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Spotlight interview with Khulile Nkushubana (CONSAWU – South Africa)

"Racism is the twin evil of poverty"

Brussels, 03 July 2009 (ITUC OnLine): South Africa, as a member of the G20 group, is playing an increasingly important role in world affairs, but the xenophobic riots of May 2008 offered a reminder of how explosive the social situation can be. Khulile Nkushubana, general secretary of CONSAWU (1), examines the recent developments in the fight against racism and outlines the strategies for a more harmonious future.

Seventeen years after the abolition of apartheid, is racism still very present in South Africa?

Yes, because it has become an integral part of a system of impoverishment affecting the majority of the population. For as long as this impoverishment exists, we will keep a very painful scar from the past. We have grown up as citizens of the same country, but we are more accustomed to fighting rather than cooperating with each other. Individual and group habits can pose an obstacle to the fight against racism. For example, some groups enrolled their children in schools where they were indoctrinated to believe in racial superiority; this indoctrination remains with them throughout adulthood and cultivates the idea of a "deadly" enemy.

Social inequalities can also result in racism. In Education, children who speak Afrikaans or English at home will have better chances of success when they study in one of these languages. As regards housing, although there are homeless people from all groups in South Africa, the majority is still the previously disadvantaged. That's another consequence of the past.

Having said that, our government has made a lot of progress. Racist laws were repealed, and numerous legal instruments and policies have been drawn up to fight racist acts, such as the policy of affirmative action and others.

What does this policy consist in?

If there are two people applying for a position in a company and they both have the same level of skills or qualifications but one is from a PDA (previously disadvantaged group), the company is expected to employ this person. The "previously disadvantaged" groups include women and people with disabilities (regardless of their colour).

Is the appointment of a "previously disadvantaged" person obligatory?

Yes, where competencies are evenly balanced. It is the product of a law, and all sizeable companies have to submit an annual report to the Labour Ministry on how it is applying this law. In practice, the company first has to take stock of its management structure and establish whether it reflects the country's demographic make-up. The company then commits to fighting against any imbalance. This usually has to be done in cooperation with the union representatives. The union then insists on respect for this policy of affirmative action, and anyone who is not appointed in compliance with the policy can take it up.

What are the results of this policy?

People have been hired thanks to its implementation, but there is still a long way to go, as it only concerns the middle classes, the elite. It is not a mass phenomenon, and if this law is amended, it should be extended to the majority of workers and take away the gate key from the employer (the right of appointment in relevant cases); it needs to go further. A way has to be found that such policies should contribute to poverty reduction.

Are there sanctions?

For the moment, it is not really a question of punishing but persuading people. Sanctions are, however, possible, and are left at the discretion of the Labour Minister, who can hold inquiries and publish a compliance order; it can even be taken as far as the Labour Court if it isn't applied.

What can a South African worker do when experiencing racial discrimination at work?

There is an Equality Court. If someone is called a "baboon", for example, they can lay charges of hate speech or verbal abuse, and this specialised court can make a ruling on the matter. This system emanates from the South African Constitution.

Have there been any concrete examples of this mechanism being applied?

If the insult can be proven, the management can take disciplinary action against the guilty party, but not many cases have been reported. What generally happens is that the guilty manager apologises and that is usually enough to calm the situation. In theory, workers can go on strike in such cases, but they have to follow the procedure. If an employer calls a worker a baboon, as a union we consider the slur to be directed at the whole group and have the right to demand a direct response from the management, which represents a shortcut in relation to lengthy court proceedings. We can also lay a grievance before the management, but there have to be witnesses or admission by the person accused.

Is it easy to address the issue of racism in a union representing workers from different racial groups?

We organised a training programme in 2008, with the ILO, in the provinces of Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal regarding the national legal instruments and international standards that can be used to curtail racism in the workplace. The Labour Ministry also collaborated with the programme. Men and women from different racial groups and different workplaces interacted during the programme, and we noticed that their understanding of the legal instruments differed according to their situation. These workshops help people to deal with their fears, to learn to dialogue, on affirmative action procedures for example. For the Afrikaans speaking, affirmative action should be temporary, as it affects young Afrikaners who had no part in the past. Conversely, for the Blacks, the contention is that it should be permanent, as young Afrikaners or their parents benefited from a demonic system. It is very good to be able to talk about all these issues frankly and openly. It is thanks to this understanding that we are able to promote racial cooperation, racial harmony and non-racism. Before preaching on this subject outside, we first have to address it within our own trade union organisation.

Serious xenophobic violence broke out in May 2008 in South Africa. Did CONSAWU take action to help restore calm?

It was horrifying: people started raping, killing, driving people out... It didn't happen to my

knowledge in the workplace, but one of the problems was that South Africans were saying (and still say) that these people from neighbouring countries are stealing their jobs. We went on the ground to give advice, to speak to the people affected, and we condemned the attacks. CONSAWU published press releases and worked with NGOs to make hatred history. We also rallied our affiliates to do everything they could to combat racism, xenophobia and their underlying causes. Some of our members say that they are being held at knifepoint, but we do everything we can to make them understand that migrants are human beings, that no one has the right to do what they did in our country in 2008, or to say what some people are still saying. So it is an ongoing battle. At CONSAWU, we believe it is above all a problem of poverty, because unemployment is over 40% (according to the wide definition of the term), and there is a lack of comprehensive social security. The xenophobic attacks took place in areas where the economy is the weakest and poverty most conspicuous.

Was the violence mainly directed against Zimbabweans?

That's what the media says. The Zimbabweans were affected, but so were the Mozambicans, Somalis, and a number of South African minorities, such as the people who speak Tsonga, the same language as that spoken in Mozambique.

So there is a close link between racism and economic difficulties?

Companies, particularly multinationals, invest in South Africa because of what they consider to be its "conducive" climate. What they understand by this term is "cheap or almost free labour". But this cheap labour is the result of racism. In the world of work, for example, we know that in such or such a field, the workers are mainly previously disadvantaged and that in another they are probably previously advantaged, barring a few rare individuals from previously disadvantaged groups.

Our government, under the pretext of meeting the "requirements of the modern world", follows the principles of the Bretton Woods institutions. It is the economy of Margaret Thatcher that has been imposed around the world and we are currently suffering the consequences. According to these economic theories, if you are a multinational, you should make more profit and, in this case, you will employ more people, out of the "goodness of your heart". Unfortunately, over the last ten to fifteen years we have seen exactly the opposite.

CONSAWU has for years been pursuing a socio-economic programme for Sustainable Human Development assisted by the CSC of Belgium (Confederation of Christian Trade Unions), to build trade unions' capacity of analysis to propose real credible alternatives in the fight against poverty. We have integrated the theme of racism in this programme, as it is the twin evil of poverty.

What future plans do you have as regards the fight against racism?

Whilst some of us believe in equality between people, we have learnt through our actions that this is not a widely held belief. We therefore have to tackle this problem, which is a time bomb. We are doing it through increased training and continuous information in our publications. A trade union confederation has to consider the attitudes within society, but also the fact that people have to live with one another in the workplace. So we have to continuously work with employers on this issue, and keep up the pressure on the government, which can do more in this area.

There are still groups of Afrikaners in South Africa who live in their own world... Reaching them through your campaigns would seem to be a very difficult task!

There is, indeed, a place called Orania, which even has its own currency but interestingly our Constitution allows it, because it speaks of the exercise of cultural identity in terms of language, traditions, etc. We cannot expect these people to change from one day to the next. A favourable climate has to be built, in which all people feel they can say and do think what they want, of course within bounds. There was not a revolution in South Africa, there were reforms. Everything is being done step by step, in a gradual way. Change is very laborious; it is a process that can take generations.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) Confederation of South African Workers' Unions

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