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Spotlight interview with Abdul Karim Radhi, legislation advisor of the GFBTU - Bahrain

"We have to revive the culture of trade unionism in Bahrain"

Brussels, 12 February 2007 (ICTU OnLine): Trade unionism is taking off in Bahrain, one of the only countries in the Persian Gulf authorising free trade unions (since 2002). 55 companies now have a union and the 25,000 members are grouped within the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU). One of the union's future priorities is the defence of migrant workers, which constitute 60% of the labour force in Bahrain. Abdul Karim Radhi, legislation advisor of the GFBTU, comments on the development of trade unionism in Bahrain and the region, and underlines the challenges raised by migration.

How did trade unionism develop in Bahrain?

New legislation introduced in 2002 authorised the official existence of trade unions. Prior to that, trade unionism existed as an underground movement, but many trade unionists were either in prison or living in exile. 2002 saw the establishment of a monarchy (Sheikh Hamad assumed the title of King) and the adoption of legislative reforms, including the recognition of freedom of association. We currently have 55 company trade unions. We do not yet have sectoral federations, but they will come, as our movement grows. There is still not much of a trade union culture in Bahrain, which is why we only have 25,000 members (10% of whom are women) out of a total labour force of 350,000 (of which 60 are migrants). We represent around 19% of local workers and perhaps 1% of migrant workers.

We are involved in a dispute with the government over the trade union legislation, as it has not yet given public sector workers, the sector with the highest proportion of Bahraini employees, the right to organise. The authorities are insisting that this right is limited to private sector workers but we are fighting to change this, because 35,000 workers are being deprived of a basic right on account of this limitation.

How did the Bahrainis, who had never heard mention of trade unions before, react when you asked them to join you?

They were very reticent at first, but mentalities are changing. We have lost a great deal: when the oil industry started in the 30s, most of the workers in the sector were Bahrainis and they organised protests and strikes for the right to unionise. During that period, because the trade union movement was linked to political movements, the government and the companies did everything to repress it. We have lost a great deal of time between 1938 and 2002. We have also lost the culture of trade unionism.

Everyone, even non-union members, enjoys the benefits we obtain through

our trade union struggle. In that respect, there is little incentive to join. So we are working more towards benefits given by the trade union rather than the employers, such as trying to conclude agreements with commercial centres, for example, to get discounts for our members. We organise cultural activities and hold events for our members, such as May Day (recognised as a public holiday since 2002) or national holiday celebrations.

Do the beginnings of a trade union movement in Bahrain raise hopes of seeing it spread to the rest of the Gulf region?

Yes. Saudi Arabia, for example, has started to set up joint labour consultative committees, which is exactly how the process began here. Between 1983 and 2002, we had the same type of committees, which are elected by the companies' workers and employers, but are not trade unions as their formation depends on the Labour Ministry. In Oman, a new labour law has been introduced. In Kuwait, there has been a union since 1961. In the United Arab Emirates, there is nothing. They say that they cannot contemplate the formation of trade unions when 90% of the workers are migrants, as it would mean that virtually the entire federation would be composed of migrants. It's not easy, but they could perhaps start with unions in the public service sector, where more nationals are employed.

What is the situation regarding migration in Bahrain?

Prior to the 70s, migration was a limited phenomenon. Most of the migrant workers came from Gulf countries. Since Bahrain was the first Arab country to discover oil, in 1932, the industry developed earlier than in the other countries in the region, so we received migrant workers from nearby countries such as Oman. When the oil industry developed elsewhere in the Gulf, Bahrain became a departure country, with Bahraini workers going to other parts of the region as they were already experienced in the oil industry and were attracted by the better salaries abroad, where there was more oil than in Bahrain.

Huge economic development followed the boom in oil prices in the mid seventies, especially in construction. The demand for migrant workers was immense. They came from Asia, mainly India, South Korea, Bangladesh, the Philippines... 60% of our workforce is currently composed of migrant workers. The proportion is high, but not as high as in other countries in the region, like the United Arab Emirates, where it is 90%, or Saudi Arabia with 65%, Qatar with over 80%, etc. There are around 200,000 migrant workers in Bahrain. Like almost everywhere else in the world, they are employed in low wage sectors: construction, transport,... The Bahrainis more often work in offices.

What services can you offer migrants to attract them to your union?

We have organised two workshops on migrant workers' rights in Bahrain, with the support of the former ICFTU, the ILO and the IFBWW (International Federation of Building and Wood Workers). The focus was mainly on the construction industry, as there are around 80,000 migrants in this sector. We are going to set up a network, in conjunction with the IFBWW, so that migrants can obtain information before coming to Bahrain. But one obstacle to the success of such a network is the fact that most migrant workers are illiterate, so we cannot ask them to look for information using a computer. This is the case for many of the

migrants from Bangladesh, for example. They need a great deal of information about their rights, as many of them are disappointed: they are promised many things when they are in their country, but once they actually reach Bahrain the situation is very different from that promised.

What kind of salaries do migrants receive?

The difference in the wage cost between a local worker and a migrant worker is about 300 euros a month. It's even worse for domestic workers: the best paid are the Indians and the Filipinos, who receive 120 euros a month, but the Bangladeshis or even the Sri Lankans only receive 80 euros a month.

In 2006, Bahrain set up the Labour Market Regulatory Authority, on which I represent my Federation. Its mandate is to increase the cost of low wage labour, so as to reduce the difference between local and migrant workers, with a view to making local workers more attractive to employers. This increase will be achieved by charging employers a commission for every migrant worker coming into Bahrain. Our position, as unions, is that it would be better to close the gap by establishing a minimum wage rather than placing a tax on employers. A joint position with employers would be possible on this subject, because they are not happy about having to pay such taxes, but the government refuses to introduce minimum wage legislation, arguing that Bahrain has a free market, a market economy.

Could you conclude agreements with the unions from the migrants' countries of origin, so as to offer them better protection?

Yes, we are taking about it, but the idea hasn't been put into practice yet. I took part in a workshop on migrants, organised by the ITUC in Brussels in 2006, where good examples were given of trade union agreements between Indonesia and Malaysia, Costa Rica and Nicaragua, or Senegal and Mauritania, for example. We intend to make contact with the unions in the countries of origin during 2007. The problem for these trade unions is that they have to run the risk of seeing migrants lose certain jobs. As trade unions from sending countries, you have to know your priorities: keeping your compatriots' jobs in Bahrain or their rights? We can't always have everything. Some say that jobs without rights are better than rights without jobs! It's a debate. In Bahrain, what stops migrants from joining our unions is not the youth of the movement, because they come from countries with a long trade union tradition, but the fear of losing their jobs. They work under fixed term contracts, whilst Bahrainis are protected by indefinite contracts that oblige employers to pay compensation in case of dismissal. Migrants fear that the employer will not renew their contract. They also fear discrimination. Are the unions in the countries of origin aware of these risks? Will they do everything they can to defend their compatriots' rights, no matter what?

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

See also: <Trade unions endorse action plan to defend migrant rights> (ITUC Online, 15 December 2006), at <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?rubrique48>

Founded on 1 November 2006, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 304 national affiliates.

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