

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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Spotlight with William Muga Akech, (TTWU - Kenya)

It will destroy the trade union movement

Brussels, 14 October 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): The termination of the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) on January 1 this year has had a devastating impact on the fragile, emerging, textile economies of many African countries.

In Kenya, for example, an estimated 10,000 directly-employed textile workers have lost their jobs and nine factories around the country forced to close. Many tens of thousands more sub-contracted textile workers, and workers in ancillary businesses, like catering and transportation, have also been badly hit by the loss of trade and this latest manifestation of unfettered Globalisation.

William Muga Akech, aged 51, was elected General Secretary of the Tailors and Textile Workers Union (TTWU) in Kenya in 2002. Married with three wives and 13 children, Akech is a living exemplar of Africa's extended family system. He was born in the country's central Nyanza Province, close to the shores of Lake Victoria, and began working life as a sweeper in a local ginnery, rising to machine operator, then charge hand. In 1982, two-years after becoming a TTWU (*) branch secretary, he was falsely imprisoned and tortured by the then-regime of Daniel Arap Moi, leaving prison on crutches three-months-later.

-Tell us about the post-ATC impact on Kenya?

- It's really affected the ordinary man. It affected ginneries, the cotton growers from Nyanza and Mombassa. They've lost their markets. And peasant growers they remain poor. Nyanza alone has 20,000 small cotton growers. These people have all lost their livelihoods. Then there are the workers in the factories, it has affected so many people.

-Has the MFA crisis hurt labour rights in any way?

-Yes. Around 20 percent of the workforce has been reduced. It is subjecting our workers to even greater exploitation. They are being forced to work harder for the same amount of money, the working load is increased, and the compensation remains the same. A worker lives in dilemma. He has no choice. If he or she doesn't agree they face the sack.

-Why did you join a trade union?

-I joined to fight for workers rights. I joined to improve conditions and wages.

Almost 80 percent of Kenyans are living below the poverty level. The legal minimum wage is 4,638 shillings a month (around US\$62). But house rent in Nairobi alone costs 2,000 shillings.

Then there is transport to and from work; school fees and clothing. What a person requires to live is more than they are paid. It is below even the minimum expectation.

How about somebody who is not working? What is their plight? He or she has nothing. The workforce in this country is only two million. And the population is 30 million. And the gulf between rich and poor is always widening.

I was arrested several times. Sometimes I spend three months in prison, sometimes days or weeks. The arrests were not lawful.

- In his June 8 budget this year Kenya's Finance Minister (David Mwiraria) recommended the introduction of "piece rate" right across industry. What will this mean for workers?

-It is our constant fear that the Finance Minister may introduce piece rate. This is an issue that will affect every sector and every industry. This is killing everybody. It is in total contravention of ILO conventions, worker rights and Human Rights. It will completely destroy the trade union movement. No worker will be safe.

-What are the other big problems facing trade union members in Kenya?

-Many workers are HIV positive. This is killing union members, and also killing union leaders. Malaria is another big killer. Workers can't even afford to buy mosquito nets. Families live in a 10x10 house. There may be between five to 10 children. They can't get medicines. There are new strains of malaria and typhoid, resistant to drugs. There's cholera, contaminated water, no toilet facilities. Workers can't afford to live in better places because of the low wages. They are under attack from many forces.

There is prostitution. A poor woman worker can be tempted to go with anybody because of the money, which she needs to feed her family.

-How well has the government responded to the post-ATC crisis?

-The government is not handling this crisis properly. We have two things to address: corruption and labour laws.

Most of the employers are connected to the political establishment and most of the political establishment are employers. So it's a conflict of interest.

They should improve the labour laws, bridge the gap between rich and poor. But no motion has been proposed to improve conditions. There is nothing about health and safety, just about controlling wages.

The current government is the most corrupt this country has ever had. The first thing they did when they came to power was voting to increase their wages six-fold.

-What would be your call to the International trade union movement?

-We need support. Support means we need expertise, and if necessary

finance. We have a 45,000 membership potential. If we can make noise then definitely we can change things.

"This current government is definitely anti-union. They have never even bothered to consult us.

Our current labour laws were enacted in 1948, when we were still in the hands of the British. The laws were passed in favour of the colonial masters.

New labour laws were drafted in 2002 and 2003. But up till now it has not been moved up to Parliament; only from one desk to another.

If you are a troublesome union leader, the government will try to get rid of you. But I will fight to the end!

Interview by David Browne.

(*) The TTWU was founded in 1956 and currently has around 15,000 members, with a "potential membership of 46,000," say union activists. It is affiliated to the ICFTU through Kenya's Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU), which has a total membership of 1.5 million workers.

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

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