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Spotlight interview with Diana Holland, Chair of the ITUC Women's Committee

"Voluntary arrangements are not enough to end discrimination"

Brussels, 13 August 2007 (ITUC OnLine): Diana Holland is the Chair of the ITUC Women's Committee. She is an experienced trade union leader and in charge of equality issues at the British TGWU (1). After outlining the Women's Committee priorities she goes on to describe her experience of organising women workers, including the often neglected category of domestic workers.

What is the ITUC Women's Committee?

The committee includes representatives of women workers throughout the world, who are nominated by unions in each region. The people in charge of gender issues in the Global Union Federations also attend the annual meetings and there are also links with the TUAC Advisory Committee to the OECD (2).

One of the goals of the committee is to strengthen women's position in the unions, through supporting their membership of trade unions worldwide and their involvement in leadership posts. We also want to ensure that the ITUC is effectively addressing the issues that are important to women workers. Women's Committee representatives attend the meetings of the General Council and the Executive Bureau of the ITUC as a means of ensuring that those bodies tackle our priorities.

We also aim to make a stronger contribution at international level in organisations like the ILO, so that the voice of women workers is heard there too. We need, for example, to increase women's representation within the ILO Workers' Group.

What are the forthcoming activities of the Committee?

Since the committee is only in its infancy we first need to establish it firmly within the structures of the new ITUC. Secondly, we have an action programme to support women's recruitment and promote gender equality within the unions. We want to get all the affiliated organisations behind that programme.

We shall be continuing to draft a Women's Charter, which will include guidelines on sexual harassment and violence against women. The charter will be discussed at our next meeting, in 2008 and will address the fundamental rights and freedoms of all women in the world; it will be a rallying document for women and will help them in the unions and at their workplaces.

We are also campaigning on maternity rights. We want more countries to ratify ILO Convention 183 on maternity protection and to denounce the discrimination faced by women when they are pregnant or have children. That is a central issue for women around the world and there are some horrible abuses.

Women make up 40% of the ITUC membership and 50% of the world's workers. Given this, what do you think of the requirement that 30% of the participants in international trade union meetings be women?

The aim is to obtain parity: 50% for men and women. That said, we realise that there are a number of steps to get from where we are to where we want to be. We will be reflecting on this, in particular at our meeting in 2008, since it may lead to our making proposals for amendments at the next ITUC Congress. But whilst we want a commitment to parity we also want to understand and combat the real obstacles that are preventing women from making progress. So we need action at all levels, not just international level.

Are some of these obstacles shared by all countries or do they vary a lot between regions?

There are still some differences, but there are some general obstacles leading to discrimination. The lack of women's representation in trade union leadership bodies is a worldwide problem. At international level it is even harder to get the right number of women, since the representatives at that level tend to be the oldest members of the unions.

Another obstacle is linked to family responsibilities, which affect both men and women but need to be shared fairly between them.

We often find that even if a union's delegation at an international trade union meeting respects gender parity, it includes a male president, who is a key spokesperson for the organisation, whilst the women delegate basically has less authority for expressing her priorities...

The standing orders of the Women's Committee clearly state that the representatives need to be women with experience of representing women's concerns and campaigning for equality, who have an active role in their unions that corresponds to the kind of representation work they will be doing. The commitment is not to involve women simply because they are women, but because they are capable of representing workers effectively and have experience of the whole workforce and not just a section of it, so that they can achieve good results. If we neglect the experience of half the world's workers the union movement will be much weaker for it.

How are women organised in your own union?

I have been working on promoting gender issues in the unions for 20 years now. One of the lessons we have learnt is that in order to combat the under-representation of women, you need some positive action, including certain rules, since voluntary arrangements are not sufficient for changing things. Our experience has shown that simply calling for equal opportunities between men and women does not provide women with equal chances in practice. That requires some positive action measures, which will only be correctly applied if they are compulsory. It is also important that women's structures should not just have advisory roles but have the same authority as the union's other committees.

The number of union members in Britain has decreased owing to the systematic government attacks on the union movement. We realised that we

would have to do our organising differently and approach workers in sectors with less of a union tradition, including many women working in jobs such as cleaning, catering, childcare and eldercare. We had to set up some new strategies for reaching them. On a personal level, I was involved in campaigns aimed at representing migrant domestic workers. They were suffering terrible exploitation and abuse, like a modern form of slavery.

Were you able to help these domestic workers?

When a Labour government was elected in 1997, one of the first things it did was to amend the status of migrant domestic workers, who were virtual slaves, and to recognise their rights. That was the result of one of our campaigns. Sadly, we now need to wage another campaign to protect those rights, since there is pressure to introduce new immigration legislation that would destroy the achievements of 1997.

Women domestic workers have different expectations from the unions than other categories of workers. They are clearly not asking for collective bargaining with an employer. It is possible that we will get a national collective agreement at a later stage, but for the time being we are still dealing with individual relationships. What these women need is a strong trade union and to feel they are part of an organisation with hundreds of thousands of other workers alongside them.

Having a union membership card also provides these migrant domestic workers with an identity, since that identity may have been stolen by their employer hanging on to their passport, or because their status on entering the country did not entitle them to individual rights as workers.

How did your union start approaching these domestic women workers? It must have been hard, as they work in private homes ...

In fact, they approached me. They invited me to one of their meetings. They explained their situation and then stuck a microphone in my hand and asked me what I could do about it! We started with the organisation that these migrant domestic workers already had and worked out how it could cooperate with the unions. We had to adapt our working methods as a union; for instance, we have a group of collectors of union fees, since many of these women cannot get bank accounts.

To begin with, the priority was to campaign with these migrant domestic workers to get their rights recognised. When that campaign was successful, the form of support could change. Trade union representatives now go to the community centres where many domestic workers regularly meet and offer them advice.

Is there any cooperation at international level?

At the last meeting of the ITUC Women's Committee, the issue of representation of domestic women workers, particularly migrants, was again raised and recognised as a priority worldwide. The ILO also needs to address this issue. A session devoted to domestic women workers at the last IUF (3) congress was encouraging. The discussions at the meeting clearly showed that the same sorts of abuse are being committed in numerous countries. Proposals were adopted for ensuring that migrant domestic workers are better informed about their rights and the

situation in the host countries, together with the sorts of contacts they can have with trade unions or communities that can help them. Our own union works with the Filipino trade union movement in this area and we would like to build similar contacts with other countries.

In Britain we got an agreement whereby migrant domestic workers entering the country receive a document pack that includes references to our union and to Kalayaan (4).

What services do you offer them in practice?

We work with their organisation, Kalayaan to provide them with computer and language courses. Some women migrant domestic workers have been trained as trade union representatives so that they can, in turn, train others. We have also been involved in campaigns against deportation.

Many migrant domestic workers want to benefit from our experience and confidence in conducting negotiations with the authorities. They also want help with getting a stronger voice themselves. This is very important, because although much of the work done by women around the world is invisible, that is particularly true of domestic work.

Was it difficult to get other members of the union to recognise the need for this type of work?

There was not really any resistance, though it is true that if we had been discussing priorities, it would not have been at the top of the list. Unions are about people meeting and joining forces to secure change. That is exactly what happened with migrant domestic workers. We organised a number of fringe meetings at TUC and Labour Party conferences, at which migrant domestic workers were given the floor. Many top union leaders attended those meetings. The sheer strength of the women talking about their experience highlighted the importance of the campaign and from then on nobody asked if it was a priority.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

- (1) Transport and General Workers' Union (<http://www.tgwu.org.uk/>)
- (2) <http://www.tuac.org/>
- (3) International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (www.iuf.org)
- (4) <http://www.kalayaan.org.uk/>

Founded on 1 November 2006, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 305 national affiliates. Website: www.ituc-csi.org

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