

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU OnLine...

146/180906

Spotlight on Rosa Calle (COB/COMUANDE-Bolivia)

"Andean women trade union uninitiated have a greater say now"

Brussels, 18 September 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): Rosa Calle, the trade union education and social protection secretary for the Bolivian workers' confederation COB and president of the Bolivian Section of the Andean Women Workers' Network, COMUANDE (1), gives us an overview of the situation in Bolivia, where the trade unions have been closely involved in government policy since the recent elections in December 2005. Job insecurity, wage inequalities and inadequate maternity protection are key issues she raises of particular concern to women workers.

What do working women think about the current political process, in which public demonstrations have resulted in the election of a government that includes several trade union leaders?

We view this process positively, particularly from the perspective of working women, as conditions are being created so that they can become fully involved in the political life of the nation. The current political climate is also clearing the way for us to carry out our role as trade union leaders more effectively. Under the current circumstances, we have a much better chance of making progress with our specific demands.

At the level of the Andean Region, you form part of COMUANDE. What prompted the creation of this organisation?

COMUANDE was created five years ago and its chief task is to coordinate the initiatives of all the working women in the Andean Community. That is, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela. The idea is to promote the exchange of ideas between women workers, to create forums for coordination between trade union leaders and to promote greater openings for women in the leadership structures of the trade union movement. To achieve this, the delegates from each country meet on a regular basis to share their knowledge, to build on their capacities and to seek ways of expanding the role of Andean women in the world of work and the social arena.

Are women fighting for a prominent place in trade union leadership structures?

Of course, but without placing ourselves in opposition to the rest of the workers at any moment. I mean, we don't want to isolate the women from the men. The women have always worked side by side with the men, in coordination with the other trade union leaders. Men and women workers, in fact, share the same fight.

What has COMUANDE achieved since its creation five years ago?

Andean women are better equipped than in the past to rise to the challenge of leading trade union organisations. Because leading our trade union organisations means fighting for equality and justice for women, both within the movement and at work. In the past, women were not able to participate fully; we were always vetoed by the men. We have many more opportunities now. Thanks to the current political situation in Bolivia, there are a number of women trade unionists in the government, several female Members of Parliament and even a number of women ministers. This is partly thanks to our capacity building work within the Andean Community.

Latin America has entered a new cycle of economic growth and Bolivia, in spite of its less favourable situation, is showing signs of an industrial revival, with the appearance of small and medium size industries in the cities of El Alto and Santa Cruz. Has the proportion of women within the salaried workforce increased?

Yes, quite a lot of women have entered the workforce, especially in the city of El Alto, and many of them are skilled workers, such as those employed in the textiles factories. There has been a real increase in the female workforce, mainly in industry, and we are very proud of this. We find this very encouraging, as women workers were undervalued in the past; employers always used to give preference to male workers. This is no longer the case; women have joined the labour market and now make up some 40% of the salaried workforce.

Is this integration raising the women's awareness about their rights?
Are the workers in the city of El Alto open to unions in the new companies established there?

I think they are, because if we look back on the mass protests of February and October 2004 (2), which led the changes now taking place in the country, to the change of government. It was the women who took to the streets in protest. I took part in many of the demonstrations and strikes. It's a sign of the desire women have to assert their rights and take part in social organisations. No one can deny the role played by women in the protests held around the country, which succeeded in ousting Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, who did nothing to serve the interests of the people. Women played a major role, which is why we had to mourn the death of several colleagues, who were killed at the hands of the police. There are already many trade union organisations in El Alto and new groupings are being formed with the participation of women. COMUANDE is working hard to reach out to all organisations that have already been formed, especially those in the formal economy, although it also wants to reach the informal sector. The ILO sponsored an event so that we could guide and organise the women in the informal sector. Women are also forming trade union type organisations on their own initiative, such as the PLANE association of women workers or the women's unions granting micro-credits. To resume, women are eager to organise so that they can defend and assert their rights.

What is PLANE?

PLANE (National Employment Plan) is a project managed by the municipal

authorities and is aimed at promoting temporary service jobs. The women employed by PLANE generally work on public buildings, street-paving and the like. They are paid in kind with food baskets, consisting largely of cereals, and receive a small amount of money in addition; the overall payment is equivalent to the minimum wage. That wage is not high enough, since other working women who have a contract and are unionised have other benefits on top of the minimum wage. PLANE, moreover, violates workers' rights in another way, given that the women have to accept hard work, tasks that are arduous and much more tiring than those that a textile factory worker has to perform. The women employed by PLANE have to do the same work as men, they have to use picks and spades, dig ditches and carry heavy loads. And, worst of all, these jobs do not give them what they really want: open-ended contracts.

Are these women unionised?

They are starting to group now; they cannot unionise since they're jobs are temporary, but they are doing as much as they can, promoting solidarity and creating associations. But since these are temporary jobs, the municipal authority can constantly renew their staff and thus avoid the formation of trade unions.

What are the unions doing about these precarious working conditions?

It is not easy for the COB to act since the creation of jobs depends on the availability of municipal funds. For example, at the end of 2005, the women employed by PLANE were on the verge of declaring a hunger strike to stop the programme from being suspended because the municipal authorities didn't have the funding required to renew it. The COB supported this action, because although PLANE only provides precarious work, it nonetheless helps women to buy food for their families. But the COB's main desire is to see the creation of permanent and secure jobs.

Do women workers have equal pay with male workers in Bolivia?

We have achieved equality with men in some institutions, but there is usually a difference between men and women's pay. But our real interest lies in a general increase in wages; our priority is to fight for better pay for men and women.

What is the situation like for women workers in terms of maternity rights?

There is still discrimination in this area, as not all employers comply with the provisions of the General Labour Law, according to which employers should give three months maternity leave, forty-five days before the birth and forty-five days after. Many employers only give the forty-five days following the birth of the baby. It also has to be said that some women make deals with their employers which end up to their detriment and are not in line with union principles. The legal regulations are only complied with by the major institutions such as schools, hospitals funded by social security funds, and universities. In the private sector and factories the application of the law is contradictory. Now that we have a minister for the manufacturing

industry hopefully there will be some changes ensuring all women's right to maternity leave, especially in the newly-created SMEs. Women have to be made aware that the right to maternity leave is not limited to the time when they give birth. The benefits offered by the National Fund also cover the right to breastfeed, and include the provision of foodstuffs as well as access to health care for the mother and the child. But not all the provisions are complied with. Another problem is that there are some employers who threaten to dismiss women who become pregnant. In such cases, we, as part of COMUANDE, are able to take the employers to the Labour Tribunal or report them to the ILO.

What is the current child labour situation in Bolivia? Is the new government determined to legislate in this area?

Yes, I think the new government is determined to eradicate child labour and the corresponding authorities are trying to change the current situation, that is, the abuse of child labour. Unfortunately, in countries such as Bolivia, children work in huge numbers. At present, the protection afforded to working children is limited to giving them food and shelter in hostels. We are pressing the authorities to come up with a permanent solution, because the hostels are merely a temporary, palliative solution. We are pressing for solid, long-term projects. The government is in the process of setting up a literacy programme. This is a very positive step forward because it is precisely children who have had no schooling and cannot read or write that are entering the workforce. The literacy programme is a way of making children aware of their rights.

(1) The Coordinadora de Mujeres Trabajadoras Andinas (COMUANDE) is a body bringing together working women from the Andean region. It was founded by Agreement CCLA -14/2000 of the Consejo Consultivo Laboral Andino and is composed of representatives from the various women's sections of the different trade union centres in Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela.

(2) In February 2004 the first mass protest was held against the government of President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada. In October of the same year, the president resigned in the face of popular pressure following the violent protests sparked by the brutal government repression that claimed the lives of over eighty people in the city of El Alto. Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada was replaced by his vice president, journalist Carlos Mesa, who had shown opposition to the government's rigid stance.

Interview by Alberto A. Zalles and Samuel Grumiau
Also see the interview with Sofia Rios (COMUANDE-Bolivia)
(<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991225023&Language=EN>)

The ICFTU represents 155 million workers in 241 affiliated organizations in 156 countries and territories: <http://www.icftu.org> ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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

You are currently subscribed to icftu-online as: Rainer.Gries@fes.de

To unsubscribe send a blank email to leave-icftu-online-167589G@forum.icftu.org