

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU OnLine...

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8th March - International Women's Day

Spotlight interview with Fabia Gutiérrez Reyes (Honduras- CUTH)

"Blacklists" in export processing zones

Brussels, 5 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 (*).

Fabia Gutiérrez Reyes, Organising Secretary of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Honduras (CUTH), denounces the human and trade union rights violations faced by the women working in the maquilas of Honduras, and the impact on their reproductive health. To mark International Women's Day on 8 March, the Honduran trade union confederation, CUHT, plans to draw attention to the issue of respect of the rights of women working in EPZs.

What proportion of EPZ workers are women and how many are unionised?

According to our census of Honduran maquilas, they employ around 135,000 workers. 75% of these are women, which represents 101,250 jobs. In the cutting [apparel] section, the zones employing the most women are Choloma, Villanueva, Naco and Progreso. Over 260 companies are operating in these EPZs. Only 12% of the workers are unionised, and 8% of these are women.

Could you describe the working conditions and the problems they create?

There have been numerous complaints and studies regarding the deterioration in female workers' health. This is the result of the appalling health and safety and working conditions. The long hours and dual workload (paid and domestic) endured by the women working in the maquilas have a serious impact on their physical and mental health.

For the unions, the main consequences and problems generated by this situation are many and varied: deterioration in the women's general health, and particularly their reproductive health, violations of their rights, and the impossibility of organising to demand respect for these rights.

What are the chief obstacles to organising the women in the EPZs? To what extent are the "blacklists" a problem?

It could be said that "blacklisting" is one of the most effective, most successful anti-union practices. Numerous complaints on the matter have been submitted to the government authorities (Labour Ministry and Labour Court), as well as human rights organisations (CODEH - the national human rights commission, and several NGOs). They are in the process of being investigated. We have, nonetheless, noticed that the women are afraid of lodging complaints, for fear of the reprisals they may have to face. The accounts given by a number of women confirm that some of them have found themselves out of a job and unable to find work in another maquila.

Can you give any concrete examples and the names of the companies involved?

It's difficult to give the names of the companies in this case. There's a huge degree of secrecy surrounding the lists being circulated, and no one would want to be caught divulging names. The maquila

industry is very powerful; what's more, those heading it are those heading the country. All the power is in their hands. If this interview had been more confidential, I could have quoted the names. Most of the time they draw up blacklists and use them to repress trade unionists.

What strategy is the trade union deploying and what practical measures are being taken to try to organise the women working in these zones?

The first stage consists in paying home visits to various contact people. We set up small study circles. They are groups of five people at the most, people we trust who want to organise so that they can improve their working conditions.

We then hold secret meetings. Unionisation has to be very discreet in this sector.

Lastly, we produce information bulletins, posters and brochures.

We also organise awareness raising campaigns, public meetings, training seminars and workshops.

We are also drawing up a system to gather information on the companies: name, origin of the capital, the brands they work with, and the number of men and women they employ.

Do you use the media to exert pressure on the companies and the government?

Yes, we are constantly denouncing the violations and use every means of communication possible: radio, television and the written press.

How do you think the international trade union movement could help you to step up the pressure on companies or the government?

International bodies are very important allies when it comes to lodging complaints and denouncing the constant violations of workers' rights. Another important source of help would be to exert pressure on the ILO and the other international organisations currently trying to reach the millennium goals.

Interview by Pierre Martinot

- Also read the Spotlight Interview with Marcelina Garcia (Nicaragua -FESTMIT/MLSM), "Unions join forces to organise the maquila",

at <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223497&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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