issues affecting their working and living conditions.

However, these rights and guarantees have been, for the larger part, recognized on paper only; their actual implementation is quite impossible in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, and only partly feasible in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The attempt of Kazakh oil workers in Zhanaozen to exercise their right to bargain collectively for their interests was brutally suppressed. Those events created a new reality, making massive repressions against workers a part of labour relations practices. Today in the majority of the former regions of the Soviet Union we witness a shift towards the dismantling of social standards, accompanied by persistent, ever mounting pressure against workers as a way to prevent their collective actions. This leads to growing social tension in the region fraught with increased risk of bitter social outbursts suppressed by force. These trends in Central Asia, in their turn, influence the situation in the neighboring Eastern European countries, depressing the overall level of social standards and undermining the protection of workers' labour rights.

The meeting participants strongly believe that there is a need to coordinate activities of human rights groups and independent trade unions in the area of protection and implementation of labour rights in the Central Asian countries. We view our meeting in Bishkek on November 3-4 as a starting point in this coordination. And we are ready to join our efforts defending labour rights and achieving their expansion.

We appeal to national and international trade unions, non-governmental organizations, the expert community, and civil society activists to form a broad coalition for mutual support of our actions and initiatives defending and expanding labour and human rights in Central Asia. We shall continue our fight for the release and complete acquittal of community and trade union leaders who have been prosecuted for their human and labour rights activities; to ensure unimpeded functioning of independent trade unions and human rights groups; and to have provisions speaking of "fomenting social discord" and other provisions that limit fundamental freedoms and contradict ILO Conventions removed from legislation and law enforcement practices.

We announce the establishment of an International Trade Union Monitoring Mission on Labour Rights in Central Asia charged with the task of gathering information on existing practices related to violation of the freedom of association rights, providing protection from discrimination and the worst forms of exploitation, analyzing general trends, and preparing recommendations on opportunities to improve the legal situation in this area with the view of achieving universal social and economic progress, peace, and stability in the region.