

ICFTU OnLine...

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Spotlight interview with Abdallahi Ould Mohamed - Nahah (CGTM - Mauritania)

"Organising the informal economy gives us credibility as a major player in the fight against poverty"

BRUSSELS, 15 September 2005, ICFTU Online: In Mauritania, the rather encouraging economic prospects, particularly given the imminent launch of oil production activities, stand in stark contrast to the ever-growing poverty and social exclusion in the country. The General Secretary of the CGTM points the finger at the refusal to involve civil society players, particularly trade unions, in poverty eradication strategies. As the CGTM prepares for its Congress to be held in December under the heading "The CGTM and the Global Campaign against Poverty", Naha is calling on the international trade union movement's solidarity in the form of expertise, political pressure and information. Although the CGTM has managed to double its female membership, chiefly in the informal sector, the time has now come to consolidate the progress made by organising microprojects in order to contribute to improving their living and working conditions (*).

In political speeches, it is said that the fight against poverty is a national priority in Mauritania (1). Yet little progress has been made and the objectives set by the World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy are far from being reached. The situation is becoming increasingly difficult for low-paid workers. What are the main obstacles to the fight against poverty?

The main deficiencies lie in the failure to involve civil society at any level, particularly the groups targeted, the most affected. The projects are not effective because they do not have the support of those concerned. There's also a lack of rationality in the use of the resources allocated. The poverty reduction strategy does not address the issue of employment, for example. There is not even the slightest reference to social security and the place reserved for occupational training is hugely insufficient.

The place reserved for non-governmental actors is purely formal; they are invited to a seminar or a ceremony, for example, to put in a token appearance before the television cameras, but that doesn't make them genuine partners. In reality, the State ascribes the role exclusively to itself. It is pursuing a policy of State aid rather than a genuine fight against poverty. The CGTM has repeatedly raised this issue with the government as well as with international institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, the UNDP and the European Union. Everyone says they agree on the principle but nothing changes.

It also has to be recognised that the trade union movement is partly responsible, it lacks resources and is not always able to develop a concrete alternative rather than simply formulating a general demand. Take the expansion and modernisation of the social security system, for example: we have still not been able to produce a methodical and detailed proposal.

What support do you think the ICFTU could offer in the fight against poverty?

The ICFTU has already made a significant contribution. We have benefited from a project to organise women, which has enabled us to recruit a substantial number of female members, mostly in the informal economy - an area we were not sure how to tackle before. Being able to recruit thousands of poor workers in the informal economy is an important step

forward for us. It gives us credibility as a major player in the fight against poverty.

During a recent trip to Brussels, we also received the backing of the ICFTU and the ETUC in the negotiation of new fishing agreements with the European Union.

In concrete terms, we hope that the ICFTU will be able to offer us support in three forms: expertise, political pressure and information. We need assistance to develop our internal expertise so that we can develop better-honed policies and thus manage to hold our own with specialists from the government or international organisations; to ensure a genuinely open debate, and to stop them looking down at us for being insignificant workers' representatives who are quick to make demands but incapable of proposing alternatives.

The ICFTU should also press international organisations and donors to give more consideration and a greater role to trade union organisations. The European Union Representation, for example, has always refused to work with the trade unions and does not even respond to our invitations. We would like the EU Representation to agree to a dialogue with us within the framework of decentralised cooperation, as is the case in Mali. Thanks to the ICFTU, which has managed to prise open the door of European interlocutors in Brussels on several occasions, we are starting to see some improvement.

Information is also essential. Everything the ICFTU publishes constitutes a bank of essential information for us, even though as French speakers we sometimes feel a little badly done by, given the lack of English documents translated into French. And yet, especially with Mauritania's entry into the famous club of oil producing countries, we are going to need more information than ever before to ensure that we are not trampled on by the oil multinationals. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Guy Ryder, General Secretary of the ICFTU, for having helped us to establish contact with ICEM, the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions, thanks to which we have got off to a good start in our efforts to ensure that we are not sidelined. All the social actors in this country are worried about what the future holds for us, what the repercussions of this oil find will be. The government has made a commitment that most of the gains will be allocated to the social sector (education, health, infrastructures). But it's all rather vague for the moment. The contracting companies have been sworn to silence about the size of the reserves. There are, of course, understandable strategic reasons for this, but we are soon going to publish the CGTM's view on the issue.

The CGTM has been remarkably successful in its implementation of the campaign to organise women in Maghreb launched in 2004 by the ICFTU and backed by the Belgian confederation CGSLB. You have managed to double the CGTM's female membership, which has gone from 15 to 30%. What can you now do to consolidate these results?

The project to organise women has allowed us to recruit many women in the informal economy, as well as some female employees in the formal economy. It has also enabled us to strengthen the structural presence of women in the CGTM, which was one of our initial priorities. Involvement in the informal economy gives the union more social influence in regions where the working class is very weak. It gives us a social base that is even stronger than that of the political parties.

But this does not go without raising other problems, as, in the long term, we cannot hope to stabilise and consolidate these gains unless what the trade union offers benefits these women workers, such as greater expertise through training, or a better quality of life, or by improving the management of their cooperatives, for example, or their production tools, or their distribution networks.

In some regions, the response of the female population was so strong that we had to stall our recruitment drive to allow us time to propose

concrete projects. This is what we did in Rosso, a region in the south of the country, where we identified a rice husking project. The project responds to the high demand in this area and is set to create jobs because, at the moment, small producers often have to wait for weeks or even months before they can have their rice husked, and cannot always afford the price they have to pay. In other regions, we are trying to set up grain mill projects, to allow the women in the informal economy to develop an activity that will provide them with a stable income. In the traditional fishing sector, we would like to set up a cold storage project. And for women dyers, we are reflecting on how to help them modernise their production tools in order to cut their costs and increase their revenue. The aim is not only to ensure an improvement in working conditions but also in the living conditions of these women, which will benefit all their families.

Informal workers are extremely poor people, and the reason women came to our union in droves is because they are carried by the hope of improvement, even on a small-scale, in their conditions, which are extremely difficult at the moment.

Do you hope to work with other partners to set up these projects?

Mauritania is, unfortunately, the poor relative when it comes to international cooperation. NGOs are very few and are focused on very small pilot projects that often lead to nothing once the donor withdraws. We were surprised at the incredible vitality and motivation of these women, all the more so given that some had already been disappointed by the many national NGOs which had already passed through their regions, making speeches and collecting membership fees door to door but never taking any concrete action. At the moment we are being supported by the ICFTU and the CGLSB (Belgian Liberal Trade Union Confederation), but we hope to be able to perpetuate these projects and perhaps also find other partners, trade unions or NGOs, with common objectives.

In July 2004, a new labour code was passed and in January 2005, after six months of tripartite negotiations, you secured a historic agreement raising the legal minimum wage by 82%; improving occupational training and social protection, and institutionalising social dialogue. This is the first agreement between social partners in Mauritania in 20 years. These gains are not inconsiderable.

Generally speaking, our legislation now guarantees the most fundamental rights, but there are still provisions allowing the administration to block strike action.

The right to organise is better guaranteed, but remains limited. In practice, negotiations in most companies only arise in reaction to a dispute. Mauritania has ratified ILO Conventions 87 and 98, but the culture of social dialogue is still way behind in relation to these texts.

To place the record increase in the legal minimum wage in context, it should be pointed out that the wage system is completely out of line with the cost of living. The employers, moreover, supported us in the January negotiations, because their management has gone beyond the stage of capital accumulation. They are already sitting on fortunes and need stability more than anything now, hence their commitment to a fairer distribution of wealth in return for stability. Conversely, it is the public and para-governmental sectors that are lagging behind. Despite the progress represented by this agreement in January, we still have serious concerns about the spirit of rebellion driving some employers with regard to the application of the agreement. Social unrest has, moreover, given rise to numerous conflicts over recent months, with the dismissal in April of twenty two mineworkers taking strike action.

What expectations does the CGTM have regarding the move to reconfigure the international trade union movement, as was decided at the last ICFTU

Congress in Miyazaki?

This move to unify is one of the fundamental reasons why we have given our full backing to Guy Ryder, as the leader of a genuine project. Because routine would be the death of the trade union movement, it is essential that we innovate. We must strengthen our influence, be more aggressive in order to make our objectives more visible and to ensure their integration within the policies of these institutions, particularly with regard to the fight against poverty and respect for trade union rights.

This new grouping must take care that it doesn't become too bureaucratic; it should concentrate more on the situation and concerns of its affiliates, by going towards them more, as many expect it to do.

The future of trade unionism inevitably lies with the young. With the support of the ICFTU, you have launched a national campaign to organise young men and women. How is it progressing?

The under 30s represent almost 70% of the population, and a trade union movement without any hold on the young has no future. Our priority targets are not only young people working in the formal and informal economies, but also unemployed graduates. The latter are very numerous owing to the inconsistencies between training policy and actual job opportunities. We must manage to mobilise these young people who could bring new blood to the organisation and ensure the renewal of our structures, as well as the expertise we need, for example, in economics, law, sociology... Attracting them is a complicated task, and we would like to be able to offer them retraining opportunities, alternative training that leads on to the jobs available. There is an incredible shortage of skilled labour in some sectors, such as boiler making, electromechanics, or transport.

We would like to form a partnership with donors to be able to pay the training staff and ensure a minimum level of equipment and resources. We are still at the embryonic phase of our campaign to recruit young people. We need a strong push forward, and, in particular, the expertise required to develop more targeted policies.

Interview by Natacha David.

(*) This interview was conducted shortly before the coup staged in Mauritania on 3 August 2005, when the security and armed forces announced the formation of a Military Council for Justice and Democracy (MCJD), which pledged a return to civilian rule within two years, once it has created "the conditions for a transparent and open democracy". The Mauritanian trade union centre, the CGTM, whilst reaffirming its disapproval of the use of force and its commitment to the democratic and peaceful change-over of political power, called on the Council to honour its pledge to restore civilian rule and urged it to establish a permanent framework for consultation with all social, political and economic actors in response to the critical need for urgent and profound reforms capable of improving the harsh living conditions of workers and the population in general.

According to the UNDP, Mauritania ranks 152nd out of the 177 poorest countries in the Human Development Index.

Link to Spotlight interview with Amadou M'Bow (CGTM- Mauritania)
<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221700&Language=EN>

Link to briefing on Mauritania: organising women in the informal economy to fight against poverty
<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991222817&Language=EN>

Link to Spotlight interview: Mahjouba Mint Salek, executive secretary in charge of women's affairs and a founding member of the CGTM (General Confederation of Workers in Mauritania :

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991219061&Language=EN>

The ICFTU represents 145 million workers in 234 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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