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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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Spotlight interview with Laurent Ouedraogo (CNTB - Burkina Faso)

“Trade union action against high cost of living”

Brussels, 7 April 2008 (ITUC OnLine): Following on from the recent demonstrations that rallied tens of thousands of people across Burkina Faso, one of the poorest countries in the world (1), the national trade union movement, backed by civil society organisations, has called a general strike for 8 and 9 April to protest against the high cost of living, corruption and impunity. Interview with Laurent Ouedraogo, general secretary of the CNTB and current president of the national coalition of trade union and civil society organisations.

- Why is it that the demonstrations of recent months rallied so much support?

The reason for such massive support is the growing awareness of the huge imbalance between wages and the cost of living. The high cost of living, which the unions have been denouncing since 2001, is a truly major concern among the population. The currency devaluations, the constant increases in the price of basic necessities and foodstuffs such as rice, oil, salt or soap, the austerity measures imposed by the international financial institutions, the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, the freezes on wages, pensions and study grants, the culture of impunity surrounding murders and financial crimes.... The general feeling of discontent was expressed through these demonstrations. We regret, of course, the violence that broke out during some of the demonstrations in February. It has to be understood that the social situation is so grave that people are going hungry. They are also thirsty for social justice, for access to health care, housing, education, and for a better future for their children. They are sick of seeing the country's few resources being swallowed up by a tiny minority of people in power and those close to them.

The demonstrations also owe their success to the increasingly effective unity of action between the six national trade union centres and the fifteen or so independent unions. Finally, our impact has also been strengthened by the expansion of our action base, with the arrival of fourteen civil society organisations and the taking on board of their concerns. The trade union movement in Burkina Faso has become a serious and essential social partner for the government. It organises activities, strikes, meetings and marches with order and discipline, as seen during the demonstrations in March. Genuine social dialogue that meets people's real expectations is the only way to defuse the risk of violence.

National trade union centres, independent unions and associations joined forces on 12 March to form the CCVC, the “national coalition to fight the high cost of living, corruption, fraud, impunity, and in favour of rights and freedoms”(2). What are the key demands of this broad coalition uniting

the trade union movement and civil society?

We are demanding a 25% rise in the wages and pensions of public, semi-public and private sector workers. We want price controls and a significant cut in the price of basic necessities such as rice, corn, millet, beans, oil, salt, sugar and milk. We are also demanding a reduction in the taxes on petroleum goods and other taxes affecting small traders, artisans and service providers, as well as the elimination of VAT (value added tax) on bank loans. We want to see more accessible and better quality education, better access to health care, and are demanding an end to the expropriation of poor people's lands as well as to the reckless privatisation of state enterprises, especially in strategic sectors.

We are also asking for the release of all those arrested and imprisoned within the framework of the demonstrations, in the interests of peace and fairness.

- How does the trade union movement view the measures taken by the government in response to the protests, such as the suspension of certain customs duties?

The unions have taken note of the government's decisions and view such initiatives in a positive light. We nonetheless remain concerned about the implementation of these decisions, given that "outlawed" habits have become well engrained, favouring fraud, corruption and impunity.

- You have called a 48-hour general strike for 8th and 9th April. How do you intend to pursue this action?

"So many people came to the meeting on 15 March at the trade union building in Ougadougou that we did not have enough room for them". We informed the members of the decision taken by the Trade Union Centres and Independent Unions to hold a national strike on 8 and 9 April. The two strike notices were issued and all the legal procedures were followed. This is a first and important stage in the process of raising awareness, and we are using every means at our disposal, such as the media. The civil society organisations came to the meeting and their representatives were introduced to those attending.

Prior to that, all the general secretaries of the Trade Union Centres and Independent Unions went to campaign in major cities such as Koudougou, Bobo Banfora, Fada, N'Gourma, Tenkodogo and Zorgo, to rally the members' support for our activities. We are going to continue our campaign in other towns, Dori, Kaya, Po, Leo, Gaoua, Dedougou, Boromo, before the strike.

How do you think the international trade union movement could help you in your struggle?

It's very important that our action captures the attention of the international trade union movement, so that it can advise us and give us greater visibility on a global scale.

We are entering the very hot season and it will become increasingly difficult to organise big rallies of the kind announced for the strike of the 8th and 9th April. The material requirements are huge: we have to be able to give a bag of water, at the very least, to every member coming to the labour exchange. We also need international solidarity.

Interview by Natacha David

- Also read the "Union View" report entitled "Burkina Faso: Informal economy

at the centre of new solidarity initiatives" at
http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/Burkina_EN_Smaller.pdf

- Also see the video entitled "Salissa - Maternity protection in the informal economy" at

http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article722&var_recherche=burkina%20faso
<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article722&var_recherche=burkina%20faso>

(1) A poor country, enclosed in the Sahel, Burkina Faso is ranked 176th, second to last place, in the Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

(2) This coalition groups the CNTB, CSB, ONSL, USTB, FO/UNSL and CGT-B union centres, around a dozen independent unions, and fourteen civil society organisations. The CNTB, in the person of its confederal general secretary Laurent Ouedraogo, is presiding the coalition for the period running from 31 December 2007 to 30 April 2008.

The ITUC represents 168 million workers in 155 countries and territories and has 311 national affiliates.

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