

ICFTU OnLine...

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Video Spotlight interview with Georges Macès (Sokowa-HAITI)

« Georges' hope »

Brussels, 25 November 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): What's the link between the top brand of jeans you may be wearing and Haiti, the poorest country in the Americas? The answer is the CODEVI export processing zone factory located on the Haitian border with the Dominican Republic.

Georges Macès sews the hems of jeans sold abroad by major international brand names such as Levi's. He earns less than €15 a week, on the edge of survival.

George is an activist within the local trade union SOKOWA, and his number-one demand is a decent wage.

In this video (3 minutes), Georges launches an appeal to all those who buy big brand jeans. To view the video :

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223109&Language=EN>

Trade Union World's article:

"Just enough to survive on"

"When I arrived, I was just given a form to complete. I simply signed it, without even knowing what was written." Georges Macès soon realised that the working conditions at the CODEVI export processing zone did not correspond to what had been agreed. This Haitian worker has been employed for almost two years at a factory in Ouanaminthe, on the border with the Dominican Republic, making jeans sold abroad under top brand names such as Levi's or Wrangler.

A second factory in the CODEVI zone makes T-shirts for Sara Lee.

In theory, Georges could earn up to 1300 gourdes a week (€25.54), if he could sew 1180 trouser hems a day. Not surprisingly, the 32-year-old worker has never managed to reach this unrealistic production target and has to settle for 750 gourdes a week (€14.86). It is more than the legal minimum wage (70 gourdes/day) provided for in Haiti's Constitution, but "it is just enough to survive on", complains Georges. "Although I earn a little more than before, it's still by no means sufficient. Life is becoming increasingly costly." Georges lives with his wife and young daughter in a small house that floods every time the nearby river bursts its banks during the rainy season. They would like to move, but cannot afford to.

Georges and other workers at the EPZ were motivated to form a local union, SOKOWA, in the hopes of securing a wage increase and extra pay for compulsory overtime. But events were to take a turn for the worse. "When one of the workers had problems, we would go to the office to defend them. That's why the management drew up a list of trade union members and dismissed most of us." There was no doubt in Georges' mind: CODEVI's managers did not want a union in the factory. At the beginning of 2004, the management resorted to more brutal measures. "Dominican soldiers were hired as security agents inside the free trade zone. They would intervene on the slightest pretext. Workers were beaten on several occasions," explains Georges. The day following a stoppage drawing large support among the workers, around 350 of them were fired. Was this a coincidence, or a deliberate reprisal against the union? The management then elicited "acts of violence within the factory" to justify its subsequent lockout of the workers.

Months of unrelenting local mobilisations and strong international pressure were the required to make Grupo M - the Dominican garment manufacturing giant managing CODEVI - give way. A memorandum of understanding was finally concluded in February 2005. The majority of the dismissed workers were to be gradually reinstated; SOKOWA was recognised as a legitimate representative, and a joint committee was set up. Since then, there has been a significant improvement in the treatment of the 1300 men and women working at the jeans and T-shirts factories in the CODEVI zone. "They treat us with more respect," Georges recognises. "We also have a direct line of communication with the management, which previously refused to talk to us." Nonetheless, the trade unionists involved in the collective bargaining process are not resting on their laurels. Around twenty members of the Haitian union meet every Sunday afternoon, because, in spite of the progress made, several problems remain: low wages, undrinkable water, a stifling work environment...

What if other garment manufacturers established themselves in the Ouanaminthe export processing zone? "It would no doubt be good for employment," admits Georges. "But the wages are still just as low; the same kind of poverty will always prevail in Haiti."

See also the Trade Union World Briefing New Trade Union World Briefing (8 pages) – video portrait (4 minutes) EPZ - Dominican Republic and Haiti: Taking on Grupo M

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223136&Language=EN>

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