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THE BRICS TRADE UNION FORUM: TEN YEARS OF NEW TYPE INTERACTION

Discussing the problem of the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity from the standpoint of trade unions may seem like a waste of time, since the Russian trade union system has been standing on a solid, practice-proven foundation for more than a century. You could say it has remained traditional and rigid, which helps it survive in difficult periods of change. In spite of several revolutions and other dramatic transformations of our society, elements of the trade union system, the hierarchy, and the way its parts interact remain almost unchanged. The organizational foundation and procedural order are multiplied and legislated in more than two hundred internal documents regulating union life, relations with external parties and with its own members. Moreover, Russian law explicitly requires unions to comply with the norms outlined in their Charters, prescribing that they must ensure strict voting procedures and mechanisms for maintaining internal democracy. Certainly, there is room for discussion and a choice of variations of democracy in trade unions: some put forward ideas of greater centralism, some unions build extensive and rigid hier-

archies, and some organizations prefer freer rules of operation. At the same time, the framework, basic principles, and forms of work remain relatively stable and common to all organizations.

These considerations are relevant not only to Russian trade unions; they are successfully applied with varying degrees of similarity in Europe, America, as well as in trade unions in Japan, South Korea, and other countries lying outside the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

Various international trade union organizations are built along similar lines. The ITUC (International Trade Union Confederation), the ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation), the GCTU (General Confederation of Trade Unions), etc., follow the same approaches based on the Cartesian worldview, rationalism, reductionism, and other basic philosophical ideas conceived in the Renaissance and New Age, and impregnated with the ideals of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”.

There is no doubt that the formats of interstate bilateral and multilateral relations and organizations, mostly built in the 20th century, also bear the aforementioned features. Ideologically, procedurally, and formally, the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council implement similar principles. The same can be said about informal gatherings of G7 and G20 leaders. And how could it be otherwise, if traditional diplomacy, with its set of theoretical postulates, values, rules, and moral norms, was formed under a strong European influence and, having received a powerful impetus after World War I, has remained in the same intellectual vein throughout the entire subsequent period.

Establishment of the BRICS in 2006 marked the emergence of a new philosophy of relations between states. A notable feature of this association is that the member countries mostly do not have common borders and are located on different continents. By and large, they have more differences than common features. It is noteworthy that this association was based on the common interests of its member countries and similar views on the world order, largely dictated by imperfections and dissatisfaction with the existing model of international relations.

Organizational forms, procedural rules, and decision-making mechanisms of the BRICS are quite difficult to un-

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derstand and implement, since they are markedly different from customary mechanisms, as will be discussed in more detail below. Without delving into the history of the BRICS association, one should say that despite periodic predictions of its demise and allegedly low efficiency (in the traditional system of evaluation of such projects), over the 17 years since its creation, the BRICS is gaining increasingly more supporters and potential participants.

It is important to explain what all of the above has to do with the trade union movement. Since 2012, when the largest national trade union centers of the BRICS member countries signed the Declaration on the Establishment of the BRICS Trade Union Forum and established the principles of its work during the regular event of the International Labor Organization in Moscow, the interaction between members of this Forum has become systematic and long-term. Over the years, the Forum has held eleven plenary sessions, addressed a wide range of issues of interest to unions, and adopted and implemented joint decisions. Participants of the BRICS Trade Union Forum intend to continue to interact in this format and consider it helpful and productive.

At the same time, behind the facade of the BRICS Trade Union Forum, there are quite significant problems that have arisen due to the exceptional novelty of relations within this format and the complexity of the transition from the generally accepted system of decision-making to a new one built on different foundations.

Here a small digression is necessary. As Deputy Chairman of Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, I was charged with preparing the plenary session of the BRICS Trade Union Forum in 2014, then held in Russia for the first time. This decision was based on the fact that in 1991–2000 I had to act as a coordinator of international relations of the Northwest region of Russia with European countries. It was during the period of profound, comprehensive transformation of the Russian trade union movement, from the “drive belt” model (cascading of goals and objectives from the CPSU to the workers) to the model of an independent federation of industry and territorial trade union organizations (with its own procedures for the development, adoption, and implementation of decisions based on the opinion of member organizations). It was necessary to find methods and tools to solve problems in almost all areas of trade union life that would enable this transition with minimal losses. These tasks were accomplished, although the losses were higher than expected.

The method of transferring ready solutions, which was then widely used to find answers to the questions of organizing life “in a new way”, was based on the notion that our society had “gone the wrong way”, that the working masses had been duped by the pipe dream of a “communist tomorrow” and were left with empty shelves and no means of survival, while dwarf neighboring countries and large distant states have lived much better and more comfortably while moving in the vein of the capitalist system. I will not criticize the past; most likely, in that period, there was little choice of development options and under the pressure of the circumstances, the society and its rulers (the elite) chose the path that we have all taken. It led to both negative and positive results. Adoption of the available foreign experience of trade unions’ work under capitalism (with Russian specifics) was inevitable, since the socialist economic system had been killed off, replaced by an unmanageable “market”, and

capitalism, as we then imagined it, still had a long way to go. Apparently, the internal content of the adopted foreign trade union experience, its entire philosophy, corresponded to the Protestant work ethic, and was impregnated with elements of the American model of the trade union movement. In Northwest Russia of that period, it seemed that the Scandinavian model of the social system suited us best, and we wanted to implement it through the accelerated introduction of the social partnership system and other mechanisms of interaction with employers. At the same time, because of the enormous size of our country, the ideas of autonomous regional unions, embodied in the United States in the form of local unions, also appeared attractive.

The approach to the borrowing outlined above has worked well at that time, but its energy wore off by the early 2000s. The Russian trade union movement faced new tasks that had to be solved immediately, and no ready recipes were available in foreign experience. The main problems were massive non-payments of wages and social benefits, low labor productivity due to obsolete means of production, lack of qualifications for participation in the global labor market, and the need to develop a new labor law. In these conditions, we had to rely more on our own experience and our own “brains”.

Returning to the BRICS Trade Union Forum, it is clear that the method of borrowing and adapting existing practices is inapplicable here, because the Forum is rooted in the principles and mechanisms unfamiliar to the trade union movement in Russia or the countries, with which we have established relations of trust. It is no exaggeration to say that the development of forms and methods began from scratch.

What were the differences that necessitated building a new relationship with the five BRICS members?

A fundamental difference from other formats, in which unions had previously participated, was that in the BRICS union association, there were no juniors and seniors, newbies and oldies among the five member countries. There were no donors and recipients, no one with experience to share, and no newcomers in need of mentors. All of the sixteen national trade union centers that make up the BRICS Trade Union Forum are equal. This means that all members of the organization must equally support the work of the Forum on a rotating basis, contributing materially and intellectually to its construction.

The second, not least important difference is that all decisions made in the course of the Forum are made by consensus. This is a fundamental point. Consensus is a special kind of decision-making that involves the agreement of everyone without exception. Let me emphasize: the decision is not made by voting, although this procedure can be applied, but always and only unanimously, otherwise the decision is not considered to be made. This procedure was adopted at the creation of the Forum; it is also used for decision-making at summits with participation of heads of state, and, as far as I know, in other formats within the BRICS (ministerial meetings, various forums of non-governmental organizations, etc.), of which there are more than a hundred.

It is not easy to make the turn from democratic procedures, where the minority always has the right to be heard, has no right to cancel a decision made by the majority, but has an obligation to implement it, to procedures where the participants work together to prevent the emer-

gence of a minority. Basically, in preparation for the year of our presidency of the BRICS in 2015, Russian trade unions had to build and embrace completely new procedures that implement unfamiliar ethical norms, which are completely devoid of the missionary role of the author of the idea. All this habitual baggage had to be replaced by hard collective work to develop solutions that would take into account the views of each participant. In other words, it was necessary to move from a democracy based on “majority rule” to full realization of “common interests” through “conflict avoidance”.

The seeming simplicity of replacing one procedure with another could not be realized in the case of the BRICS, because the differences between the countries that make up the international association are truly vast. If anyone could come up with a list of major developing nations with the biggest differences, there is an 80% chance they would get the BRICS. Many researchers and experts wrote about this in the initial period of formation of the association. Over time, however, it has become apparent that despite the differences, it is necessary to implement what unites us – the enduring common commitment to creating a model of international relations that would ensure accelerated economic and social development on an equitable basis, universal security in the world, and elimination of all forms of colonialism and dictatorship. This has everything to do with the union work, since unions represent the core interests of workers in member countries.

The differences are really enormous. What matters most for the unions is particularities in the construction of labor relations, in the daily practices of interaction in the workplace between workers and employers. It is important for unions to understand the motivational aspects of labor, worker attitudes toward unionization, and many other nuances that result from the internal development of our countries.

Each country in the BRICS has its own history, its own state, political and social structure, which should be taken into account in the work of the BRICS Trade Union Forum. Otherwise, it would be difficult to reach consensus on substantive issues, or the solutions would be devoid of specifics and would be perceived as a struggle for “everything good against everything bad.” The European and Anglo-Saxon models of relations are almost always built on educational, missionary principles, which involve the flow of resources from those who have them to those who lack them. It doesn’t matter if it’s knowledge, experience, equipment, or funds. It is usually implied that this overflow obliges the recipient to “pay back” at some point. Such interactions are often built on the division by seniority in an imagined hierarchy; we all remember the “divide and conquer” formula; we have not forgotten the British mission of “white man’s burden”, etc. All of the BRICS countries without exception are familiar with its practical implications. In terms of game theory, the familiar system of relations outlined above is almost always a zero-sum game, i. e. an antagonistic game. This generally falls within the philosophical framework I mentioned earlier.

A logical question would be, is it possible to build a relationship that will lead to a nonzero result, in which there will be no losing sides and there will be added value, i. e. the system will have “emergence”? What should be the rules and conditions of such an interaction?

This question is difficult to understand and is even more difficult to answer. But finding this answer is the main mission of the national trade union centers of the BRICS countries, motivating them to work together. Reaching a common understanding, a consensus, as opposed to making decisions in a hierarchical system, is a very time-consuming process that involves a lot of preliminary work and the need to include all participants in the development of decisions.

To gain “added value”, participants in the BRICS Trade Union Forum adhere to several rules.

First, at all stages of developing joint solutions, participants are obliged to know and respect the diversity of historical patterns of social and working life in the BRICS countries, especially in the chair country, sometimes deeply rooted in the history and culture of peoples of the participating countries.

Without turning this report into a cultural study, let me mention that, for example, in Indian society the division into castes and, as a consequence, into professional groups for the majority of the population derives from the Vedic worldview based on religious and philosophical sources of the 16th century B. C. And this background cannot be misunderstood or ignored. We must also bear in mind that informal employment typical of the service sector and agricultural labor (almost always within the family) is the backbone of the Indian economy. 78% of more than 560 million employable people work in the informal sector, and the recipes for bringing these workers into the formal sector look very different from those in Russia. In the current year of South Africa’s presidency, we should remember that apartheid (the separation of black, “colored” and “white” citizens) was only overcome in that country in 1994 and the kinds of businesses and jobs where “whites” dominated are at times vacant because there are not enough indigenous Africans and “colored” employees with the right competencies. Administrative measures, no matter how sophisticated, cannot make up for the physical shortage of local qualified personnel. The issue of expropriation of the land of landowners who have left the country is still relevant in South Africa, so agricultural development is still constrained by property relations and this is already turning against the economy, taking on ugly forms of “reverse apartheid”. Every BRICS country has such characteristics, and importantly, none of us is waiting for “teachers” to bring the “light of knowledge” and explain how to live and solve problems.

The second rule. When discussing any serious topic, one should not seek to impose one’s own understanding of the question and the answer to it on other participants. It may be the case that they simply do not understand the nature of the phenomenon under discussion, cannot grasp its essence. In that case, it is better to put such a question aside, no matter how important it may seem. If there is no common interest and understanding, there can be no consensus.

The third rule. There should always be an opportunity for a free exchange of views, a process that can be called “reaching mutual understanding”. This is something similar to editorial work, but it is based not so much on the search for appropriate words and terms as on the elimination of contradictions on a worldview level, since the perception and wording of the same problem in Chinese, Indian, Brazilian, African, and Russian versions will always be different.

In concluding my report, I should say that trade unions, as a special institution for the realization of indigenous interests of working people, have made a unique contribution during the ten years of joint activities within the BRICS Trade Union Forum in finding ways to transition from a unipolar world that holds developing countries back, to a new and fairer world order where the full-

est potential of the peoples that constitute them will be unlocked. The national trade union centers of the participating countries, united in the BRICS Trade Union Forum, are determined to develop this format, including through the involvement of trade union organizations of countries aspiring to membership in this international association.