

ICFTU OnLine...

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"The new labour code will take us back 100 years"

Brussels, 17th February 2005 (ICFTU Online): Adan Mohamed Abdou is the General Secretary of the Djibouti Union of Labour (UDT), an ICFTU affiliate. As the government prepares to introduce a new labour code undermining free trade unionism in Djibouti, he speaks about the dire situation of Djiboutian workers, the attacks on the UDT, and suspected corruption.

What is the situation regarding workers' right violations in Djibouti?

Our problems began in September 1995 when we staged a general strike to protest against the structural adjustments imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions, which were resulting in huge wage cuts of around 40%. During the same period, hundreds of trade unionists were dismissed, including trade union leaders from the UDT and UGTD (Djibouti General Workers' Union). The trade union leaders, including myself, remain unemployed to this day. Any company daring to employ us risks prosecution. So we have been living without a salary for almost ten years now. The state continues to harass us on a day-to-day basis as we carry out our trade union activities. The situation is unbearable. We are finding it very difficult to cope.

The plight of trade unions was made even worse in 1999 when the current Labour Minister came to office and decided to stage a "coup" against the country's two independent unions by setting up two phantom unions, "clone" unions with the same initials as the authentic ones. He invites and pays for these "clones" to attend official meetings abroad, such as meetings with the Arab Labour Organisation or the ILO, etc., introducing them as Djiboutian workers' representatives, when they are nothing of the kind.

You are also concerned about the proposed introduction of a new labour code...

Yes. A new labour code has been drawn up and approved by the Council of Ministers, pending its adoption by the National Assembly. The Labour Minister has been working on it, alone, since 1999, refusing to consult with trade unions and employers. The employers have never felt threatened by this reform, perhaps because the minister is himself an employer and past events have reassured them.

The labour code currently in force in Djibouti is from 1952; it dates back to the colonial era. We are already over fifty years behind with this code, but the new labour code is now calling into question all the fundamental rights of the ILO: the right to freedom of association, collective bargaining and the right to organise. According to this code, the authorisation of the Interior Ministry, the Labour Ministry, the Labour Inspectorate, the Justice Minister and the Attorney General will be required to set up a trade union. Furthermore, the Attorney General will have the power to dissolve a trade union, by means of a simple administrative decision, if requested to do so by these ministries. It would mean taking Djibouti's labour legislation back 100 years, even though no improvements have ever been made to the 1952 code.

The new labour code may be adopted this year, but we are heading an awareness raising campaign and mobilising opposition through press releases, petitions, lobbying our contacts within the National Assembly and so on. We are also planning demonstrate against it.

Is physical violence used against Djibouti's trade unionists?

Not at the moment, but if we demonstrate, there's always a risk that a protest will be met with violence, or that our families will have problems. We're always on edge. We were able to celebrate May Day in 2004 without any major incidents. The government didn't dare to confront us because we were ready to resist. But in 2003, all May Day celebrations were prohibited.

How is the employment situation?

Unemployment is rampant: according to government figures, the rate is 70%, but only around 40,000 of the 700,000 inhabitants of Djibouti are employed in the formal economy. All the others live off informal work, and many of them are not included in the government's figure of 70%. Young people form the vast majority of the unemployed. Under these circumstances, many of them are deeply concerned about their future.

In the name of the fight against global terrorism, the French army has now been joined by a large presence of US, Spanish, German and Dutch troops in Djibouti. They all give handsome subsidies to the Djiboutian state, which has never been as rich as it is today thanks to this money. But this "manna from abroad" has not benefited the people of Djibouti: as reported by the United Nations, poverty persists and is growing. Unemployment remains endemic whilst purchasing power is plummeting.

How do people get by in the informal sector?

Many depend on their families. Over 20% are nomads. Informal workers are active in a whole range of occupations: bus drivers, shop assistants, street vendors, women selling farm produce from Ethiopia... We have organised a drivers' union, but it's not easy to keep up membership levels as things are forever changing: one day they are drivers and the next day they are doing something else.

What is the salary of a Djiboutian worker?

The SMIG (guaranteed minimum inter-occupational wage) used to be around 100 dollars, but it has been repealed by a law that will form part of the new labour code. The wage gaps are huge: whilst the SMIG is 100 dollars, a section manager or director earns around 2000 dollars. The average monthly wage is around 300 to 400 dollars, but at least 1000 dollars a month is needed to lead a decent life, as the cost of living in Djibouti is very high.

The presence of the US army has created some jobs, especially in the area of security. The Americans had wanted to use their own wage scale, but they were told to comply with the wage scale in force in Djibouti. When they first made salary payments, workers received an average salary of 500 dollars or more, but the government said that they had to pay less, like the other employers in Djibouti.

How is the creation of the free trade zones progressing?

Progress is underway. We know, for the moment, that the development of these free trade zones has been entrusted to a company from the Port of Dubai, which is importing workers from the Philippines to build them, believing them to be cheaper than Djiboutian workers! Our workers are in the process of preparing an offensive against this abusive use of imported labour for jobs than could be done by competent national workers.

The Port of Dubai has also been entrusted with the management of the Port of Djibouti. The latter is generating massive earnings, but no one, aside from the Presidency of Djibouti, knows where all this money is going. No one knows the nature of the contract signed between the Port of Dubai and Port of Djibouti, not even the National Assembly or the government. It's the same with the airport. The wealth generated has not benefited the rest of the country in any way. A few private individuals may be benefiting from it, but not the population in general.

Interview by Samuel

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The ICFTU represents 145 million workers in 233 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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