

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU OnLine:

070/310505

Spotlight interview with Amadou M'Bow (CGTM- Mauritania)

Working on the ground to organise young people in the grip of precarious employment

Brussels, 31 May 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): Sixty five percent of Mauritania's population is under 40. With the support of the ICFTU, the CGTM has launched a national campaign to organise these young men and women caught in the trap of poverty and precarious employment, developing close contacts with students and young people who are unemployed or working in the informal economy.

Spotlight interview with Amadou M'Bow, head of the provisional national youth committee set up in 2003 in line with the youth policy established at the CGTM Congress in 2001.

-What triggered the launch of this campaign?

We started out from the observation that there is massive de-unionisation among young people here in Mauritania, as in many other countries of the region and the world, and yet we have to think about ensuring the long-term survival of the trade union movement. Young people are the future of the trade union, and we have to find a way of making them take an interest in the movement.

Young people are no longer joining the union, either because they don't know anything about it, or because they are not interested. By going out to meet young people, we realised that many of them think that unions are only for salaried workers and have nothing to offer young people leaving school without work or those working in the informal economy.

This is a poor country where structural adjustment policies have led to major job cuts and the closure of many companies. The vast majority of young people live in precarious conditions and are left entirely to fend for themselves. They have great difficulty finding a job and planning their future. The idea is to go out and make contact with all these young people hit by social exclusion and insecurity. It also forms part of the movement's global fight against poverty.

-What kind of educational background do these young people have?

School dropout rates are very high, especially among girls, who generally leave school before secondary level, at age 13 or 14. There's a huge gap between the major urban centres, where schooling rates are high, and the rural areas, where child labour is more widespread. There's a significant difference in mentality.

Education and training is really a nationwide issue. Like in many French-speaking countries of Africa, education is generally very literary, and schools do not respond to the demands of a very tight labour market. The public sector barely creates any employment, whilst the private sector mainly offers work in building and public works, a sector where subcontracting is widespread and young people are heavily exploited. The commercial and agricultural sectors generally offer the most job opportunities.

In the Senegal River valley, for example, young people are very active in agriculture. They have good basic skills and many new ideas, but not the resources needed to put them into practice. So why not develop trade union cooperation with the agricultural technical colleges for example?

-How are you going about winning the trust of these young people?

Thanks to the project financed by the ICFTU, we have launched a very dynamic campaign, which commenced in December and will run until the end of June (*). During this initial phase we have recruited a thousand new members (more than a third of the CGTM's young members), mostly from the capital Nouakchott and all from the informal economy.

This is a small country and almost everyone knows each other. We are working very close to the ground, going from family to family, friend to friend, colleague to colleague. This network of relations, friends and contacts is our number-one tool. We have spent a lot of time in the neighbourhoods, schools and universities. Because of the lack of resources, we have been concentrating on Nouakchott up until now, apart from one relay in Nouadhibou, the country's economic capital.

It took a great deal of patience and much power of persuasion to overcome the initial reaction of mistrust, and convince young people that we are not playing party politics and that the union can have a real impact on the situations affecting them, as well as on society as a whole. They went on to realise that they were not merely being contacted by individuals who are linked to their families but by the trade union as a mass movement that is concerned for their welfare, willing to accept and respond to their criticisms, and ready to travel to the regions to meet them. We have gained a great deal of credibility.

-Have you encountered difficulties specific to each different target group?

Our first contacts with the students were the most difficult. They were very sceptical and critical; it's only natural, they are intellectuals, and the issues have to be debated. We discussed with them at length, and with great patience, as we believe in the principle that each member should be deeply convinced.

The young people from the informal economy were much more receptive, coming towards us in large numbers. They thought that we could finance projects that would give them work; we explained that this was not the case, that the idea is to reflect on how improve their situation by organising. Now, even those who initially left have come back. We have gained their trust without making empty promises. We obviously hope to be supported by outside donors, but are placing greater emphasis on self-financing options. In the informal economy, we have young members in nearly every trade - mechanics, shoe shiners, fishmongers...

If we could secure access to micro-credits it would be a great help for young people trying to start up their own small garages or their own small businesses. I'm convinced that there's the potential to mobilise over 100,000 young workers. Why shouldn't we also set up mutual funds for the informal sector, to help improve the living conditions of these young people?

-One of the aims of your youth campaign is to fight against gender inequality. What place do young women occupy on your committee?

Young women face very heavy social constraints in Mauritania. People still believe that a woman's place is in the home. Many girls are taken out of school at a very young age to get married and quickly have their first child. For us young men, at least if we have a shirt on our back we can get by outside. It's much more difficult for girls; their outings and movements are very limited. Some progress is being made, but it is still very meagre.

Fortunately, however, increasing numbers of girls are being able to go to school, which makes a big difference in comparison with previous generations. They are able to acquire the basics to help them manage the takings of a small business for example. But schools are often not well adapted to girls; they don't feel at ease there.

In the union, however, they are starting to take the place that belongs to them. Of the 9 members on the CGTM youth committee, 4 are young women, including the vice president.

-Do you feel supported by the trade union movement at national and international level?

The CGTM leadership is truly committed to encouraging young members, but we need more training. At international level, we would like to have more contact with other countries, particularly those in our region, so that we can discuss youth activities, share experiences and exchange points of view. Why not set up a body to lobby the African Union on the issue of action on poverty and youth employment? Those most concerned are often not involved, and when financial aid is allocated it almost never reaches the target.

To go back to our campaign, the first phase of our recruitment drive was a 100% backed by ICFTU funding, which also allowed us to set up regional and sectoral committees. The ICFTU is now going to support phase two of the project, focused on training the young people in charge of awareness raising and recruitment campaigns. After this, the youth committee hopes to be able to organise regional seminars, then a national seminar, a follow-up mission and, finally, an evaluation seminar.

Interview by Natacha David.

- Also see the recent Trade Union World Briefing entitled "Young and Vulnerable: meeting the challenge of youth employment" at : <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221662&Language=EN>

- This 12-page briefing looks at the challenges facing the trade union movement in its efforts to open the door to decent employment for millions of young men and women around the world, and reports on the practical steps many trade unions are taking to achieve this goal.

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

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