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Uganda: A government at the service of employers

New Trade Union World Briefing

Brussels, 18 August 2005 (ICFTU online): Often considered one of Africa's star pupils by the Bretton Woods Institutions, Uganda has been relatively stable since President Museveni came to power in 1986. This new Trade Union World Briefing (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991222107>), however, shows that the effects of its economic development have barely been felt at all by workers. A vast majority of them remain trapped in the informal economy or in sectors where major violations of their rights persist, such as in the clothing industry.

This Trade Union World Briefing denounces the un-livable wages and inhuman working conditions in many textile companies. One of them, Tristar, which produces clothing for companies including the American giant Wal-Mart, is held up as a good example of Ugandan development by the highest authorities in the country, but is in fact a major perpetrator of workers' rights violations, the vast majority of which are women. According to the briefing, "injuries and humiliation are frequent occurrences and toilet breaks are timed. The country's highest authorities have their eyes closed".

Other Ugandan garment factories are not any better. For example, at the Southern Range factory the workers condemn the working hours which force them to work sometimes more than thirty hours in a row in order to receive salaries no higher than one euro per day. These serious violations of workers' rights occurring in clothing factories have prompted the ITGLWF to demand that the US government withdraw Uganda from the list of countries able to profit from the beneficial tax regime under AGOA.

The codes of conduct implemented by big international brands sourcing goods in Uganda stipulate that factories must be visited by 'independent' consultants who should check whether or not certain criteria for working conditions are being met. Ugandan workers' accounts provide confirmation, if it were really needed, that these visits are biased. "When labour inspectors or foreign visitors come to the factory we are not allowed to talk to them", says Rose, a Southern Range employee in the new ICFTU Trade Union World Briefing published today.

The Ugandan trade unions are doing their utmost to help clothing workers, but in this sector, as in many others, they are often confronted by the vehement hostility of the employers. The highest authorities of the land don't do anything to curb these ardent anti-union attitudes and sometimes they are even complicit in them. Y. Museveni, the President of Uganda in fact declared following a strike of TriStar workers: "I sacked those girls because their action would scare off investors".

It is in this climate that NOTU, the ICFTU's Ugandan affiliate manages to achieve some successes. This new Trade Union World Briefing shows how the Ugandan unions are effectively contributing to the fight against HIV/AIDS, as well as how they have succeeded in recruiting more women workers. The briefing also demonstrates the difficulties of organising in the informal economy and of fighting child labour.

See spotlight interview with Lyelmoi Otong Ongaba (NOTU, Uganda): <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991222110&Language=EN>

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