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Spotlight interview with Ashok Subron (Mauritius - GWF)

The "24/7 economy", a social step back

Brussels, 12 August 2008 (ITUC OnLine): The Mauritian government and private sector are campaigning for an economy that works 24 hours a day, seven days a week, pushing Mauritians on a wide scale into working nights. Trade unionist Ashok Subron warns of the social and environmental perils of this trend.

Why has the concept of a "24/7 economy" emerged?

The promoters of the "24/7" campaign, mainly the Mauritian government and private sector, maintain that the leading sectors of the economy, such as call centres, tourism and even new technologies, are having serious difficulty recruiting local workers to do nightshifts. The declared aims of the campaign, launched by the Human Resource Development Council (HRDC), is supposedly to attract investors, create jobs (*) and improve people's quality of life. In the telesales sector, for example, major international firms are relocating their activities to low- or medium-income countries such as Mauritius. Due to the natural time difference between Europe and Mauritius, Mauritian workers are hired to work outside normal hours, (between 7/8 a.m. to 4/5 p.m.), in the evening or at night, according to a system of rotating shifts and breaks, but receive no extra pay for the overtime or the non-standard hours they work.

What dangers do you see in this trend?

A "24/7 economy" implies fundamental changes in the temporal structure of our social and family lives, giving rise to social disintegration that could lead to the break up of society. It is set to have serious repercussions on people's personal and family lives, the relations between spouses, between parents and children, and between friends, affecting social relations in general.

In addition, working non-standard hours can also affect people's health; parents have to deprive themselves of sleep during the day so that they can be there for their children. People working late hours are more susceptible to a range of illnesses, including stress, cardiovascular disorders and gastroenteritis, as several International Labour Office (ILO) studies have shown.

The 24/7 economic model is being placed at the centre of the new labour legislation and economic policy that the Mauritian government is planning to establish over the coming years. But is it compatible with existing social rights?

The new labour laws are designed to wipe out the social rights won by workers, eradicating the right to compensation in the event of a company closure, for example, or advocating an extension of the working week from 40 to 45 hours and a reduction in sick leave entitlement from 21 to 15 days a year, etc. The two bills introduced into parliament a week ago - the Employment Rights Bill and the Employment Relations Bill - advocating a 24/7 economy, are a step in this direction.

The trade union struggle fought in many countries over the last century had succeeded in reducing working hours, but we are now seeing a reversal of the trend. Many had hoped that new technologies, especially information and communication technologies, would contribute to reducing working time. But people are in fact working longer hours.

In Mauritius, we have been witnesses to a dual process, with a reduction in the sectors, such as public services, with shorter working hours, and an expansion of the sectors with long working hours, such as telesales and the textile factories located in the export processing zones.

And when Mauritian workers try to oppose the extension of their working hours, foreign workers are recruited. They can already be seen leaving their workplaces on the island by the thousands after nine or 11 at night. The Employment Rights Bill is set to codify this increase in working hours by allowing employers to force workers to legally commit to working up to 45 hours a week, instead of the current 40 hours, for the same pay. The older version of the bill had even tried to introduce a 12- or 16-hour day without any change in pay.

The telesales and garment sectors have introduced new piecework systems. If the workers fail to meet their daily target, they have to do so outside their normal working hours.

Until now, non-standard working hours were generally limited to essential services, such as policing or health care, and were based on a social agreement. But the 24/7 campaign wants to impose such hours on the island's entire economy.

What would you say to the promoters of this model who argue that it will spur growth?

Economic growth does not necessarily go hand in hand with the creation of decent work and poverty alleviation. In Mauritius, the growth of the last three years has been accompanied by mounting poverty and greater wage inequalities. The rise in the rate of inflation is double the rate of wage growth, and the GINI coefficient (measuring the gap between the rich and the poor) has worsened over the last ten years, as has absolute poverty.

Economic growth, under the current mode of production and consumption, is not therefore synonymous with poverty reduction. In countries such as the United States, job growth forecasts suggest that we will see a rise in non-standard working hours over the next few decades, affecting women and the poor in particular, as the growth will be concentrated in the lowest paid sectors.

What would you say to those underlining the economic losses linked to the non-continuous running of machinery?

Running our entire machinery non stop would mean tripling production and consumption capacity. Could our society and our planet cope with such levels of production? It is in total conflict with the progressive ecological ideas put forward in the campaigns to change our patterns of production and consumption. The concept of a 24/7 economy contains the seeds not only of social but also environmental destruction.

Are there any other ways of developing the economy?

Slave owners used to argue that they would not be able to keep on producing without slaves. Society survived the abolition of slavery. We need to ask ourselves serious questions about our current patterns of production and consumption. Under pressure from collective political and social struggles, technological developments will have to be reoriented to serve the interests of people and humanity as a whole.

Interview by Maude Malengrez Nasseem Ackbarally (Infosud)

(*) Unemployment has reached 45,000 according to official figures for 2008.

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