

International Trade Union Confederation

Publications

Spotlight on Constantina Kuneva (PEKOP-Greece)



"I've been receiving death threats"

On 22 December, Constantina Kuneva was the victim of an attack with sulphuric acid. After sustaining very serious injuries she is still in hospital in an intensive care unit in Athens. This immigrant worker from Bulgaria lost the use of one eye and her vocal chords but fortunately she is now able to communicate in writing. ITUC demands that justice be done after ignominious acid attack on a woman trade unionist (1). As General Secretary of PEKOP, the Athens-based “All Attica Union of Cleaners and Domestic Workers (2), a few weeks before this terrible attack she had warned that she was in serious danger owing to her trade union activities. In this interview conducted at the end of November for the ITUC, she also complained about the poverty wages and harsh working conditions in this sector, where 80% of the employees are migrants and the vast majority are women.

How did you get in contact with the union?

I've been living and working in Greece for seven and a half years now and have been in a union for just over six years. It was not easy and took me a year to find one. At first I wasn't planning to be an activist: it was simply that as a Bulgarian, where all workers are union members and the unions are a kind of administration and employment agency looking after workers, I was expecting that kind of support. I had worked in a chemical factory when I was young and been a union member. Then I went to university, where I got a degree in history of art and archaeology. So I didn't have a “trade union conscience” as it is called here in Greece, despite the fact that the Bulgarian school curriculum included a compulsory course on employment rights, so before working we knew something about unions and collective agreements, etc. Before emigrating I tried

to find out more about labour legislation in Greece and I realised that the various forms of protection we enjoyed in Bulgaria, despite all the problems we faced there, were not guaranteed in Greece. In addition, as a foreigner, nothing was simple and I eventually contacted the Ministry of Labour, which put me in touch with a union covering my sector.

What did you do before getting a job in the cleaning sector?

To begin with I obtained a visa that was valid for a few months. My main aim was to get an operation for my son, who has serious heart problems, in good conditions, which I managed. Then in 2001, the government began a campaign of regularisation of undocumented people, which helped us. Firstly, I was employed in a supermarket and then I worked nights at a pharmacy. Since then I have been working for several years as an employee of OIKOMET, an industrial cleaning firm. I earn just over 600 Euros a month.

Why did you become a trade union delegate?

I joined the union in 2002 and was elected as a delegate in 2004. I have been re-elected twice since then. We defend the rights of over a thousand members, dozens of whom are not even legally registered. The most satisfying thing for me is to feel that I am helping colleagues who are suffering discrimination and being treated as "second-class citizens". In the last three or four years we have had some successes, though it has mainly been about forcing bosses to respect some basic rules in the labour legislation. In the Attica region (Athens, Piraeus and the surrounding area) alone there are some 100,000 people who need defending and organising, 40,000 or so in the industrial cleaning sector and about 60,000 domestic workers.

What are your working conditions like?

Dangerous and tough. We are in permanent contact with chemical products and carcinogens, but are not given suitable equipment and the workers have to buy protective gloves themselves or work with torn gloves. As you can see I have some skin problems on my face and so on. We do not get proper support from the authorities. The labour inspectors are doing nothing to help us. The authorities support the employers, so we are on our own.

What barriers have you come up against in organising?

We have 1000 members, which is not many, but we are faced with a kind of terrorism by the employers. Whenever we hold elections there is an employers' representative who notes down everything, including the people entering and leaving the room, etc. I have work colleagues with whom I normally have friendly relations who no longer dare to speak to me, or say hello, in case we are spotted by someone from management. Workers have frequently been sacked in recent months for no reason, totally arbitrarily. Our employer is clearly at war with us after a few successful legal cases by our members.

What problems have you had personally owing to your union work?

For months I have been asking to change my working time but the manager has always refused. I have even referred the requests to the labour inspectorate and the industrial tribunal, but to no avail. I work 30 hours a week, from 5.30 to 11.30pm and cannot look after my sick child; he's at school when I'm at home and my mother looks after him although she is also ill. She also worked for OIKAMET, which is how I got my own job, but she was sacked just after my election as a union delegate.

As a union delegate I cannot be fired, except for serious misconduct, and that protection lasts more than one year after the mandate ends. But I have been accused of theft and have received death threats by phone. They say "don't move, there are lots of police around". One day, at the metro station where I was working, three police cars had come to question me, as though I had killed the Pope or something! Yes, they've been direct threats, not disguised. I also suspect them of trying to get me deported.

Interview by Jacky Delorme

(1) Read also the ITUC online "[Greece: ITUC demands that justice be done after ignominious acid attack on a woman trade unionist](#)", released on on 21/1/2009

(2) PEKOP is the All Attica Union of Cleaners and Domestic Workers.

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