

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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Spotlight interview with Souad Belaidi (Algeria - UGTA)

"The campaign has given women a taste for asserting their rights"

Brussels 29 January 2007 (ICTUC OnLine): Souad Belaidi, aged 37, Tlemcen region coordinator of the campaign to recruit women, talks about the campaign's positive results and the personal sacrifices made to achieve them. The first woman to enter the regional leadership structure of the occupational training trade union, Souad now also heads the women's committee for her region and has succeeded in placing women's issues on the agenda. She is demanding a greater role for young members and insists that she is ready to take on the fight to ensure the rise of the next generation of trade union leaders.

How did you get involved in the trade union and how old were you?

I was trained as a seamstress, but my first job was at a cultural centre in my region, Tlemcen (West Algeria). I was eighteen. Then, after doing teacher training in the ready-to-wear sector, I started to teach at an occupational training centre. I obtained my first job contract when I was 22, but had to face a great deal of injustices, bureaucratic barriers and discrimination before obtaining a permanent post. My colleagues, on seeing that I had no reservations about going to those in charge to demand greater justice, asked me to take on the leadership of the trade union section grouping around 50 employees. I gathered a lot of experience in a variety of areas. I also received a many blows, but I always had the support of my colleagues, who called me the "Iron Lady". After a three-year mandate, I was elected onto the leadership structure of the regional occupational training sector trade union, which groups around 9000 workers. That day left a great impression on me, as I was the only woman among all the other trade union leaders in the sector.

How did your male colleagues react to your arrival?

To be honest, for the first two years I received lots of encouragement and didn't have any particular problems with my male colleagues. I moved around a lot and secured concrete results in terms of legal advice, awareness raising and information. After two years, it was decided that the women's committee should be renewed in the region. Over 400 women elected me as president in a secret ballot. For me, being democratically elected by the members is an unbending principle, otherwise I would rather withdraw. It was after this election that I started to have problems with the men. I organised a three-day seminar on globalisation with the UGTA training department; there was a majority of 27 women for 13 men. The men were not too pleased, and said that the women were going to take their place. They were not happy about the wide media coverage given to the seminar either. After that, I started to be the target of criticism from the leaders; they criticised my dual leadership role, my post at sectoral level and on the regional women's committee.

I played for time, leaving things to calm down for a while, and the problems eventually died down.

What priorities are you working on?

I have started to organise the women in the area. A lot of women have joined, from different sectors. They used to think that the union was a man's business, but seeing a woman representing the union has opened a window of opportunity for them to come and present the problems they face as women, such as promotion discrimination and sexual harassment. I went to Alger to follow a training course for trainers, to build on my skills and knowledge of trade union work. I am now a trainer at the National Trade Union Research Institute. I also followed training in Turin on social protection.

What role did you play in the ICFTU backed campaign to organise women?

I took part in the campaign as the coordinator for my region. We organised study days and seminars for the women; it was something new to them, a real discovery in terms of the methodology, based on a more global approach to the woman's world of work. It has given them a taste for asserting their rights. The campaign reached out to women of all ages and environments. Some of the women's stories brought me to tears on more than one occasion; they were so moving.

How do you manage to reconcile your trade union and family responsibilities?

I got married when I was 17 and have four children. My eldest is 17 and my youngest is 6. My parents have been a great help. My mother has supported me a lot by looking after the children when I'm working away. My family was happy to see me reach a certain level of responsibility and proud of me being known as a defender of the least advantaged. But it has influenced my family life a great deal; I haven't been able to spend much time with my children, to really make the most of their early years.

On the one hand, the campaign has given me a lot, but on a personal level it has also meant making a great personal sacrifice. When my son failed his exam, everyone blamed me, because I was working away on the day of his exam. Fortunately, he has passed this year, and he's very proud of me and my work.

What have you learned from the campaign assessment seminar (*) that has just come to a close in Marrakech?

We worked so hard on this campaign. Our work on the ground was very positive and following our visits we would often receive calls from the women to keep us informed of the gains they were able to secure. All the effort put into it, the thousands of kilometres travelled, all the time devoted to the campaign, ... it was all quite a strain, because I wasn't seeing the big picture or evaluating the global results. But today, at the seminar, on seeing the video presenting the campaign activities in Algeria as a whole, I cried, because I realised the magnitude of the work accomplished, I saw the fruit of our work. The overall assessment is very positive. I also felt a real sense of solidarity with our

Moroccan sisters; it's very encouraging.

You stress the need for the trade union movement to better integrate young people. What role do they play in the Algeria?

Young people have always been marginalized in our confederation. The youth committee exists on paper, on an organisation chart, but it has not actually been formed yet. And yet, in my view, it's very important to prepare the next generation of leaders. There are many old trade unionists in the Arab world who don't want to give way to the young. They accuse them of not having been involved, like them, in the hard battle for independence, because in their day the trade union struggle and fight against colonialism were inextricably linked. They mistrust the youth because of this historical gap. But these young people are achieving miraculous results through their work. They have to be given a chance, a role.

It's true that young people are quicker to protest than their parents. At university already, if something displeases them, they complain and put up a fight. They want jobs that correspond to their qualifications and training, decent work, permanent posts. They're not ready to except just anything, to put up with what their parents have endured.

I'm very keen to get involved in setting up a youth committee. I want it to be set up as it ought to be, not rushed into head on. I'm confident it will happen and am ready to commit to it.

Interview by Natacha David.

(*) The International Trade Union Confederation is carrying out an ambitious international campaign with the Global Union Federations (GUFs) aimed at organising women workers around the world called "Unions for women, women for unions". The campaign is focusing primarily on women workers in the exporting processing zones and the informal economy, and on migrant women workers. Fifty-five ITUC-affiliated trade unions from 43 different countries and at least 20 GUF affiliates from 20 different countries are involved in this global campaign, which is part of the campaign to organise women workers originally launched by the former ICFTU in 2002 and then re-launched in 2004.

Under that global campaign the former ICFTU had launched a two-year organising campaign in three countries in the Maghrib region: Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania, supported by the publication of a campaign guide in Arabic.

In September 2006 a seminar was held in Marrakech to evaluate the campaign's achievements in Morocco and Algeria with the support of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). Over forty Moroccan and Algerian women trade unionists were thereby given the opportunity to evaluate the initial results of the campaign in their respective countries and to exchange their experiences at local level.

See also the briefing on < Algeria - Women Make Progress in the union > at : http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/Algeria_EN-2.pdf

- Also see the interview of Karima Boudrouaz (Algeria - UGTA), entitled "We have to fight to ensure that the law on equality is implemented" at

<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article630>

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

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