

## INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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### **Spotlight on Abdallahi Ould Mohamed (CGTM- Mauritania)**

“The young are mobilising in Mauritania too, and the unions are at their side, fighting for change”

Brussels, 8 March 2011 (ITUC OnLine): Encouraged by the revolutions in Tunisia, then Egypt, young Mauritians have launched their own movement for change, called 25 February. Three national trade union centres (CGTM, CNTM, CLTM\*) that have persistently denounced the serious violations of workers' rights, are encouraging the population to get out onto the streets and are determined to make the government finally face up to its responsibilities. Abdallahi Ould Mohamed, known as Nahah, General Secretary of the General Confederation of Workers of Mauritania (CGTM), explains the causes they are fighting for, and the hope for change that is driving the movement in his country, with one key date in their sights, the 11 March demonstration.

How would you describe the social situation in Mauritania today?

The current social situation in Mauritania is shaped by an unprecedented deterioration in living conditions for the people in general and workers in particular, due mainly to weak purchasing power, and repeated sharp rises in the price of basic commodities such as rice, sugar and oil.

Paradoxically, in face of this situation the government seems to take pleasure in systematically refusing to negotiate or hold dialogue with the trade union organisations, despite many requests. The authorities are taking the ostrich approach: they respond to every call for dialogue with a travesty of a meeting with a select few organisations loyal to the government, who are not even interested in the issues raised. This situation further strengthens the discontent of workers who continue to suffer the effects of precarious employment, pitifully low wages, a lack of social protection, sub-contracting, the informal nature of employment relations and the decision to totally ignore the trade union organisations that genuinely represent the workers.

Despite the situation, the government is multiplying the number of contracts granted to multinationals that are pillaging the country's mining wealth while the population languishes in poverty (between 46 and 52%) and youth unemployment (35 to 40%).

What has been the impact in your country of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions and the uprisings in Libya and other Arab countries?

These movements are being closely followed in Mauritania where they have the admiration and sympathy of the population in general and the young in particular. They have begun to organise and demonstrate both in Nouakchott and in some parts of the interior, such as Aioun, Fassala and Néré, to demand the respect of democracy, better living conditions and even a change of political regime. Now, a huge youth movement called 25 February has been created, bringing together all strands of thinking, and it is growing stronger at every demonstration.

Broadcast to a wide audience by the Al Jazeera television station, highly regarded in Mauritania, the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, etc., have sparked lively discussion and have given the Arab people renewed confidence in the possibility of changing their destiny through struggle, chasing out the despots and dictators that run our countries. These sporadic movements are heading for a crescendo because the social networks are getting busier and busier. The horror felt after the massacre of civilians in Tunisia, Egypt and now Libya, on an appalling scale, has driven the people to choose between two camps, the patriots and the dictators' forces. This will have a huge impact on the history of our countries.

What role are the Mauritanian trade union organisations playing in the present mobilisation for change?

The national trade union centres, namely the General Confederation of Workers of Mauritania (CGTM), the Free Confederation of Workers of Mauritania (CLTM) and the National Confederation of Workers of Mauritania (CNTM) have made a big contribution to the popular mobilisations for change by organising meetings and marches to Nouakchott, the capital, as well as to Nouadhibou, the financial capital, and to Zouerate, in the heart of the mineral region.

They are also planning to extend these mobilisations to the rest of the country by means of meetings and marches on 11 March 2011. The three national centres have also had meetings with some civil society organisations that share their goals and their struggles.

How are the Mauritanian authorities reacting?

The government is ill at ease faced with the size and determination of the social movements in the Maghreb and the Middle East, and it has prompted the Prime Minister to go on a media offensive, announcing measures such as the building of 100,000 social housing units. The Minister for Oil has also announced a fall in fuel prices, but so far that hasn't happened.

The leaders are also panicking because much of the funding for their development programmes depends on investments in Libya, but the uprisings taking place there have made the situation very uncertain. It is public knowledge that Gaddafi played a significant role in the failure to return to constitutional order in Mauritania through his support of the military putsch of 6 August 2008.

On the other hand, the demonstrations organised by the young have not been repressed and even the public media have reported on them, further illustrating the authorities' confusion over how to respond to the movement.

Finally, the government has opened shops supplying basic goods, but they only sell retail, meaning that people have to queue up for hours for a few kilos, not even enough for their daily consumption.

What are the key demands addressed to the Mauritanian government?

The youth movement has drawn up demands for fundamental political, economic and social reform.

The trade unions' main demands are for higher wages, an increase in the minimum wage, and

the removal of the tax on pay and salaries. (ITS)

In terms of social security and health, we are demand higher pensions, a review of the way the National Sickness Insurance Fund works, an increase in family allowances and finally the creation of unemployment insurance.

We want to see labour legislation reformed at every level: The Labour Code, the Civil Service General Statute, general collective agreements, sectoral collective agreements, collective agreements for maritime workers, and new collective agreements. We would also like to see a vocational training policy.

And our demands don't stop there. We are also calling for the establishment of social dialogue with the creation of a permanent consultation forum, the development of a social housing policy for workers, the involvement of workers in the management of public enterprises, an end to the legislative codification of sub-contracting, a ban on hiring out labour and a review of employment policies.

Can you give us some recent examples of trade union rights violations?

I can give you several.

First, the orders given by a regional authority to the directors of secondary schools not to engage in labour relations with the national union of secondary school teachers affiliated to the CGTM. Then there was the refusal by public and para-statal administrations to hold elections for staff representatives, the exclusion of the CGTM from Mauritania's official delegation to the International Labour Conference in Geneva in June 2010, and the refusal by the public prosecutor's office to receive documentation from trade unions and sectoral federations affiliated to the CGTM applying for registration, even though they continue to officially recognise national trade union centres. Then there is the absence of access by national trade union organisations to the national media and the mass dismissal of workers because of their membership of the CGTM.

What kind of solidarity are you looking for today from the international trade union movement?

We would like to see a continuation of the sort of work done by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) to make the trade union situation and violations of trade union rights in Mauritania better known.

We hope that the implementation of the conclusions of the April 2010 Conference of Arab trade union organisations organised by the ITUC, and the role these organisations are now playing in social mobilisation will lead to the institutional strengthening of Arab trade union organisation.

Finally, we hope to persuade the governments of the North to support the legitimate aspirations of the people that are battling courageously against dictatorship and for the real democratisation of the Arab countries.

Interview by Anne-Catherine Greatti, with N.D.

\* The General Confederation of Workers of Mauritania (CGTM), the Free Confederation of

Workers of Mauritania (CLTM) and the National Confederation of Workers of Mauritania (CNTM) are all affiliated to the ITUC

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