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Spotlight interview with Gertrude Hambira (GAPWUZ - Zimbabwe)

"Farm workers are ill-treated and abandoned"

Brussels, 02 July 2010 (ITUC OnLine): Gertrude Hambira is the general secretary of the General Agricultural Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ) (1). She has been forced to leave her country after criticising the land reform that has triggered countless barbaric acts and left hundreds of thousands of workers jobless. Amid continued human rights violations and the persecution of trade unionists, she is calling for a genuine land reform programme that will bring greater social justice without violating human rights.

What does the land reform implemented in Zimbabwe since the year 2000 consist in?

It could be seen as a racial issue, as white farmers are evicted from their farms to be given to blacks... but the fact is that they are given to the blacks that are part of the political elite: ministers, war veterans, ZANU-PF (2) supporters, judges, etc. The ministers have received around five to ten farms per person. In the process, the new owners have evicted the farm workers who were supposed to work this land. They only keep five to ten workers, for example, on a farm that used to employ 200 people. Production is falling as a result, and this affects the production of the entire country.

The potentially active agricultural labour force prior to the reform was around 500,000 during high season (including seasonal workers), but it has now fallen to almost 120,000. Most workers are abandoned on the farms and become internally displaced, living on the side of the road; others hang around in the villages and try to survive on piece work. Some take up illegal activities, such as gold or diamond panning, or join the informal economy, etc.

But it is not in the new owners' interest to evict the farm workers. Why do they do this?

Everyone wants land, but not everyone wants to be a farmer. Farming is a business, not a hobby; every effort has to be put into it. To produce, you have to be on the farm. Yet these new owners spend most of their time in offices from which they give orders, and there is no one on the ground to supervise the work that is supposed to be done. If you take on a farm and part with the labour force and start to underpay the workers, you are heading for failure. When this happens, you place the blame elsewhere (on the opposition, the workers, the banks that won't give you a loan), but it is you yourself who put yourself in this situation.

Has the entrance of opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai into the government not helped the situation?

Things may have improved for the rich, but when there is a change in the structure of a system, people expect to see bread and butter on the table. This is what the ordinary person in the street would like to see the government focusing on, but within a week of the national unity government being formed, farms were being seized again, workers were being evicted and others continue to be underpaid. The human rights violations have continued and trade unionists are still being persecuted and arrested. It was under the rule of the unity government that I had to go into exile. Yet an ordinary woman like me has no intention of overthrowing the government, or reversing the land reform. All I am doing is telling the truth.

What led you to go into exile?

I was summoned to the JOC (Joint Operation Command), a high-level structure of the army, police, prison system and intelligence services. On 19 February, they summoned me to the police headquarters and asked me why I had produced a documentary on the human rights violations linked to the land reform (3). They questioned me for about two hours. Three days later, they sent seven men to "kidnap" me, which implies being arrested and held in secret for an indefinite period. Fortunately, I wasn't at the office, and I fled the country. After my departure, my colleagues were arrested. They were not beaten but they were heavily intimidated. They were told that they would die in jail if they didn't tell them where I was.

What form did your interrogation take?

They kept asking me where the images of the documentary were filmed and what our intentions were. They told me I should be imprisoned and die because I am a dangerous person. I answered that I was only telling the truth, that I would expect them, rather, to ask me how to stop all these terrible acts of violence. Instead of that, I was confronted with an aggressive interrogation.

Have you been arrested in the past?

Yes, and I have also been beaten by the police on a number of occasions. My latest arrest was in December 2008, when we took part in a ZCTU (4) demonstration about the lack of money in circulation. I was severely beaten by the police in the street and was then held in detention for about two hours before being released.

The GAPWUZ documentary denounced the torture inflicted on black workers and white farmers. It shows, for example, the case of a worker thrown into a crowd of drunken people that treat him with appalling cruelty. Are these people paramilitaries, gangsters?

They are the "Youth Militia". The government has set up a youth militia made up of young unemployed people from rural areas. They receive training and are then sent to invade farms. They start to harass the workers, forcing them to attend their meetings. If the workers refuse to obey them, they accuse them of being members of the opposition and threaten to "discipline" them. Then they harass them, beat them up, tie them to trees to beat them, force their children to watch the torture they inflict on them.

They are like paramilitaries employed to do the dirty work?

Yes, and if we call the police for help, they simply look on without doing anything.

Is the same violence against white farmers and their black workers described in your documentary still taking place now?

At present, they are evicting them but not assaulting them. The Youth Militia sometimes comes to drive away the workers living on the roadside, but there are organisations that come to provide them with humanitarian assistance.

What happens to the white farmers who are evicted?

Some have gone to Australia, England, New Zealand or neighbouring countries. All they can take with them is their family. Our documentary shows the case of an evicted white farmer worrying about his daughter's schooling, but who is going to take care of the schooling of the 200 workers he used to employ? There is nothing wrong with correcting the inequalities that existed, because the good land was owned exclusively by the white minority, but why kill a worker, a farmer, in the process, why do children have to be thrown out of school? We need a genuine land reform programme that does not lead to

human rights violations.

Can the union remain active in such a context?

Prior to the land reform, we had 150,000 members. This number has now fallen to around 25,000. Most of our members have been thrown off the land where they used to work. Our union is doing everything it can to remain strong; we have done nothing but rebuild it over recent years. When the farms were seized as of the year 2000, all the trade union structures were destroyed. We started to build them up again. Then, in 2005, human rights violations were rife and trade union structures were hit once again. We had to start rebuilding them after the elections. The farm evictions that have been pursued over all these years have meant that we have constantly had to rebuild our structures. In 2008, during the most violent elections ever seen in Zimbabwe, all the union structures were affected once again. Other trade unions were hit, but the agricultural union was the worst affected.

We have always, in fact, been in the process of building up the trade union within rural communities. We have been recruiting members since 1985 through education programmes, meetings, explaining the benefits of becoming a member. It took nearly 20 years to develop this union, but what we had built was demolished virtually overnight. One day we are building, they next day it is destroyed... that is the context we have had to overcome, surviving thanks to the support of foreign unions and other partners around the world.

What services are you able to offer your 25,000 members?

A trade union's work is not limited to negotiating wages. When farm workers are thrown off the land, we represent them in the courts; we establish links with organisations that can provide them with humanitarian assistance. We also organise civic education programmes, education on HIV, etc.

You provide legal assistance, but it is a well known fact that the judicial system in Zimbabwe is far from independent...

Of course, but we have to do it, because one day normality will be restored and we will be able to reopen the cases and demand justice.

Your documentary reports on the cases taken to the SADC (5) Tribunal. What rulings did it deliver?

The SADC Tribunal affirmed that the government should not seize the farms, but the latter refuses to implement these rulings and there is no one there to force it to do so. Some of the cases taken before this tribunal even involved farms that came under the SADC bilateral partnership agreement, which were not supposed to be affected by the land reform. According to this partnership, everything produced on these farms is for export to SADC countries.

How can international labour solidarity help you?

The ITUC and its members should write to the government of Zimbabwe, support the ZCTU, and join with the IUF (6) in highlighting the plight of farm workers. And whenever possible, financial resources should be offered through the ZCTU, to help our members affected by the reform. All the workers interviewed in the documentary, whose faces were concealed, are still in hiding in Zimbabwe, they are in an extremely difficult situation.

Knowing the problems you would face as a trade union leader, what motivated you to take on this role?

I am passionate about my country and the people I represent. They were voiceless for so many years. I cannot simply sit back and watch what we have built over the years being destroyed. Someone has to speak out, and I was given the mandate to speak on behalf of Zimbabwe's workers when I was elected at a congress.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) General Agriculture & Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe, affiliate to the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU).

(2) Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front, headed by President Mugabe

(3) "House of Justice", available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqOjiq19rHk> , <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wl97cR5rQp0&feature=related> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ulGlmCC9zE&feature=related> . Also consult "If something is wrong...", the report accompanying the documentary, at http://www.kubatana.net/docs/agric/gapwuz_suffering_farm_workers_091111.pdf

(4) Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, affiliated to the ITUC

(5) Southern African Development Community

(6) International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations, <http://www.iuf.org/>

- Also read the interview of Vimbai Zinyama (ZCTU-Zimbabwe) published by the ITUC on 12 November 2009 entitled, "For my eight-year-old son, a policeman is... someone who hits his mother": <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spotlight-interview-with-vimbai.html>

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