

ICFTU OnLine...

153/281105

Spotlight interview: Yannick Etienne (A pioneer of the trade union struggle in Haiti)

"The workers' demands have been constantly backed by international solidarity"

Brussels, 28 November 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): A pioneer of the trade union struggle in Haiti, Yannick explains how the complex strategy combining local action and international mobilisation was organised. As one of the key players in the birth of Haiti's first collective bargaining agreement, she charts the lines of action which need to be taken in Haiti and the Dominican Republic to tackle the Caribbean manufacturing giant, Grupo M.

A collective agreement in a garment export processing zone in Haiti?

Until recently, the very notion would have been considered a vain fancy. Today, the Haitian workers making jeans for Levi Strauss and T-shirts for Sara Lee are on the verge of making it a reality. After two years of trade union repression, these Haitian workers have managed to earn greater respect, partly thanks to international solidarity campaigns in which the labour movement played an active role. Caution, however, remains warranted, as the collective bargaining process initiated in September is far from over.

Interview with Yannick Etienne, spokeswoman of the workers' federation, Premier Mai - Batay Ouvriye (E.S.P.M. BO), to which the local union Sendika Ouvriye Kodevi Wanament (SOKOWA) is affiliated.

Over the last two years, the CODEVI EPZ factory workers have had to cope with a long succession of anti-union practices and demeaning treatment: forced overtime, mass dismissals targeting unionised workers, armed intimidation and even beatings. Have you seen any improvements in the working conditions since the signing of the memorandum of understanding with the management in February 2005?

The industrial disputes are undoubtedly being better managed. A week after the memorandum was signed, we secured the reinstatement of the trade union leaders. And over the last few months, virtually all of the dismissed workers have gradually regained their posts. There are just a few still waiting. A joint committee has also been set up, comprising three members of the management and three union members. But the principal breakthrough the workers tell us they have achieved is the management's respect. Previously, no exchanges or discussions were possible. Now, as soon as any kind of conflict arises, the workers call on the trade union representative to assist them. CODEVI's managers are making an effort not only to respect the memorandum of understanding, but also the right to freedom of association.

Before, security officers - Dominican soldiers - would intervene in the disputes, maltreating Haitian workers on Haitian soil. It was unacceptable. Now CODEVI employs Haitian security officers. We do not see Dominican soldiers inside the factory anymore... although we know they are still not far away. In spite of these gains, we are still working hard to resolve several problems that still remain: the heat in the factories, access to drinking water, difficult access to the zone owing to the state of the road, and, above all, the wages. The workers are constantly having to turn out more work, but the salaries are not following suit.

The memorandum of understanding between the management and the union did not fall from the sky. What are the key factors that contributed to the opening of social dialogue? Local mobilisation? International pressure on Grupo M, which owns the zone?

Firstly, the workers continued to mobilise in spite of all the difficulties. They came to the meetings, took part, discussed and made decisions. All the violations committed were rigorously documented, which gave us a very solid case. Secondly, CODEVI's managers were amazed at the international support for the workers. They never expected that. They never thought that anyone would be interested in this lost corner of Haiti. Thirdly, they made very serious cultural errors, not being familiar with Haitian culture and the historic problems between the two countries [Haiti and Dominican Republic]. Moreover, they were on territory that is highly sensitive to Dominco-Haitian tensions. The management of CODEVI was not prepared for dealing with all that. They had to do something to calm things down.

"What was amazing was the massive mailing campaign. Letters of support flooded in from everywhere, especially the United States and Europe. CODEVI's managers didn't know what to do."

What shape did international solidarity take during the months of struggle when the workers were out of work? A difficult balance had to be struck between applying sufficient pressure to break the deadlock but not too much, to ensure that CODEVI's clients would not cancel their orders...

Absolutely. What was amazing was the massive mailing campaign. Letters of support flooded in from everywhere, especially the United States and Europe. CODEVI's managers didn't know what to do. They complained that they were still receiving letters even though the negotiations had started. Honestly, mailing campaigns are really very important. At least three European countries, Belgium, France and the UK, contribute to it through organisations such as the Clean Clothes Campaign (Belgium), Réseau-Solidarité (France) and the Haiti Support Group (United Kingdom).

In the United States, organisations from the labour movement such as the Solidarity Center and the Workers' Rights Consortium were in contact with the companies like Levi's and exerted important pressure on the World Bank, which is financing the project, to prevent orders from being withdrawn. The support of North America students associations such as United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) and the Haitian community abroad should also be mentioned.

-To download the Trade Union World Briefing "EPZs in Haiti and the Dominican Republic: Taking on Grupo M" (8 pages):

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

- To view the video portrait entitled "Georges' Hope", the account of a worker who sews the hems of Levi jeans for just 15 euros a week and his appeal to consumers around the world:

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

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