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Spotlight interview with Soumaila LINGANI (Burkina Faso - PRASEI)

Informal economy: from information to mutual protection

Brussels, 21 February 2006 (ICFTU online): How to manage a hairdressing salon or a welding shop? What are the basic rights of a worker in the informal economy? Armed only with their teaching materials, the educators trained by the Programme for the Reinforcement of Trade Union Action in the Informal Economy (PRASEI) have reached a total of over 70,000 workers in Burkina Faso. The fact that in Ouagadougou, Bobo Dioulasso, Koudougou and Tenkodogo, the workers within the informal economy can now to take part in May Day celebrations or convene collective action is the result of successful trade union awareness- raising. All this is the fruit of an intensive grassroots campaign carried out in 14 provinces of the country and led by the 554 resource persons trained by PRASEI.

At the end of seven years of activities, the project has been successful in organising 5 trade sectors. Initially structured as national sectoral groupings these have now become autonomous trade unions.

The PRASEI or Programme for the Reinforcement of Trade Union Action in the Informal Economy in Burkina Faso, which concluded with a sub-regional seminar held in late December 2005 in Ouagadougou, highlighted two national initiatives: the setting up of the National Council for the Informal Economy (CNEI) and the range of services offered by MUPRESSI (Mutual Provident Fund for Informal Economy Workers).

According to PRASEI's national coordinator Soumaila LINGANI, these confirm the structuring and professionalisation of the informal economy.

The CNEI is an initiative from Burkina Faso. What are its objectives?

The Council provides a framework for consultation and negotiation between the representatives of the informal economy, the employers and the state.

It was born out of discussions between trade union centres and workers around the concept of social dialogue.

A draft was then submitted to the Employment Ministry and the Chamber of Commerce. From the outset, these two partners appeared interested in this trade union dynamic, with which they were for once happy to be associated.

On 18 December 2003, we held a National Forum on the informal economy during which we adopted the official name and the Statutes of the Council.

Since then, every time the Employment Ministry launches activities involving workers from the informal economy, we are contacted via this Council.

It therefore acts as a genuine platform for social dialogue and consultation.

What benefit does a worker draw from this Council?

It is important for the workers to be able to rely on a permanent consultation and dialogue framework.

In a place like this they are able to voice the specific demands of their sector.

The occupation of public areas, for example, constantly causes problems between the informal economy and the local authorities.

Workers are regularly the victims of eviction. Through this Council, they can negotiate the occupancy of public space either by trade or by geographical location. The trade union representatives negotiate directly with the municipal authorities.

The workers are also involved in joint activities such as discussions on the tax system. Right now, the state is not concerned whether they are in a position to pay the tax, and tax collection is always problematic. In Burkina Faso, a census is currently being taken of the workers and the economic activities. As part of this enrolment process we provide counselling to the workers and impress on them that tax evasion can be dangerous.

Through the Council, we put forward a demand for a trade union role in the various census procedures. Moreover, proposals are formulated for setting the workers' wages.

What is the Council's calendar of activities for 2006?

We held a session at the end of 2005 during the closing of PRASEI. Its aim was to carry out an assessment of the collaboration between the trade unions, employers and the government.

Now that the project has reached its term, the trade union centres will ensure its follow-up. We are currently drawing up the programme of activities for 2006. It should be noted that the Council can be convened at the request of one of the three parties.

Workers can also benefit from a mutual fund...

PRASEI has also given new momentum to certain mutual initiatives.

Today the MUPRESSI (Mutual Provident Fund for Informal Economy Workers) is fully operational and accessible to all informal economy workers without discrimination. It is headed by a 9-member Steering Committee elected at a General Assembly that was

attended by the workers of the 10 activity zones spread across the whole country. This Committee is, in turn, supervised by a Verification Committee that monitors the proper running of the mutual fund. Currently, a Provincial Union has been set up in five zones (Ouagadougou, Koudougou, Tenkodogo, Bobo Dioulasso et Pô). Their purpose is to spread the word about MUPRESSI. In the long run, we hope to cover all 10 zones and to reach out to a maximum number of workers.

What services are on offer?

Enrolment costs 5000 CFA francs (7.60 euros) and the monthly affiliation fee is 1000 CFA francs (1.52 euros).

The mutual fund offers coverage of risks in the workplace.

Workers who have remained on sick leave and have not worked for one month are eligible for the payment of benefits of 25,000 CFA francs, in addition to 15,000 CFA francs to cover prescription fees.

As of the month of April, the fund will also provide support to workers during special family occasions. In the event of a birth or a wedding, the worker will be entitled to a sum of 25,000 CFA francs. He or she will also receive a solidarity payment of 10,000 CFA francs in case of a death (birth, wedding and death).

In the near future, we envisage the possibility of subscribing to an old-age insurance scheme, which would allow for a pension to be paid out to workers having contributed for at least 15 years of their working life.

We are in contact with the National Social Security Department that backs and encourages our efforts.

The mutual fund also organises awareness raising activities.

We have developed an information campaign on the workplace risks associated with each trade. Our action in this field has included a tetanus inoculation programme carried out in collaboration with the Ministries of Health and Public Service.

An anti-AIDS caravan also travelled the length and breadth of the country to raise awareness about the risks of HIV among the workers of the informal economy.

Finally, the mutual fund provides access to a short-term micro-credit facility allowing workers to launch or expand an income generating activity. This credit portfolio is placed at their disposal by the ILO.

What are the prospects for the future, now that the project has reached its conclusion?

The PRASEI was a sub-regional pilot project jointly organised by the ILO and DANIDA, launched in 1998, and involving Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali and Senegal.

Each participating country has submitted its conclusions, its recommendations and best practices.

The ILO is currently assessing the outcomes of the project with a view to developing a similar initiative in other countries. It is also preparing a report that will allow for the sharing of the data collected in the different contexts.

There clearly is a demand for the strengthening of our achievements. Here in Burkina Faso, the informal economy unions have asked the ILO and the trade union centres to organise training programmes on TU leadership and business management in the informal economy.

The trade union centres will continue to back the structures that have been created and will support their activities within the bounds of their financial means.

We have requested state subsidies for training the first informal economy leaders in the field of labour rights and legislation. The ILO's involvement will include assisting us with training in small business development.

Interview by Pierre Martinot

Also read the Spotlight Interview with Jean-Apollinaire Kafando (Burkina Faso - ONSL) entitled "The main obstacle to organising the informal economy is the lack of resources" at

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223420&Language=EN>

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>

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