

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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Spotlight interview with Anthony Jones (ITUC/TUCA - Haiti)

"The decent work agenda is a primary need when we talk about reconstruction"

Brussels, 24 June 2011 (ITUC OnLine): Anthony Jones, the resident representative of the ITUC and the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA) in Haiti highlights the urgency of placing decent work at the heart of the reconstruction programme and insists on the importance of training in the strategy to support the Haitian trade union movement.

-What has been so far the role of decent work in the reconstruction effort?

The issue of decent work has not been discussed for reconstruction purposes. What has been discussed is creation of jobs, but not decent work. People are operating in the short term, and that is not taking into account standards needed to protect workers and ensure that their rights are also enforced. So what we have is an attempt to recreate what Haiti had in the past. The practises that existed before the earthquake are the same practises that are taking place. So the decent work agenda is a primary need when we talk about reconstruction and creating a new Haiti.

-Are trade unions prepared to face this massive challenge?

The trade unions here reflect in many ways the state of the economy. The formal economy of Haiti represents only 2% of the total employment picture. That has a serious impact in the unions' ability to function. When you have a strong economy, and specially a formal economy, unions can act and be stronger.

So there is a great need to reorganise in Haiti and help unions to reach out to new members. So this is one of the major challenges for the international trade union movement. This would be difficult to organise in any setting; this is not a problem unique to Haiti. But over the course of time the role of the informal economy has been greatly diminished for the unions. They need additional support and resources to be able to meet this new challenge.

-So training is one of the main necessities today in Haiti.

Yes. On this one issue there are no disagreements amongst unions and amongst civil society partners. Training is the only solution to help Haiti to get out of the situation in which it finds itself. Unions are in need of training in a number of areas. First, because we need to start to replace the void created by years of a mass migration that drained people with good skills out of Haiti.

In addition, there are generations of people who don't know certain rights and practises that should be in place. Why or how they are supposed to be? What are the minimum standards, what are the protocols? In construction, for instance, workers are walking round with no protection, no helmet and no gloves on. The International Trade Union movement can also and should be in this area. You would go to make the sector safer. It would create a class of

workers that are skilled and who could work effectively and be a valuable part of the reconstruction process.

-What else can the international union movement could do to support workers in Haiti?

International unions can lobby national donor countries to support decent work and worker education and training programs. There is little that the Haitian labour movement can do to convince government agencies and donors to honour their pledges. International unions can encourage and support policy and strategic reforms to create decent employment and respect of human and workers' rights.

This pressure can also lead to increased opportunities to expand program outreach or provide improved services to workers and their families. By merging international and national efforts into a uniformed strategic approach, workers across the globe will contribute to the reconstruction and rebuilding of the nation.

-We know that there's also a historic problem regarding freedom of association and union busting in Haiti. What is the situation now?

The laws only exist in the books. And so most unions do not have access to act. Furthermore, for workers there is a sense of fear and a plan of intimidation. They know that any noise or trouble trying to organise or trying to promote unions, their jobs would be at stake. This has been seen in a number of occasions in a number of different factories, where people raise issues to try to promote change and are fired as a consequence.

With the shortage of jobs that existed, workers do not feel that they can in any way, shape or form, upset the employer. And so it is not only unionism but is a whole lot of actions that could improve workers lives that are not being discussed or addressed. There needs to be serious and fundamental changes from a number of levels to better protect workers and to enforce the rules that existed.

-Also read the Spotlight interview with Antonio Cruciani (ILO-Haiti): We have to change the system. This would be the labour revolution: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spotlight-interview-with-antonio.html>

-Also read the Union View: Reconstruction in Haiti: The urgency of decent work : <http://www.ituc-csi.org/reconstruction-in-haiti-the.html>

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