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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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Spotlight interview with Louisa Ait-Rached (FNTTC*- Algeria)

"I want to exchange experiences and take back ideas that I can put into practice in my trade union work"

Brussels, 20 October 2009 (ITUC OnLine): In her work as a shop steward at a clothing and leather goods company in Algiers, Louisa Ait-Rached, aged 33, fights against women workers' lack of access to promotion. Having experienced sexual harassment firsthand at the start of her working life, she welcomes the efforts carried by the UGTA to eradicate this taboo. This is the first time she is attending an international trade union conference (1), and she is keen to draw on the exchange of experiences and also to learn how to mobilise against the urgent matter of climate change.

You were quick to join the union when you started working. What motivated you to become a member?

I started work at the age of 23 in the administrative department of a state-owned clothing and leather goods enterprise in Algiers, employing 145 workers, mainly men. I joined the union as soon as my position was confirmed. My motivation? To protect myself! If you are not unionised, you cannot defend yourself.

Why did you wait until your position was confirmed?

Out of fear. If your job is not confirmed, you daren't unionise, for fear of losing it.

How did your family and friends react to your involvement in the union?

It is not usually well looked upon by people's families, it's a question of mentality. It was not easy for me either at the beginning, they had prejudices against trade unionists. But they are very proud of me now and support me wholeheartedly. I am also fortunate that my husband has always stood by me. If I am concerned about a dispute at my company, he discusses it with me at length, it's indirect trade unionism!

In 2005, you became a shop steward at your workplace. What are the top demands for the women at your company?

The question of poor wages and calls for formalising the jobs where women work hard but at lower wage scales are major issues. The lack of promotion at production post level is, however, the number one problem. It is virtually impossible for a woman to be promoted. I was recently involved in the particular case of a very competent woman. I even took the case to the company's board of directors. But to no avail, they would not give in. When I asked for an explanation, they told me that a woman cannot be a supervisor, simply because a woman cannot be in charge of men!

The difficulties of combining work and family life also bear heavily on women. I see my colleagues who have to juggle their time between their job, their children, the housework. We really need childcare where I work, for example. Most women have very limited financial resources and it is difficult to find quality childcare they can afford.

Conditions are particularly dismal for women in informal textile production...

The situation is much worse in the informal economy. Women are put out on the street as soon as they become pregnant. Women working at home are given outrageous amounts of work to do for ridiculously low wages, and have no social protection as they are not declared. If another order is not placed, they lose their jobs from one day to the next, without any compensation.

The UGTA is heading a campaign against sexual harassment. Are mentalities starting to change?

When I first started work I suffered really seriously from sexual harassment. No one around me was aware of my problem. It is so difficult to speak, to defend oneself, and even more so to prove it! At the time, I kept everything to myself and it was only time that sorted the problem out for me. It was ten years ago, when the subject was still completely taboo. We have come a long way since then, thanks to the union. Awareness-raising campaigns have contributed to helping us speak more openly about the problem. At our local union, there is someone on duty every Monday afternoon so that women can come and speak at ease and in total confidence. Every 8 March is an unmissable opportunity to highlight all the issues linked to the protection of women's rights.

How do you feel as a woman within your trade union?

Personally, I can say that my male trade union colleagues and I really work as a team, in a real spirit of fraternity. I'm lucky, as I have heard that this isn't the case for all women trade unionists. At the level of the UGTA leadership, our general secretary has really imposed women's involvement, which helps us a great deal. Quotas for taking part in training activities are essential. I think it is thanks to this willingness to make space for women that I am here today. My federation also provided me with concrete help to be able to come here, without having problems with my employer.

Have you come into contact with trade unionists from other countries before?

I'm a member of Formaghreb, which has been bringing young trade unionists together from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, with the help of Andalusian unions (Spain), since 2007. The aim is to create a North African trade union movement and to train future leaders. The team of young Algerian trade unionists is made up of 12 young women and 12 young men. I put all the training I've received to direct use in my trade union work. It has helped me to communicate better, to understand the workers' needs better, and to defend their interests more effectively.

What are your main expectations from this your first international conference?

This conference is a valuable opportunity to share experiences and to develop new ideas that can be put into practice in the trade union struggle. I am very interested in any opportunity to learn. In Algeria, our trade union training institute plays a fundamental role. It's thanks to training, for instance, that I had the tools to lead a strike for the very first time, with every respect for the legal requirements.

Which of the subjects covered at the Conference is of most interest to you?

After seeing the Conference programme, I started to read up on the issue of climate change, which is on the agenda, on the internet. I was very shocked at what I discovered about this terribly worrying subject. I said to myself, it really is "Apocalypse Now"! Honestly, if we do not have a viable planet left, what is the use of reflecting on the future of trade unions? I really want to find out more about it through this conference, to be able to mobilise around this issue.

Interview by Natacha David

(*)FNTTC : Fédération nationale du textile, tissage et cuir.

(1) Under the heading "Decent Work, Decent Life for Women", the first ITUC World Women's Conference is bringing together 460 delegates from over 100 countries from 19 to 21 October in Brussels. They will examine the repercussions of the global jobs crisis on women and map out international trade union action to improve their job security, pay and working conditions. For more information, see the ITUC website at: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/womensconference?lang=fr> (photos and interviews).

Also see the website of the "Decision for Life" project <http://dfl.wageindicator.org/home>) covering 14 developing and transition countries and eight occupational groups.

Photos of the Conference:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/ituc/sets/72157622062720970/>

The ITUC represents 170 million workers in 158 countries and territories and has 316 national affiliates.

Website: <http://www.ituc-csi.org> and <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

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