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Spotlight interview with Shouket Ali (APTUC-Pakistan)

"The floods have brought social dialogue to a standstill"

Brussels 18 January 2011 (ITUC OnLine): Five months after the floods affecting 20 million people in Pakistan, the country is still in a state of shock. Shouket Ali, general secretary of the APTUC (1), talks about the consequences of the disaster on the world of work and the current trade union priorities.

What are the APTUC's priorities?

Education and training are our top priority as this is a poor country where the literacy rate is no more than 50%. At one time, the legislation set a quite low wage limit over which workers could not join a union, they could only join associations of supervisory or managerial staff. Only the poorest workers, usually the least educated, were able to join unions, so we have to invest heavily in education and training for our members.

Another priority is increasing our membership base. The APTUC only has 150,000 members at present. That may seem a lot, but Pakistan has a population of around 180 million people. Only 5% of workers are unionised. This meagre percentage is owed to the fact that the legislation prohibits workers in many sectors from joining a union, such as health and education workers, for example.

Are the consequences of the floods not a priority for the trade union movement?

To some extent, yes, but the whole nation is rallying to this cause. The floods are a great handicap for society as a whole, huge numbers of Pakistanis have been affected. Pakistan's trade unions are involved in a range of humanitarian aid projects, thanks to support from organisations such as the ITUC, Education International, Public Services International and Building and Wood Workers' International. There are projects, for example, to help people who have lost their glasses, their hearing aids or artificial limbs in the panic surrounding the floods. The aid will also be used to treat victim's traumas, to meet nutritional requirements, resolve water pollution problems, etc.

There is a lot of support and sympathy within the international trade union movement for the flood victims. Having said that, huge international aid is already reaching Pakistan; it is managed either by the Pakistani government, the big NGOs or international organisations. There are many aid structures in place in the country and we think it is better to ally ourselves with these structures, as the trade unions are not equipped to manage situations of this nature on their own.

Reconstruction implies getting the victims back to work...

Indeed. And we want to be closely involved in rehabilitating and rebuilding the capacities of the workers affected by the floods. Initially, there was talk about the destruction of crops, houses, livestock, essential goods, etc. but the victims have also lost the ability to keep their jobs or find another one. Most of the flood victims are informal economy workers, people from rural areas or small towns: farm workers, small traders, self-employed people, small carpenters, weavers, etc. They have been displaced by the floods, taking them far away from their workplaces and often destroying their livelihoods.

We are worried about the future: at this moment in time, money is coming in, there is international attention, but it is only temporary. Disasters like these are usually forgotten quite quickly. The floods took place in August, the international community has done a great deal and we are very appreciative, but this honeymoon period is going to be over within the next few months, and what will happen then? What will happen when all our infrastructures have to be rebuilt, when we have to face all the difficulties arising from the power cuts?

What impact have the floods had on trade union matters?

The main impact has been on the government's agenda, as most of the damage has been to infrastructures: bridges, roads, etc. Their repair is going to require huge government investment.

This will mean cuts to its development and aid projects, to its subsidies to the ordinary people of Pakistan. It constitutes an indirect damage for the trade union movement, because, at the end of the day, it means the workers are going to receive less.

Moreover, the government has changed its priorities. It was preparing to announce a rise in minimum wages, but we can forget about that, as it says we are facing an emergency now. Some months ago, we were talking about new labour legislation, about extending social security to the informal economy. These projects still exist on paper, but how can all this be implemented without the financial resources required?

So you had initiated a process of social dialogue prior to the floods...

Yes, the workers and employers had come together to form a structure, the Workers-Employers Bilateral Council, which promoted social dialogue. The ILO, the FES (2) and the Solidarity Center played a major role in setting up this structure. The social partners managed to come to an agreement on a consensus document concerning a simplification of the labour legislation. Just as the social dialogue was about to come to something, serious violence broke out in the country, and then came the floods. We are waiting for a more fitting moment to continue down the social dialogue path.

Are you able to conduct trade union activities across the whole of Pakistan?

Pakistan is engaged in a war on terror that has given way to a wave of troubles in two major provinces, Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khyber_Pakhtunkhwa), but there are security fears throughout the country.

The trade unions therefore have to be very careful. Most of our activities are based in the two peaceful provinces of Sindh and Punjab. We have contacts in the other two, but they are not very strong, as it is really risky to operate there. There are other factors making trade union activities extremely difficult. In Pakhtunkhwa, for example, women do not have the right to vote, and they are not supposed to belong to trade unions. And just next door, there are tribal areas still governed by special laws. There are practical and geographical realities that go back hundreds of years in this region and that explain why trade union activity is so difficult there.

What is the situation as regards women's involvement in the APTUC?

At present, over 70% of our members are men, but we attach great importance to women members. One has to bear in mind, however, that we live in a rather conservative society. There are religious factors to take into account; it would be very difficult to ask women production workers to sit side by side with men at trade union meetings, their husbands or parents would not allow it. We have started to invite women (not only women workers) to meetings where we discuss the right to education, social security, issues affecting the whole family. Women have thus been able to take part in our activities and feel at ease. Little by little, a relationship of trust is being built up with these women and their families, everyone realises that they are safe even though they are away from home, and we can start to inform them about other issues. We speak to them, for example, about the institution specialised in microcredits for women, and can put them in touch with this organisation.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) All Pakistan Trade Union Congress

(2) Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

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