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Spotlight interview with Cheung Lai-Ha (Hong Kong-HKCTU)

"Employers see women as second-class labour"

Brussels, 20 October 2009 (ITUC OnLine): Hong Kong, one of the world's leading financial centres, has been hard hit by the economic crisis, accentuating the inequalities women workers already suffer. A delegate to the first ITUC World Women's Conference (*), Cheung Lai-ha is the vice president of the HKCTU (1), president of its Women's Committee and general secretary of the textile sector union (2). She charts the catalogue of discriminatory practices against women workers and explains how the trade union defends their rights, especially those of domestic workers, who are prey to very serious abuse.

What impact has the economic crisis had on women workers in Hong Kong?

Like everywhere, Hong Kong has gone into a recession. Many men have been made redundant and their wives have gone out to look for a job, if they did not already have one. Government statistics show that increasing numbers of women have entered the labour market over the last six to nine months. And yet their pay has stagnated over the last ten years or so, and for the same work a woman worker employed in the private sector earns between 75 and 80% of a man's wage.

We have also observed that a very large number of women are only able to obtain precarious formal work or informal economy work. There are twice as many women in this situation as there were five years ago. As women are more inclined to accept poorly paid and/or insecure jobs than men, the rate of unemployment is currently higher among men than women. The crisis has also led to a considerable increase in working hours.

Furthermore, whilst discrimination in the employment of married women was already rampant prior to the crisis, it is even worse now: employers would rather avoid hiring them as they fear they will fall pregnant. Many women workers are fired if they get pregnant. The birth rate is already very low in Hong Kong and this type of discrimination does nothing to help matters.

Does the legislation in Hong Kong not protect pregnant workers?

Yes, but it is not properly applied, firstly, because women workers rarely file a complaint (as it is difficult to furnish proof of discrimination) and, secondly, because the sanctions against employers are too trifling.

Why is it so difficult to gather proof of discrimination?

Because this type of discrimination is not overt. The employer puts pressure on the pregnant worker so that she ends up resigning. They use several techniques: making her work in a place without air conditioning, with poor ventilation, overloading her with work, forcing her to carry out useless tasks, installing a camera to keep her under constant surveillance, etc. Eighty percent of women workers that contact our union after being placed under this type of pressure are in need of psychological help.

How do you explain the pay gap between men and women doing the same job?

In the textile sector, a male office worker earns 10,000 Hong Kong dollars a month (860 euros) whilst a female office worker earns between 7500 and 8000 (647 to 690 euros). This difference is owed to the mentality of private sector employees, who see women workers as second-class labour. The lower pay is not explicit: on paper, it is the same for an identical job description, but if one calculates all the components of the wage paid, it will be lower for a woman. This type of difference doesn't exist in the public sector however.

What action does the HKCTU take against such forms of discrimination?

We help those affected to file a complaint. In 90% of the cases over discrimination against pregnant women, we obtain reparation and/or a ruling against the employer. That having been said, too few women dare to complain, as they are more tolerant in the face of discrimination. This is particularly the case for middle-aged women, who know they would have difficulties finding another job.

We place pressure on the government to tackle these issues, and raise public awareness about the problems experienced by women workers. Our lobby has, for example, resulted in the government's women's affairs commission pushing harder for the law to be reformed in women's favour.

Combating violence against women is one of the main themes of the ITUC World Women's Conference. What is the situation in Hong Kong?

The Hong Kong government and employers do not consider sexual harassment to be a major problem. It is, however, more of a problem than the statistics would indicate. It is still a taboo subject, even though more and more cases are being reported, among other things thanks to the HKCTU's awareness-raising campaigns. We do not want sexual harassment victims to fear dismissal or some other form of retaliation if they dare to speak out. Our campaigns are targeted at young women workers and the general public, because the victims all too often remain silent for fear of how their friends and families will react.

We are also mobilising to stop employers from verbally abusing women workers, which is a serious and widespread problem in Hong Kong. When we receive complaints from men who have been seriously insulted by their hierachal superiors, we defend them too.

We are also dealing with the cases of increasing numbers of migrant domestic workers who are beaten and abused by their employers. One of the HKCTU federations is specialised in defending them. It assists the victims with the legal procedures and gives them material support. Without this aid, the employer wouldn't be at any risk as his victim would be forced to return to her country, not having a work permit.

What are the priorities of the HKCTU Women's Committee?

Unfortunately, we have to admit that Hong Kong unions do not consider gender issues to be a priority. We are not falling over ourselves to be on the women's committee. Our members, male and female, would rather mobilise around other issues linked to the world of work, areas where they have more influence. They would rather not work on gender-related issues as it takes more time to see the results. Our Women's Committee is also disadvantaged by the fact that its members are less educated, and they have less occasion to be exposed to international debates. Our priorities nonetheless continue to be the fight for women workers' rights, for equal pay, the fight against sexual harassment and age discrimination.

What kind of age discrimination do women workers suffer from?

In the retail and services sector, for instance, women over 30 cannot find work as they are considered to be "too old". Another type of discrimination affects people under 22, who generally have a lot of difficulty getting hired, but in this case it is the women that are at an advantage when it comes to recruitment, as employers like to have "young and pretty" women on their staff. Looks are very important in Hong Kong.

You are the general secretary of the HKCTU textile and clothing sector union. Is this still a key sector in Hong Kong?

Over the last 20 years, the number of employees in this sector has gone from 320,000 to 32,000, 80% of whom are employed as clerical staff and the rest as "technical" workers (cleaning, replacing "Made in China" labels with "Made in Hong Kong" labels, etc.) With the economic crisis, another 10,000 people out of these 32,000 have been laid off or are under-employed. There used to be a lot of managers from Hong Kong among these 32,000; they used to work in mainland China, but they are now largely being replaced by mainland Chinese managers, whose wages are not as high. Some companies in mainland China continue to prefer managers from Hong Kong, as they have higher ethics, but they are increasingly less well paid.

Those who have lost their jobs in this sector over the last 20 years have tried to find another job, but their wages are lower: their lack of qualifications means they only land jobs as private security guards, domestic workers, etc.

Has Hong Kong's return to China in 1997 led to a deterioration in workers' rights?

As soon as it took office, the new government rushed to abolish the laws regulating collective bargaining... which had only been adopted 50 days before the end of the British era! We are pressing the authorities to legislate again, to no avail thus far. It is also increasingly difficult to obtain an employer's recognition of a union, and there are more restrictions on the holding of demonstrations: for any gathering of over 20 people, the police has to be asked for a document stipulating that it is not opposed to it. Some police officers are reticent to issue these documents, which can mean that the demonstration is rendered illegal.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions.

(2) Clothing Industry, Clerical and Retail Trade Employees General Union, affiliated to the ITGLWF.

(*) 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://dfi.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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