

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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Spotlight Interview on Renana Jhabvala, national coordinator of ITUC affiliate SEWA

“ITUC must encourage organising of informal workers”

Brussels, 21 November 2006 (ITUC OnLine) : Renana Jhabvala is the national coordinator of ITUC affiliate SEWA, which organises women workers in the informal economy (1) in India. Representing over 800,000 members nationwide, SEWA hopes to pave the way for other trade unions to organise in the informal economy.

How does SEWA negotiate on behalf of women workers in the informal economy?

Our members are street vendors, home workers, women working in small crafts, casual workers (usually hired on a day to day basis in agriculture, construction, etc.). Our chief aim is to organise them and negotiate on their behalf. The bargaining process doesn't always involve an employer, as in most cases these workers do not have an employee-employer relationship as such. In the case of the street vendors, for instance, we have to negotiate with the municipal authorities obtain vending space. As for women working in agriculture, we lobby the WTO to improve its policies regarding small farmers. The way we conduct our negotiations differs from traditional bargaining, in that we deal with a wide variety of bargaining partners.

What services do you offer your members?

We have had to promote our own cooperatives due to the total lack of public services for workers in the informal economy. Our first cooperative is a bank providing micro-credit facilities, among other services. We are very pleased that this year's Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded to the founder of a micro-credit organisation in Bangladesh, the Grameen Bank. Our organisation had promoted the same concept prior to Grameen, even though it is for the sole use of our members. We also run our own social security scheme, insurance company, pension fund, childcare centres, etc.

What advantage does SEWA draw from its affiliation to an international union body such as the ITUC?

We have witnessed the steady deterioration in our members' living and working standards over the last twenty years; they are bearing the brunt of the policies implemented without consulting them. These policies are often dictated from overseas, so we have to be in a position to influence the decision makers abroad.

That's why we chose to join the ranks of an international union. Another important aim is to convince trade unions worldwide that informal workers, men and women alike, must be incorporated into the trade union movement. In many countries, the informal economy employs between 60 and 80% of the total workforce. Even in the OECD countries, the rate currently stands at 20%. For this reason we hope to see the ITUC encouraging the organisation of this important category of workers.

Would it be possible to replicate the SEWA model outside of India?

The model itself might not be fully transferable, but the principles it embodies are: there are men and women working in the informal economy in every country and our experience shows that they want to be organised like their salaried counterparts, because they need a united voice to be heard. The organising method may differ, depending on the options available in each country. In India, for instance, informal workers have the right to form trade unions, whilst in other countries they might only have the right to form associations, but it is of no matter, the main thing is to organise them, to associate them, for it is their wish. Services like micro-credit facilities, pensions and health insurance are likely to be of interest to informal workers worldwide, this interest is not limited to India.

How do you finance these services?

The pension funds are financed through the membership fees and act as a long-term savings scheme. As for the insurance plan, the premiums are collected annually. Our members are happy to contribute to the pension fund: as they get older they witness the gradual breakdown of the family structure; children are no longer willing or able to take care of their parents and sometimes treat them very badly. When we recently launched the pension fund, one of our members said she was eager to take part in it because she didn't want to go through the same as her mother.

A pension system is in place in India but not for informal workers. We are trying to persuade the government to pass a new law on social security for workers in the informal economy and it seems to be open to the issue. We may eventually succeed in creating a joint programme involving the government and the unions.

Do you collaborate with other unions in India?

We collaborate a great deal on specific issues such as the new social security law for which we've jointly lobbied the government. Previously we had lobbied together in favour of a national policy on home workers.

SEWA recently appealed for help regarding a dispute with the Gujarat State authorities. What exactly happened?

We are prey to the wrath of the government of the State of Gujarat, where our head office is based and where we organise most of our activities. In 2001 and 2002, Gujarat was the scene of widespread riots and a deadly earthquake. We have endeavoured to assist our members in the aftermath of these disasters. This included a rural development project set up in co-operation with our sponsors and the Government of Gujarat, but the dominance of the Hindu nationalist party brought an

end to project funding. SEWA had advanced large sums of money to part of the project aimed at promoting women's employment and was left in grave financial difficulty when the government withdrew its support. We were then targeted as part of a media offensive led by the Gujarat government who accused us of embezzlement. We were placed in a difficult situation, so we published a communiqué announcing that we would no longer work with this government. The government reacted even more angrily and decided to cut off funding to our cooperatives, including those providing childcare. We had financed the launch of these cooperatives and the government then took over from there. The funding was however terminated without prior notice and the food aid programmes for children were stopped in their tracks. The government subsequently took further retaliatory measures.

To prove that the allegations made by the government of Gujarat were unfounded, we disclosed all our accounts. These were examined by a certified public accountant who delivered a certificate that received the Indian government's approval (but not that of the Gujarat State government). The aim was to end the false allegations. They are now using other means to harass us, such as new allegations, cancellation of funding, sending letters criticising us before the governments of other Indian states, etc..

(1) Self Employed Women's Association, www.sewa.org

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

On November 1, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 154 countries and territories and has 307 national affiliates.

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