

Spotlight interview with Titus Mlengeya (CHODAWU – Tanzania)

"An international convention on domestic work would help us a great deal"

Brussels, 27 July 2009: The Tanzanian Conservation, Hotels, Domestic and Allied Workers' Union, CHODAWU (1), has been working in defence of domestic workers and in the fight against domestic child labour for over ten years. With less than one year to go before the first ILO discussion on a new international convention on domestic work, Titus Mlengeya, National Chairman of CHODAWU, outlines the trade union action taken in this area and the problems still to tackle.

What are the main forms of exploitation suffered by domestic workers in Tanzania?

As there is no formal employment contract, domestic workers face harassment and threats from their employers but do not usually dare to complain. They are often treated like second-class citizens in relation to the family members in the household. Some domestic workers receive unduly severe punishments for the slightest of errors. And then there is also the potential problem of sexual abuse: domestic workers refusing sexual relations with their boss risk being dismissed. This also creates tension with the boss's wife, who does not usually trust the domestic worker as she suspects her of colluding with her husband. In situations like these, the worker is doubly mistreated in the household.

Another recurring problem is the irregular payment of wages. At the end of the month, domestic workers are told they will be paid the following month... There is no certainty as to when they will be paid and, in some instances, the employer holds on to their wages until their departure, saying that they do not really need the money. So they end up like slaves, as they do not have the freedom to leave the job with the guarantee of being paid. In addition, it is not uncommon for them to have considerable amounts deducted from their salary (which is sometimes as little as 10 dollars) for small damages such as a broken glass. After deductions like these they are left with nothing of their wages at the end of the month.

What services do you offer domestic workers?

We have set up five help centres in Dar es Salaam, the capital, which is the main destination of domestic workers from the rest of the country. The two other centres are in regions considered to be the main places of origin of domestic workers and have been set up to try and contain the problem at the source. The aim of these centres is to help domestic workers living in very difficult circumstances. They mainly take in former child domestics and welcome around 4000 children a year on average. The staff at the centres includes teachers, nurses and matrons, who give advice and training. One of the aims is to counsel those who have suffered from exploitation so that they can get back to feeling like normal human beings. Another aim is to give them training in different disciplines (sewing, cooking, housekeeping, etc.) so that they can then secure decent work and a decent life. These training courses are organised in conjunction with specific institutions (driving schools, hotel management schools, etc.). The younger ones manage to get back into mainstream education.

Is it not up to the authorities to offer training?

Indeed, it is the government's responsibility to look after its citizens' welfare, but

CHODAWU, as a union associated with domestic workers, has a role to play to ensure that its members are not mistreated. But you cannot protect them if they themselves are not made aware of their own situation, if they have no confidence in the fact that they are human beings and deserve to be treated the same way as everyone else. This awareness cannot be gained if we leave them in their current state of ignorance. If we do not act at this level, they will continue to be disrespected, to receive extremely low wages, and this new generation of domestic workers will develop within the context of mental and material difficulties, which is no good for the future.

How do you make contact with exploited children?

We have been cooperating for over ten years with NGOs and representatives of the authorities at neighbourhood level to identify where child domestics can be found. We also make good use of the media, as some domestic workers, in the towns, have access to radio and TV programmes. Even if they cannot sit down to listen to these programmes, they can listen while they are working, and learn about how others have been rescued by CHODAWU.

We also go to the bus and train stations to identify newcomers. Some people trade in these children, recruiting them in rural areas and then selling them in the towns. Whenever we identify potential victims, we work in partnership with the police to have the traffickers arrested and we take the children to our centres. We also contact the authorities in the villages where they come from. If we do not find a member of the family who can take care of the child, we give them long-term shelter in our centres.

Children who have been trafficked and then rescued by our programme are now helping us to identify other mistreated children and adult domestics suffering from exploitation, and bring them to our centres. It is also a means of recruiting them as members and letting them open up about their grievances so that CHODAWU can try to help resolve the problems with their employers.

Do these programmes bring you new members?

Yes, but we are above all fulfilling our duty in terms of social responsibility. Having responsible citizens is crucial to Tanzania's future. CHODAWU has become like a parent for a group of former exploited workers, as we have helped them to regain a normal life. They place great trust in us and we have a long-term relationship with them.

How much does a domestic worker earn?

Last year, a minimum wage of around 60 dollars was set for domestic workers, following the negotiations we held with the government and the association of employers. The latter does not formally represent domestic workers' employers, but it is able to speak on their behalf, as its members employ them. The law allows employers providing lodging, food and medical care to make deductions from the minimum wage.

Is this minimum wage applied?

There has been some progress. The families who have access to the media know that there is now a law that obliges them to apply this wage, but most people have not yet heard about it. Our duty as a union is to help spread this awareness, in the same way that it is the government's duty to enforce the law. Prior to the adoption of this minimum wage, domestic workers could be paid five or ten dollars a month.

Do you offer adult domestic workers any other services?

Yes, the settlement of disputes with their employers, for example. We write a letter to the employer to ask him to come to our office. Initially, we try to resolve the problem

amicably, without going to court, so that good relations can be maintained. If that is not possible, we go further. Because our trade union is quite well known, the employer knows that he has a good chance of losing a court case if we are involved.

Does the law establish the working conditions of domestic workers?

No, and that's why CHODAWU is keen to see an ILO convention on domestic work. We really hope it will be adopted: it will help our prospective members, domestic workers, to be recognised as workers rather than being classed as "servants" as is usually the case at the moment. A convention of this kind would also raise self-awareness among the workers themselves. They will be internationally recognised as a category of workers that makes an important contribution to the economy and to livelihoods.

Such a labour standard would also help Tanzania to introduce legislation that protects the interests of these people, that helps them to secure formal employment contracts with clearly stipulated terms and conditions, so that they have rights they can defend. For us at CHODAWU, it would be easier to defend them as it would be a question of enforcing existing laws. And once our government has ratified this prospective ILO convention, no one will look at us oddly and say, "How can you defend domestic servants?". On the contrary, we will be seen as citizens who are protecting the interests of a group of people who are just as important as everyone else.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) Conservation, Hotels, Domestic and Allied Workers' Union, affiliated to TUCTA (Trade Union Congress of Tanzania)

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