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Spotlight interview with Vimbai Zinyama (ZCTU-Zimbabwe)

"For my eight-year-old son, a policeman is... someone who hits his mother"

Brussels, 12 November 2009 (ITUC OnLine): The recent arrest of the president of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) once again bears witness to the constant harassment and insecurity facing trade unionists in the country (1). Vimbai Zinyama, vice president of the ZCTU tells us about the threats and dehumanisation they have to battle with on a day-to-day basis. A specialist in the informal economy and microcredits, and currently the head of international relations for the ZCTU, she explains how the massive campaign to organise the informal economy is giving new and decisive strength to the ZCTU.

What are the day-to-day challenges facing trade unionists in Zimbabwe?

We have to battle with the widespread denial of workers' rights. In a context where the infrastructures have collapsed, where it is impossible to make a living, to get health care and to ensure our children's education, we are working from day to day in a climate of insecurity.

Harassment, problems with the authorities, ill-treatment, imprisonment... the news we receive from the Zimbabwean trade union movement reflects an extremely harsh and disturbing reality. Can you yourself testify to this?

Like all other trade unionists, I live with harassment and victimisation. At times, it is truly dehumanising; we feel stripped of the ability to express ourselves, it destroys our self-confidence and our ability to speak out. The methods and the language used against us strip us of our humanity. When the police comes to your house and harasses you in front of your children, hits you and treats you like a thief, a criminal, it is very disturbing for those surrounding you who are forced to witness such scenes.

When a teacher asked my eight-year-old son what the role of a policeman was, he replied "to hit your mother" and avowed in front of the whole class that he had seen it with his own eyes. The teacher contacted me to ask me to explain to my son that this is not the role a policeman is supposed to fulfil. I also have an 18-month-old little girl; it's a very difficult environment to bring up children in.

How did you get involved in the trade union movement?

I started working in a bank in 1990 at the same time as completing my studies in banking and finance. I joined the union during the very first week, following the visit of an organiser from a banking union (2) who convinced me of the need to unionise in order to defend our rights and to be represented. I soon got involved in women's issues and I became the head of the bargaining team.

In 1993, I became a member of the ZCTU's national executive.

At the start of my trade union career, the priority was the fight against the decent work deficit created by the structural adjustment programmes. Liberalisation led to soaring staple food prices. Falling bank deposits led to cuts in banking staff, making working conditions more and more difficult. Despite the very low wages, the employees were stripped of the benefits granted to them in the past. The bank loan facilities disappeared and it became impossible, for example, to ensure our children's education. During my time as a trade unionist at the bank, we organised five strikes. The threat of dismissal weighed heavily over the negotiators.

How did your family react to your early involvement in the trade union movement?

There were already a number of committed activists in my family, including various trade unionists. So they were very understanding. My father was active in the battle against HIV/AIDS and my sisters were also involved in the fight for economic and social rights.

After eight years in the banking sector, you took on the role of national coordinator for the Indigenous Business Women Association. What motivated you to make this move?

My sister, who had founded the association, was killed in a tragic accident. I was very much aware of the importance of this work and when I was asked to replace her, I accepted. The aim was to help marginalised women gain access to credits to develop their micro-projects. The association had 5000 members at the time, in a wide variety of sectors such as peanut butter production, textiles, handicrafts, transport or construction. After being in this association for three years, I joined a microcredit organisation for two years. Its aim was to make microcredits available to all small operators. This organisation already had links with the ZCTU.

You started work with the ZCTU in 2001, to take care of organising men and women in the informal economy. How committed was the ZCTU to this issue at the time?

It was already a key policy priority for the ZCTU. The ZCTU had been given the mandate to organise the informal economy within the framework of a national tripartite agreement. The aim was, of course, to structure trade union organisation and to make the link with access to microcredit, but also to go further than that, by trying to promote decent work in a sector where the decent work deficit is abysmal. Informal workers need to be recognised, to be included in decision-making processes, to be protected by a legal framework from which they are excluded. A salesperson working inside a building by no means shares the same status as the salesperson laying out vegetables on the street in front of the same building. Yet both of them make the economy work and pay taxes. Informal economy workers have to cope with red tape and harassment from the police authorities, who often drive them out of their workplaces. They are pushed to the sidelines of the system, without any rights. Our aim is to integrate them within the system.

How does this strategy to organise the informal economy work in terms of social security cover, for example?

We facilitate and strengthen the links with pre-existing informal economy associations and organisations, with a view to fully integrating them within the trade union movement. We want to break down the barriers, the barricades that keep the informal economy sidelined.

As regards social security, one approach is to help those who have lost a formal job to secure the rights they are entitled to and that they are sometimes denied. We are also helping disabled workers to obtain the benefits they are entitled to, as well as access to rehabilitation. For workers that have always worked in the informal economy, we are setting up insurance schemes, to cover funeral costs, for example. As regards HIV/AIDS, we have also set up an insurance scheme to give the victims' children access to orphanages and schooling. We also work with various donors and churches to collect foodstuffs and clothing for these children.

What results has the ZCTU campaign to organise the informal economy seen in terms of membership?

The ZCTU has 1.8 million members in the informal economy nationwide, and 60% of them are women. Companies are closing down every day with the failure of the economy. Overall economic activity is running 20% below capacity. This is driving many

men and women to work in the informal economy to survive. Not to mention all those that have a salaried job they cannot live off and have to supplement with another activity in the informal economy. Public service employees, for example, do not earn enough to make ends meet, so at the same time as holding on to their office jobs, one goes back and forth to South Africa to sell chickens whilst another sells shoes... it's a very common state of affairs.

What concrete activities are you carrying out within the framework your recent ZCTU posting, liaising with parliament?

Over the last three weeks, for example, we have taken advantage of the reopening of parliament to inform its members about the serious abuse and harassment trade unionists are facing on a day-to-day basis. We are also lobbying for Zimbabwe's ratification of the ILO Conventions protecting migrants' rights. It's a very sensitive issue as, to survive, many Zimbabweans are being forced to go into exile, especially to South Africa, where they have to cope with terrible conditions. We are insisting on the need to ensure respect for the rights of all workers in Zimbabwe, as this would give us more credibility when we demand respect for Zimbabwean migrants abroad.

What is your perspective, as a 38-year-old woman, on the gender issue?

Like all women, I find it difficult to balance my family and working life, especially in such a threatening environment. Society does not expect to see a woman being arrested, beaten, humiliated, imprisoned... it's very difficult.

In the private sector where I worked in the past, the struggle for power and positions was fierce, and the glass ceiling was very low. Things are very different in the ZCTU. From the moment I joined I felt there was a strong commitment to helping women take on responsibilities. A lot of what I have been able to do and where I am today is thanks to this policy to promote gender equality. Men have also, no doubt, realised that women are also needed to make headway in the fight for rights.

What message would you like to send trade unionists and human rights activists around the world?

In Zimbabwe, we are fighting to create a free environment, without harassment, where economic and social rights are respected. We invite our international partners to support us in our struggle, the objectives of which are shared by many people in Zimbabwe, even though they are not openly engaged in it. We would like to live a normal life, not to have to constantly struggle to make ends meet. If we do not keep up this fight, our children will not have any chance of one day leading a normal life.

Interview by Natacha David

(1) The ITUC strongly condemned the arrest on 9 November of Lovemore Matombo, president of the ZCTU, and two members of his staff, Michael Kandukutu and Percy Mciyo. According to information received by the ITUC from the ZCTU, the three trade unionists were arrested on the night of the 8 to 9 November in the Victoria Falls District, where Matombo was addressing ZCTU members in what was to be the first stop in a nationwide tour. This arrest constitutes yet another blatant attack on the legitimate trade union rights enshrined in ILO Convention 87 on freedom of association and the right to organise.

(2) Zimbabwe Banks and Allied Workers Union.

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