

Georgia: Unions defending public services

(July 2011) Trade unions in Georgia have managed to campaign and negotiate for improved services despite the challenges they face.

The greatest problem faced by the public services unions in Georgia is that the legal and political climate makes workers afraid to take action, or even afraid to join unions ([read more here](#)). The labour code introduced in 2006 allows any employer to dismiss any employee for any reason or no reason at all, at any time. So although the constitution guarantees the right to strike, it is very little used as workers fear they will lose their job if they go on strike.

The government is also openly hostile to unions, attempting to undermine unions. It has tried to build compliant 'alternative' staff associations for teachers and to deny civil servants the right to belong to trade unions in the special law concerning public servants.

Unemployment is also at a high level: officially it is about 17% in Georgia as a whole, and about 30% in the capital Tbilisi, but the unions are certain that the real level is much higher. Workers are not only afraid to take action but are often bullied by management into 'volunteering' for redundancy.

Some public services are nevertheless being improved, and trade unions have made some impact on this process. The city council of the capital city, Tbilisi, has invested in improved public transport. There is a modern metro system, which is reliable and financed from fares.

The city bought new vehicles for the municipal bus service, which operates on subsidised fares, but much of the city is still depends on mini-buses. These were run by small groups, often cooperatives of drivers, but the government decided to privatise the system by dividing the city into five areas and inviting tenders for monopoly licenses in each area.

The transport workers' union organised a series of protests by the existing drivers, demanding that the companies winning the tenders should sign collective agreements ensuring that existing drivers would keep their jobs. The government

attempted to repress the protests, imprisoning some workers who went on strike, but finally agreed, and the new companies and the union signed the agreements in April 2011.

Tbilisi has also invested in refuse collection and waste management, without privatisation. It reorganised the system under a single municipal organisation covering the whole city, used public finance to buy a new fleet of refuse collection vehicles and roadside containers, and directly employs the workforce.

Sources:

- interviews and discussions with Nugzar Tchintcharauli and Davit Darsavelidze, Chair and Deputy Chair of the Public Servants Trade-Union of Georgia
- [AFL-CIO solidarity center, Georgia](#)
- [Video interview with Nugzar Tchintcharauli \(Public Servants Union of Georgia\)](#)

Photographs (April 2011):

- [refuse collection workers in Tbilisi](#)
- [public transport union signing collective agreement](#)
- [water workers in Tbilisi](#)
- [rally in Tbilisi April 2011](#)

Further links:

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