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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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Spotlight interview with Rabiataou Diallo, general secretary of the CNTG (Confédération nationale des travailleurs de Guinée)

"The entire Guinean population is unionised"

Brussels, 25 April 2007 (ITUC OnLine): Guinea is gradually recovering from the strikes and demonstrations brutally repressed three months ago. The protests led by Guinea's trade unions have led to the appointment of a new government and progress in the social sphere, such as a fall in the price of basic foodstuffs. It is a victory that has boosted the popularity of the trade union movement in Guinea, but one which cost the lives of 120 demonstrators. Rabiataou Diallo, general secretary of the CNTG (Confédération nationale des travailleurs de Guinée) and newly-elected vice-chair of the ITUC Women's Committee, was one of the mainsprings of the protest movement. She talks to us about day-to-day life in present day Guinea, about the violent repression suffered by trade unionists, and her hopes for a better future for Guinean workers, especially women workers.

Where do things stand now in Guinea after the mass protests so brutally repressed by the government?

We managed to secure an agreement on the appointment of a new prime minister and a broad-consensus government, which has now been implemented. But it is now that the real work starts: there are some people who have become entrenched in their positions, who have taken a liking to this bad governance, corruption, impunity and bureaucratic wastefulness. Changing the system is not going to be easy. According to the agreement signed in January 2007, the government is going to have restructure the entire administration to set it straight, making technical and staff changes, among others. It also has to revive the economy and tackle inflation. Another task ahead of it is the revision of all the agreements in the mining sector, which have been drawn up any old how. Life is very difficult for Guineans at the moment: we are without drinking water and electricity, health care and education are in a sorry state, the hospitals are alarmingly under-resourced... Nearly everything has to be redone from scratch.

The Guinean trade unions are now backed by the whole population...

Of course. People have given their support to the unions because they have seen that our demands mirror their own. They'd had enough of the situation and were fed up of the way things were being done. Our criticisms are not levelled at anyone in particular but at the way things are being done, the poor distribution of resources: a small minority of people is taking advantage of the situation at the expense of all the rest. Although ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) has adopted the principle of free movement of goods and people, we have asked for a one-year freeze on the export of basic foodstuffs, because with the exceptional situation in Guinea, we no longer had access to the good fish, we were not eating well anymore, and even those who could afford it were not eating well, because there was nothing on the market. Everything was being exported, even our brooms! The price of a broom, which used to cost 200 Guinean francs, had risen to between 2000 and 2500 francs! It has now dropped to 500.

Since we secured this freeze on exports, people are able to breathe a little easier. Although our purchasing power is still rock bottom, we are now able to get hold of decent fish, meat, fruit and vegetables at the market. It's a step forward, however small. Before these measures were taken, the euro was worth 9,000 Guinean francs; now it's worth 4,000. As a result, the price of basic foodstuffs has fallen, something we have managed to achieve without violence or fuss. These are the reasons behind the support the people have given us. The action we organised also awakened people's consciousness. When they saw that the border-control employees were not doing their job, for example, they blocked the trucks and made them unload. Since the trucks are carrying perishable goods, the producers have been forced to sell them, which means that the markets are full and prices are dropping even further.

Have the gains secured by the trade unions brought you new members?

Absolutely. I would even go as far as to say that the entire Guinean population is unionised. Since there is no employment, young people had formed associations. All of these groups are now rushing towards the unions. They think that the trade union is the solution to all their problems, even those that the trade union doesn't usually deal with. People have a great deal of confidence in trade unions now, everyone wants to join, and people are proud to carry a trade union membership card. Some informal economy workers had already joined a trade union, but our action over the last few months has brought us many more new members. And in companies where unions didn't stand a chance, the workers have woken up and have asked for a union to be formed. It's the same abroad. I have learned that Guinean nationals living in Belgium, for example, are coming together and think they should join the Belgian unions that work with Guinean unions.

Are the Guinean unions cooperating with each other?

We worked with the USTG (1) on the agreements made following the two strikes in 2006. The other trade union centres joined forces with us in 2007, after we announced the call for the general strike of 10 January. Consequently, all the documents were signed in the name of the inter-union group "Intercentrale CNTG-USTG- élargie à l'ONSLG et à l'UDTG" (2) The CNTG, USTG and ONSLG (3) are affiliated to the ITUC; the UDTG is not yet affiliated but we are working with it to ask the ITUC to accept its application.

What hopes do you have for the national reconstruction and reconciliation conference to be held by the ITUC and its Guinean affiliates from 23 to 25 May in Conakry?

Today, the trade union movement is much more than just a protest movement. Its work has a much wider reach and it is taking part in the country's development. The events of recent months have been a success for the trade union movement at national, African and international level. Everyone has contributed to this victory, but it's now that the work begins, and we have to see it through to the end. The ITUC has taken the initiative of convening an international conference that will bring together all the stakeholders in the country (the government, civil society, political parties,...). We are going to reflect on the country's future, but not alone: unions from other African countries will also be given an opportunity to take part, along with those from other parts of the world, invited by the ITUC, as well as organisations that provide trade unions with funding. We are going to reflect together about what can be done to ensure Guinea's reconstruction, the strengthening of its social dialogue, good governance and democracy. It is the logical follow-up to the end of the crisis. The conference will provide us all with an opportunity to build bridges and to find a way of healing these wounds, which are very deep. Guineans living abroad will also take part.

You yourself were violently attacked on numerous occasions during these events. Has that strengthened or weakened your resolve as a trade unionist?

It has strengthened my resolve. I received bullet wounds, was beaten, and am still suffering from health problems as a result of the violence inflicted on me. I also lost my sister, who had a heart attack when she was mistakenly informed that I was dead. She was in a coma before I was taken to the hospital. They were not able to save her life. She has left me with five young children. I was not even able to go to her funeral because I had to be at the negotiating table the very same day. I told myself, "she has passed away, she's in God's hands now, but there are others who are still alive and have to be saved".

They said that they were going to kill me little by little... Recently, while I was on a mission in Belgium, I received a call from Guinea warning me that they had burnt my plantation. I had been working on this plantation with my husband and family for years. We had trees that were starting to give fruit. The fact that they burnt it to the ground affected me badly.

But, in the face of such suffering, seeing the whole world rallying to support me, was a great source of encouragement, and gave me the strength to carry on. I told myself that I had no right to make a mistake, that I could not give up, that I had to press ahead to reach my objective.

How do you manage to reconcile your trade union activism with your family life?

I am 48 years old. I have had nine children, seven of whom are alive. I also look after orphaned children, plus my sister's now. My family is very big. I'm used to it, as I'm from a polygamous family. I am always able to find time for my trade union activities because my family helps me, they all know what my goal is, everyone contributes and helps each other (my husband, my parents who look after the children,...). When I'm not at home, I know there will not be any problem there. I would not have been able to get ahead without this help. My relatives and neighbours all help me in their own way, because they know that I want to succeed.

I do, however, worry a lot about my children, who have not been safe since all these events sparked off. I'd rather they didn't go to school, to limit the risks. Two of my daughters were due to sit for their baccalaureate this year, but they won't be able to take the exams because they haven't been able to follow the whole curriculum. But I'm hanging in there, with all my hope, because if I give in now I am going to let down an entire nation. When I forge ahead, it's a source of encouragement for everyone, even though I don't get the satisfaction I would like. If I were to die now, the people of Guinea would at least be able to aspire to the same satisfaction, and would say that it was thanks to a woman that they were saved from misery. It's a comforting thought. My children or grandchildren will perhaps one day achieve what I have not been able to achieve; I'm convinced of it.

You are one of the rare women occupying the post of general secretary in the trade union world. What is your recipe for achieving this?

The secret is to keep trying, to persevere, and never give up. We women are convinced that we will not be handed anything on a platter. We have to fight for what we want. Women are alienated, we are used for production but when it comes to sharing positions of responsibility we are pushed to the margins. We are not asked to take part in making important decisions. And yet women are less reckless, for example, in management. They analyse things better because they think of their families first. We fight using all the means at our disposal, we are raising women's awareness, we are motivating them so that they understand that we must stop simply being seen and make ourselves heard, so that we are not just given posts such as "head of social affairs" (which means helping with marriages, baptisms or funerals), because whilst the men are making the big decisions, the women are serving the drinks! Women are not even given the minutes of important meetings, to keep them equally informed. We want to see an end to this situation, so we are fighting, but it's not a question of whining or simply demanding respect for our rights. We have to be on the ground, we have to be seen hard at work.

I'm very proud that things are progressing in Africa, and not only in law but in practice. In Europe, the legislation is there, but its enforcement is often lacking. But that's not the case here. The ITUC Constitution demands at least 30% female participation in trade union events and delegations, but in my union the male-female ratio is fifty-fifty. Having said that, although the minimum female participation rate of 30% for all events, seminars or position of responsibility is not enough, it is, at least, a step forward. The goal of equal representation has not yet been reached, but awareness of the need has been raised at all levels. Men should not be marginalized either. Women cannot evolve alone, as both men and women are essential to success in the world. We complement each other, in the same way we do to produce children.

What prompted you to become a trade unionist?

Ever since I was born, I liked to protest! I grew up in a family that was very politically active. It's in my blood. I was the head of the coordinating committee at school. I held positions of responsibility in the youth movement, then in the women's department, but I had to go further. I wanted to reach this stage, where I would have the right to speak out in defence of the least advantaged, to fight injustice. The trade union movement is the place to do that. There are other associations, but they cannot fulfil the role of the trade unions, which is to defend the interests of the workers, whilst that of an association is more limited. The trade unions are protected by laws that govern the world of work, by international labour standards. The ILO is a tripartite organisation and the workers are one of the pillars, not the NGOs.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

- (1) Union syndicale des travailleurs de Guinée
- (2) Union démocratique des travailleurs de Guinée

(3) Organisation nationale des syndicats libres de Guinée

Founded on 1 November 2006, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 304 national affiliates. Website: www.ituc-csi.org

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