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INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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Spotlight interview on Gabriella Bonilla (Costa Rica and ICFTU-ORIT)

"Young people want to move onwards and upwards!"

Brussels 14 August 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): Unemployment and job insecurity: the employment opportunities of young people in the 29 countries covered by the ICFTU's Inter-American Regional Workers' Organisation (ORIT) are very poor, with increasing numbers of young people resorting to the informal economy.

The recently-established ICFTU-ORIT Youth Committee has been assessing the work before it and trying to strengthen international links, as Gabriella Bonilla, a technical assistant for the ORIT Youth programme based in Costa Rica, explains.

What are the job prospects of young people in Costa Rica and the ORIT region?

They are very bad; in fact there is a huge level of youth unemployment. Jobs are insecure and provide no long-term prospects. In most cases young people do not receive social security benefits. Another feature is the growing number of young people pushed into the informal economy. Like other Latin American countries, Costa Rica has signed a free trade agreement with the United States. Certain companies affected by these agreements demand total availability and flexibility from their employees. To put things simply, given the countries' ardent pursuit of jobs at any price these agreements are opening the door to precarious jobs. Chances to rise through the ranks within the same company are few and far between. In the export processing zones (EPZs), for instance, it is virtually impossible to get promotion or higher wages. In factories owned by multinationals young people move aimlessly between jobs for which little experience is required. That is exactly the opposite of what young people want - which is to move onwards and upwards!

How are the unions affected by this unfavourable job market for young people?

For the unions, this has clearly led to a large drop in membership. When a young person does not stay at the same workplace for a certain length of time the unions have trouble contacting him or her. The person does not get support from the union or information about his/her contract. So in the end s/he can't see the point in joining a union. Generally speaking young people are badly informed and have little knowledge of trade unions, though this does vary a lot between sectors. In the EPZs young people are interested in the support they can get from unions so membership rates are high. In pineapple plantations, for instance, you can find several unions that are not legally registered but organise a lot of young workers. In the public sector, the unions have members but very few young ones since it is hard to get those sorts of jobs. In Latin America as a whole, young people's union membership rate is low. In North America, by contrast, youth membership is much higher.

How do you organise in Costa Rica? Do you have people in schools or on

university campuses?

There is no recruitment on campuses in Costa Rica. That is a popular strategy in Brazil, Mexico, the English-speaking Caribbean, Venezuela and the USA, however. In those countries the unions contact students before they get a job.

In Costa Rica, the traditional presence or absence of trade unions in a given sector influences whether a young person will join a union. In certain sectors there are strong trade union traditions, so young people working in them are tempted to join. However, the newest sectors attract fewer young union members.

How does ORIT's youth policy aim to interest more young people??

ORIT's youth programme has been going for some 15 years, in fact, though it was the last ORIT Congress that decided to establish a Youth Committee. That committee has set itself several targets at regional level. Firstly, we want to work out some guidelines on youth employment. Then we want to become a political reference point for youth action in the various member countries. At the moment we are focusing on young trade union activists.

How is the Youth Committee's political commitment applied at the grass roots?

In ORIT our aim is to establish a transnational policy. We do not see young people in terms of figures or quotas. We are considering how to give their work a transnational dimension, particularly in the areas of human rights and trade integration. That means their representatives need to start addressing geo-political and economic issues and to attend the major international events like the Social Forums. They need to get their voice heard in the core trade union debates.

What can the Youth Committee suggest for tackling the precarious nature of youth employment?

At national level, the union movement and young people can create alliances with other civil society organisations or NGOs. We can see that 'business' is prospering and united. We also need to close ranks and develop a strategy based on broad alliances with civil society, so as to increase the impact of our work. Another possible strategy would be to facilitate young people's access to vocational training. That means the government would need to have a proper employment policy and a desire to invest in vocational training, which is not currently the case. If the country is not creating jobs there is no point in having vocational training.

Interview by Pierre Martinot

Please also read the interview with Erin Polaczuk (NZCTU-New Zealand):
<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991224828&Language=EN>

Please also read the interview with Evgeny Sivaykin (Russia - FNPR):
<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991224857&Language=EN>

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