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Spotlight interview with Eric Manzi (CESTRAR-Rwanda)

«Trade Union Crèches to Help Informal Agricultural Workers»

Brussels, 23 October 2007: What can be done to reach informal economy workers and respond to the rise of the private sector? Eric Manzi, general secretary of CESTRAR (Centrale des Syndicats des Travailleurs du Rwanda), outlines the trade union priorities in Rwanda.

How did CESTRAR emerge?

CESTRAR was formed in 1985, under the auspices of the single party. There was a lot of resistance within our union itself, because the independent nature of the trade union movement, its independence from the single political party, had to be asserted. During the Congress in 1991, a declaration of independence was made. We then experienced a kind of liberation of the trade union movement and other organisations were created, but this has not led to the development of a strong trade union movement in Rwanda. The trade union movement pulled itself together again after the war in 1996. We have about 35,000 members. The monthly affiliation fee is 100 Rwandan francs (€1 = 750 Rwandan francs). We need to increase that amount to be able to operate better. We are going to ask for 1% of wages, that way everyone will pay in accordance with his or her salary, making it fairer for low income earners.

What are CESTRAR's main tasks?

We are the oldest and most representative trade union centre. The government organised social elections some months ago and we were pleased to have won 94% of the seats for workplace representatives. We have an important role to play in the construction of a strong trade union movement. We inform the workers about their rights. The idea that they have the right to express and defend themselves is quite foreign to them, because of the lack of a democratic tradition and the political environment of the past and present. There has been some progress, of course, but there's still a long way to go. Our awareness raising work is a crucial task. We also carry out trade union activities to promote the protection of workers. We work to ensure that our legislation conforms with international labour standards and that this legislation is respected.

What is your policy regarding informal work?

We have fought a number of legal battles regarding the protection of these workers. We're trying to convince the Labour Ministry about the need to protect them. The false informal sector, such as undeclared companies, must be dismantled. These are people that want to shirk their tax and social security obligations. The workers in these companies are deprived of all their rights. We make them understand that they have the right to an employment contract and social security. Alongside these are the real informal workers, such as the self-employed door-to-door plumbers. We try to help them to increase their revenues, by persuading them that it is better to work as a team. By setting up a co-operative, for example, they can secure more earnings and register with health and social security funds.

How do you reach out to these informal workers?

They don't come to us, we have to go to them. You'll have noticed that there are a lot of moto-taxis in Kigali. We approach these workers, giving them help and advice. They have set up mutual funds and we've organised them into unions. They have set up a driving school and opened a spare parts shop. The hardest task is making them understand the importance of uniting; individualism is still deeply rooted in Rwandan society. What matters most to them is money; the first thing they ask us is what the union is going to bring them in monetary terms. It's a long and arduous task...

About 90% of the population lives in rural areas. How do you get your message across to these people?

There are many cooperatives in the tea sector. We have found a way round things, because they directly ask us what we're going to give them in monetary terms. In the tea sector, for example, we're going to start a programme – with the help of the Belgian trade union centre the FGTB – on health and safety, and set up a trade union crèche for the women working in the fields. They earn less because their wage is calculated on the basis of the number of kilos sold. Women work up until two weeks before giving birth and we don't have a fund to cover maternity leave. The law establishes two months maternity leave with pay from the employer. But informal economy workers have no employer, so they have to start work again straight after giving birth. Their productivity falls because they have to go home in between tasks to feed their babies. We have come up with the idea of setting up crèches in the fields so that the mothers can leave them there, close to where they work. We carry out awareness raising, on the one

hand, explaining the health risks involved in working just two weeks after giving birth, pointing out that it's not very good to bring their children to the fields either; but, on the other hand, we are providing them with a concrete service, which is what they want. Through this crèche they are going to set up mutual fund to help them every time a mother falls ill, or to compensate for their losses when their earnings fall. According to estimates, there are 300,000 informal workers in Kigali, working in construction, woodwork and welding workshops, etc.

Are you working in partnership with other unions?

There are currently 5 trade union confederations in Rwanda and we are the most representative. We led an inter-union group at one point, and have been involved in joint initiatives, but with the competition being so fierce, there was often friction. But, to be frank, we have opted to work alone now, because we realised that the other unions are still weak and had little added value to offer us in terms of our action. We have, nonetheless, carried out joint initiatives and are working on the Labour Code with COTRAF at the moment. Aside from the ideological differences, it's a union we could work with in the future.

How are employers reacting to the trade union movement?

It's not easy with the private sector, which is still very wary about our awareness raising work. We're making good progress thanks to the Labour Ministry, which is supporting our campaign to promote the implementation of new policies and to encourage private sector employers to adapt to the rules. The Ministry is taking a lot of measures to force the private sector to respect the law. If it wasn't for that, we'd be nowhere. The slogan is "Protect your capital in terms of financial resources but also your capital in terms of human resources", but it's by no means an easy message to get across..

Can you work freely as a trade union, or do you have limited room for manoeuvre?

There is no direct pressure. In a way, we come under the tutelage of the Labour Ministry, which is our social partner at government level and doesn't give us any problems. We do say, however, that they don't do enough to ensure that the good relations we have with the government and the Labour Ministry impacts on the private sector. This sector is on the rise and the State is no longer the largest employer. We are sometimes limited when it comes to the right to strike. We live in a country that is still damaged by the war we experienced. Sometimes, the slightest grievance is seen as a public disturbance and is severely punished. Not being able to express ourselves by means of strike action is one of our frustrations.

Interview by Bruno BrioniAlso

Read the Spotlight Interview with Dominique Bicamumpaka (COTRAF-Rwanda), entitled "Organising the Informal Economy is a Priority, especially in the Tea and Coffee Sectors" at <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article1518> <<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article1518>>

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