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Spotlight interview with Nejiba Hamrouni (Tunisia-SNJT)

"Many journalists are afraid, but want to see a truly free and independent trade union"

Brussels, 15 October 2009 (ITUC OnLine): Treasurer of the national journalists' union SNJT and member of the Gender Council of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Nejiba Hamrouni tells us about the press freedom violations plaguing the Tunisian media and journalists (1).

How would you summarise the current state of play as regards press freedom in Tunisia?

It's very simple: we can neither write nor publish freely. Newspapers are regularly banned from going to press, websites are blocked, journalists are harassed, prevented from working, subjected to phone tapping, arrested, put on trial and sometimes physically ill-treated.

And it was the public exposure of these press freedom violations that plunged your union into the crisis it is going through at the moment?

Indeed. Our union, founded in 2008, began having problems following the publication on 4 May 2009 of a report on freedom of the press in Tunisia, describing the problems facing the country's media and journalists. The authorities were not happy about the truth being exposed and declared a war against the union that is still ongoing. One of our union's former members, who has become the president of a new trade union promoted by the government to counter us, and who also happens to act as an advisor to the ruling party, in turn presented a document to the government press agency TAP depicting Tunisia as a haven of press freedom. But our union then presented our report exposing the real situation, at a press conference. The forces of law and order violently interrupted the press conference. We soon understood that the authorities had taken another step forward in the war on press freedom.

How did a second trade union come to be formed?

Three members of our union, followed shortly afterwards by a fourth, resigned. As we see it, it's all too easy for the authorities to put pressure on journalists in a country where 80% of them depend on state-controlled media and are subjected to constant blackmail at work. On 15 August, in violation of legislation on the press as well as the internal rules of the trade union, these members who resigned organised a "putschist" congress with massive state backing to fund materials such as banners and posters, as well as giving it wide coverage in the official media, of course. Despite the pressure placed on journalists by media bosses subservient to the powers that be, the two-thirds membership quota was not

reached. The congress was nonetheless endorsed by the authorities. We have filed several appeals to stop the procedure but, even though the law is on our side, we have not yet won the case. We are waiting for another ruling on 26 October.

Given that, in accordance with the Statutes, our union is obliged to hold an extraordinary congress following the resignation of these four union members, our president agreed to hold this congress on 10 September. But the authorities do not want a legitimate extraordinary congress to be held, with the risk of seeing journalists in favour of press freedom being elected once again. We are willing to go to the ballot box at congress, but the "putschist" side is not responding. We, we have confidence in the Tunisian journalists who are sick and tired of this climate of fear and the denial of press freedoms. They discreetly tell us that we have to keep up the fight for a truly free and independent trade union, and we are going to forge ahead.

How did your involvement in the trade union develop?

When I began working as a journalist, I affiliated to the association of Tunisian journalists in 1996. I worked eight hours a day for the Tunisian daily As-Sabah, then in 2004 I became the chief editor of the news bulletin of the research and training centre for Arab women Qawtar. In 2006, I was elected president of the women's committee. During the founding of the first journalists' union at the beginning of 2008, I stood as a candidate and was elected deputy general secretary in charge of press freedom. With the resignation of three members of the union, we restructured our tasks and I became treasurer. Given the financial problems facing the union, which relies solely on the members' affiliation fees to pay for the four permanent staff and all the operating expenses, looking after the accounts is a priority. The lack of resources is also an obstacle to trade union rights and freedom of the press.

Are you not also afraid?

We are well aware that aside from this trade union putsch, the authorities still want to punish us. I have already been called before the economic brigade three times. They are accusing me of dipping my hands in the till! Fortunately, all the accounts are straight, to the last penny. But I know full well that it is a political problem, that they can find whatever pretext they want to put us in prison, to silence journalists. It's a very wearisome struggle.

Are there any specific difficulties to your fight, as a woman?

By law, there is total equality between men and women in Tunisia. Since 1956, we have had highly advanced legislation on this matter. Men and women suffer equally from the problems regarding press freedom. But there is a gap between equality in the law and equality in people's minds. As a journalist, for example, a woman is more likely to be given the pages on women, family or social issues rather than politics or the economy. We have to fight to convince. On paper, for instance, 65% of the decision-making posts in Tunisia's public television are held by women, and the authorities are very proud of this. But it isn't because these women have the title that they have any real decision-making power. We can hold the title of chief editor

without really being it!

And what place do women occupy in your union?

At trade union level, the proportion of women in leadership posts is quite good, better than in Europe, with women holding genuinely key positions (2).

How much attention does the Tunisian media give to social and trade union issues?

Social issues are covered; there is no direct obstacle to that. But how can we cover social issues in any depth, social issues linked to trade unions for example, without touching on human rights issues? That is the red line that cannot be crossed if you do not want to create problems for yourself and your newspaper. In the report our trade union published on press freedom in May, one of our demands was precisely that: greater scope in the media for in-depth coverage of social rights issues.

Interview by Natacha David

(1) See the ITUC OnLine "Middle East: Governments Step Up Repression as Economic Crisis Hits Jobs and Incomes" published on 9 September 2009, at:
<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article4274&lang=en>

(2) According to figures published by the IFJ, the proportion of women journalists in trade union leadership posts in Tunisia is 33%, representing the largest percentage in the Middle East - North Africa - Iran region ("Getting the Balance Right - Gender Equality in Journalism", IFJ, 2009, <http://www.ifj.org/assets/docs/071/230/91dfd47-f4ee8e6.pdf>).

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