

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU OnLine:

079/170605

Spotlight interview with Ebtisam Ali Ayad Muosbahe (Jordan - JTGU)

"Women are over-represented in Jordan's export processing zones"

Brussels: 17 June 2005 (ICFTU Online): Jordanian and immigrant women form the bulk of the labour force in Jordan's EPZs. For want of a better alternative, they are forced to accept the poor wages paid in the zones.

As the ICFTU today publishes a four-page Trade Union World Briefing on Jordanian export processing zones (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221894&Language=EN>), we turn the spotlight on Ebtisam Ali Ayad Muosbahe, a 29 year-old woman who works in the Al Hassan industrial zone near Irbid in northern Jordan. A member of Jordan's General Trade Union of Workers in the Textile, Garment and Clothing Industries, she explains how her union is battling to inform women workers of their rights.

What proportion of Jordan's EPZ workers are women?

Of the 53, 000 workers in the textile and clothing factories in the zones, some 14, 000 are Jordanian women and over 30, 000 are workers from South-East Asia, of those 19, 000 are women - thus a large majority.

What is the reason for this over-representation of women?

The main problem is the wages. The level of pay offered in the zones is usually the minimum wage, in other words, 85 dinars a month (120 dollars), which is nothing given the cost of living here. In Jordan, it's a pittance. No man, barring the poorest of the poor, could afford to accept such wage conditions. No one can maintain a household, feed a family and bring up children with 85 dinars. In the public sector, the wage of a young person starting work without any qualifications never falls below 150 dinars...

At least a minimum wage is applicable in the zones now. Until the year 2000, we didn't even have a minimum wage. The employers used to pay whatever they felt like: 40, 50 or 60 dinars a month, whatever they were willing to pay. Forty dinars for a 48-hour week - I don't even want to think what that represents in terms of hourly wages. According to a recent government study, the minimum wage needs be at least 250 dinars if we want to bring the country out of poverty. That's triple the amount I'm currently paid.

Why do women accept these wage conditions?

The problem is that, for a long time, a job in the zones was not considered as any ordinary job. The employers played on the fact that the zones were a novelty, taking advantage of people's curiosity to draw

them in for wages that defy all reason. In the beginning, no one really knew what the working conditions were going to be like in these factories. Men came along but most of them were quick to leave. The women, unable to find anything else, stayed on. They never intended to stay, so they accepted the conditions on offer.

Things are evolving, but many women continue to see their place as anywhere but in salaried employment, which obviously does nothing to help matters for the trade union. Only 12% of women work in Jordan. The employers use this to their advantage. One of them, I have been told, recently claimed to be paying decent wages, on the pretext that 85 dinars multiplied by the number of young women from the same family who are willing to work could represent a handsome amount.

What is the current situation of immigrant workers in the zone?

Difficult. They are recruited from the labour markets of South-East Asia and employed on special contracts that deviate from Jordanian law. They are mutual agreement contracts in which the workers undertake to work ten hours a day without overtime pay, which, if we refer to our laws, means that 25% of their work is free of charge. Migrant workers arrive here with special visas issued by the Labour Ministry, authorising them to work exclusively for the company that has decided to employ them. It's a life of slavery. They are workers with their hands tied, forced to accept working conditions that obviously influence those reserved for us. Workers from India, China or Sri Lanka are able to accept terms that no Jordanian could ever afford to accept. Eighty-five dinars is not the same for someone who is fed and lodged as it is for someone with a family to support.

What are the working conditions like in your factory?

Imagine a hanger with 500 people inside. A hanger without heating or air conditioning. In winter it's terribly cold; in summer, the heat is unbearable. That's what it's like in my factory. I have just arrived. In April the temperature is just about bearable. I can't imagine what it's going to be like this summer... The company has installed fans, but within five minutes they do nothing but blow hot air. That's what the conditions are like in the zone. And when work inspectors come to visit the companies working here, to check that the law is being duly applied, the managers ask us to wear our masks, to place protection on the machines and to wear our uniforms. Once they are gone, life reverts back to its usual course...

What action are you taking with the union to try and change things?

Our priority is to inform the workers about the law. To achieve this we organise meetings, events and training courses on salaries and working conditions in order to raise our colleagues' awareness of the legislation, which most of them are completely unaware of. We try to speak with them whenever we can, either in the workplace, during the breaks, or in the premises we have opened in Irbid. We have someone on duty there three afternoons a week. The door is always open. Anyone can come for information, advice, assistance... Only recently, I learned that one of the women I had been in contact with had come for assistance because the Turkish firm she works for had refused to pay her and her

colleagues the wages they are entitled to in case of technical unemployment. This means that we have the trust of those who know us. We would never be able to change things alone, each in our own corner. We have to organise, to strengthen the influence of the union. For the rest, we are continuing to campaign for an increase in the minimum wage. Our demands on this point must be satisfied. It's essential.

Are you confronted with any particular difficulties as a trade union activist in the zone where you work?

Like anywhere else, the employers consider it unacceptable to have people on their staff who know how to defend themselves, people who know the law. It's by no means easy.

Interview by Martine Hassoun

-Link to Trade Union World Briefing : Jordan's export processing zones - A political bargaining chip

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221894&Language=EN>

-Link to Spotlight interview with Fathalla Omrani

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221890&Language=EN>

-Link to Spotlight interview with Fatmeh Habahbeh (Jordan - GFJTU):

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221356>

-Link to ICFTU REPORT EPZs: working conditions and labour rights around the world:

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991220896>

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