

THE INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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Spotlight on Adan Mohamed Abdou (UDT- Djibouti)

“The ITUC will help us combat trade union rights violations better”

Vienna, November 3, 2006,(ITUC OnLine):Adan Mohamed Abdou, the General Secretary of the UDT (Union djiboutienne du travail), has great hopes for the new ITUC. The trade unionists of Djibouti need it badly, since their government is constantly harassing them and Adan Mohamed Abdou himself and three other union leaders spent one month in prison this year.

How do you view the creation of the ITUC?

I think it's a very good thing. Now there will be a single powerful trade union voice at international level. Having that single representative organisation will help us guarantee freedom of association and protect trade union rights better. Having a common approach towards the international institutions and against those governments that violate union rights is exactly what the international trade union movement needed.

Djibouti has a poor reputation on union rights. How have things been in recent months?

Four union leaders from the UDT were arrested in March 2006 and arrested on charges of insulting the President of the Republic and “intelligence with foreign powers”. In Djibouti, those accusations can lead to seventeen years’ imprisonment and a stiff fine. I was one of the four leaders who were arrested and the others were Hassan Cher, the UDT international secretary, and Djibril Ismaël Igueh and Mohamed Ahmed, both members of the UDT executive board. Djibril and Mohamed were arrested on their return from a training course in Israel and Hassan and me were arrested shortly afterwards (accused of having sent them there). The journey to Israel was just a pretext; in fact we were arrested because of the report submitted by the ICFTU for the WTO study on trade policy in Djibouti. That report upset the

government, which reacted by arresting us and refusing entry to the foreign delegations that came to support us. In the interrogations they asked about our relations with Israel and Histadrut, the national trade union organisation, but also about the information we had provided to the ICFTU and for complaints to the ILO. As the authorities saw it we had been helping foreign powers that wanted to harm Djibouti! That's totally wrong: we respect our country's Constitution, which provides for freedom of association, and our international affiliation is covered by ILO conventions that Djibouti has ratified. These are just excuses for destroying the free and independent trade union movement in Djibouti, which the UDT embodies.

Why were you released?

It was thanks to international pressure, mainly from the ICFTU, the FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights), the ILO and many other trade unions, that the government had us released. Delegations from those organisations were sent to Djibouti. The ones from the ICFTU and the FIDH were turned back by the army at the airport. The ILO representative managed to enter the country but the day after he arrived he was arrested at his hotel, interrogated by the police and expelled from the country. Nevertheless it was that pressure that finally got us out of prison one month after our arrest. That said, although we were released we are still under police surveillance: there have been no official charges, no trial and we are on conditional release. I'm also likely to be bothered when I return from this Founding Congress in Vienna.

What sort of conditions were you held in?

As for all other prisoners the conditions were bad. The cells are drastically overcrowded, common law prisoners are tortured (all four of us were beaten), the food is unhealthy (our families had to bring us food), the prison is extremely dirty and common law prisoners (criminals, rapists, etc.) and political detainees are mixed up.

Were you aware of the international support for your release?

Yes, we were visited by friends and family members who told us about the campaign. We even knew that an ICFTU delegation was coming. We also listened to other

prisoners. Some have been in preventive custody for several years, and one even for 14 years without being tried!

How strong is the UDT at the moment?

The UDT has 15,000 members (from the education, energy, port, public works, hotel sectors, etc.). It represents almost 80% of unionised workers in Djibouti. I should also admit that women only make up some 20% of the membership. That is partly a cultural problem, but also because we do not have enough time for telling women more about the unions given the very difficult conditions in which we are operating.

What are the UDT's main demands?

The main ones are reinstatement of the union leaders who have been sacked since 1995, recognition of union rights and the need for social dialogue based on tripartite structures. Before we can make progress in other areas, unions need to be recognised and to be able to operate freely, which is not currently the case. We are harassed, our lives are in danger and our families are threatened. Lastly, the UDT international secretary, who travelled to Turin for a training course, was sacked for "leaving his job", despite having taken some precautions: as he did not have much confidence in the legal educational leave system he had requested his normal paid leave, but that was subsequently refused under government orders. So his employer sacked him for leaving his job. That is the kind of treatment we are used to and it is very hard to do any union work in such circumstances. Despite our repeated requests, the government refuses any dialogue.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

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Created on November 1, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 154 countries and territories and has 306 national affiliates.

The new website of the organization is: <http://www.ituc-csi.org>
