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036/070305

8 March: International Women's Day

Spotlight Interview with Guillermina Huaman Salazar of CUT-Peru

"We need to promote decision-making powers for women informal workers' in trade unions"

Brussels, 7 March 2005 (ICFTU Online): What can be done to recruit, organise and improve the conditions of women workers in the informal economy who earn their income as street vendors, domestic workers, or "handy women", for example? Guillermina Huaman Salazar, of the Peruvian workers' confederation CUT, tells us of the pioneering experience underway in Lima, which has already led to the organisation of 10,000 women workers. This initiative forms part of the ICFTU's global campaign "Unions for Women, Women for Unions". Guillermina Huaman Salazar is a CUT union representative for women in the informal economy and the minutes and records secretary of the Departmental Federation of Street Vendors in Lima and Callao (FEDEVAL).

In many developing economies, the informal economy represents one of the main sources of employment, especially for women. What percentage of informal workers in Peru are women?

Women represent over 75% of the informal labour force in the metropolitan area of Lima, that is, over 20,000 women, 10,000 of whom are affiliated to our federation and to the workers' union confederation CUT. At national level there must be many more, but, unfortunately, we do not have up-to-date statistics. Most of them are street vendors, domestic workers, women from rural areas employed as cheap labour, and women known as "mil oficios" (multitaskers).

The female workforce therefore forms one of the pillars of the informal economy, which is currently the largest segment of the labour market in Peru. It is because of the state's failure to generate formal employment that men and women with nowhere to work have to carry out this type of activity. Those who find themselves jobless following a dismissal have to generate their own income to support themselves and their families. There is no other alternative.

- How much, for example, does a street vendor earn in Peru, and what are the working conditions?

In exceptional circumstances, such as at the start of the school year, Christmas, national holidays or Mother's Day, street vendors earn between 20 and 30 sols a day, on average (one new sol = € 0.47 or US\$ 0.3). The rest of the time their earnings vary between 10 and 15 sols a day. Most of the street vendors pay the municipal authorities a tax of 2 sols a day for the space occupied to be able to carry out this activity, despite the fact that there are municipal bylaws regulating and restricting street vending. Under very harsh conditions, some sell their goods from "mobile carts", which they then sleep in at night with their children, whilst others sell as they walk from one place to another.

- From domestic workers to street vendors and landless peasants... Peruvian women in the informal economy mostly work in homes or on the streets, without a contract or a registered business, without effective state regulation... In such a volatile environment, how did you manage to organise them, in spite of all the difficulties?

CUT has been developing initiatives aimed essentially at the informal economy since 1996, prioritising the recruitment and organisation of women. Progress was very slow at first, given the change in trade union leadership every four years. Despite the difficulties which we faced, the recruitment process was cemented with effective strategies which in turn led to a more consolidated process in 2003 and 2004.

Overall, CUT managed to integrate the five federations that correspond to the five main sectors within the informal economy. One example of this was the affiliation of FEDEVAL in 2003, which represents street vendors. We have also affiliated the departmental federation of micro-entrepreneurs, FEDAMPI, the federation of market porters, FETRAAMAP, the association of rural women of Huacabamba (AAMBHA) and SINUTRADIS, representing women with disabilities. District coordinators have already been trained in the capital, and we can now rely on them to start on the work planned for this year.

- In practical terms, what kind of activities have you been able to carry out for women in the informal economy?

The CUT Women's Secretariat lends support to all the activities carried out by the women. In March 2004, capacity building programmes were organised with the technical assistance of the ADC (Communal Development Association) and the support of Andalusian section of the Spanish trade union confederation Comisiones Obreras (CCOO). We organised education and training activities targeted at women, such as the "education promoters" programme, which helps them to do their jobs with greater decision-making power within the informal economy. As part of an action plan covering the period up until 2005, the trade union confederations asked the women working in the informal economy to participate in the sharing of experiences and teach each other what the lessons they have already learnt. The educational dimension of recruitment and organising is seen as fundamental.

In 2005, we held the first national conference and a regional conference for women in the informal economy, organised through the International Relations Secretariat, the Women's Secretariat of CUT, and with the technical assistance of the ADC (Communal Development Association). This event was sponsored by the ICFTU and ORIT. It is the first time that an international organisation has proved willing to give support exclusively to women in the informal economy.

- What came out of these two events as forums for reflection among the women workers? What are their main demands?

We, as women, find that we are socially ignored, exploited, and that our social, economic and cultural rights are not defended. All of this creates instability of our living and working conditions, and limits our development. Women are asking for full recognition from the state, Peruvian society, and the international community. We want the laws and municipal by-laws that regulate and provide for the socio-economic activities within our country's informal economy to be better established.

There are only laws protecting our workers in two sectors, domestic work and portering, but they are not really enforced. There are laws covering the street vending sector that no one defends or discusses. This is why we are asking to be involved in the decision-making forums of our trade unions and local governments.

- From a critical perspective, what is still missing from the organising process? What issues does CUT want to prioritise in the coming months?

In the face of the authorities' constant abuse of our workers, such as impromptu evictions, physical abuse, bribery and even death threats, we have asked the state to create a space for dialogue with the Labour Ministry. In 2005, CUT is planning to call on local governments to set up tripartite consultations between the workers, the local community and the local authorities, aimed at formulating policies on street vending and to prioritise women in this regard.

Our aim is to improve the living and working conditions of those in the informal economy by passing a law to protect it, in the same way as the formal economy is protected, and to ensure a formalisation process that is in keeping with the incomes of these emerging workers. We also recently invited the 6,000 to 7,000 women working in community kitchens to join the movement alongside the 10,000 women already organised in the metropolitan area of Lima. There are also plans to form a strategic alliance with national and international organisations that can support the projects targeting these women.

- Have you been able to open a dialogue with the state to bring an end to these abuses?

Two or three weeks ago, over 10,000 workers were evicted here in the capital. It is, in fact, the property owners who manipulate the municipal government so that they can charge the workers over 100 US dollars rent a month for a basement or a first floor and up to 500 US dollars for ground floor premises. Most workers in the capital cannot afford such high rents.

Given that the municipal authorities ignore the proposals we send them, CUT-Peru has lodged a complaint directly with the state. What proposals have we made? In one of the districts of Lima, for example, a women's collective that cannot pay the rent, because they do not produce their own goods, prefers to buy its own premises. This seems like a viable proposal to us, even though it may be long-term plan. I remember one woman who said: "I will stop eating if I have to, but I want something of my own. We are not going to work all our lives to pay the rent." These abuses exist in the capital and in the provinces across the country yet no one takes the problem seriously. But now, CUT has taken on the cause of the street vendors, defending the rights of these workers and presenting the local governments with a proposal to remedy the situation.

- What do the more traditional sections of the Peruvian trade union movement think of these experiences?

This experience has come as quite a surprise to the trade union movement, given that our colleagues were not familiar with the women who work in the informal economy. We invite all of them, men and women, to accompany us, so that they can build a better picture of our situation. It is thanks to this that I was able to meet the president of CUT in person, to denounce these abuses.

- At international level, the ICFTU has decided to launch a campaign targeting the least protected workers such as EPZ, informal and migrant workers. What do the women workers of Peru think of these international efforts to provide them with support and education?

Through me, the women from the informal economy have sent a message of congratulations and thanks to the ICFTU for the pioneering work being done in support of women in this emerging sector in Peru. We feel supported for the first time on seeing that this international organisation has looked towards this group of women who, most often, have to fulfil the role of both mother and father in their families. I think that this very global campaign initiative may open the path towards resolving our legal, social and, perhaps, educational problems in Peru, as well as in all the countries of the world where there are women working in the informal economy.

- What are your expectations regarding this global campaign launched by the ICFTU?

Firstly the resolutions arising from the ICFTU World Congress should be integrated within the policies and the strategic plan of CUT-Peru. Secondly, respect for the rights of women workers must be attained in all countries across the world where their rights are violated simply because they are employed in the informal economy. Thirdly, the decision-making powers of women informal workers should be promoted within organisations as well as their participation in discussions and debates of the trade union

confederations. And, finally, women should be given the opportunity to train, perhaps over one or two years, so that they can recruit and pass on their knowledge and experience to other women, and, ultimately, implement their own projects.

- The Peruvian programme to organise women informal workers could serve as inspiration for trade union organisations in other parts of the world, particularly in developing countries. What recommendations would you give to other ICFTU affiliates who would like to follow your example?

I would advise them to take on board the strengthening of the women's organisations through appropriate education and training. To ensure that women workers have genuine trade union structures, so that they can defend their labour and social rights. We, the women working in the informal economy, need to broaden not only our political and social knowledge but also our knowledge of technologies. In other words, we need to look at how women can become more productive in a short space of time and how they can open new markets for their products. There is a lot to be done, but the most important thing is that women unionise, organise and build on their strengths with a view to initiating the process of change.

Interview by Laurent Duvillier

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