

Spotlight interview with Marie Josée Lokongo Bosiko (UNTC - Democratic Republic of Congo)

Elections in DRC - helping women move into positions of responsibility

Brussels, 10 April 2006 (ICFTU online): Husbands, traditions, religions and sects are only a few of the obstacles that Marie Josée Lokongo Bosiko, Vice President of the National Union of Congolese Workers (UNTC), says are preventing Congolese women from taking up positions of responsibility in society. In the run-up to the June elections, she explains the UNTC's strategy to boost women's participation and representation in politics. She also tells us about the ideas behind the trade union organisation of female workers in the informal economy of the Kinshasa markets.

You have been head of the UNTC Women's Department since 2002 and were appointed Vice President of the union at the UNTC Congress in December 2004 - the first Congolese woman to hold such a position. But what are the main obstacles that the majority of Congolese women face when it comes to taking on positions of responsibility, and what obstacles do they face in trade unions in particular?

Husbands are often the first obstacle that a woman needs to overcome when it comes to rising through the ranks of positions of responsibility. They find it hard to deal with their wives' absence from the home - saying that it (the home) will be neglected and that the children will be left to fend for themselves. They also say it can be difficult to fit in long meetings, which can go on late, into the day's schedule. Tradition too can have a considerable influence. In certain ethnic groups, for example, women are not allowed to speak in front of men. Traditional laws prevent the social development of women. There are huge differences, therefore, between theory and practice. Although women are gradually being accorded greater recognition in legislation, they still have to overcome the sway held by traditions. Finally, in the DRC religion, sects in particular, are not always supportive of the advancement of women. Sect leaders have a lot of influence over their female followers. Preachers sometimes force women to behave in a way that is contrary to trade union principles. That said, women play an important role at the UNTC. In the upcoming elections in June 2006, we have several women standing for the national parliament. It is essential that we invest in these decision-making arenas for the benefit of all lobbying activities that support workers - and Congolese female workers, in particular.

A new president will be elected in DRC in June. What are you expecting from this election?

Yes, if everything runs to schedule, we will elect a new President in June - perhaps we'll even see a female President. This election is extremely important for the entire Congolese population, which is why we believe it is of utmost importance that this election is fair, free and transparent. We expect candidates to be able to express themselves freely when they present their programmes to voters. They must all have the same opportunities, particularly as regards the media, to introduce themselves and to meet the Congolese people. We also hope that voters can make their decision without any pressure. This election must be prepared and organised in a transparent and reliable manner.

What is at stake in this election for you as a female trade unionist?

For many years now we have been fighting at the UN and ILO to see better representation of women in elections. We have been guaranteed 30 per cent on the lists. Our own Constitution, in DRC, guarantees equal numbers.

Since 2004, the UNTC has travelled the country to prepare for this election. We have developed civic education programmes that include the concepts of civil participation, democracy, abuse of power and participation in the electoral process. In 2005, a working session was organised for 70 women and the

Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission to inform them about preparations for an election, and procedures on the day of the election. During that day, we also talked about electoral regulations and abiding by the outcome.

More recently, on International Women's Day on 8 March, a statement was published that focused on women and decision-making, via elections.

We have therefore helped women prepare themselves for this election. Networks have worked hard to encourage women to become involved in political parties. We have fought to see women represented at all levels of power. Women need to be represented in municipalities as well as the national parliament. Four female candidates are currently standing for the presidential election and we will ask them to present their programmes as soon as the lists are officially registered and their names have been made public. They will be able to explain to us what they propose to do to improve conditions for female workers.

Consequently, Congolese women will be able to go to the polls fully informed. We have launched all of these actions in a bid to boost representation of women and to see more women in decision-making arenas.

2005 was an important year for trade unions due to the trade union elections that were held, elections that the UNTC continues to dispute...

Since 1990, when several trade unions emerged, my union has always represented most of the workers in DRC. We were therefore surprised to come second in the results issued by the Ministry of Labour - since, in all the calculations we made in companies at the end of the elections, we came top. Consequently, we do not accept these results because we believe that there was extensive fraud and bribery.

As a trade union we cannot accept such behaviour because trade unionism is a school of democracy. If we are not vigilant, these examples of cheating may be very dangerous, especially during this electoral year. In some schools and companies, certain trade unions have donated computers and freezers to buy votes, and even did this when radio and television journalists were present. Moreover, in Southern Kivu, voting forms have been issued for companies that closed many years ago. We are, therefore, asking for voting forms to be checked carefully. We have also submitted this request to the President of the Republic.

In the face of the decline of the State, the informal economy is in full expansion. Are you playing an active role in supporting the organisation of these workers?

Firstly, at the UNTC, we try to work upstream from the informal economy by maintaining contact with the business world. In agreement with employers, we prepare workers who are leaving the formal economy, due to redundancy or early retirement.

We have an entrepreneurship department that trains workers who are due to leave a company and who will inevitably find themselves in the informal economy - where they will set up a small business. We organise training sessions on management of trade activities and accounting. Workers are often prevented from developing, due to a lack of training. This is particularly true for women at the markets who have been there for many years - without ever seeing their situation improve. We try to fill in these gaps.

What practical steps are you taking to approach workers in the informal economy?

We try to meet them to help organise them into some sort of structure. This strategy allows us to develop certain activities that can support these workers. We have already managed to bring together women market sellers. We currently have a representative in 64 markets in Kinshasa. Each time we want to organise an event, these representatives serve as our contact point for informing the other sellers. The aim is to set up a committee of women that we can then monitor and train. This is important because the informal economy does not have a social security system to protect against the hazards of life. Women working in the informal economy often have difficulties with the police. They need to be able to deal with these situations and negotiate with the police. If they are part of a structure, we are able to protect them better.

We also target other professions, in particular shoe sellers. We currently have contact with 58 shoe sellers.

The UNTC is also setting up health insurance services. Women and their families are starting to come for treatment at the clinic we run, in conjunction with the Worker and Farm Worker Solidarity Fund (CASOP).

Employers are also interested in the health insurance fund. They see it as way of dealing with their employees' illnesses and as an access point to anti-retroviral drugs.

At a practical level, members pay a subscription based on the number of illnesses they have signed up for and the number of family members.

It is only a start, but our researchers are visiting families to promote the health insurance fund.

At the moment, our work is primarily focused in Kinshasa. Regional UNTC officials have asked us to develop the project across the rest of the country but a lack of resources is the main problem that prevents us from travelling.

Trade union involvement in campaigns to prevent HIV/AIDS was also stepped up last year...

Yes, in August 2005, the UNTC signed a contract with the National Multi-sector Programme to Combat AIDS (PNMLS). This will allow us to launch awareness-raising projects in companies using funds provided by the Multi-Country AIDS Program (MAP).

If workers' health is not protected, companies' productivity will decline. This could also lead to company closures.

An HIV/AIDS Inter-Enterprise Committee (CIELS) was set-up to look into these issues. Since October 2005, several missions have been undertaken in Eastern DRC involving awareness-raising activities and peer and employee education activities. We will focus more on the west of the country during 2006.

Interview by Pierre Martinot.

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For more information, please contact the ICFTU Press Department on +32 2 224 0204 or +32 476 621 018.

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