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Spotlight Interview with Erin Harrison (Canada- CLC)

« Women and young people are the first victims of the crisis »

Erin Harrison, youth officer for the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), is one of the youngest delegates at the ITUC's World Women's Conference opening today, 19 October, in Brussels (1). Here she talks to ITUC Spotlight about the impact of the crisis on young and on women workers in Canada, about their priorities and about the successes of the Canadian trade union movement in organising the "under 30s".

Who are the first to be affected by the crisis in Canada?

Young people and women workers are the principal victims. They are the first to be laid off because they have the least seniority. In September, the unemployment rate for workers under 24 years of age was 16.4%, compared to just 10% at the beginning of the crisis. The real rate is certainly higher, because this figure only includes those who have registered as unemployed. The unemployment level of women workers has also risen, from about 6% before the crisis to between 10 and 12% today. Our government says we are overcoming the crisis, but workers are still suffering its drastic effects and unemployment rates do not seem to be going down. At best they are staying the same as at the height of the crisis.

The CLC and its affiliates are implementing an action plan to deal with the crisis. One of the main aims is to reform unemployment insurance (to ensure easier access) and to raise the level of public pensions. There are a lot of demonstrations about this by CLC members across all the provinces and territories of Canada. We are trying to get as wide a public participation as possible in our demonstrations, because it is a campaign for everyone, not just our members.

Why do women workers have less seniority than men?

One of the main reasons is that women begin their professional careers later than men, notably because there are more highly qualified women than men (and they therefore enter the labour market later) or because they have had children.

How is the organising of young workers and women workers going in the CLC ?

Union membership levels among young workers are rising, and have reached about 20% of the under-30s in the labour force at the national level (in provinces such as Newfoundland and Manitoba the rate is as high as 35%). This rise is due partly to a change in our organising strategies. In the past we had high levels of union membership in the factories, but we are

faced with a serious industrial crisis: many factories are being transferred to countries in the South, on the grounds of cost. So we are beginning to organise in sectors that hitherto had a much lower level of union participation, such as the service sector, where there are more young people. One technique we often use is to get our young members to talk to other young people at the work place, because they are the best placed to find the right words and the right arguments about the benefits of union membership.

Our affiliates are also carrying out a lot of awareness-raising campaigns so that people have a positive image of trade unions. They talk of the benefits that unions can obtain, explain that we are the people who fight for an increase in the minimum wage, for improvements in health and safety legislation, and that our fight benefits all workers, not just our membership.

What are the most convincing arguments in favour of union membership?

The difference in pay levels for workers employed at a unionised workplace is enormous: on average, a part-time worker earns 5 Canadian dollars (4.8 US dollars) more per hour if they are unionised, and that difference rises to 7 Canadian dollars (6.7 US dollars) for full-time workers. It also facilitates access to pensions, because the unions negotiate for guaranteed pensions. Furthermore, 80% of our members also enjoy non-wage benefits such as spectacles, medication...

The advantages won by the trade unions oblige anti-union employers to be better employers if they want to continue to be union-free. We have seen this sort of development in the automobile industry for example: the three North American companies in Canada (General Motors, Ford, Chrysler) in Canada are all unionised, while the two foreign companies (Toyota and Honda) are not but the salaries, pensions and non-wage benefits they offer are similar to those of the unionised factories because they could not hold on to their workers (or prevent the formation of unions outside) if they didn't.

You spoke of a campaign to improve the unions' image. Is it so bad?

The media are controlled by the North American giants. In 90% of cases, they publish negative stories about the unions. We have to counter this influence, but using other means, because obviously we do not have enough money to operate the same way as these media giants. Furthermore, we have a right-wing government that has a very negative attitude towards the unions. That is reflected in the messages that young people receive and in what society in general thinks about the trade union movement.

What are the other priorities of the CLC's youth work, beyond organising ?

The biggest campaign we have at the moment was launched on the World Day for Decent Work and it is about the minimum working age. You would imagine that Canada would not have any child workers, but there are a lot of them, and it is a serious problem. The minimum working age differs between provinces and territories. ILO Convention 138 stipulates that the minimum working age should be 15 years, or 14 in some cases, but in nearly all the

provinces and territories of Canada there are children under 15 at work. The situation is worst in British Columbia and Alberta, where children begin to work at the age of 12, and in Quebec, that has abolished minimum age legislation, claiming it was age discrimination! The law does of course ban the employment of children during school hours but outside those hours they can work any time (although some provinces ban children from working between 10.00 pm and 6.00 am). The situation is different in every province and territory, but the trade union movement believes there should be a single message. The tripartite partners managed to agree on Convention 138 at the ILO, so why can't they do so in our country? We are trying to get the Convention ratified here as quickly as possible.

You are a member of the ITUC Youth Committee. How does that benefit the young workers of Canada ?

It gives me an excellent analysis of what is happening in other countries, and I come home with lots of ideas about what could work for the youth of Canada. Furthermore, while it is important to have a united trade union message in your own country, it is all the more important to have a united message for youth at the world level. I try to bring all the ITUC campaigns to Canada. Young people love to take part in these campaigns, and to sign petitions. All the members of the CLC Youth Committee have signed the latest petition on the fight against nuclear arms (2), and they pass it on to other young members. International campaigns are very important because young people are very receptive to them. This generation is growing up in a spirit of social activism.

One of the themes of the First ITUC World Women's Conference is pay equity between men and women. Where does Canada stand on this?

The CLC launched a major campaign on pay inequality on International Women's Day in March 2009. On average, for every dollar earned by a male worker, women only get 70.5 cents. The difference is even greater for women graduates who only earn 68 cents to the male dollar. So even when you have paid a huge amount of money to study, you still earn less than a man.

One of the reasons for these differences is that women still tend to occupy the less favoured jobs, such as child care, which are not well paid, while men tend to take the better paid jobs. For example, in the restaurant trade, women work more in small restaurants, while men wait on tables in the more prestigious establishments. The job description is the same, but they earn 10 Canadian dollars more than women.

Our campaigns are aimed at fighting against this type of preferential hiring, and for gender equality in general. We want to persuade the authorities to adopt equal pay legislation, but the government doesn't believe there is a problem. We must keep coming back to this point, and we will keep campaigning for as long as there is no change.

Is there a difference between the pay of men and women doing the same job in the same enterprise?

Not if there is a union. In some non-unionised work places, it still

happens.

Does CLC collective bargaining always include gender issues?

Yes, it is a matter of principle. All of our affiliates have a women's committee, and they help press for gender-related issues, particularly in collective bargaining. All collective bargaining training has a strong gender content. This goes well beyond pay equity. For example, one of our campaigns is on conjugal violence. We hold the view that this violence can entail an occupational risk: when a woman leaves home to live in a refuge because of domestic violence, her companion knows that the easiest place to find her is the workplace, because she will have to keep working to meet her needs. Adequate protection is therefore needed at the workplace, and there must be legislation on the subject, otherwise these women will not be safe at work.

You participated in the Poznan Conference on Climate Change in December 2008. Is it a priority for Canadian workers?

This is a very important issue in Canada. Our country is very big, and borders on the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic oceans. Every region of Canada is affected by global warming, be it by the extinction of the polar bear and other species in the North, uncontrollable forest fires in British Columbia, rising water levels submerging the East Coast, etc. The young are extremely concerned about these issues. This Friday, 23 October, we are launching « Power Shift Canada 2009 », an environmental conference that will lobby our government about climate change. The young are very much involved, as it is they and their children who will suffer the consequences in the coming years. We must act now to find solutions, to make our government act, because the United States and Canada have extremely weak legislation on climate issues. They promise a lot, but they do very little about it.

Are environmental issues tackled in collective bargaining negotiations?

The biggest challenge we face in the trade union movement is the transition from "dirty" jobs, which do not help the environment, to green jobs. Trade unions from the steel sector or the automobile industry for example, should bring up these issues in the negotiations, and ensure that processes are in place to train workers so that they can be employed in these environmentally sustainable jobs. Other arguments in favour of green jobs are that they are often well paid, and tend to be in unionised workplaces.

What do you hope to gain from attending the First ITUC World Women's Conference ?

At my age, (25 years), being part of a delegation to such an event is a fantastic opportunity. It shows just how much importance my union attaches to young people. I am very happy to be able to meet older and more experienced women trade unionists. I can learn from them and give them a more youthful perspective. It is important not to look on young people as people who have less knowledge than others, because in fact we just have a different analysis of what is happening in the meetings, in the political discussions, etc.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) Over 460 delegates from more than 100 countries are meeting in Brussels from 19 to 21 October for the ITUC's First Women's Conference, on the theme « Decent Work, Decent Life for Women ». It will examine the impact of the worldwide jobs crisis on women and will set out the broad lines for international trade union action to strengthen job security for women, review women's pay and improve their working conditions. For more information see <http://www.ituc-csi.org/womensconference?lang=en>
See also the website for the project "Decisions for Life" <http://dfl.wageindicator.org/home>, which covers 14 developing and transition countries in eight sectors of activity.

(2) <http://www.ituc-csi.org/peace?lang=en>

See the Video at : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REYgypv37g>

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