

Tbilisi: Meeting at a time of crises

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I've just come back from an international conference that could not have happened thirty years ago. And it's a conference that might also prove impossible to hold in just a few short years.

LabourStart's Global Solidarity Conference on the theme of "trade union internationalism today" was held on the weekend before May Day in Tbilisi, Georgia. The vast majority of the nearly 300 participants came from countries which within living memory had no legal independent trade unions.

The post-Soviet world was represented not only by a large number of Georgian trade unionists, but also by representatives of unions in Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. In many of those countries, the very existence of independent trade unions is now under threat. In Belarus, the unions have been crushed, declared illegal by the courts, and their leaders jailed and exiled. In the opening plenary, I spoke about the challenges of meeting at this time. I mentioned that in 1909 Karl Kautsky had written that we were living in a time of "Krisen, Kriege, Katastrophen" — crises, wars, disasters. "He could have been describing our time, more than a century later," I said.

The conference provided an opportunity for trade union leaders and activists from nearly 30 countries to show their solidarity with our comrades in those countries and more.

The LabourStart conference is unique. Any trade unionist can attend. Top leaders from global unions and national trade union centres participate, as do rank and file workers, students and pensioners. In Tbilisi, we had representatives from several global unions and national trade union centres, mostly from Europe.

Many more trade unionists would have attended, but almost none from the global South were able to get visas, despite help from our hosts in the Georgian Trade Union Confederation. But we were able to bring over trade unionists from Iran, Israel, Palestine and other countries.

The conference opened with a minute of silence to mark International Workers Memorial Day on 28 April. Several speakers addressed health and safety issues throughout the three-day event.

Ukraine

The sessions on Ukraine, and the presence of women trade unionists from that country, were particularly important. Trade unionists from Spain came over to help build a European network in solidarity with Ukraine.

The conference took place shortly after the launch of major online campaign to mark one year since the crushing of the independent trade union movement in Belarus. A number of exiled trade unionists from Belarus were able to come and speak about the struggle for freedom in their country.

There were important presentations on Myanmar, with the participation of a leading figure on that country's trade union movement, now in exile. A representative of the International Labour Organisation reported on their current project to revitalise trade unions around the world. Two different workshops focussed on how Israeli and Palestinian trade unionists can work together — with international support. Two workshops addressed the ongoing revolution, led by women, now taking place in Iran. One panel gave the Georgian and Israeli union leaders present the chance to speak about the labour movement and the struggle for democracy and against creeping authoritarianism in their countries.

Many of the speakers mentioned the role played by LabourStart campaigns in putting pressure on employers and governments. These included speakers from Poland, Georgia and Belarus who addressed current campaigns, while others spoke about past struggles in Lithuania, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

A highlight of the conference was the announcement of the decision by the Norwegian trade union movement to award the annual Arthur Svensson Prize for International Trade Union Rights to Elizabeth Tang and the International Domestic Workers Federation. That would have been a special moment in any event, but was all the more moving because Tang was recently arrested in Hong Kong and is currently prevented from leaving the country.

The conference could not have taken place without the leaders and activists from the Georgian Trade Union Confederation. They were superb organisers and hosts. And the conference gave everyone a chance to demonstrate solidarity with striking Wolt couriers in Georgia — the subjects of yet another LabourStart campaign. The day after the conference many of the international guests remained in the Georgian capital to join with the local trade union movement for a march and demonstration in front of parliament, demanding a big increase in minimum wages to help lift working families out of poverty.

The noisy march had many features that would be familiar to trade unionists in other countries, including a Georgian language version of the song "Solidarity forever". But the sea of blue flags — not red ones — was a reminder of how decades of Stalinist rule in the country made many symbols of the Left toxic and therefore unusable.

The conference — the first in seven years — was critically important in strengthening the network of personal relations that makes LabourStart's work possible. Thanks to Covid, we have missed these vitally important face-to-face meetings. Many people asked where the next conference would take place.

In the final plenary session, I gave my answer. We should hold the next LabourStart Global Solidarity Conference in Kyiv, once all of Ukraine has been liberated and the aggressor expelled from its territory. I for one would not miss that conference for the world.

Eric Lee is the founder editor of LabourStart, writing here in a personal capacity

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