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Spotlight interview with Dominique Bicamumpaka (COTRAF-Rwanda)

“Organising the Informal Economy is a Priority, especially in the Tea and Coffee Sectors”

Brussels, 23 October 2007 (ITUC OnLine): Dominique Bicamumpaka, president and coordinator of COTRAF (Congrès du Travail et de la Fraternité) tells us about the trade union movement in Rwanda and his union's efforts to organise the informal economy.

What are your union's aims?

Our goal is to support, mobilise and defend the workers and raise their awareness about the need to organise into unions. We train trade union leaders. We receive many complaints regarding unfair dismissals and workers' rights violations. We also take care of the social economy. We have 11,000 members at the moment. 4200 of these pay their dues regularly. Those in the lowest income groups pay €0.14 and teachers, for example, pay around €1.00.

How large is the informal economy in Rwanda?

Salaried employees only account for 5% of the workforce in our country, so the majority of workers are employed in the informal economy, mostly in agriculture, which represents 90% of Rwanda's economic activity. Out of an active population of 3,300,000, only 600,000 people work in the formal economy and 2,700,000 in the informal economy. What we have to do now is to give them support and help them to organise and manage their projects. We provide them with financial assistance to launch their projects, in the form of micro credits.

You do a lot of work with cooperatives. How does that work?

Cooperatives are born out of the idea that unity is strength. First of all, we look at how they are organised, the state of their finances, the equipment they use, etc.. Then we give them guidance to ensure that their income generating activities are well-managed. After that, we give them funds to finance the continuation of their activities, be it cattle raising or handicrafts, etc. Those involved in agricultural activities, for example, reimburse us at harvesting time. Those working in other areas, reimburse us on a monthly basis, paying interest of 1% a month.

How do you raise informal economy workers' awareness about trade unionism?

We go through the cooperative leaders. We tell them about the benefits of a trade union and about their rights as workers. We most often approach them, because they are not aware of our existence, be it in rural areas or in towns, whether they work as motor mechanics or shoe shines, etc. They are like micro entrepreneurs, but they know nothing about their rights. We inform them, for example, that they can seek financial assistance from financial institutions to expand on their activities.

So is the informal economy an action priority for you?

Yes, especially in the tea and coffee sectors, where many workers have no employment contract. There are estimated to be as many as 80,000 in this situation. Informal workers without a contract can also be found in the cooperatives of small planters. We try to organise them into unions and inform them about their social security rights, for example. Raising awareness is a lengthy process, as many of these workers cannot read or write. We were in the south of the country, last week, where the bosses are starting to appreciate the presence of trade unions, because the trade union leader is setting an example, changing the mentality of the workers, and it's more constructive. We are also helping them to secure better pay, which is very low at the moment. The price per kilo of tea varies according to the price on the international market. But there is a difference between the international price and the local price, and it's not right for small planters. The average salary in Rwanda is \$212 a month, but in the informal economy it is just \$20 a month.

Do you have good relations with the government?

There is currently no structure for social dialogue. Last year, the Prime Minister passed a decree on the setting up of a council for social dialogue, but it isn't yet operational. It's a structure we really need, because everything is informal at the moment. I receive mails from the Labour Ministry, inviting us to attend certain consultative meetings, but the negotiating system is not yet up to scratch.

Could you give us an example of the demands made by informal economy workers?

In the southern region we visited a few days ago, for example, the workers are asking for a wage increase, because they are working for €0.50 a day at the moment. We are engaged in talks with the Labour Ministry regarding the introduction of a guaranteed minimum wage but, because there is still no formal negotiating structure, it's not easy. The message is getting across, and we have heard that we might secure a euro and a half, but we don't consider this to be enough, and would welcome a more in-depth examination of this issue. There are also demands regarding overtime and the lack of equipment, such as the boots to protect the people working in the swamps.

Are you cooperating with other unions?

In March 2007, we created the ITR, an inter-union group bringing together the main trade union centres in Rwanda - the Association des Syndicats Chrétiens, Conseil National des Organisations Syndicales Libres au Rwanda, Congrès du Travail et de la Fraternité and the Confédération Rwandaise Indépendante des Syndicats et Associations des Travailleurs. Only CESTRAR (Centrale des Syndicats des Travailleurs du Rwanda) has chosen not to join the inter-union group for the moment.

How are employers reacting to this new trade union movement?

We organised workplace representative elections, which most employers objected to. They are afraid of the power these reps might gain! But we have seen some progress since 2002, when Rwanda ratified the Constitution and the Core Conventions of the ILO, which enshrine the right to freedom of association and freedom of expression. People were afraid to even mention the word "union" before. More media coverage is given to trade union activities now. As of next year, we are going to receive training assistance for six years, within the framework of a cooperation project with the Belgian trade union centre CSC (Confédération des syndicats chrétiens), funded by the Belgian Development Cooperation Department, thanks to which we'll have better leaders and better trained members.

What about the right to strike?

The right to strike is recognised by the Constitution, but there is obviously a gap between our rights in law and in practice. A number of conditions, prerequisites, have to be fulfilled before a strike can be authorised, and strike action is often confused with public disorder. We live in a country traumatised by the genocide of 1994... We give priority to mobilisation and negotiation.

Interview by Bruno Brioni

(*) Also read the Spotlight Interview with Eric Manzi (CESTRAR-Rwanda), entitled "Trade Union Crèches to Help Informal Agricultural Workers" at <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article1519&lang=en>

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