

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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Spotlight interview with Nadia Shabana (Palestine-PGFTU)

« Trade unions must increase awareness about climate change which affects the very poor in the developing countries »

Brussels, ITUC OnLine (21 October 2009): Nadia Shabana, 30, vice-Chairperson of the ITUC Youth Committee, is urging youth and women to work more closely together in the trade unions. Despite cultural obstacles, she is calling for a better balance between the genders and greater democracy. As a delegate at the ITUC World Women's Conference taking place in Brussels (*) she stresses the need to strengthen the trade union's work on raising awareness about climate change, particularly in the developing countries where the poorest people, particularly women, are the hardest hit.

With a degree in computer science and economics, how did you begin to be active in the Palestinian national trade union movement?

I began as a volunteer in the PGFTU national centre when I was 22, helping with translations and projects. The union leaders then asked me, four years ago, to become youth representative. It was in that capacity that I took part in 2007 in the ITUC Asia-Pacific Conference, and I was elected second vice-Chairperson of the ITUC Asia-Pacific Youth Committee. In 2008, in Ukraine, I was elected as vice-Chairperson of the ITUC Youth Committee.

Like other young women from the ITUC Youth Committee, I am at this conference not because my national centre sent me but thanks to the ITUC Youth Committee. It is symptomatic of the fact that few national trade union organisations have nominated young women to take part in this conference. General secretaries and the unions' decision-making bodies often choose delegations without thinking that young women are also women! It is a shame because there are a lot of young women in the trade unions, full of energy, well trained, with a good knowledge of new technology, and lots of new ideas. They should be given the opportunity of putting these skills to use for the benefit of others, and of ending this separation between youth and women's structures.

What are you getting out of this first ITUC World Women's Conference ?

It is interesting to take part in a Conference that consists entirely of women, there is a very special atmosphere. Meeting trade union women from all over the world and exchanging experiences with them is very enriching. The human relationships we develop in the course of these meetings are so important. In our youth committee meetings, like the recent Brazil meeting, we build very strong inter-personal links, and I think that makes us more motivated and more effective.

What have you heard during the Women's Conference that made the greatest impression on you?

A delegate from Nigeria took the floor. She is 64 years old and has had four children. She is the general secretary of a union whose members are mostly men. What she had to tell us was very interesting and shows how hard she had to work to reach that position. It is very inspiring to hear about personal journeys like hers!

Can you see yourself holding an important leadership post one day?

Sometimes in discussions at meetings abroad, some people tell me I will be the next general secretary of the Palestinian trade unions. But I know that when I go home I will find all those men, and mostly old men, in the top positions. They would laugh in my face if they heard me and would say "who do you think you are to talk that way? You were born yesterday!". It is only thanks to international pressure that youth and women can participate in trade union life. It is not just a structural problem, it is also a cultural one. Male domination is the rule in my country, and respect for your elders, whom young people must not contradict. We need a better balance between genders, and more democracy.

Which of the various themes on the Conference agenda interests you most?

I was particularly interested in the session on climate change. I am very happy that I was able to meet the South African Minister for the Environment yesterday, who spoke to the Conference. Many people in the developing countries underestimate the problem of climate change, and some don't know anything about it at all. And yet it is often the very poor, including many women, in the developing countries, who are the most affected by the disasters linked to climate change. In my view it is essential for the trade unions to raise awareness of this issue in the developing countries.

Palestinian women trade unionists have a reputation for being strong and determined in the Arab world and the Middle East. What is needed to help them be given the role they deserve?

It is true that there are a lot of strong and determined women in Palestine. Maybe it is because of their struggle against occupation. But when I am in international meetings, I am sometimes a little envious of the skills of women from some of the other countries. We would like to have the same opportunities. We need more training, and we need to be given a proper role, that is fully accepted.

How does it feel working with your male trade union colleagues in Palestine ?

I greatly appreciate the work of my male colleagues. And some of them support women. But what we want is a genuinely balanced relationship, where everyone feels mutually supported and where there is real equality.

Interview by Natacha David

(*)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 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://dfl.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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