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Spotlight interview with Yannick Etienne (Batay Ouvriye - Haiti)

Brussels, 25 June 2007 (ITUC OnLine): In May 2006, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the World Bank's private-sector lending arm, took a decision that was warmly welcomed by the trade union movement: to include an international labour standards provision in its loan agreements. Part of the origins of this social gain can be found in Haiti. It was there that the IFC, under pressure from the Haitian, Dominican and the international trade union movements, first imposed this condition on a company violating trade union rights. The firm in question was CODEVI, a subsidiary of the textile manufacturing giant Grupo M, which had set up operations in Haiti's first export processing zone. Then, thanks to the relentless work of the Haitian trade union centre Batay Ouvriye and renewed international pressure from trade unions, Clean Clothes Campaign, etc., a collective bargaining agreement was signed at the end of 2005. Batay Ouvriye coordinator Yannick Etienne, discusses the results and future prospects.

Almost 18 months have gone by since the agreement was signed between your affiliate, SOKOWA, and the Dominican company managing the EPZ, CODEVI. Would you say it is being respected?

There is still a long way to go, especially on the issue of wages, which is the workers' main concern. We thought that the rise in the minimum wage to 900 gourds a week (around US$25) was a preliminary step and that all the workers would benefit from the wage rises provided for in the agreement (first 15%, then 10% and finally 5%). But the management decided otherwise. It only increased the lowest wages. Those who are earning around 400 gourds are now paid around a hundred gourds more. It is as if the management thinks that the minimum wage, which hasn't been raised since Aristide was in power, represents a maximum that shouldn't be exceeded!
It's true that SOKOWA is better acknowledged now and the relations with the management are acceptable, but the union is still not consulted about important decisions. Last month, the management introduced changes to the form of payment without notifying the union, which could have triggered a major dispute.

The social benefits are not properly allocated. During the first months of the agreement, CODEVI provided future mums going on maternity leave with a basket of basic goods. Then it stopped, without any explanation. Occupational training has come to a standstill, and yet it is essential that the workers be given a chance to pursue their education and learn a trade, most of them being young and having had very little schooling.

The good news, on the other hand, is that a Haitian company doctor is due to take up a post here. Until now, the workers have only been able to consult the Dominican doctor, which, for cultural reasons, wasn't easy. The union had made this request within the framework of the collective agreement, and CODEVI has just accepted it. The doctor signed his contract in May. His salary will be paid by the Haitian state. I hope he'll be able to develop other initiatives, such as a programme to fight against HIV-AIDS, which is a major problem in our country, and all the more so in a border town like Ouanaminthe.

In short, this collective agreement constitutes a substantial gain. Without it, the union would have to start from scratch with each negotiation. We are well aware of this and are placing a lot of hope in the forthcoming discussions on the renewal of the agreement.

What is the rate of unionisation at CODEVI?

Almost 90% of the 1500 employees are unionised. But the figure fluctuates. It reaches a peak around the time when a general meeting is held, when the union wages a campaign. The rest of the time, it decreases. Staff turnover is high. The union is nonetheless well established. The workers know that without it, relations with the Dominican management would be much more difficult.

You talk about cultural differences. When the export processing zone was set up, the local population felt affronted by the presence of Dominican security guards on Haitian soil. How is this cohabitation going now?

It's going better. The export processing zone is right next to the border. There are two entry points, and on our side, at least, the guards are Haitian. But the situation is still delicate. A few weeks ago, a large number of guards surrounded the premises where the workers gather. It was a form of intimidation, because the management was set to announce a number of layoffs. It doesn't have the right to act in this way; the collective agreement prohibits such methods. It had never acted this way before, when layoffs were made in the past. It's worrying.

What is behind all these dismissals?

There are two explanations. On the one hand, it has to be understood that most of the workers are very young, between 18 and 20, women for the most part, from rural areas, and they haven't had a chance to get used to the rules, the working hours and production targets that have to be met. It's the first time they do a job like this, and sometimes the last, before long. The wages are too low. Some of them are still working the land as well, or have small businesses. There is also the Dajabon market (on the Dominican side), which is an important source of income, so they take time off and end up being sacked. On the other hand, however, many of the problems arise from poor management and the cultural differences. The management is almost entirely Dominican. This leads to friction, misunderstandings and disputes. There are a lot of arbitrary decisions, as well as very obvious sexual harassment. If the women don't respond to the "favours" demanded by their supervisors, they are sacked. On top of that, a Dominican simply has to notify in writing that he doesn't want to work with such and such a worker, and the worker is fired. There are sometimes mass dismissals of around 20 workers.

The Grupo M case also led to some interesting cooperation between Haitian and Dominican trade unionists. Is this being pursued, or has the risk of Dominican companies relocating to Haiti affected it?

We have shared a lot of information and experiences with the Grupo M union in Santiago. We were all hoping that the collective agreement at

CODEVI would serve as an example. The Dominican unionists drew up a draft collective agreement and presented it. But the management opted, rather, to promote the emergence of a yellow union. As regards the risk of relocation, it's true, it exists. Some companies have already closed down in the Dominican Republic. The bosses are perhaps waiting for the passing of the law in the United States, HOPE, (providing Haiti with trade preferences), to take advantage of it by setting up operations in Haiti.

Have the gains secured at CODEVI had positive repercussions on the Port-au-Prince region?

In 2006, job security was too much of a problem in the capital. The factories were either struggling to keep going or busy closing down. The workers had their backs against the wall. The only thing that mattered to them was keeping their jobs or receiving all they were due. It wasn't the right time to talk to them about trade union rights, etc. We did, of course, talk about the success at CODEVI on the radio. Most of the workers in the industrial sector knew about this agreement. Fortunately, the situation is improving a little now. There is talk of industrial redeployment. So yes, we are absolutely determined to share this experience elsewhere.

How are the plans to create new export trade zones progressing?

There are plans to set up four new ones in the Port-au-Prince region. The Drouillard and Taba zones, where works are underway, will be the first to open. According to the authorities, investors are rushing to ask for information about them. The government is promoting Haiti's comparative advantage, which means its low wages! During the May Day celebrations, the key issue we raised was a minimum wage increase. But nobody will hear of it. We are being asked to be patient; they tell us it's just a phase... There are even bosses who are asking us to hush our demands, on the pretext that they are negotiating with potential investors.

Let's return to the Grupo M case, which led to an unprecedented trade union victory. Thanks to the work of your members, backed by unions and NGOs around the world, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) has included international labour standards in its conditions for the granting of loans to the private sector. What lessons have you drawn from this experience? What improvements could be made?

The commitment of the international financial institutions remains highly theoretical. Extraordinary mobilisation efforts had to be made to move things forward in Ouanaminthe. Our presence is accepted now. That's all well and good! But it's not enough. There is no effective follow-up from the IFC. When relations between the management and the union deteriorate, the IFC should get more involved. A forum for dialogue between the IFC, the union and the employer should be promoted; periodical meetings should be held. That is what's missing here. We have only had one discussion on the issue of wages with an IFC representative, and it has led to nothing for the moment. The IFC has laid down conditions for the granting of the loan and should ensure that these conditions are met. Where can a complaint be taken about the fact that social compensation is not paid to rural inhabitants thrown off their land when an EPZ is created? This is just one example.

And what is going to happen once the loan has been repaid? Won't the employer feel relieved of the commitment to respect international labour standards? Will the unions be strong enough?

Finally, the unions have to be given the skills needed to do their work. International solidarity should also be channelled towards trade union education and training. The ITUC has a key role to play in this respect.

Interview by Jacky Delorme

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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