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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

## ITUC OnLine

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### Spotlight interview with Amna Abdel Jabbar Mafarja (PGFTU - Palestine)

"The participation of women and their effectiveness is now visible thanks to quotas"

Brussels, 23 June 2009 (ITUC OnLine): A member of the PGFTU(\*) executive bureau and president of the agriculture and food industry union, Amna Abdel Jabbar Mafarja talks about Palestinian women's twofold struggle: against Israeli colonisation and fundamentalism. She underlines the progress made inside the trade union movement and the obstacles still to be overcome to secure equality.

Women make up less than 15% of employees in the Palestinian labour market; it's not very much...

Indeed, the rate is low for a number of reasons. The impact of the occupation on Palestinian women is severe, especially in terms of their participation in the labour market. Their participation is very weak owing to the lack of investment because of the policy of occupation. The checkpoints make it very difficult for women to move around, especially in the villages. A lot of land has been confiscated by the settlements, and the wall is also a major obstacle.

The poor application of the labour legislation, especially in the area of social protection, prevents women from being more present on the labour market. The inequalities in terms of pay and promotion are also a barrier. Wages are the lowest in sectors that are predominantly female, such as agriculture and services. And in the private sector, women only receive 60% of the pay given to men for work of equal value.

Societal traditions are an added obstacle, such as the burden of family responsibilities. There is still discrimination at the legislative level (\*\*). Progress is very slow, but we have noticed that women are nonetheless gaining more self-confidence. Women have progressed in the political arena. In 2004, 17% of the seats at local level were won by women. In 2006, the representation of women in parliament reached 12.9%.

What lessons have you drawn from the establishment of a 20% quota for women on the structures of the PGFTU?

In 1975, women's participation in trade unions was only 0.2%. In 1985 it was 5% and in 1995 it rose to 13% following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, which gave women a positive push forward within unions. Our objective today is to bring the rate of women's participation in unions from 15 to 25%.

The PGFTU Congress in 2004 established the principle of quotas for women in decision making structures, as well as that of proportional representation. Initially, a large majority was against quotas for women. So, although we

were initially pushing for 30%, after lengthy debates we finally managed to secure 20%, as a first step forward. It is an avant-garde experience, an important change that we are very proud of. We can no longer be ignored or sidelined. The participation of women and their effectiveness is now visible. We have worked hard in the area of educating women trade unionists and we are now starting to see the initial results in terms of the presence of women in decision-making posts. In some sectors, we would beg them to stand for election and they would respond that it was impossible, that there was a conspiracy against them that would stand in their way. They had no confidence in their chances of succeeding. The quota helped encourage them to stand as candidates and increased their chances of succeeding, which is a major incentive. Twenty percent have to be elected by men and women, it's a democratic approach. We would now like to increase female membership rather than increasing the quotas, to increase the direct election of women.

Could this experience have any impact on other unions in the region?

We talk about our experience at the PGFTU with our sisters from Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, within the framework of the Euromed Trade Union Forum, for example, as there is not unanimous support for quotas among the women of the region.

What difficulties have to be overcome to improve women's representation in trade unions?

One of the main obstacles is women's lack of involvement in trade union work, as their family responsibilities leave them with little time to spare. Educational work has to be pursued to change social attitudes and to combat the paternalistic mindset of some leaders who are still trying to limit opportunities for women. A woman recently came to a trade union meeting with her baby; the practices of trade unions have to be adapted to the realities of women's lives. Work must also be done to ensure better protection of trade union rights, so that women can get involved in the union without having to fear for their jobs. We still live in a patriarchal society, with male chauvinist attitudes that take issue with women reaching the top of the ladder. We have had to face threats and public condemnations. Palestinian women have already faced colonisation and continue to do so; we also have the strength to confront the fundamentalist movement. The union is a progressive movement. We found the courage to fight against colonisation and we are just as determined to fight against fundamentalism.

Women trade unionists won seats during the local elections in Jenin and Nablus, for example. We have also been involved in drawing up the strategy of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. After listening to the demands of their members, the women of the PGFTU are also involved in drawing up a draft women's charter, which is being discussed at different levels and covers a range of areas such as employment, nationality, family legislation, the judicial code, etc.

What can be done to attract younger members?

We have set up a network between the women's and youth departments, which are strengthening each other as a result. We are in the process of expanding this network at local level. I am optimistic; we have a lot of young women with great qualities in this network. This is why we are placing emphasis on young women in agriculture, so that we can reach them and integrate them

better.

As the president of the agriculture and food industry union, what specific policy are you developing to organise informal workers?

We are focusing our efforts in the informal economy on agriculture, where many women perform unrecognised, informal work. We have boosted the women's cooperative movement in this sector and have also encouraged them to take the products they have to sell, such as homemade cheeses, olives, etc., to small markets. We have recently opened five centres for illiterate women, to teach them to read and write first and then provide them with trade union education. We are covering the regions of Jenin, Nablus and Ramallah and there are now a number of Bedouin families that want to enrol their daughters.

What is the PGFTU strategy to fight violence against women?

Women face violence, fuelled by poverty and unemployment, on the labour market. But they do not talk about the harassment they have to cope with. We are developing two strategies: one aimed at educating them to learn how to stand up to and combat harassment and another aimed at encouraging them to file a complaint and take their case to court. We are planning to open a hotline this year.

What particular challenges does the union face in the Gaza Strip?

The trade union movement faces a dual challenge. On the one hand, the Israeli invasion has cut off links and the bombings have massively destroyed the social, economic and political infrastructures. On the other hand, there is the arrival of Hamas, which raided the PGFTU centre and closed it down by force. Our solidarity with the men and women of Gaza is very strong and will not be halted. The emotional and psychological impact of Israeli aggression on Palestinian society is devastating and women are paying a particularly heavy price, in Gaza, of course, but also in the West Bank, because of the wall. Women and entire families have been thrown out onto the streets. We need to strengthen our support for these women who are the heads of the family. It is easier for a man to find refuge, in a mosque or another public place.

In the short term, our priority is to rebuild the PGFTU women worker's centre in Gaza. Moreover, the rise of Islamic radicalism prohibits women from being members of social organisations such as trade unions. They are also trying to wipe out the trade union movement in general. Hamas also favours employment for its supporters, so it's all the more difficult for the others to find a job. There are two poles, Hamas or Fatah, and the international media are called on to take sides, but the people, and women, who are the worst affected, are given no coverage. Not much space is given to social issues in the Palestinian media. We need public control over the reconstruction of Gaza, and women need to be involved, as they could contribute a great deal to the day-to-day work of reconstruction.

What concrete assistance do you expect from the international trade union movement?

We need the support of our sisters and brothers from other countries to reconstruct and strengthen the women trade unionists' movement. We need financial assistance to rebuild the women trade unionists' office in Gaza, as well as funding for teams of women working on the ground to recruit and organise women. We have some volunteers but we need extra staff to go out

and meet women, to listen to their problems and to provide them with training. This requires a lot of time and effort. We would also like help with the publication of a bulletin covering these activities, to spread information and provide encouragement. Finally, we need to develop psychological support for these families, for the children as well as the adults.

Interview by Natacha David

(\*)Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU)

(\*\*)The status of women within the Palestinian family and society is determined both by recently adopted Palestinian legislation and laws inherited from Jordanian and Egyptian legislation that dates back to before the Israeli occupation of 1967 but is still in force in the West Bank and Gaza. Although women have seen numerous positive changes with the laws adopted by the Palestinian Authority, the gender discrimination in the Jordanian and Egyptian laws is still being applied in situations not covered by the new legislation. The personal status of Palestinians is determined by their religion. For Muslim Palestinians, the law on personal status is based on the Sharia, whilst it is the various ecclesiastical courts that rule on matters of personal status in the case of Christian Palestinians. (Extract from "Women and Unions in Southern Mediterranean Countries: Summary Report" by Radhia Belhadj Zekri. Euromed Trade Union Forum - February 2009).

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