

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU Online
031/200206

Spotlight interview with Jean Apollinaire Kafando (Burkina Faso – ONSL)

“The main obstacle to organising the informal economy is the lack of resources”

Brussels, 20 February 2006 (ICFTU online): **Jean Apollinaire Kafando, national secretary in charge of training, education and research at the ONSL, one of the national trade union centres affiliated to the ICFTU, retraces the early stages of the campaign to organise the informal economy in Burkina Faso, and points to the main obstacles, including lack of resources, poverty and political manipulation.**

How long has the ONSL been working with the informal economy?

The ONSL (National Organisation of Free Trade Unions) began to approach the informal economy at the beginning of the nineties, with the support received from the CTC (Canada) to organise the small engine mechanics sector. The CFDT (France) then took over, assisting our efforts to organise other trades. Yet again, however, this experience was rather short-lived, owing to the lack of resources. Moreover, despite the fact that most of the different trades within the informal economy were receptive to union action, some of the promises made to them were not honoured, making the workers reticent to commit to the trade union. We nonetheless tried to keep in touch with the sector, particularly during the strikes, as it represents a large number of workers.

At the time, Burkina Faso was a pioneer in the organising of the informal economy...

Exactly. The ONSL was the only organisation taking an interest in it, developing contacts with the butchers, taxi drivers, the fruit and vegetable vendors, the planters ... but people expected financial assistance to back their involvement, and we had none to offer. At the ONSL, the levies are 1000 CFA francs a year, but, needless to say, it is by no means easy to collect them. The levies don't come in and the ONSL also has to rely on outside funding. Our activities were financed by the FO, CFDT, FGTB, CTC, the ICFTU and its regional organisation AFRO.

Which industries are affected by the informal economy in Burkina Faso?

Nearly every sector. Since the advent of the Structural Adjustment Programme in Burkina Faso, the informal economy has grown considerably due to deflationary measures. The employees made redundant as a result of the restructuring came

from many different sectors (commerce, banking, agriculture...) to swell the ranks of the men and women already working in the informal economy.

Which are the most receptive sectors, those most interested in some form of organising?

The "sunrise" informal sectors are the most receptive to our organising efforts. They are generally composed of illiterate workers. Those who joined the movement following the deflation were unionised sectors, consisting mainly of intellectuals, who tend to believe that unions have not proved capable of defending their interests. At present, they do not see the need to join a union.

The organisation's main problem is financial. Shall I give you an example? During a May 1st celebration, the Mayor of Ouagadougou distributed money to the informal workers. So everyone dispersed and the workers' day celebration had no impact.

What strategies are you developing to mobilise the workers in the informal economy?

Take the traders, for example. They often have problems with the customs and excise and tax departments. We explain to them that we can defend their interests by negotiating with these departments on their behalf. We support their demands for more reasonable taxes, for the right to negotiate the rates of taxation and stagger their payments. So, even though we do not have the financial resources, we at least have some ideas on how to support the workers and defend their interests.

**What kinds of workers are most responsive to trade union organisation?
Young people, men, women?**

Women are quick to realise the need to organise, as they are the pillars of our families. At five in the morning, women are already coming back from remote villages with the vegetables they are going to sell on the market. They also organise themselves so that they can feed their children before they leave for school. Once women are aware of the stakes for themselves and their families, we cannot fail.

Young people are also aware, but their approach is more mitigated. When strikes are organised we do not catch a glimpse of them if the CDP (the ruling party) organises a demonstration and they can earn 1000 francs. The PADEPT (African Programme to Develop the Democratic Participation of Workers) is doing university work to change the mentality of young people. The future ahead of you transcends the 1000 francs that can easily be earned within an hour.

The PADEPT offers training courses to change the attitudes of young people, explaining, for example, the difference between a union and an association.

What type of services do you offer your members?

The union doesn't have its own resources to operate with. It's quite a handicap. It's thanks to the levies of European workers that we are able to function and carry out certain actions. But our work is often hampered by political meddling, which

annihilates our efforts. At the same time as we were structuring the fight of the taxi drivers, for example, the authorities offered them new vehicles that they could pay back in instalments. The union is not able to offer this type of assistance. The “politicians” call the tune, as they have the resources. The unions do what they can, but they know that others are constantly working to undermine their efforts.

What information resources do you have?

The local unions are the fruit of trade union decentralisation. So we make contact with these unions. Through them, we are also able to widen our membership base, everywhere.

What strategies could you deploy to counter these difficulties?

The informal economy is difficult to organise, as the workers are interested in instant cash. When you approach the workers, they reply: “You want me to join the union, but what will I gain from it? If I need a loan, will you be in a position to help me?”

They have to be told the truth: we do not have the means... so it's very difficult to organise these workers. All the more so given that the poverty we are fighting against does nothing but grow.

They follow the training courses when they are given a per diem. Without that, people come and then leave the room one by one to attend to their businesses, which will bring them their earnings of the day.

Rather than paying a per diem during the training courses, we should offer the workers the means to set up a business. If we could offer micro-credits, we could make our members aware of their responsibilities towards their economic development.

The political forces in power are conscious of the informal economy's strength, and they use it in their favour. During the presidential election of 2005, men close to those in power distributed T-shirts, caps, cassettes and 1000 franc notes - enough to feed on for 4 days. It's impossible to organise a boycott under such conditions. The money spoke at the end of the day.

Do you have relations with NGOs or other civil society organisations?

Such relations are very rare in Burkina Faso, as trade union culture is marked by the desire to maintain its independence and autonomy. So we have not yet sought partners of this kind, although I recognise that, today, we could approach them and build up alliances to wage the battle. The ONSL should in fact approach NGOs with the same vocation as the trade unions, as the women's section has done already.

To conclude, what is your assessment, to date, of the trade union movement's achievements in the informal economy?

Even without resources, the workers recognise that we are fighting for their interests. Over the last 2 years, with the support of the ILO, the organisation of the informal economy (see further details in box) has been improving, and the number of strikes we organise is growing.

Interview held in Ouagadougou by Pierre Martinot.

(box) Key dates in the progressive organising of the informal economy in Burkina Faso

- 1998/1999: launch of the project, with the support of the ILO and DANIDA
- 2001: creation of national sectoral groupings within the informal sector
- 2005: formation of 5 trade unions within the informal sector
 - o SYNATRALFA (fruit and vegetables)
 - o SYNATEDRA (two-wheeler engines and associated workers)
 - o SYNACEB (barbers/hairdressers)
 - o SYNATRAFOS (welders/solderers)
 - o SYNATRACA (tailors/seamstresses)

Also read the Spotlight Interview with Mamadou Nama (Burkina Faso – USTB) entitled “The unions in the informal economy are now as vast as the entire salaried labour movement” at <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223421&Language=EN>

–

Also read the Spotlight Interview with Soumaïla LINGANI (Burkina Faso – PRASEI) entitled “Informal economy: from information to mutual protection” at: <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223423&Language=EN>

The ICFTU represents 155 million workers in 236 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

For more information, please contact the ICFTU Press Department on +32 2 224 0232 or +32 476 621 018.