

>>> "ITUC Press" <press@ituc-csi.org> 01/19/07 10:38 >>>
INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

ITUC OnLine...
010/190107

Spotlight interview with Samira Kinami (Morocco - UMT)

"Unionised... and fired on the spot!"

Brussels, 19 January 2007 (ITUC OnLine): A graduate in information science, Samira Kinami works at the cooperation division of the Agriculture Ministry. She tells us about the problems specific to Moroccan women working in the agricultural sector and the initial results of the efforts to defend their rights through unionisation.

- How and why did you get involved in the union?

I had been working at the Agriculture Ministry for two years and was the victim of discrimination and moral harassment at the hands of my immediate superior, who behaved like a paternalistic depot. I was then unfairly removed from my post, which pushed me to protest and contact the general secretary of the national federation of agriculture, Abdelhamid Amine, who resolved the problem and encouraged me to join the union.

My greatest motivation for getting involved in the union was the presence of a group of activists who supported me and stood by me in spite of the obstacles at the administration where I work. As regards my family and friends, I haven't had any problems with them over my involvement in the union.

What are the main problems facing women working in the agricultural sector?

The working conditions of the women in the agriculture and forestry sector are very specific, and influenced by the fact the workforce was previously 100% masculine, as well as by the wide diversity of structures (public, semi-public, State-owned enterprises, large-scale farms...).

The problems facing women working as administrative staff in the sector are:

- The absence of collective canteens and childcare facilities at work.
- The absence of legal and practical measures to ensure respect for the dignity of the women in the sector and to protect them from harassment in the workplace.
- Unequal opportunities with regard to promotions, ongoing training, the allocation of responsibilities, lodging, bonuses, placements, etc.

The problems specific to women labourers are:

- Employers' failure to respect the provisions of the Labour Code.
- The absence of legal and practical measures to prevent the dismissal of pregnant women or new mothers, or to protect against the dangers of night work and hard and dangerous tasks (use of toxic products).
- The absence of legal and practical measures to allow women labourers to benefit from transport in safe conditions.

The absence of decent living conditions in rural areas (lack of social services and basic infrastructure such as roads, water, electricity, schools, hospitals, etc.)

What steps has the trade union taken to promote the rights of women in the agricultural sector?

The formation of the Organisation of Women in the Agricultural Sector (OFSA) in 1999 has been followed up by action plans to unionise the women in the sector. We started with the women in administrative posts, organising a campaign that has lasted almost three years on sexual harassment and the working conditions of women in the sector.

In 2003, since we form part of the UMT's national women's committee, we joined in the "Unions for Women - Women for Unions" campaign (1), integrating it within our action plan. We then took on the difficult task of organising female agricultural labourers, faced with the abuses of their employers and the non respect of trade union rights.

What has the campaign achieved, in concrete terms?

The number of women trade union members in the agricultural sector has increased, as has the number of women in positions of responsibility, be it within the structures of the national federation of the agricultural sector, the national public workers' union or the national committees, such as the low grade public employees' committee, the national information scientists' committee, or the UMT's regional structures. Sister Rhamiri Khadija, for example, is the general secretary of the regional union of Rabat-Salé-Temara. Several women agricultural workers' sections have also been set up in the regions of El Jadida, Agadir, Sous and Massa.

Which specific case marked you the most during the course of the campaign?

The case that marked me the most is that of "mi Aicha", as we say here, which means "mother Aicha". Mi Aicha was working at La Clementine, a farm producing flowers for export. The farm belongs to Bennani Smires, who respects neither the labour laws, nor the human and economic rights guaranteed by international law, even though his production is sold abroad. "Mi Aicha" worked for him for over thirty years, without ever receiving the minimum wage or being subscribed to the social security fund. She had no right to holiday leave and worked seven days a week, except on the day of the annual sheep festival. When he found out that she had joined a union he sacked her on the spot!

What priorities is the trade union working on?

Workers' rights, and women workers' rights in particular, have been under violent attack over the last few years, as a result of the policy to dismantle the public sector and transfer the land of the two largest State enterprises (Sodea and Sogeta) to large private agricultural enterprises. The policy of pressing for voluntary redundancies in the administration has led to a drastic fall in public sector employment. Our mission is to pursue our campaign to unionise women working in agriculture and to strengthen the organisational structures at national and regional level so that we can confront the current negative economic trends, the impact of which often falls the hardest on women.

Interview by Natacha David.

(1) Also read the ITUC briefing about this campaign at http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/maroc_EN.pdf

- Also see the interview of Naima Bouguerjouma (Morocco - UMT), "Women have understood that joining a union provides them with more rights" at <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article505>

Also read the interview of Asma Elbassir (Morocco - UMT) "Giving greater visibility to young people" at <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article509>

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