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Spotlight Interview with Daniela Alexieva (CITUB-Bulgaria)

« Give youth a chance ! »

Brussels, 21 October 2009 (ITUC OnLine): Supporting youth structures and integrating them more fully into the trade union movement will also help the cause of women, explains Daniela Alexieva, chairperson of the PERC Youth Committee (1), who wants to see closer cooperation between the ITUC Women's Committee and its Youth Committee.

What impact has the crisis had on women workers, particularly young women workers, in the European region ?

Women and youth are the most vulnerable categories of workers, and the hardest hit by the crisis. Young workers are two to three times more likely to find themselves out of work, particularly young women. Women are often in the lowest skilled jobs, with the lowest levels of responsibility, and lowest pay. These jobs are the first to go when an employer wants to reduce staff. There is a paradox here, because while women are often in the most precarious jobs, women also have a higher level of education in the European region.

What can the trade unions do to respond to the crisis?

Informal employment is expanding throughout Europe because of the crisis. The trade unions are trying to make these workers more visible and are helping them to organise. In Bulgaria, for example, my national centre the CITUB (2) is negotiating with the employers and the government to increase the visibility of these jobs and give them greater protection, which is in the interests of both the workers and the employers.

Migrants are another category of workers affected by the crisis. Many Bulgarian women leave to work abroad, often in informal jobs, for example in child care or as domestic cleaners, jobs which have no protection. Because of the crisis however, many migrants who had left to work in countries such as Spain, Italy and Greece, are now coming back to Bulgaria, but there aren't enough jobs for them.

When considering what the unions can do to tackle the crisis, we have to ask ourselves not only what has to be done now, but what we have to do after the crisis.

You have been the Chairperson of the PERC Youth Committee since July 2009. What are the priorities for youth in the European region?

Strengthening our networking with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) is a priority. We must also develop campaigns and projects to encourage the participation of young people in the trade unions.

The first stage is to analyse in depth the real needs of young workers in Europe, because we don't have enough information. The second stage is to develop campaigns to promote decent work and build a better future, using an approach that encompasses all young people across Europe.

Exchanging best practices is fundamental. Trade unions in countries such as Belgium or Spain, for example, have very interesting experiences in terms of organising young workers.

On the other hand, it is also worth learning the lessons from bad practices.

The demographic challenge in Europe is of major importance. Given the fall in birth rates and the ageing of the population in the European region, we need to develop greater solidarity by the young towards older people.

As a young woman, were you supported within your trade union organisation, or held back?

I felt I had the support of my national trade union centre in making progress in my trade union career. In general however, at the European level, there is much talk of support, but when it comes to putting it into practice, young people are not being given sufficient means. I have not felt that I have been treated differently because I am a woman, either at the national level in Bulgaria, or at the European level. But I have heard stories of other brilliant young women in Europe who have been sidelined because there has been jealousy at their progress.

What do you want trade union leaders to do to give more support to youth?

Youth participation in trade union decision-making bodies must be increased, as well as in collective bargaining. There are a lot of young people with a good educational level who are willing to get involved. They must be given a chance! Stop saying youth are the future without giving them the space they need. Youth committees must be created in all the trade union organisations that don't yet have one. There aren't many young women here, at the ITUC World Women's Conference.

With four women and five men, the PERC Youth Committee is close to gender parity. Are trade union youth structures ahead of the rest of trade union structures in terms of gender equality?

It is true that youth committees often get closer to gender parity than other structures. That is one of the reasons why helping youth structures is also a way of advancing the cause of women in the trade union movement.

Parity in access to leadership training is very important. For example, the European Trade Union Institute imposes parity on participation in its leadership training, which is fundamental to helping young women reach decision-making posts in the trade unions.

What are your expectations of this first ITUC Women's Conference?

As it brings together 465 women from around the world, this Conference is an excellent opportunity to listen to different experiences and to exchange good practices. In Africa for example, the trade unions have greater experience in organising in the informal economy, and it is going to be very interesting to learn more about that.

I believe that strengthening cooperation between the ITUC Women's Committee and its Youth Committee is essential. It is essential for organising young women in the informal economy and women migrant workers. We must work together, and we must ensure collaboration with like-minded NGOs.

But what practical steps can be taken to organise more young women workers?

We must go out and meet them face to face, one young woman worker speaking to another. How can we help them protect themselves better? That is their first question. They want to know their rights, for example regarding maternity. The workplace, student meetings,

employment agencies, and new communications tools such as blogs or Facebook...we have to use every means possible to make contact.

Interview by Natacha David

(1) Pan-European Regional Council (PERC) : <http://perc.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?rubrique1&lang=en>

(2) Independent Confederation of Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB).

(3) The first ITUC World Women's Conference, on the theme "Decent Work, Decent Life for Women », is taking place in Brussels from 19-21 October, bringing together 460 delegates from over 100 countries. They will analyse the impact of the world jobs crisis on women and will map out the broad lines of 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://dfi.wageindicator.org/home> , which covers 14 developing and transition countries in eight sectors of activity.

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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