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Spotlight on Antonio Jara and Mauro Posada (CGT-RA – Argentina)

Fighting for everyone's right not to have to emigrate

Brussels, 8 September 2009 (ITUC OnLine): To combat the exploitation of migrant workers, Antonio Jara and Mauro Posada of the international secretariat of the Argentinian General Workers' Confederation (CGT-RA), are calling for freedom of movement for all people on a par with the free movement of capital. They explain the unions' work in providing information to migrants at the workplace and call for general policies to help workers avoid having to leave their countries to survive.

What are your views on the importance of migrant workers and the development of the country?

Antonio Jara – When considering migration policies one of the key factors that emerges is regulation or, ultimately, freedom of movement. We do not want only to improve migration policies but also to secure freedom of movement. That is not an impossible goal because if capital can move freely why shouldn't labour too? That's what we are aiming for anyway.

Mauro Posada – There is an enormous amount of information we can glean from official figures to understand the nature of the migratory flows of people whose employment status we should be trying to improve. Also, the flows of workers are controlled to some extent by regulatory bodies linked to MERCOSUR, and the issue of occupational emigration has frequently been raised within these institutions, such as the Economic and Social Forum, Coordination forums and our working group under MERCOSUR. The CGT has continuously defended the principle of freedom of movement, since as Antonio stresses, capital can move freely but labour is not yet able to do so.

Antonio – Argentina has traditionally been a host country for labour. We welcome many workers from Uruguay, Paraguay, Peru, Bolivia and Brazil. As a workers' organisation we have sometimes needed to develop specific policies covering migrant workers. Also, our country's history is closely linked to the history of emigration and the integration of emigrants into social and working life has taken place spontaneously. With the establishment of neo-liberal policies, from the 1970s onwards, and increasing flexibility of labour, outsourcing and reduction of labour costs, some groups became particularly vulnerable. Along with women and young people, migrants are one of the most vulnerable categories of workers. That was the origin of the notion of "irregular" – which generally means "illegal" – work, and its corollary: massive exploitation.

Which sectors employ the largest number of emigrants?

Mauro – Some sectors, such as construction and agriculture, have a greater demand for migrant workers than others. In this case, when dealing with workers' rights, the CGT makes no distinction when defending a worker who was born in Argentina or a non-national, since both are seen as fully-fledged workers. The first two figures on a worker's official documents do not influence the person's right to protection or their chance of receiving it. It is true that many bordering countries tend to send more workers whereas Argentina is predominantly a host country. In recent decades, the aim has been to make it harder for migrants to get

here and to make the processes tougher so that the country is less accessible.

Since 2002 and 2003, that approach has changed. The authorities have admitted that they want to enable many workers to live in the country legally. People with the correct papers can enjoy the rights pertaining to the official economy. However, those without legal papers will end up on the black market in the informal economy and will not receive any social protection or pension, but live in a no man's land with no rights. In 2003, the State set up a programme called Patria Grande ("Big Country") aimed at legalising emigrants from the MERCOSUR region. The aim is to make it easier for workers to get official papers enabling them to carry on working here in Argentina.

What action has the CGT taken on migration issues?

Antonio – The CGT has a department that focuses specifically on migration issues. We aim to encourage workers arriving in Argentina to contact organisations that other emigrants have set up, so that Paraguayans will meet other Paraguayans for instance. Most of those organisations have become NGOs, with or without the government's support. Emigrants try to contact them in order to get their rights defended. The CGT's international secretariat has started trying to breathe life into the project by seeing whether one of the secretariats involved, such as the Human Rights Secretariat, could head up the work or, in the longer term, whether a Secretariat "for Migrants' Issues" could be set up. That is what we are trying to do.

What are the unions doing to gain migrant workers' trust?

Mauro – We go where the workers are. We send around all sorts of information, also via the sector and in individual workplaces, to try to reach the undocumented workers so that they can legalise their employment situation. Just imagine being a worker but working totally illegally: you are in a dangerous situation in which your rights are not respected. That is why we go into the workplaces and pass on all the information.

Antonio – Illegal migrants are not in a position to demand improvements to their health and safety conditions, workers' rights, wages and employment rights, so in the 1970s, the migration started to have a different economic impact to that of the past. In Argentina, social advancement was not traditionally linked to whether someone was a foreign national or the son of emigrants from Spain, Italy, Uruguay or Paraguay, etc. Later on, that all changed completely.

Mauro – Migrants were turned into the guilty parties although in fact they are the victims in this situation. It is important to stress just how important collective organisations are for individuals, since when workers are isolated in extreme situations, with no employment contract, papers and living in a foreign country with a foreign culture and different customs, it is vital for them to join a group and contact a union or for the union to turn up at their workplace.

Antonio – Our position is that all workers have the right not to emigrate, since the conditions and opportunities in their own countries should enable them to live properly. It would be wrong to think we were in favour of emigration, since in fact you should not need to emigrate for economic reasons. It should be possible to emigrate to carry on your studies or for other reasons, but not for economic reasons and, above all, not because the place you live does not allow you to earn your living.

Interview by Alexandre Praça

- Please also read the Spotlight interview with Alejandro Delssin and Carlos Lozantos (CTA-Argentina) here: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article4272>

- Please also read the report on migrants in Argentina and the trade union policies aimed at addressing their needs entitled « El Pais Migrante » (only available in Spanish), published by the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA) here: <http://www.csa-csi.org/content/view/5246/271/>

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