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Spotlight interview with Mohammed Haidour (Spain - CCOO)

"With or without documents, migrants are an asset who contribute to the economy and society"

Brussels, 27 May 2008 (ITUC Online): Mohammed Haidour, a worker from Morocco who came to live Spain more than 20 years ago as an undocumented migrant, is now on the national executive of the Spanish trade union centre CCOO (*), responsible for migrant workers' issues. Assisting legalisation, a policy of integration into society and the trade unions, trade union cooperation with the country of origin ... he describes the challenges unions face in defending the interests of migrant workers.

When did you emigrate from Morocco to Spain?

I left the town of my birth, Tétouan, in northern Morocco, in 1986 to go to Spain. I was 17. I had no official documents, like the majority of Moroccans who came to Spain at that time. In my first four years as an undocumented migrant, there was nothing "irregular" about me, I had a life, I worked, I was a part of the economy and of society.

How did your first contact with a Spanish trade union come about?

The principal means of communication in immigrant communities is word of mouth. That's how I heard of the union. Thanks to its historic relationship with Spanish emigrant communities, the CCOO already provided a range of services for immigrant workers. Little by little, I went through all the trade union steps that an immigrant goes through. Legally, as an undocumented migrant, I didn't have the right to represent workers, but the CCOO let me do so anyway.

When did you obtain legal status?

In 1991, Spain's social movements, and particularly the trade unions, took advantage of the healthy economic climate and the growing demand for labour to get a "regularisation" procedure set up. A lot of workers' assemblies were organised with the financial support of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, particularly in Catalonia and Andalusia. We were able to get legal status for 120,000 immigrant workers, myself included. The end of this process coincided with the discussions on the preparation of the CCOO Congress, where we wanted to encourage the participation of migrant workers. And that is how I joined the national leadership of the CCOO, dealing with migrant workers' questions.

How has the trade union approach to migration evolved over the last 20 years in Spain?

The composition of Spanish society and the Spanish labour market have changed a lot. Trade unions' work with migrants has steadily grown and become more complex. In less than a decade the proportion of immigrants in

Spain's population has reached 8 or 9%, which is very close to neighbouring countries. The difference is that in Spain the process is much faster, which creates challenges for society and the trade unions. Immigrants came here, and continue to come, to meet a real demand, concentrated in a few areas of the country and in a few sectors, such as building, agriculture, the hotel trade and domestic services. This geographical and sectoral concentration makes integration and combating discrimination all the more challenging, in society and in the trade unions.

What specific steps do you take to reach out to migrant workers?

To inform migrant workers and show them the benefits of union membership, to contact undocumented workers despite the fact that this is illegal, we have created the Information Centres for Immigrant Workers (CITE), many of which are run by migrants themselves. There are 177 of them across Spain, and they play a very important role in terms of information, vocational and language training, administrative and legal advice, and liaison with the sectoral trade union federations concerned. The important thing is that the migrant does not have to be a union member or legally documented to benefit from the CITE's services.

What is the challenge for the trade unions internally, in terms of ensuring fair representation for migrant workers?

65,000 workers are affiliated to the CCOO (on the basis of bank transfers) and over 100,000 benefit from specific services, but the sectoral and territorial distribution is uneven. In some sectors, such as the building industry in Madrid or Catalonia, they account for up to 30% of members. But they don't have a satisfactory level of representation at the leadership level yet, just as women and young people don't. The implementation of resolutions and decisions taken since the 1991 CCOO Congress has not kept up with the rise in the number of migrant workers joining the union or their level of participation in grass roots decision-making bodies, shop floor delegates and works councils. It is a matter of self-criticism. We have an internal debate to identify priorities for action that will enable us to improve this situation. The debate can be controversial, just as in society at large. We also try to learn from the experience of neighbouring countries such as France or Belgium. It isn't only about discrimination; it also takes time for an immigrant to understand the internal workings of the union, trends, etc.

What progress has been made with the political authorities regarding the defence and integration of migrants?

The new socialist government has taken a lot of initiatives to encourage integration and harmonious relations between the different immigrant populations and the rest of the Spanish population. The decision to move the issue of migration from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs was an important step forward. Migrants aren't a security issue; they are assets who contribute to the economy and society. Installing tripartite social dialogue between the employers, governments and trade unions within the "regularisation" process is also positive. We know that employers are in favour of granting legal status because for the employers it is a means of "whitewashing" the exploitation of undocumented workers. It is not a game of equals. The worker does it out of need, the employer for profit. But the unions' demand for permanent legal status for all immigrant workers who can prove they have had a job and a place to live in the country for two years has been met. In the fight against human

trafficking and the mafias, we have also won the right for migrants to denounce a network or an employer that has been exploiting them, either directly or via a trade union, together with the prosecution of the exploiter and the regularisation of their employment.

Do you also make use of international legal instruments for the protection of migrant workers?

Spain has ratified ILO Convention 97 on migrant workers and Convention 111 on discrimination (occupation and employment). We think the United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families is just as important, but although it came into force in 2003, it hasn't been ratified by a single European Union country. We are organising a campaign to pressure the Spanish government to apply the UN Convention, given that it has come into force. We are continuing our lobbying work. The Spanish government is quite receptive to our arguments, but it does not have an outright majority and needs the agreement of the People's Party (PPE) to change the constitution, for example on the question of the right to vote for immigrants. But the PPE still tries to manipulate the migratory question.

With 40,000 legal immigrants and about the same number of undocumented immigrants, the El Ejido region still exports huge quantities of fruit and vegetables. How has the situation there changed since the race riots for which the region became notorious in 2000?

I was there at the time of the riots. I spent three months in the region. It was very difficult. The working conditions were appalling and the events that took place were very, very shocking. Unfortunately the situation hasn't really improved. Those who withstand the working conditions are still, mostly, the undocumented Moroccan workers. The local employers have asked that if a Moroccan is granted legal status, that they be obliged to continue working in El Ejido. But once they have legal status, they soon leave for another region, another sector of activity. It is too difficult there, so it is only the "undocumented" who continue to go there and work. There are big economic interests at stake for at least three countries. The Almeria region has the highest per capita income of any European region. On the Spanish side, a lot of the local inhabitants have started to grow produce because it is so profitable, it is the goose that lays the golden eggs. There are also a lot of Dutch interests that come into play, because the latest technologies being used in Almeria were developed in Holland. And finally, there are big Moroccan interests too. One could easily imagine that agricultural produce from Almeria is in competition with produce from Morocco, but it is much more complicated than that. Quite a lot of entrepreneurs from northern Morocco sell their produce in Almeria, where they have set up packing companies, with Moroccan workers, enabling them to re-export their fruit as Spanish produce. Recently, there has been a lot of talk about the so-called Spanish water melons, which are in reality Moroccan!

Haven't employers also taken advantage of competition between migrants, favouring workers from Eastern Europe?

The People's Party (PPE) took political advantage of the attacks in the USA and Spain to call for only non-Muslim workers to be employed. In Andalusia in particular, there was a process of replacing workers, particularly with people from Eastern Europe, but it was on a relatively small scale because employers in the agricultural and building sectors know that Moroccan

workers are accustomed to very difficult conditions, particularly the heat. The Moroccan women who come to pick strawberries, for example, have already worked in the sector in Morocco.

Today there is still a positive rate of growth, but there has been a noticeable slowdown in some sectors, such as the building industry. As soon as that happens you hear populist, xenophobic speeches about “work for Spaniards first.”

Another area of your work is fostering trade union cooperation with the migrants' countries of origin. What progress has been made there?

We have a long-standing relationship with Morocco. Since 1995, we have had agreements with the Moroccan trade unions UMT, CDT, UGTM and FDT. We have also begun to have contact with the trade union linked to the Islamist party. We've carried out a lot of training with the CDT, on gender issues, immigration, collective bargaining, to learn how to get beyond the dispute stage and find solutions.

We also have relations with Tunisia (UGTT) and Algeria (UGTA). And we have signed an agreement with the USTMA (the Union of Arab Maghreb Workers' Unions) on migration, which will be implemented this year. And we collaborate with the ICATU (International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions). We took part in seminars in Damascus last December on migrant workers in the Gulf States and the Mediterranean basin. It is very complex, but we have been able to finalise agreements with several trade unions in the region and highlight the issue of migrants, particularly the problems of migrant domestic workers in countries such as Jordan, Syria, Bahrain, Kuwait or the United Arab Emirates. These subjects were still taboo not long ago, particularly as the Gulf States see migrants as a threat to their identity. Now that we can talk about it, we are making progress.

We have a cooperation programme with the sub-Saharan trade unions (Guinea, Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, Cap Verde) and we will soon have representatives in Senegal and Morocco, because more and more workers from the sub-Saharan countries stay in Morocco to work. The same applies to Tunisia, where there are migrants from Chad and Niger in the building industry and agriculture. In the same spirit of cooperation that we have with the unions of the Maghreb and the Middle East, we are also in contact with the unions of Eastern Europe, such as the Romanians, and Asia, such as the Pakistanis, who are heavily concentrated in Catalonia.

How are the unions responding to the wave of intergovernmental agreements on quotas for temporary contracts for migrants, notably in agriculture?

The Moroccan trade unions, at the request of the Spanish unions, are also trying to improve the regulation of migratory flows, ensuring the respect of decent work, which is significant progress. To begin with, the Moroccan government was opposed to the involvement of the trade unions in the hiring process. We raised the matter with the Spanish government, and the Moroccan side finally agreed to trade union participation. We have seen positive developments from the Moroccan government and some employers in favour of social dialogue. Recently a delegation of Moroccan trade unions came to visit some strawberry farms in Spain. There are bilateral governmental agreements, but in reality the working and housing conditions mentioned in these agreements are not respected. We hope that trade union cooperation will help improve things for future seasons.

In terms of exchanges of information and experiences, cross-border trade union cooperation can have an impact in both the migrants' country of origin and destination, and in fact more and more countries are seeing migratory flows in both directions. The deplorable conditions faced by sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco or Tunisia, for example, has become an issue for these countries' trade unions because morally you cannot ask European governments to improve the situation of immigrant workers while allowing those coming to these Maghreb countries to be treated just as badly. I recently took part in a seminar in Tunisia where the trade unions roundly criticised the legislation concerning sub-Saharan migrants currently in force in Morocco and Tunisia.

Interview by Natacha David

(*) Mohammed Haidour is also a member of the European Trade Union Confederation's (ETUC) working group on "migration and inclusion."

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