

# Uganda: a government at the service of employers

Often considered one of Africa's star pupils by the Bretton Woods Institutions, Uganda has been relatively stable since President Museveni came to power in 1986. However, the effects of its economic development have barely been felt at all by workers, the great majority of whom remain trapped in the informal economy or in sectors such as the clothing industry where their rights are seriously violated. Against this backdrop, the trade union confederation NOTU, an ICFTU affiliate, is fighting a valiant battle in the face of complicity between employers and the government. Its successes include the fight against AIDS and the recruitment of female workers.



# Get to work and keep quiet!

**The Ugandan authorities give employers in the textile sector free reign, and the employers take advantage of this to exploit their workers beyond imagination. Joining a trade union means being sacked. But what about the codes of conduct issued by the big brand names?**

**T**extiles manufacturing is one of the few industrial sectors in Uganda. Most factories manufacture for the domestic market with a few benefiting from the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) (1) and export to the United States. Almost all companies exploit their workers as much as possible. A trade union federation exists – the UTGLAWU (2) – but trade unions are not protected in any way by the authorities when it comes to repression by employers and have only managed to conclude a collective agreement in four factories in the sector. *“The government is afraid of losing investors, explains Abbey Kawoya, UTGLAWU Deputy General Secretary. It encourages them to stay in Uganda by allowing workers to be treated like slaves. These investors regularly threaten to leave the country saying that they could go anywhere else and that they are doing Uganda a favour by staying.”*

The wave of privatisations during the 1990s led to trade unions no longer being recognised in nine companies in the textiles sector. This is what happened in the Nytil Picfare Ltd. factory in Jinja, 80 km east of the capital Kampala, which later became Southern Range Nyanza Limited when it was pri-



*A worker from the Southern Range garment factory shows the inside of her hut where she lives with her two children. With a salary of less than one euro per day, she is condemned to living in these indecent conditions.*

vatized in 1996. Workers in this factory complain in particular of having to work a lot of unpaid overtime. Rose (3), a Southern Range employee, has seen her health deteriorate since she started to work in the factory. *“I start work at 8 a.m. every day but we never know what time we’ll finish at, it could be 5 p.m., 7 p.m. or 10 p.m. because we are set production targets that are almost impossible to meet. When we don’t meet them, our bosses use it as an excuse to only pay us for half a day’s work. If we complain, we’ll be fired. In my department, we are prevented from going home in the evening three or four times a month because the targets have not been met. The doors are locked and we are forced to work through the night*

*and the following day. They don’t even bother to fill up our drinking water containers before they leave for the night. I’m not given a chance to tell my husband or my children when that happens and they wonder where I am (she cries as she tells us this). And if we go to sleep, they threaten us with the sack. I’m exhausted and have pains in my chest that are constantly getting worse; my health is deteriorating. There aren’t any other jobs here so I have to keep working in this factory for USh 1,900 (€0.89) a day.”*

## MAGGOTS IN CANTEEN MEALS

Many workers in Uganda’s textiles industry suffer from health problems caused not only by fatigue but also by the poor quality of their food. Their salaries are much too low to allow them to eat a balanced diet and the midday meals served (sometimes forced on workers) at factories with canteens are often badly prepared or even harmful. *“USh 500 a day is deducted from my salary for the midday meal, continues Rose, but sometimes I prefer not to eat it because it is so bad. Sometimes the ‘meal’ is even served full of maggots. And if anyone becomes ill, the first aid post in the factory has very few resources; they only have pain killers.”*

Although most workers are young women, some companies in the textile sector in Uganda show no compassion towards pregnant workers.

*“There are 20 pregnant women in my factory at the moment, says Aneno Catteren, UTGLAWU Treasurer, who works in the Phoenix Logistics factory at Kampala. They have to keep working the whole day in areas where the heat is suffocating,*

## Uganda in brief

Uganda is a landlocked central African country crossed by the equator. It gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1962, has around 25 million inhabitants and its capital is Kampala. President Yoweri Museveni has been in power since 1986. One of his predecessors, the notorious Amin Dada, was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of opponents between 1971 and 1979 (300,000 being the most frequently cited figure). For the past 19 years, the north

and north-east of the country have been torn apart by a war between the government army and the rebels of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). This war has led to a serious humanitarian crisis characterised by constant insecurity and mass migration. There are more than 10 million displaced people within the country – 80% of whom are women and children – living in over 200 overcrowded camps. The LRA has kidnapped some 20,000 children since 1986, forcing them to fight, work and serve as sex slaves.



for one thing because of the lights hanging just above their heads. If there is an urgent order, they are not exempted from working overtime and sometimes have to stay in the factory until 10 p.m."

**"It's not easy to organise workers when you know that they could be sacked at any moment if their employer finds out they are a member of a union. Members have lost their jobs because of their union membership. If they find another job and you contact them again, they ask if you're back to get them fired again. Employer hostility towards unions makes it difficult for us to support workers."**

**(James Lwanga Lukwago, NOTU recruitment officer)**

Many pregnant workers hide their condition to avoid being sacked. In the Southern Range factory, this attitude led to a baby's death, as Paul Amandrua, UTGLAWU General Secretary, explains: "One Southern Range employee worked until the day she gave birth. Her baby was born one evening after she had finished work. She was single and didn't have any family living nearby. The day after her child was born, she went to work and left her baby alone at home because she was almost certain that she would lose her job if she asked for paid maternity leave. She did the same thing on the following days but when she returned home on the fourth evening, the baby had died from neglect. She was ashamed and abandoned the body a short distance away, at the edge of the village, but a stray dog found it during the night. It started to eat the body and dropped part of a leg in the village. This was how the whole story came to light and the village, only a stone's throw away from the factory, was shocked."

The UTGLAWU is trying to give the Southern Range workers the best advice it can, but the management's refusal to recognise any kind of independent trade union necessarily limits the opportunities for action. At Southern Range, as at many other Ugandan companies, there is a tendency to only offer workers short-term contracts so that

they can be sacked easily if they call for their rights to be respected or if they want to join a union. "I complained about my salary one day, recounts David (4) a former Southern Range employee. A month later, my contract was not renewed; my employer said that I was a troublemaker and had too big an ego. Mention trade unionism and you'll be sacked on the same day; there are plenty of other people out there looking for a job." In fact, despite the extreme exploitation and the fact that salaries rarely rise above USh 2,000 (€0.93) a day, there are hundreds of applicants queuing up at factory doors trying to escape unemployment. Some even go as far as paying intermediaries to increase their chances of being hired.

#### SHAM CODES OF CONDUCT

The codes of conduct implemented by big international brands sourcing goods in Uganda stipulate that factories must be visited by 'independent' consultants who should check whether or not certain criteria for working conditions are being met. Ugandan workers' accounts provide confirmation, if it were really needed, that these visits are biased. "When labour inspectors or foreign visitors come to the factory we are not allowed to talk to them, says Rose, a Southern Range employee. These visitors don't know how much we are suffering. One day an American came and he asked us if everything was OK, but the manager didn't give us time to answer: he said that everything was fine." Tri-Star workers (see page 4) agree: "We have seen five visitors this year - white people, says Angelina, a Tristar worker. One of them expressed concern about the lack of drinking water and that the windows and doors in the workshop were locked, especially in this heat. He wondered what would happen if a fire broke out. Everything was improved for a few days while he was here and first aid boxes were refilled but when there aren't

any visitors the boxes are practically empty."

The suppression of trade unions largely explains the reasonably widespread incidence of sexual harassment of female workers, particularly in the textile sector. "It has almost become part of daily routine in a good number of factories, but the victims don't complain because they are afraid of losing their jobs," points out Abbey Kawoya. The system whereby female workers' performance is evaluated by supervisors who are almost always men only helps the abusers get away with it. "Workers' individual performance is regularly evaluated and can lead to dismissal, continuation of the status quo or promotion, comments Aneno Catteren. Female workers know that they have no chance of getting a good report from their supervisor if they accuse him of sexual harassment."

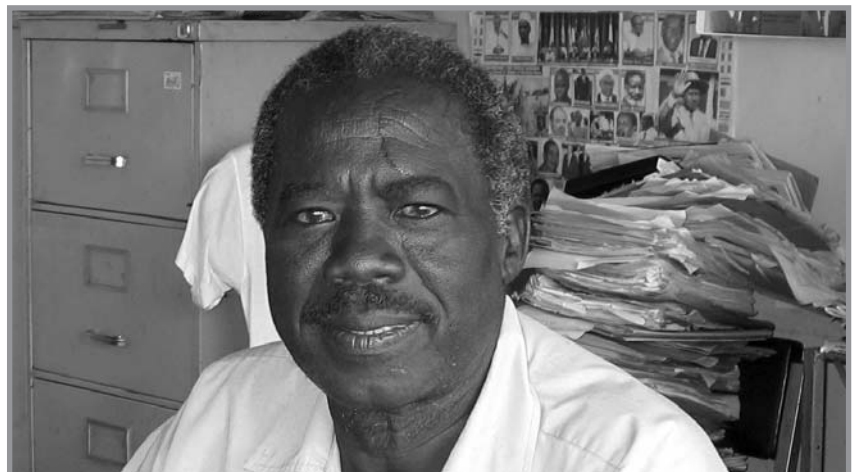
Despite pressure from investors, no export processing zone has yet been officially created in Uganda, but it is clear that in practice the level of exploitation is similar. "Companies such as Tristar and Southern Range aren't located in free zones - Uganda doesn't have any such zones yet - but they are being run in a similar way to factories in free zones across the world, characterised by the total suppression of trade unions and the right to strike, non-compliance with labour legislation, powerlessness of the Labour Ministry, and so forth," concludes Paul Amandrua. ●

(1) The Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) aims to allow African countries access to the American market and to develop local industry through tax exemptions for certain export products.

(2) The Uganda Textile, Garment and Leather Allied Workers' Union, a member of the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF).

(3) Name has been changed.

(4) Name has been changed.



*Paul Amandrua, the secretary general of the UTGLAWU, continues to fight to help the workers of the garment sector, despite increasing hostility on the part of the employers loyal to those in power.*

# “They call us donkeys and monkeys. We don’t dare answer back.”

**The Tri-Star apparel factory, which produces clothing for companies including the American giant Wal-Mart, has become notorious for serious violations of its workers’ rights. Injuries and humiliation are frequent occurrences and toilet breaks are timed. The country’s highest authorities have their eyes closed.**

The Ugandan government’s chronic inability to enforce the country’s legislation was denounced during the International Labour Conference held in Geneva in June. On this occasion the General Secretary of the ITGLWF (1), Neil Kearney, cited the unfortunate example of the Tri-Star Ltd. apparel factory, a Sri Lankan-owned company based in Kampala, which benefits from the AGOA (Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, see page 2) to export its goods to the United States. This factory, which is held up as a good example of Ugandan development by the highest authorities in the country, is in fact a major perpetrator of workers’ rights violations (the vast majority of the workers are women). Since the Tri-Star factory opened in 2003, the UTGLAWU has managed to mobilise 90% of the workforce but management has constantly refused to recognise or engage in dialogue with the union, saying it will only do so if the union submits a list of its members to prove it represents at least 51% of the workers. The UTGLAWU, fearing, understandably, that its members would be subject to harassment if their names were revealed, has refused to comply.

The poor working conditions and the low wages at Tri-Star resulted in strike action in October 2003. Over 250 workers were sacked on the 23rd of October 2003 and suspected links between Tri-Star and the Ugandan President, Museveni, were revealed for all to see when he stated: “I sacked those girls because their action would scare off investors”. The Sri Lankan managing director, Vellupillai Kananathan, said the operation was as a “clean-up of saboteurs”. The factory then continued with production. Since the issue of union recognition remains unresolved, the matter was brought to the attention of various ministers but none of them

were able to make Mr Kananathan see reason. He has even declared himself to be “untouchable” and said that the only person he would speak to was the President.

The Commissioner for Labour, Employment and Industrial relations wrote to Tri-Star’s management at the end of 2003 asking it to provide a list of its employees so that a comparison could be made with the list of members submitted by the UTGLAWU to the body responsible for registering unions. This would have allowed the body to determine whether the union did indeed represent over 51% of the workforce, which is the condition required by law for a trade union to be recognised. Tri-Star’s management is still continuing to ignore this demand. In its outright cynicism, it claims that since the union cannot prove its representation, it is not obliged to engage in dialogue with it.

## ABUSE BY SUPERVISORS

The international outcry sparked by the violations of workers’ rights at Tri-Star has forced the company to make a number of improvements: female workers no longer have to share dormitories with male workers, for example. However, all in all, working conditions and wages are still far from decent. Blue collar workers are employed on fixed-term contracts with wages ranging from US\$ 45,000 to 85,000 (€21-40) per month. “One of the worst things is the humiliation we are subjected to by some of the Sri Lankan supervisors and management” said one worker, who has been employed at Tri-Star since 2003. “They call us donkeys and monkeys in English and insult us even more in their own language. We don’t dare answer back because if you have problems with a supervisor, he takes you into the manager’s office and doesn’t let you speak. They proceed to talk amongst themselves in their own language and finally they tell you to either go back to work or leave. You have no chance whatsoever to defend yourself. After this, if you do the slightest thing wrong, the supervisor comes down on you like a ton of bricks. When a supervisor starts harassing you it means you won’t be there much longer; make the slightest mistake and that’ll be it, your contract won’t be renewed.”

## “EVERY TIME WE NEED TO GO TO THE TOILET, IT’S A REAL RACE AGAINST TIME”

Workers also complain about the unbearable heat in some workshops:

the fans are too high up to have any real effect and the windows and doors are often kept shut. The bullying endured by workers who need to go to the toilet is also extreme. “If you want to go to the toilet, you have to get permission from the supervisor, said Angelina (2), a Tri-Star employee. If he says you can go, he gives you a kind of permission slip, but there are only two of these slips per section (each section has about 70 workers). So you have to wait until the previous worker has come back before you can go. It’s a real race against time because we only have five minutes: when you go out through the door, which is supervised by a security guard, you have to write your name, card number and the time you left your work station in a register, and the same when you come back. Because the toilet is quite far from the workshop, you sometimes need five minutes just to get there. But if you are gone for more than five minutes you get a warning. After three warnings you run the risk of getting the sack. If you spend more than five minutes in the toilets they can also halve your pay for that day. Whilst this is not always systematically applied, the threat is enough to make us defer going to the toilet until the last moment, which leads to health complications, especially when women have their periods.”

**“I sacked those girls because their action would scare off investors”.**

**(Y. Museveni, President of Uganda)**

These serious violations of workers’ rights at Tri-Star and other clothing companies have prompted the ITGLWF to demand that the US government withdraw Uganda from the list of countries able to benefit from AGOA. “If this happens, some workers with probably lose their jobs, but the exploitation of these workers has reached such proportions that sometimes it is better to accept a few job losses so that progress can be made in the future” said Lyelmoi Otong Ongaba, NOTU Secretary General. ●

(1) International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers’ Federation  
(2) Not her real name

# Exemplary fight against AIDS

**Uganda is often cited as one of the countries that has succeeded in significantly reducing the AIDS infection rate of its population - from 18% in 1992 to 7% today. With support from the ICFTU, Ugandan trade unions are playing an important role in this success story.**

**A**lthough the vast majority of Ugandans have heard about HIV, fewer know what it really is and

without regular awareness raising campaigns the infection rate could rocket again. The Ugandan ICFTU affiliate, NOTU (1), is doing everything it can to ensure that this does not happen. With support from the international community (2), NOTU has been able to develop a wide range of worker information campaigns, in particular through training for trade union representatives. The union has adopted the following rule: during any trade union seminar lasting more than two days, at least one half-day session must be devoted to raising participants' awareness about HIV. Each trade union affiliated to NOTU also has a trained HIV counsellor/peer educator.

*"We are applying the strategy recommended by the ICFTU, explains Rose Nasanga, NOTU's HIV campaign coordinator. When you train one shop steward, you can reach all the workers in his or her workplace. We have identified several target groups such as women, young people and health and safety representatives. We have endeavoured to raise each group's awareness and taking all these groups together you could say that we have reached at least 80% of the 370,000 workers represented by NOTU."*

If their employers agree, shop stewards trained in HIV related issues organise short seminars in their companies to

➔ CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

**"I've gained self-confidence since I became an HIV counsellor/peer educator."**



Odong Piny (above) is a trade union shop steward in Kampala at Roofings Uganda Ltd., a construction company with over 600 workers. He was trained by the ICFTU-AFRO and NOTU to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS in his company. Here is his story. In 2001, my trade union suggested that I attend training sessions on HIV/AIDS organised by NOTU and the ICFTU-AFRO. I learnt a lot at the sessions, especially at an AFRO workshop in Nairobi where I was able to meet participants from 12 African countries and received a certificate at the end of the course. I wrote up a report on my training for the managers in my company who allowed me to attend the workshop in Nairobi. The chairman and managing director of Roofings Uganda, an Indian, believes that awareness raising campaigns on this issue are useful and is aware of the

devastating effect the illness can have on the workforce. As a result, he supported my request to organise information sessions for workers at Roofings. I was able to get a room with a projector screen and the company provided drinks for participants. The low-ranking employees came to begin with, and then the managers became interested and they sent me to hold training sessions for various employers' associations. I was able to put up posters about HIV/AIDS in the factory and its clinic, and 25 other peer tutors have been trained in my company. Awareness raising campaigns involve four one-hour sessions on four topics: the effects of AIDS on the workplace, changing behaviour, using condoms and abstinence, and care at home. I also have a T-shirt and a badge to show that I'm an AIDS counsellor which is very useful

because workers occasionally approach me outside sessions to find out more about the issue. All of these things have helped to reduce the stigma attached to workers infected by HIV. In the past, some workers even had to resign. Things are very different now, workers who I know are HIV-positive do not resign any more; they don't openly admit that they are HIV positive but they continue to work, hoping that the company will soon offer them anti-retroviral treatment (ARV). A representative from the Ministry of Health visited Roofings Uganda and said that he would provide ARV drugs if a permanent clinic was built here.

I am pleased to be able to contribute to the battle against HIV. I'm involved in setting up a theatre group to raise awareness about the issue which is being supported by the ICFTU-AFRO, NOTU and the ILO. I think that my trade union work is preventing me from getting pay rises because my supervisors don't always give me good evaluations due to my being a union activist. On the other hand, being involved in HIV awareness raising campaigns has boosted my self-confidence. Before I became involved, I didn't really know how to communicate or how to persuade others but during the training sessions I learnt how to speak in public without being afraid.



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raise workers' awareness (see box). As a result, trade union credibility amongst employers is strengthened. "When we were training our AIDS councillors/peer educators, some employers may have said that we weren't capable of taking on the challenge, continues Rose Nassanga, but they gave us a chance and came to realise that it is easier for workers to listen to their colleagues than their employers about these issues because there aren't any barriers. They can talk during meal breaks or give out information to workers who don't go to training sessions, for example. The shop stewards also leave condoms in the toilets at their place of work. To start with, we told workers/trade union members that they could get condoms from their trade union representatives, but nobody dared to. The toilets are the ideal place because everyone goes there, but nobody sees who takes the condoms."

### DON'T FORGET WORKERS WHO ARE HIV POSITIVE

In 1999, NOTU wrote its first manual to help representatives talk to their colleagues about HIV. It also uses ICFTU-AFRO publications. Experience gained in recent years by the Ugandan trade union has allowed it to hone its strategy for raising awareness about the issue. Rose Nassanga says, "In our early awareness raising campaigns, we focused primarily on prevention, forgetting that some of our listeners were already infected. This was a serious mistake on our part. We are still talking about prevention but have also started to discuss treatment so that everyone feels involved. We do not assume that none of our trade union members are HIV positive. Nor do we believe that any particular group needs to be targeted more than any other: everyone must be made aware of the issue, even trade union leaders and company managers. A special awareness raising campaign is also needed for women because they are more likely to fall victim

to AIDS: they are often in low-paid jobs and in a bid to survive some of them have several partners who help them financially. We are also trying to encourage our female members not to be financially dependent on their husbands and to have their own income so that they can choose life as opposed to death when their husbands are unfaithful."

NOTU would now like to continue its HIV awareness raising campaigns by developing support for infected workers through the use of anti-retroviral drugs. However, several steps need to be taken before this next development: each worker affiliated to a trade union that is a member of NOTU needs to be given a membership card, clinics need to be found where victims can be treated with discretion and, above all, funds need to be raised to finance the project. ●

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- (1) National Organisation of Trade Unions.  
(2) ICFTU, ICFTU-AFRO, CTUC (Commonwealth Trade Union Council), UNAIDS, etc.

## Will 645 children have to return to work on the plantations?

**Over 80% of the Ugandan workforce is employed in agriculture. Products such as tea and sugar cane account for a large proportion of the country's exports. But child labour is rife in these sectors. A union – the NUPAWU (1) – is fighting for change.**

The hills which are home to the tea plantations in the Lugazi region between Kampala and Jinja afford idyllic views for the people who travel through them. But the reality for those who work on them is much less romantic. When the first rays of dawn appear, they leave their huts and begin work under a blazing sun: sowing seeds, weeding, spraying, picking tea leaves and so on. Wages are so low (less than a dollar a day on some plantations) that many workers cannot afford to send their children to school. The children therefore have to go to work with their parents, even when pesticides are being sprayed.

The NUPAWU, which is affiliated to the IUF (2), has been fighting for years to improve the lot of agricultural workers. It has managed to increase wages in the sugar and tea sectors by means of collective bargaining, but many plantation owners still refuse to engage in any form of bargaining, particularly in the tea sector. Thanks to an ILO-IPEC project, the IUF has also managed to stop several



hundred children from working on sugar and tea plantations and provide them with schooling. "It was extremely difficult to convince parents to stop their children from working", said Pajobo Joram Bruno, Secretary General of the NUPAWU and member of the Ugandan Parliament. "They hated me, they said that I was wrecking their income because they couldn't pick as much without their children. When they saw me arrive on the plantations in my jeep, some of them even tried to hide their children! Finally we managed to persuade the parents of 645 children to let them go to school." Committees on child labour have been set up with parent, teacher and child representatives. The parents of former child workers who are enthusiastic about the scheme have convinced other parents to follow suit. The children share the supplies paid for by the project when there is not enough to go round.

The NUPAWU has managed to recruit

new members by initiating dialogue with the parents regarding their children. Their situation is now extremely precarious since the ILO-IPEC project sponsor has decided not to support it any longer. "We're risking disaster again", said Pajobo Joram Bruno. "We no longer have the means to fund schooling for the 645 children supported by the project. They are therefore likely to have to return to work on the plantations where thousands of other children have not yet been saved. Some of these

children are not much older than seven when they start work. The ILO should not have let us down like this. As unions, we should be the first to be involved in the IPEC programmes."

The NUPAWU fears for its credibility among the workers who joined full of hopes for their children and have now had these hopes dashed. The union provides its members with many other services (training in craft production and the use of pesticides, fight for better wages and so on) but wants to do all it can not to abandon the children who have managed to leave the plantations and to support others. It is appealing for international solidarity to help it in its cause. ●

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- (1) National Union of Plantation and Agricultural Workers  
(2) International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations

# Cautious start to organising in the informal economy

**Several Ugandan trade unions are trying to gradually establish themselves in the informal economy. Although a lack of financial and human resources is preventing them from making much progress, small signs of success are encouraging.**

**B**ashir Kakaire completed his university education in 2004. Armed with diplomas and certificates in business management and IT, he did everything he could to find a job that matched his qualifications. However, the Ugandan economy, based on agriculture and slowed down by the war in the north of the country, does not have enough jobs for the country's young university graduates. To survive, 27 year old Bashir has had to rent a bike and become a 'boda boda' or moto taxi driver. "I rent this bike for USh 7,000 (€3.10) a day. If I work from the morning until the evening I can make a profit of USh 3,000 or 4,000, barely enough to buy my food. There are far too many boda bodas in Kampala and many of them drive dangerously because they don't understand the highway code, which then gives us a bad image and deters customers. We have an association but it is only there to collect taxes; it doesn't help us escape from poverty."

The Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU) is trying to work with the boda bodas but comes up against the suspicion of the existing association, which sees the ATGWU as a potential threat. "We are trying to show our credentials by inviting the boda boda leaders to HIV information sessions, explains David Baliraine, ATGWU General Secretary. We want to show them who we are and what we can do together because as long as they don't understand our role, they will be suspicious, especially when it comes to paying membership fees." The ATGWU has already used this technique successfully in the past to recruit lorry and bus drivers. "We raised their awareness about HIV and then we talked about the problems they were facing on a daily basis (such as harassment by the police and non-existent or temporary contracts) and once we had recruited enough workers in one company we contacted the managers. It's a start, but there was a lot of resistance and we are now currently in a dispute with two companies that refuse to recognise us."



*Bashir Kakaire (second from the right) has finished a university degree, but he has to make do with being a moto-taxi driver in order to survive.*

## MISTAKEN AS REBEL RECRUITERS!

One of the main services that the ATGWU offers its members in the informal economy is the opportunity to 'formalise' their situation through employment contracts. "We have been quite successful in the private security guard sector," continues David Baliraine. "During the 1990s, lots of small companies were set up with a few dozen people employed informally on a day-to-day basis depending on the company's needs. We had problems at the beginning when it came to approaching guards because some were telling the government that we were recruiting for the rebels! We had to explain ourselves patiently and now a good number of companies are signing letters of appointment for their workers. As a result, we can intervene if there are problems, ensure that the minimum salary of USh 85,000 (€38) in this sector is respected (we are trying to get it increased to USh 125,000), inform workers of their rights and so on. Our trade union is recognised by around 60 security guard companies and there are just over 80 in total in Kampala."

The Uganda Fisheries and Allied Workers Union (UFAWU) has also succeeded in establishing itself in the informal economy. It has concentrated its efforts on two lakes, Victoria and Kyoga. "Fishermen from the lake meet at around 600 sites, explains Geoffrey Mayanja, UFAWU General Secretary. In 2002, we visited around 50 sites and offered to hold

HIV awareness raising sessions. In the morning we discussed HIV and in the afternoon we talked to them about trade unionism. We were able to recruit 3,500 workers in this way, but it was difficult to collect fees because these sites are far from our offices and the money spent travelling there is more than the total amount collected for fees! It's a serious problem because if we don't return to see them regularly, the workers think that we are only there to take their money. Without these fees and external support, we wouldn't be able to do anything and as it is we have done virtually nothing since 2002. We want to set up co-operatives and put the fees into small funds that could be used for micro-loans, but to do that we have to find the financial resources to be able to get to these sites. It's a vicious circle."

The lack of financial and human resources (the ATGWU has two employees and the UFAWU has four, including the General Secretaries) is currently preventing Ugandan trade unions from making progress in terms of organising in the informal economy. However, workers in this economy, who represent the vast majority of Ugandan workers, have great expectations. The trade unions hope that a little international solidarity will help them to better support these millions of workers. ●



# Increasing female participation in the Ugandan trade union movement

**The percentage of women members in the NOTU (1) trade union confederation has increased significantly in recent years and currently stands at 40%. This success can, in part, be attributed to the sacrifices made by female workers and the modifications made to the statutes and to union meetings.**

In Uganda, as elsewhere, changing the mentality is not an easy task. It took several years to get male trade unionists to admit that women could be just as competent as they were...and there is still more work to be done. The NOTU confederation, which is affiliated to the ICFTU, is setting a good example for its federations. One of the first achievements was the election of a woman to each of the deputy senior official posts in NOTU: the Chairperson General, the Secretary General and the Treasurer General. *"Each woman was up against about three men for each post", said Agnes Kim Atwooki, Chairperson of the NOTU Women's Committee. "We managed to appoint women thanks to the virtually unanimous support of the female members and of several men who were sympathetic to our cause. It will obviously take more than a few months to eliminate the prejudices of men who have always thought that women are inferior. When the women were elected to these deputy senior official positions, some men said 'What are these women going to do?' How can we be led by women?". This didn't stop us from succeeding. I realised that when women decide to do something together, it always succeeds."*

The female unionists, boosted by this success, have managed to push through another change in the confederation's statutes so that gender equality is recognised as a union priority, mainly in activities to recruit female members for which a special budget is earmarked. *"However, not all General Secretaries of the unions affiliated to NOTU are yet on the same wavelength. We have to continue our fight, otherwise we won't achieve anything", deplors Agnes Kim Atwooki. "It is never easy, but as we recruit more women the union gets bigger and therefore receives more money in fees."*

Encouraging more female workers to join the Ugandan trade union movement has also required changes to the



**Rose Nassanga (NOTU) :** *"We don't invite women to a seminar simply to speak to them about unionism, we need to address matters that affect them"*

form and contents of union meetings. Many married women, for example, find it hard to get the support of their husbands if they have to attend a week-long seminar in a town which is not nearby, since this means they have to stay away from home. NOTU is therefore trying to organise shorter seminars which do not last more than three days to minimise disruption to family life. *"It is also necessary to adapt the contents of meetings to a female audience so that issues which affect women are addressed", said Rose Nassanga, the official responsible for women at NOTU. "We don't invite women to a seminar simply to speak to them about unionism, we need to address matters that affect them such as family issues. When they come to meetings, they are mainly concerned with family matters: some are abused by their husbands, others have children at home and many of them are extremely poor. They like talking about income generating activities, family planning and - once confidence has been established - about more specific trade union issues such as collective bargaining. The majority also have a relatively low level of education which means that if highly complex issues are tackled straight away, they won't understand all that much."*

## INCREASING CONFIDENCE AMONGST FEMALE WORKERS

One aspect of NOTU's strategy consists of increasing the self-confidence of female workers who join the organisa-

tion. All too often, being a woman and not having a high level of education is enough to discourage a female Ugandan worker from exercising her rights. The training seminars mainly focus on teaching the female workers to speak in public and become leaders. The example of a former trade union delegate who gradually worked her way up the ladder and was eventually elected to the Ugandan Parliament is often used to motivate the women in this respect.

NOTU's efforts to attract female workers have seen the percentage of female members increase from 10-15% ten years ago to 40% today. This representation means they are able to make male trade unionists open their eyes to certain priorities which the men sometimes find embarrassing, such as sexual harassment. *"We have had to raise awareness among male union leaders", said Rose Nassanga. "It has been hard but at least now they are willing to admit that the problem does exist. Beforehand, they used to deny the reality of the situation, partly because they were not well aware of what constituted sexual harassment. We had to explain to them that even certain comments, when voiced by superiors, were a form of harassment."*

The length of maternity leave is another priority which is better upheld by women, as highlighted by Agnes Kim Atwooki: *"We have to explain to the male unionists what women have to go through in order to convince them to negotiate longer leave. I recall one negotiation where I was the only woman in the group. The men said that we could do without an extension of maternity leave, that the current duration of 45 days was sufficient. I said that I wasn't going to leave the room until they had agreed to an extension of this period. We finally got 60 days... and three days of paternity leave."* ●

(1) National Organisation of Trade Unions.

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