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Spotlight Interview with Michel Barka (Chad-UST)

« Chad : trade union leaders are being targeted by the government

Brussels, 27 June 2008 (ITUC OnLine): Despite its oil revenue, Chad is still faced with insecurity, corruption, an absence of democracy, and very serious poverty. Trade unions fighting for change are subject to underhand repression by the authorities. Michel Barka, the President of the UST and a member, until January 2008, of the College for the Monitoring and Surveillance of Oil Earnings, talks to the ITUC.

The UST has been the prime target for anti-union attacks by the governments for many months. Why is this?

It all began with our 2005 pay claim. The oil fields were beginning to bring in a lot of money, while purchasing power was falling sharply. At the President's request we agreed to postpone our demands, after he had promised an initial pay rise of 5% at the beginning of 2006, to encourage us to wait. But he didn't keep to that promise. At the beginning of 2007, the whole Chadian trade union movement seemed to be behind our demands, so we proposed creating the "Intersyndicale", a cross-union group. All the trade union leaders thought this was an excellent idea. Unfortunately, when it came to the formal creation of the Intersyndicale, some of them started to hesitate, explaining that they had not had time to consult their rank and file, etc. We couldn't wait any longer. The Intersyndicale called a strike and it was very well supported throughout the country. Then in a dramatic about-turn, the teachers' union of Chad (SET), an independent organisation, announced that it was leaving the Intersyndicale and calling off its strike.

Did you find out what was behind that?

Corruption. We have proof that the government paid 200 million CFA to the SET leaders to leave the strike and the Intersyndicale. The go-betweens who took the money to the SET got angry however because they weren't paid any "commission", and they took their revenge by telling us about it. A few weeks later we got hold of a copy of a document setting out the terms and conditions of the agreement. The SET general secretary denied it all of course. He tried to intimidate us as well, because all of a sudden he had become an important person in Chad. The authorities had completely won him over, by including him on all sorts of state structures.

Did the government succeed?

Yes, when it saw some trade unionists hesitating over the creation of the Intersyndicale it realised that it was possible to divide us. That was just one of several attempts. For example, François Djondang and Younous Mahad, the president and general secretary of the health workers' union, were also

approached by a Minister of State, but they would not give in to corruption. But when it came to the strike, the pressure on workers was too strong. There were more and more violations of trade union rights. Many activists were intimidated. The movement was running out of steam so we decided to suspend the strike. The organisations who were not, or no longer, members of the Intersyndicale reached a draft agreement which included some of our demands. But today that agreement is by no means being respected. Even the leaders of the CLTT who signed it recognise that now. Our fellow trade unionists have to learn from this: we can only succeed if we remain united.

What other anti-union attacks have been made against you?

The arbitrary dissolution of the Intersyndicale in 2007 was a violation of ILO Convention 87 and the refusal to negotiate with the workers' chosen representatives is a breach of Convention 98. During the strike the government changed strike legislation, making it much more restrictive. We are also critical of the government's refusal to take trade union representativeness into account. There are legal criteria on this that are not being respected. On the Economic and Social Committee for example, the appointment of members does not take into account our specific role. The UST is on the same level as about 30 federations. For several years, the government has refuted the right of our general secretary Djibril Assali to represent workers at the International Labour Conference. Last year, his passport was withdrawn to prevent him from attending. Furthermore, he and Haroum Khager, a UST adviser, are being prosecuted in Chad for denouncing the corruption I referred to. Both leaders are being targeted by the government. They have been dismissed because of their trade union activities, and in practice they are banned from working in this country. They are not alone. Since 2005, hundreds of our members have been subject to intimidation or sanctions for taking part in strikes.

Is the decision to replace you on the College for the Monitoring and Surveillance of Oil Earnings also a form of punishment by the government?

Of course ! Partly because of the strike and partly because of recent events. Following the rebel attack at the beginning of February 2008, the government took all sorts of arbitrary decisions. I'm not the only one to have been thrown out of the College. The president of the Chadian human rights' league (LTDH) and the representative of development organisations were too. I'm very sad it happened, but it was a great experience and I learnt a lot about my country. I was the rapporteur general, which was a great honour. Today, I doubt this institution can still play the role it used to.

The College was created in response to World Bank requirements. It wanted to make Chad's oil industry a worldwide example of good governance. Do you think the College has lost its legitimacy?

Yes I do. It is important to know that after the clash between the World Bank and the government, following the government's decision to change the oil law (1), the World Bank got the role of the College extended to monitor all oil revenue, not only direct income. Indirect earnings, namely tax, are the jackpot, and the government dips into that money shamelessly. So we had to be replaced by people who would be more "pliant".

But even then, Chad has not had positive results from its oil production. Very few Chadians think the financial resources have been used to improve the country's development or reduce poverty. It hasn't been a total failure. From 2004 to 2007, direct earnings were used to build schools, health centres, roads, water towers, etc. The College was able to verify all this. But it was also very critical of the way the budgets were managed. Another problem is that there is a lot of infrastructure that still doesn't work for lack of staff, material, medicines, etc. The problem is that at the College we didn't have the power to supervise indirect earnings, which are 10 to 20 times higher than direct earnings! Everyone knows what is going on. The money has mostly been used to pay the army, to buy tanks and helicopters. Corruption is at its worst in the oil-producing regions, which should get 5% of oil earnings. The members of the commission that manage these resources have just been replaced for the second time. In Doba, for example, they have built a stadium instead of taking care of priorities such as water purification.

Can the trade unions play a role in bringing peace to the country?

Chad is an incredibly complex country, with ethnic and religious divisions. Conflict is almost a way of life here. But you won't find anyone in Chad who would dare claim that the UST reflects these divisions. We include everyone: southerners, northerners, Christians, Muslims. It works in the UST because we run our organisation democratically. Everyone knows what we are negotiating about, and afterwards we share the results of the negotiations with everyone. That is how it should work at the national level if we want to bring peace to the country. We need frank and inclusive dialogue, involving all those involved in the crisis. But in Chad, anyone who speaks of the rebels is suspected of passing intelligence to the enemy. But the truth is that dialogue and education are our best weapons in this fight. It is worth emphasising the key role that PANAF (2) played in promoting dialogue and peace among the workers. In addition to providing workers' education we were able to carry out a civic education campaign, with the support of the US national trade union centre the AFL-CIO, during the 2001 elections. Together with several human rights organisations, we created a radio station in the capital that had a very big audience, although that has just been suspended again by the government. The UST is present in all the structures that have been set up to promote democracy, such as the Call for Peace and Reconciliation Monitoring Committee. Despite our anti-democratic government, we intend to continue instilling an understanding of the benefits of dialogue among our compatriots. At least this has given us an opportunity to develop strong ties with everyone who wants change in Chad.

Interview by Jacky Delorme

(1) Following pressure by the World Bank, the 1999 law on managing oil revenue stipulated that a large share of direct income should be allocated to priority sectors such as health, education and rural development. The equivalent of 10% of these financial resources should be paid into a Fund for future generations. The 2006 changes included the cancellation of this Fund and, more broadly, a reduction in spending on the fight against poverty.

(2) The Pan-African Workers' Education Programme (PANAF) is a programme

aimed at training workers in study circles at the work place.

For further reading, see the Union View edition on Chad: "Chad: Peace as a trade union demand" at http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/VS_Tchad_EN.pdf

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