

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU OnLine...

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Spotlight interview with H  l  ne Sawadogo (Burkina Faso - SYNATRAFLA)

"From the garden to the market - Improving the fate of women workers"

Brussels, 2 March 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): On March 8, 2006, the ICFTU will launch the second phase of its global campaign to organise women workers. Women working in the informal economy are a primary target of this campaign (*).

Having started out as a market vendor in the fruit and vegetable trade in 1995, H  l  ne Sawadogo now defends the interests of the sector's workers, as the general secretary of SYNATRAFLA (National Union of Fruit and Vegetable and Associated Workers). She retraces the history of SYNATRAFLA for us, a union that materialised as part of an ILO-backed campaign to organise the informal economy, launched in 1999. She also tells us of the union's priorities: regulating international buyers' access to the market gardens and improving the working conditions of the market traders, such as health and safety.

How did you become involved in the fruit and vegetable sector trade union?

I decided to sell fruit and vegetables in 1995. I was unemployed at the time and had seen that my friends were making a reasonable amount of money by working on the various markets in Ouagadougou. So I asked my husband for his permission. He agreed and I asked my friends to show me the ropes: where to buy the fruit and vegetable, how to set up the stall, and how to approach the customers. Then, thanks to my access to transport, I became a wholesaler. It's a more profitable trade. Initially, I accompanied other women, to get to know the market gardens on the outskirts of Ouagadougou, and then started to work alone.

A wholesaler's day is very long and laborious. I was on the road by four o'clock in the morning. Buying stock from the various market gardens around the city can be a lengthy process. I would then go the market and would often get home after six in the evening, when I would have to store the produce. But doesn't end there. I also have to take care of the domestic tasks, the cooking and the children.

The women working as market traders and wholesalers spend very little time at home. In many cases, their working conditions and, above all, their absence from the home create domestic problems. The husband doesn't accept his wife being absent for so many hours.

It was not long before I realised how difficult life was for the women in the trade. Then, one day, the general secretary of a trade union confederation came to see our representative at the market. He was looking for women to take part in a training seminar for workers in the informal economy. So I followed the training course for five days, and it was as of that moment that I got involved in the trade union.

Why at that precise moment?

It was thanks to the seminar that I really came to realise that trade unionism defends the moral and material interests of workers. I wanted to share this knowledge with other women on the market who were not aware how important it was to defend our interests.

I became active in the trade union in 1999, through an ILO project aimed at structuring the informal economy. Between 1999 and 2001, we were organised by trades into different groups, and it was as of then that we progressively evolved, and finally became a union on 24 February 2005, in Bobo Dioulasso.

SYNATRAFLA now exists in the four main trading areas of Burkina Faso (Ouagadougou, Bobo Dioulasso, Tenkodogo and Koudougou). We also have representatives in Ouahigouya and Pô.

What are your key aims?

SYNATRAFLA would like to meet with the authorities, so that they draw up laws to regulate our activities. Everything is disorganised here in Burkina Faso. When we go to Ghana to buy supplies during the tomato season, everything is well organised. We don't have the right to go directly to the garden markets. We have to go to the counter and negotiate the price. Those in charge of the counter then take our vehicles to the market garden and load the crates of tomatoes themselves.

In Burkina Faso, the fruit and vegetable buyers go to the gardens directly and impose their conditions. Once all the produce is in the crates, the buyer steals the opportunity to renegotiate the price again, to bring it down. It's a question of take it or leave it. Given that the produce has already been picked and the gardeners have no guarantee of seeing another customer that day, they have to accept the conditions forced on them.

It's a common practice that goes against the interests of the gardeners and we would like to change it, by regulating access to the gardens.

Would you also like to improve the image of the sector, by addressing the issue of competition, for example?

I would like the authorities to support us in this respect. Anyone can work in this sector. The amount of women street vendors is growing fast, those who carry the produce on their heads are all over town. It's a good business... But those of us who are based in the markets have to pay for a stall. We would like the authorities to discuss with us on the issue of competition.

Are you also concerned about the health and safety of the vendors and the consumers?

There are women whose job it is to ripen the fruits. This activity is not regulated. They use chemical products, such as calcium carbide, to speed up the ripening process. It's a process that is damaging for their health and that of consumers.

We also have to raise the gardeners' awareness about the use of fertilisers. Sometimes they spray and then pick the produce a few days later. It can also be harmful to consumers if they do not wash the fruit and vegetables properly.

Are the women here prepared to take action to defend their rights?

Yes, they are organising, as they can see the benefits of being unionised. Regulating and taxing the access of international buyers to the market gardens are essential to improving the conditions of the wholesalers and retailers. We are going to contact the authorities so that they take steps in this direction.

Do you have any relations with national or international NGOs?

No, apart from the ILO, we have no relations with other organisations. But we are interested in having other partners.

What are your ambitions for the coming years?

I would like to travel to Ghana to get a better understanding of the mechanisms used to regulate the fruit and vegetables sector. I would also like to meet vendors from other countries, so that we can share our experiences.

Interview held in Ouagadougou by Pierre Martinot

Also read:

The Spotlight Interview with Soumaïla Lingani (Burkina Faso - PRASEI) "Informal economy: from information to mutual protection" at

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223423&Language=EN>

(*) On 8 March 2006, the ICFTU will be launching the second stage of its global campaign on organising women workers. The campaign is called "Unions for Women, Women for Unions" and is principally targeting women working in export processing zones and the informal economy, and migrant women workers.

The first stage of the campaign, between 2002 and 2004, was led by 60 national centres from 49 different countries. It achieved remarkable results in some countries, including Mauritania, where the number of women trade unionists tripled.

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

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