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Spotlight interview with K. Velayudam (NTUF- Sri Lanka)

"Trade unions could play a vital role in the peace process"

As war rages in northern Sri Lanka, the trade union movement is trying to surmount its rifts and fight for the common good of all communities. K. Velayudam, president of the ITUC's new affiliate the National Trade Union Federation (1), sets out his priorities and examines the increased role that trade unions could play in fostering peace.

How large is the NTUF at present, and what are your plans?

We represent some 400,000 workers, divided into five federations, the largest of which in terms of membership are the JSS (Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya, active mainly in ports, transport and food-processing factories) and the plantation-workers union LJEWU (Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union). One of our plans is to organise workers in export processing zones where other trade unions are not yet active. In the near future, we are also looking to develop trade union representation for self-employed workers, workers in the informal economy and migrants. The level of trade union representation in Sri Lanka is only 10%, so there is much potential for developing our membership.

In the east of the country, an ILO-funded project has already enabled us to organise some 500 self-employed persons, mainly those in fishing communities who lost their jobs as a result of the tsunami. We are helping them to generate other income, for instance by means of vocational training programmes. We are trying to use this as a basis for attracting fishermen and other workers in this region. This might be done through organisations other than grassroots unions, which we could guide and assist. Once they are fully operational, they will become affiliated to the NTUF. This field requires a completely different trade-union approach: there is no collective bargaining, no employer-employee relations... This is a new experience for us, being accustomed to employer-employee relations. It's rather difficult, but we're able to rely on a number of young activists who are fully committed to the project.

The majority of tea-plantation workers are longstanding trade union members, but living conditions and wages are still deplorable. Why is this?

That's true, but both wages and living conditions have improved somewhat; it was much worse before. One of the problems is that tea-plantation managers do not receive a fair price for their products. Some major business owners have developed a system whereby they are also the purchasers: they operate as brokers, buying cheaply and selling the tea on at much higher prices to other countries. A foreign purchaser has to go through these kinds of brokers in order to buy tea. If this trade were better organised, workers could receive an income of 500 rupees (\$4.60) a day, compared with only 290

rupees at the moment. The government must ensure that producers receive the best prices: the cost of living is increasing exponentially so plantation workers' wages need to rise.

There are over 1,600 trade unions in Sri Lanka. Why such a proliferation?

In fact, there are only 20-25 genuinely active trade unions: the rest are unions in name alone. One of the reasons for this situation is that, under our legislation, you only need seven workers to found a trade union. And Sri Lanka's unions have been politicised from the outset. For instance, there are over 70 unions in the plantations, because the political leaders organise workers into trade unions so that they can have their own say there. These politicians are not interested in the balance of power in negotiations; all they want is a foothold in the plantations. Sometimes a plantation of 500 workers has 16 trade unions... and the 'dominant' trade union has perhaps 21 members!

Another reason for the large number of such organisations is that legislation does not allow public sector trade unions to federate. Consequently, each small category of public-sector employees has its own trade union; there are over a thousand of them. We are calling for the law to be changed to enable public sector unions to federate.

Are the trade unions fostering peace in Sri Lanka?

The trade unions have stressed to the government the importance of recognizing them as stakeholders in its efforts to establish peace, and that they feel it is the responsibility of the government to initiate consultations with them. Unfortunately, unlike in other countries at war, in Sri Lanka the trade unions have never been considered as partners for the peace process. Under some previous governments, a peace process was embarked upon and made modest progress, but when the new government came to power it stirred up an atmosphere of war among people in the south. People now accept rising rice prices, as long as the war is won. Few people realise that this war cannot be ended in our lifetime. Indeed, experience elsewhere in the world shows that guerrilla movements never die out. According to the news we get from the media (though it comes from only one source), the Tamil Tigers have abandoned some of their positions in order to avoid excessive losses. But what will happen once they take refuge in the jungle and embark on guerrilla warfare?

The trade unions could perform a vital role in the peace process by promoting a peaceful mentality among local populations. As a trade union, we have this capacity to unite people. Within the NTUF, for instance, we have members of different political parties, different ethnic groups and different religions, but we are united as workers. We should be taken into account in other fields as well. Politicians and members of parliament are not the only ones who can bring peace to the country.

Many Tamil workers feel discriminated against in Sri Lanka...

Tamil workers are frequently arrested in the plantations; the government suspects them of having links with the Tamil Tigers. These workers live in fear: there are not enough jobs in their own areas, they have to go through very lengthy procedures to obtain identity documents (30% of plantation

workers still have no identity card), and if they come to Colombo they will be suspected of being Tiger sympathisers. These Tamil plantation workers don't even have their own address. When they receive a letter, the envelope states their name, the name of the plantation and the town or district, but many workers have the same surname, so letters are delivered to persons other than their intended recipient, which raises privacy issues in particular.

The NTUF joined the ITUC in December 2007. How has affiliation benefited you?

Firstly, recognition. The ITUC is the world's largest trade union federation; it has power. For instance, when I go to the ILO, it is more comfortable to be an ITUC member; it's like belonging to a large family.

Secondly, through ITUC publications we receive a great deal of information about international trade union trends, decent work, globalisation, world developments, the arrest of trade unionists, news about the International Labour Office, and so on. Before, we didn't have access to all this information. Having it helps us to find our place in the world. For instance, if we learn that a trade union struggle is achieving results in another country, we can use it as a role model. Access to information is very important in the modern world.

Thirdly, our trade unionists participate in international training and other programmes and build up expertise that improves our human resources.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) The NTUF (National Trade Union Federation) is one of the ITUC's three affiliates in Sri Lanka. The other two are the CWC (Ceylon Workers' Congress) and the NWC (National Workers' Congress).

See also our report Union View: Sri Lanka: Trade unions hard at work at : http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/VS_Sri_lanka_EN.pdf

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