

ITUC OnLine

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Spotlight interview Loulou Cherry (CTH - Haiti)

“Rebuilding Haiti’s future is about reconstruction and creating jobs”

Brussels, 2 February 2010 (ITUC OnLine): Grief-stricken in the wake of the earthquake that ravaged the country, the trade union movement in Haiti, supported by international trade union solidarity, immediately turned its attention to helping the population (*). Food and medical aid and accommodation were organised at the CTH training centre in Port-au-Prince with the help of trade union organisations in the Dominican Republic, which sent in relief supplies straightaway. Whilst trade union organisations throughout the world continue to collect funds to help Haiti, Loulou Cherry, general secretary of the Confédération des travailleurs haïtiens (Confederation of Haitian Workers - CTH), takes stock of the most obvious urgent needs. He also emphasises the necessity of a medium-term strategy of reconstruction and job creation and issues an appeal for support for vocational training.

What was your experience of the earthquake?

Between 3 and 3.30 pm, I went to the head office of the Supreme Electoral Council where Denise, the CTH’s finance manager, worked. She was supposed to be signing some cheques so that our affiliate members could complete the administrative formalities to attend a seminar organised by the Conseil des Travailleurs des Caraïbes (Council of Caribbean Workers) in the Dominican Republic from 21 to 25 January. Once I had got her to sign them, I went back to CTH headquarters in rue des Miracles. I had just got there and was still sitting in my car when I saw people running down the street. The car started to shake and I prayed to God not to let me die in this way but to spare me. You could hear people shouting strangely. It was unlike anything I’d ever experienced. Everything went white and then black. Houses collapsed in seconds. There were dead bodies and blood everywhere, and people were panicking. It was then that we realised it was an earthquake. I thought about abandoning my vehicle but there were others on the road making their way through. I moved slightly forward in my car and then, a few metres further on near the Presidential Palace, I got out and walked. My wife, Ginette, phoned me to say she and the children were alive. It took me 50 minutes to walk to the house. It was awful, appalling.

My house is cracked and uninhabitable. We spent a night in the street and then finally decided to go to the INAFOS, the CTH’s social education centre, whose building had remained intact. We’ve been living here ever since with lots of other families.

The impact of the catastrophe in terms of the loss of human life is very great for the trade union movement...

The CTH is mourning the loss of Marie Denise Sinclair Almeus, our comrade and finance manager. Denise’s death was a great shock to us. Several days after the tragedy, we pulled her from the rubble ourselves and her remains were buried on Tuesday 19 January.

Adam Saintenie, the housekeeper at the INAFOS, died as well, along with her son. Several members of the Executive Committee also lost members of their family, particularly children. Most of their houses have been destroyed or are seriously damaged and thus uninhabitable.

The headquarters of the CTH is still standing but is so badly damaged that it’s dangerous, and the premises we had in Pierre Baptiste have simply collapsed.

What was the first help to get through to you?

It was from MOSCHTA, a movement affiliated with the CASC in the Dominican Republic, which supported us immediately after the earthquake. They brought in doctors and ambulances, which were housed at the INAFOS centre. Using the centre as a base, they treated dozens of injured people and handed out water and medication. From a receiving station for the convoys sent in by unions in the Dominican Republic, INAFOS has been turned into a welcome centre for the victims, and a place where we can store supplies and offer whatever help we can to those in need.

What are the most urgent priority needs for the population today?

The most urgent requirements are for water, food, tents and medical care. Medication is hard to find on the market. We also need homes for workers who have nowhere to live and there's no proper list available yet.

What do you expect from the international trade union movement?

The magic word in the trade union movement is solidarity. We are not poor people asking for some kind of hand-out. But in addition to support from the government and international aid, which is still disorganised at this point, we need to give the trade union movement the capacity to act. We are grateful for the international aid that has come from many governments and organisations but the trade union movement has the ability to contribute to getting aid to where it's needed.

The emergency aid getting to us from the ITUC shows that it's possible and it's important that the solidarity that has grown out of the emergency continues.

In the medium term, we are thinking about putting our efforts into building houses for homeless workers and we need land so that we can do so. We have already been in discussions with a number of mayors offices, in Port-au-Prince but also in the areas outside the capital as many people, fearing further aftershocks have left the capital. Many refugees are moving out to the provincial areas and the situation is urgent there too. We need to avoid focusing all our efforts on Port-au-Prince so we're going out to Leogane and Petit Goave to see the situation there, which doesn't seem much better.

What's at stake in terms of employment?

To be honest, you can't really talk about employment. Everything has been destroyed. In terms of creating jobs, it's important to recognise that the situation was urgent even before the disaster. A job was already a luxury. Only 250,000 of five million workers were in employment. The Ministerial Palace, which employed thousands of workers, has collapsed.

We can only rebuild our future through reconstruction and creating jobs. The INAFOS can play a central role by launching immediate vocational training programmes so that workers, both men and women, can get back into the labour market and contribute to the reconstruction. But it needs to be able to operate under decent conditions and ensure it has the capacity to organise training. We are thinking of installing solar panels so that it will be self-sufficient in terms of energy. We could certainly work with the ILO and the ITUC to find the best expert trainers and select people to participate in vocational training courses in the 12 areas of activity in which the CTH operates.

Interview by Isabelle Hofferlin
(with N.D.)

(*) Following the earthquake that struck Haiti, the ITUC, in conjunction with its American regional organisation, the TUCA, launched a trade union appeal for humanitarian assistance for the victims. As a priority, the funds collected as a result of the campaign are being dedicated to providing humanitarian aid through affiliated organisations in the Dominican Republic, the CASC, CNTD and CNUS, to the ITUC's Haitian affiliate, the CTH.

For more information on the initial emergency operations conducted in Haiti thanks to trade union solidarity, see the ITUC's Online communiqué dated 21 January 2010 at: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/haiti-l-aide-syndicale-arrive-sur.html>

Please see also the first photographs of the humanitarian aid brought by the trade union movement to the area: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ituc/sets/7215762333251334/>

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