

ITUC OnLine

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Spotlight interview with Miguel Zayas Martínez (CNT - Paraguay)

"We are working with our Brazilian colleagues to better defend migrants' rights"

Brussels, 5 October 2010 (ITUC OnLine): As part of the ITUC's global policy in favour of migrant workers' rights, a new bilateral cooperation project (1) has been launched, bringing together ITUC affiliated organisations from Brazil (UGT, CUT and Força Sindical) and Paraguay (CUT-A, CNT), to promote a decent life and decent work for migrants. Miguel Zayas Martínez, general secretary of the CNT, tells us about the first concrete activities organised within the framework of this project and the trade union action agenda for the coming months.

What is the main focus of the bilateral trade union project "Decent Life, Decent Work for Migrant Workers in Paraguay and Brazil"?

With the backing of the ITUC and other support organisations such as LO-TCO (Sweden), this project allows us to really promote decent work for migrants, of which there are ever growing numbers in our respective countries as well as in Latin America as a whole. Our trade union centres are each incorporating well-defined strategies regarding migrants within their work programmes, identifying them as priority actions for our national and regional trade union organisations.

Migration is an ever growing reality in our countries, and a very large percentage of migrants are women, who are exposed to many rights violations on leaving their home country. So the challenges facing our trade union centres are huge: we have to raise consciousness, to succeed in making our migrant colleagues aware of their rights through capacity building and closer follow-up. It is widely known that migrants rarely have any awareness of the labour legislation in the host country; nor do they know where to turn in case of difficulty. The trade union centres involved in this project want to address this situation.

We realise that the situation needs to be tackled from a number of different angles at the same time, and that trade unions, the governments, employers, etc., all need to be involved. Progress cannot be made in any area without cooperation and strategic alliances between social organisations, civil society and government authorities. This is the only way we can hope to meet our objectives as workers in support of the least protected classes. Education, awareness raising and the unionisation of the workers in question are essential.

How successful have you been in reaching the target groups?

Thanks to the commitment to solidarity undertaken at national level between the CUT-A and CNT in Paraguay, as well as with our Brazilian colleagues from the UGT, CUT and Força Sindical, we have been able to join forces so as to better identify the migrants working in the different regions. We are now trying to help them organise, especially in the border zones between our two countries. In the Ciudad del Este region (Paraguay), for instance, many migrant workers, mainly women, cross the border illegally every day to work in this city and then cross back over at night to return to the dormitory city of Foz de Iguaçu in Brazil. Several attempts have been made to organise these workers, to equip them with a tool to defend their rights. Thanks to the implementation of this project, we were able to learn about very important experiences involving leaders of the trade union centres and the migrants themselves, such as the case of the colleagues belonging to Japayke, an association of Paraguayan migrants in Brazil.

What are the main obstacles?

The first difficulty we have to overcome, as regards project management, is the need to improve communication and information flows.

The national authorities' lack of interest in drawing up proposals aimed at formulating a policy for this sector is another challenge. In Paraguay, the launch of our project has undoubtedly had an impact on the attention our country's public institutions are devoting to the issue. We have to continue down this path.

Another obstacle is the business community and its lack of heed and respect for the labour legislation and the Conventions signed with international organisations such as the ILO, despite the fundamental nature of these legal instruments.

We have also noted difficulties and, on occasions, a lack of initiative on the part of migrants when it comes to forming organisations; although they have their reasons, such as, the fact that they are working in the host country illegally. We are working to make them understand that if they united and joined trade union centres they would be better placed to defend their labour demands and their human rights. We are very optimistic about the possibility of making steady progress towards better coordination between migrants themselves, as well as the possibility of finally establishing an organisation in this sector, which would help us to guarantee migrant workers' human rights.

What have been the first key stages in your joint work?

In May, we met in Asunción (Paraguay) to sign our bilateral trade union cooperation agreement, stipulating the activities to be conducted in both countries to set our work programme in motion.

Within the framework of these activities, a first event was held in São Paulo, Brazil, on 23 and 24 July 2010 (2). As general secretary of the CNT, myself, and Víctor Ferreira, general secretary of CUT-A, took part in this activity, which gave us an invaluable opportunity to learn about the experiences of the Paraguayan residents in Brazil grouped within the organisation known as Japayke.

The second activity was a workshop held in Asunción (Paraguay) on 13 and 14 August 2010, attended by trade union leaders from Paraguayan and Brazilian trade union centres, as well as representatives from TUCA, the ILO and the Ministries in charge of labour and issues related to migrants. This event was held within the framework of the IV Social Forum of the Americas. It provided an opportunity to listen to concrete testimonies, such as that of the lawyer Sonia Martins, who gave her own account of her life as a Brazilian migrant in Paraguay, relating the difficulties faced as regards employment and economic matters. She also spoke about her involvement as an activist at national level within the commercial workers' union Sindicato Nacional del Comercio, affiliated to the CNT, which helped and contributed to securing social and labour demands. Her own university studies have also had a positive impact, as she now offers professional services to workers, especially migrants. During the final discussion involving all the trade union delegates, we were able to determine the concrete activities to be carried between now and the end of the year.

What activities have been planned?

We decided to organise seminars at border level, to facilitate exchanges with migrant workers; to establish research mechanisms with the involvement of Brazilian and Paraguayan migrants; to conduct surveys and censuses of migrant workers; to wage a campaign about the 20th anniversary of the UN Convention on the rights of migrant workers and their families; to follow-up on the amnesty campaign in Brazil and the amnesty bill in Paraguay. Another very important plan is to set up migrant support centres within our trade union centres, so that they have somewhere to go for information and support in the search for solutions to their problems.

Interview by Natacha David.

(1) This bilateral agreement between trade union centres in Paraguay and Brazil comes in addition to the cooperation agreements already backed by the ITUC (and also supported by LO-TCO Sweden and the TUC - United Kingdom) between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, Mauritania and Senegal, India and Bahrain, as well as Indonesia and Malaysia.

(2) See the video of the interview with Maria Susi Clea (Asis/Força Sindical - Brazil) at: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/decent-work-and-life-seminar-for.html?lang=en>

During her participation in the workshop held in São Paulo in July 2010, Maria Susi Clea, talks about the importance of Paraguayan migrants for the textile sector in Brazil and the extremely precarious conditions they face. She sends out a message of solidarity to them, explaining how the trade union can help them, particularly the very active garment workers' union.

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