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Spotlight Interview with Nina Nyembezi (LRS- South Africa)

The ³Decisions for Life² campaign in South Africa aims to reach out to 10,000 young women workers.

Brussels, 16 October 2009 (ITUC OnLine): The trade union « Decisions for Life » campaign, linked to the innovative web-based « Decisions for Life » project (1) covers 12 countries (South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Ukraine). As she prepares to attend the ITUC's first World Women's Conference (2) due open in Brussels this Monday, Nina Nyembezi (LRS*), talks to us about the successful launch of the campaign in South Africa. Thanks to the close collaboration of the four South African national trade union centres (COSATU, FEDUSA, NACTU and CONSAWU) and three service sector trade unions (SASBO, SACCAWU and CWU), the campaign aims to reach 10,000 young South African women workers, focussing on one clear priority: fighting against sexual harassment.

In a few words, what is Decisions for Life about?

Decisions for Life is about young women having the confidence, understanding and power to make decisions about the careers they choose, how they respond to challenges at work and home, who they choose as partners, how they balance personal/work life and essentially how they make their dreams a reality.

What are the key concerns of the young women workers in South Africa?

- Study opportunities
- Working in a job where there is space to grow and develop
- Being recognized and valued in the workplace, home and community
- Being able to have fulfilling relationships with their partners
- Being able to have more control over when they become parents
- Being able to remain free from HIV
- Being able to have control over their bodies and not having to face sexual violence
- Being able to enjoy youth without all the pressures of having to look after a range of financial dependents e.g. siblings, parents, grandparents etc.

You are the campaign coordinator. What does this project and trade union campaign offer to young women workers in the service sector?

- A chance to share their experiences with other young women
- An opportunity to understand the nature of the sector and the challenges it poses for young women
- A chance to work collectively in dealing with some of the challenges facing young women in the sector

- A chance to strengthen and build trade unions in the sector and importantly a chance to ensure that the voices of young women become central to the trade union organizing in the sector.

On 29 August you launched the trade union campaign. What were the highlights of the launch?

- The interest on the part of young women in the service sector, in the broader union movement and beyond the trade union movement e.g. in the local communities
- The level of participation of young women in the launch
- The fact that almost all the presentations and discussions were organized by young women from the service sector
- That young women from different service sector groupings e.g. call center and retail sector; women in job categories like secretaries and administrators from the manufacturing sector; young women administrators from the trade unions and young unemployed women could all identify their common dreams and challenges and all felt inspired to collectively organize to address these challenges and realize their dreams
- That the kinds of educational activities and materials produced for the launch seem to be connecting with our target constituency
- That the launch generated considerable media attention and support from a range of service organizations working with women
- That we have a wonderful springboard to take the campaign forward
- That through organizing for the launch we have managed to strengthen working relations between the different trade unions federations who often have different approaches to organizing

What are the objectives of the trade union campaign in itself?

- For young women in the service sector, in other sectors and in the community more generally to see the campaign as a space where young women's views, ideas, feelings and decisions are taken seriously.
- A space where young women feel they are being empowered both individually and collectively to take informed decisions.
- An opportunity for the trade union to develop strategies that can attract young women to the trade union and strengthen the voice of the existing young women in the union movement
- An opportunity for the trade union to become a ³home² for young women
- An opportunity for the trade union to strengthen strategies to address unequal gender relations both inside the union as well as in the workplace
- An opportunity for collective bargaining demands to reflect the interests of young women workers
- An opportunity for more young women to emerge as trade union leaders

What interesting and innovative campaign activities will you be organizing for these young women workers?

My role is to assist the trade unions in organizing relevant, innovative and exciting campaign activities what will strengthen the position of young women workers and allow the union to emerge as a ³home² for young women workers and an inspiration to young women in all the other sectors in society.

Examples of campaign activities for the next 4 months (till the end of 2009)

- Organized follow up discussions with all the participants who attended the launch. This will be done through the different trade unions
- The formation of forums/discussions circles etc. that will bring together young women from the service sector who are not yet organized. This will act as a recruitment space for the trade unions
- A smaller launch to the campaign in Cape Town - coordinated by a group of young women workers from the retail and call center groups
- Focus group discussions with groups of workers who are interested in exploring how they can participate in the campaign
- Target areas e.g. specific shopping malls - to conduct public recruitment campaigns - this to be coordinated by existing contacts within the malls
- An organized media campaign that will focus on trade union media and community radio stations. ³Our faces² will play a more dominant role in the media campaign
- Creating spaces for the DFL play to be performed
- Recruiting a group of young retrenched women workers to take over the campaign from the professional actors
- Collection of ³sector² specific stories e.g. stories from women in the call centers
- Training in using social networking in a gender sensitive manner
- Building solidarity networks with women's groups
- A DFL focus on ³sexual harassment² as part of the broader national campaign -16 days of activism against gender based violence
- A DFL presence at all the trade union federation congresses

How many young women workers do you want to reach and what do you hope to achieve concretely in two years time?

Our target is 10 000 women workers in the next 2 years

Who are the different partners of the trade union campaign and how was this unique coalition of NCs/ unions build?

We have 4 trade union federations i.e. COSATU, FEDUSA, NACTU and CONSAWU as partners. There are also 3 UNI affiliates i.e. SASBO, SACCAWU and CWU participating. Through the federations we have a number of young women working in service type job categories e.g. secretaries, participating in the campaign. We are also building a group of solidarity organizations e.g. Sexual Harassment Project (SHEP); International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG), People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA) and a range of community based women's groups.

In your sense, what makes this project so unique?

This is a project that is speaking about the power of young women and not treating young women as victims. The project is also speaking in the language of young women without appearing patronizing and condescending. With this project we are showing that age is an important component of addressing gender inequalities.

(1) The « Decisions for Life » project targets young women aged between 15 and 19, in 14 countries. For further information see the project website : <http://dfl.wageindicator.org/home>.

(2) 450 women trade unionists from 100 countries will be gathering in Brussels on Monday for the opening of the first ITUC World Women's Conference. For more information on the conference see:

<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article4518>

(*) Labour Research Service (LRS).

The ITUC represents 170 million workers in 158 countries and territories and has 316 national affiliates. <http://www.ituc-csi.org> and <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

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