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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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Spotlight interview with Rosane Da Silva (CUT - Brazil)

"To change the world, we need to change the lives of women"

As the ITUC publishes a new report (1) condemning gender inequality and examining the cost of violence against women, the Brazilian trade union confederation CUT (2) is launching on this 8th of March a permanent campaign against gender pay inequality.

Rosana Da Silva, a member of the ITUC Women's Committee and the national women's officer for CUT, speaks about the issues of inequality, the impact of the crisis on women workers, and violence against women in Brazil.

Is the impact of the economic and financial crisis on women workers already being felt in Brazil?

In Brazil, women tend to work in the most precarious sectors and in the informal economy. The crisis is set to accentuate this trend, as women are the first to be laid off: culturally, in Brazil, it is still widely believed that a woman's primary role is to look after the family rather than to earn a living. It is thought that women should largely remain in the private sphere, at home, whilst men go out to work in the public space. It takes time to change beliefs that are so deeply embedded in our society. And so, in the meantime, it is the women who face the biggest job losses. Some companies are laying off workers because they are genuinely suffering the effects of the crisis, but others are using it as a pretext to cut down on their staff.

Women are also the hardest hit by the cuts in public spending being pushed by the authorities on account of the crisis, such as in the health and education sectors, which employ large numbers of women. The unions recently managed to obtain a commitment from the central government that social spending would not be cut, and may even be raised, but this promise still has to be ratified by the National Congress. And then there are the huge social budgets of the federal states, which are also threatened by cuts.

How wide is the wage gap between men and women in Brazil?

The wages of women in Brazil are 30% lower, on average, than those of men. This injustice arises from the notion that a woman's wage is just a "plus" in the household income, but ever increasing numbers of women are, in fact, the head of the household. The trade unions and other social movements have become conscious of the need to challenge these conceptions. CUT is going to launch a campaign on International Women's Day, on 8 March, that includes the issue of the gender pay gap. The union had already led a campaign on this matter in 1995-96, but this one is going to be permanent. It will also address the issues of maternity and paternity protection, the abortion law,

and increasing the presence of women in trade union decision-making structures.

What is the level of women's representation in CUT?

Approximately 40% of CUT's members are women, but there are only six women among the top 25 leaders. According to our statutes, there should be a minimum of 30% women at all meetings but, in practice, it's more like the maximum!

Combating violence against women is one of the ITUC's priorities. What is the situation in this respect in Brazil?

A law passed in 2004 protects women against violence in general. There are debates throughout the country about the different forms of violence against women, ranging from psychological abuse to murder. Brazilian men often think of women as their property, which leads to all kinds of tragic consequences. In 2008, for example, a 16-year-old girl in São Paulo was kept a prisoner in her home for four days by her boyfriend because she wanted to leave him. On the fourth day, he killed her. In a town on the border with Uruguay, Santo do Livramento, there is a lot of domestic violence, and anyone who kills a woman takes refuge in Uruguay, and vice-versa. The women in this region have tried to obtain a protocol whereby the culprits can be brought to justice on either side of the border. The trade union confederations of Brazil and Uruguay are going to mobilise on 8 March to condemn this situation, to call for obtain legislation that protects women.

Sexual and moral harassment is widespread in the workplace, across all sectors. Tackling these issues is very difficult: cultural issues aside, women who report harassment fear being targeted; they also feel shame with regard to their partners.

What can the union do to help them?

Talk about it; inform them, and support those who have the courage to report it, offering them psychological and legal assistance. All our local unions offer these kinds of services. In a recent example, a woman supported by CUT reported the harassment and won the case. The union openly revealed the facts, and for fear of bad publicity her company took measures, dismissing the person guilty of the harassment. It has to be said, however, that such cases are still rare, as most women dare not report the abuse.

We are campaigning to raise awareness that regardless of where it is perpetrated, be it at work or elsewhere, violence against women must be denounced, and that the unions are there to help women to defend themselves. It is hard for a women on her own to report abuse and to obtain justice, but if they feel helped and supported in such procedures, which are not at all easy, they might just succeed.

The ITUC is organising its first World Women's Conference from 19 to 21 October 2009 in Brussels. What expectations do you have with regard to this event?

We would like to see the adoption of a resolution clearly underlining the need to fight all the inequalities suffered by women, across the board, not

only within the workplace but also within the trade union movement. ITUC resolutions, be they on domestic violence, pay inequality or other abuses, can help us raise these issues with our governments; they give more weight to our demands. They also show that it is not an isolated battle we are waging but a worldwide campaign.

You took part in the latest World Social Forum in Belém, in the Brazilian Amazon. What impressions has it left you with?

Holding the Forum in the Amazon reinforced the participants' interest in climate change. The debates on the crisis also demonstrated that each and every trade union and NGO around the world is directly concerned. They also highlighted the need for greater unity between the workers of the world, to fight against its consequences. When the world comes to grips with the fact that the crisis is going to be a long one, it is imperative that we realise that the workers are not to blame. The time is right for us to reflect on the global capitalist system, so that we can build another model of society based on greater respect for the value of labour and participative democracy.

As regards CUT, the Forum provided us with an opportunity to strengthen our ties with a number of NGOs and movements such as the World March of Women.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau and Mathieu Debroux.

(1 Gender (in)equality in the labour market: an overview of global trends and developments: http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/GAP-09_EN.pdf

(2) Central Única dos Trabalhadores: www.cut.org.br

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