

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

## ICFTU OnLine...

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### 8 March: International Women's Day

Spotlight interview with Fatmeh Habahbeh (Jordan - GFJTU)

"We need quotas for women in unions"

Brussels, 5 March 2005 (ICFTU Online): Fatmeh Habahbeh became active in the trade union five years ago, starting out as head of the women's committee of the Royal Jordanian Air Transport Union and going on to be elected as chair of the women's committee of the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions (GFJTU). The mother of four children, she married at 16 and went on to study at university although she already had two children. "Here in Jordan, it's quite common to go to university when one is already married with children."

A business administration graduate, Fatmeh Habahbeh has been working for the Royal Jordanian Airline since 1979. She started out working in airport services and now holds the position of administration manager.

As the head of your federation's women's committee, you give priority to educating women workers. What objectives are you trying to achieve with this?

In Jordan it is not uncommon for women to hold high-level positions, whether it be in administration or in the private sector. But this is not the case in the unions, where there are no women in the leadership, for lack of information and lack of motivation. Not many women are convinced of the value of trade unions. And when they are unionised, they do not want to take on responsibilities. Almost 75% of the women working in the transport sector are union members, for example. But they do not want to take on responsibilities, for lack of information or lack of time - because it's not easy to combine trade union activities with their family responsibilities, and also for fear of the leadership structures.

That's why we organise a lot of training seminars on women's rights in the workplace and in trade unions. The first step is to educate women about their rights and opportunities. Our number-one priority is education. And it works. We have noticed that women soon gain the confidence to assert their rights.

We also develop as much contact as possible with women trade unionists from other countries to build a better understanding of global issues such as globalisation or privatisation.

What other priorities are you working on?

As members of the federation's women's committee, we are fighting to have women in the leadership structures of all unions, as well as demanding that they all set up women's committees. In some instances we also negotiate directly with the management of certain companies, in an effort to improve the working conditions of women.

How is the attitude of your male trade union colleagues evolving in relation to your demands?

In the beginning, we received no encouragement from the men. But little by little we have managed to convince them of our abilities. Nonetheless, we still do not have a single woman on the executive committee. We are demanding that a quota system be introduced for women as a temporary yet essential initial step forward. We are faced with persistent refusal, but we are sticking to our demand. We are aware of both the positive and negative aspects of the quota system, but in a country like Jordan it's very difficult to do without it. Even the King has accepted the idea of quotas for women, so why not the trade union



federation?

We have to keep up the fight to change the belief that is still widely held - that men are unquestionably superior to women, who are weaker and less capable.

In general terms, how is the situation of working women evolving in Jordan?

Jordanian women, as wives, mothers, housekeepers and, of course, workers, have to cope with many difficulties at the same time. Discrimination is not as harsh here when you compare it to other countries in the region. The problem of sexual harassment, for example, is less acute. But, although we are confronted with less official barriers, the obstacle of the glass ceiling, firmly rooted in people's minds, is very real.

The situation of women working in the textile sector, in low skilled and very low paid jobs, is particularly difficult. Most are on short-term contracts or are paid according to the production targets they have to meet. The minimum wage is 85 dinars (about US\$ 120), which is really very low. We are fighting for a minimum wage of 120 JD. We are also trying to organise these women better. With the support of the Solidarity Centre, we organised three education workshops, three months ago, and visited the women's workplaces. We were able to listen to their problems at great length. We also met with their trade union leaders and the factory managers. All too often, factories open one day and close the next in this sector.

Interview by Natacha David.

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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