

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

ITUC OnLine
008/050911

Spotlight interview with Gabriel del Rio (CASC - Dominican Republic)

"We offer social security to over 31,000 informal economy workers"

Brussels, 5 September 2011 (ITUC OnLine): The Dominican trade union confederation CASC (1) has secured social security coverage for over 31,000 informal economy workers and their families. It also supports essential projects providing concrete assistance to Haitian migrants. Fighting poverty and labour rights violations, defending domestic workers... Gabriel del Rio, general secretary of CASC, outlines the many battles being waged by his union.

How has CASC managed to provide informal economy workers with access to social security?

Over half of the active population works in the informal economy. CASC has set up the Mutual Association of Solidarity Services, AMUSSOL (2), to give informal economy and self-employed workers access to social security coverage, as well as all other workers with difficulty accessing social security, such as domestic workers or those employed in small workshops, etc. We are waging an ongoing campaign for the law to be applied to all informal economy workers, because the law stipulates that they are covered by social security, but there are difficulties when it comes to putting this into practice, as the state is supposed to cover the employers' contribution but has neither the means nor the political will to do so. Workers have to pay two contributions: one as a worker and the other corresponding to what the employer is supposed to pay. We receive the workers' contributions then transfer them to the government's social security fund, and thus act as a virtual boss for these workers, giving them access to social protection.

Members of the fund can also take out a life insurance policy for a very low fee. This insurance protects workers and their families against serious hardships in the event of death. A total of 31,500 workers and their families enjoy social security coverage thanks to AMUSSOL, and the number is growing by the day.

Although AMUSSOL is part of CASC, it is open to all workers, whether they are members of our union or not. It is also useful for domestic workers, whose bosses do not want to be considered as employers with respect to social security.

In addition, AMUSSOL and CASC assist Haitian immigrants to legalise their status in the Dominican Republic and to defend their rights as migrant workers, so that they are not discriminated against.

What practical shape does the help to Haitian migrant workers take?

The Socio-Cultural Movement of Haitian Workers (MOSCHTA), affiliated to CASC, offers vital health care services. It has ambulances, for example, that can go to rural areas to come to the aid of agricultural workers (Haitian or Dominican). It also offers legal services to defend migrant workers' rights, helping them to obtain the legal papers they are entitled to and defending their right to fair pay. The workers have a MOSCHTA-CASC membership card

that allows us to represent them at the Labour Ministry if they are unfairly dismissed. Over 5,000 Haitian migrant workers are currently affiliated to CASC. We are also set to launch a campaign to secure social protection for migrant workers.

There are various Haitian workers' organisations in the Dominican Republic affiliated to CASC and we are promoting their unification within one big federation.

Did MOSCHTA mobilise during the earthquake in Haiti in January 2010?

MOSCHTA's two ambulances went straight to Haiti with medical personnel and supplies, immediately after the earthquake. We also sent trucks with food. CASC and the Haitian workers' confederation CTH set up a cooperation project within days of the earthquake; it is still underway now.

What other priorities is CASC addressing at the moment?

Our main priority is the fight against trade union rights violations linked to the non-application of the labour laws. We have some strong unions, but most employers do everything they can to stop workers from exercising their trade union rights. Workers trying to form unions are faced with dismissal. The combination of workers' poor knowledge of their rights and the fear of dismissal makes it difficult to form unions. The industrial sector is the worst affected, particularly the export processing zones and small and medium-sized enterprises. The wages in the EPZs are 100 dollars lower than in the factories outside the zones (although they can earn much more than this minimum wage if they fulfil a high production quota).

Pay is another key priority. With wages as they stand at the moment, workers are not able to live decently in the Dominican Republic. After a long fight, we managed to secure an agreement for a 17% increase in the legal minimum wage; it is now close to 10,000 pesos (around 260 US dollars). We are now starting negotiations on the wages in the export processing zones and the hospitality sector. Most workers earning over the minimum wage have to settle for just 300 dollars or so a month. It is virtually impossible under such conditions to pay for children's education, for health care, a little leisure activity, etc. Considering the cost of living at the moment, a decent wage would be 750 US dollars a month.

CASC, which has two large agricultural federations among its affiliates, is also fighting for farm workers' land rights. Thousands of small farmers have been left without land, which is concentrated in the hands of large landowners. We are trying to recover these lands so that they can work there. We are also campaigning for those farm workers who received land following the agrarian reform to be given the title deeds. Other issues we are fighting for include better social security cover, decent pay, access to decent accommodation for farm workers.

Is CASC trying to incorporate domestic workers in its trade union campaigns?

Yes, and we also defended the proposed ILO Convention on domestic work. We are currently pressing our National Congress to ratify the new Convention. It is essential that domestic workers have the right to form their own unions, to fight for their rights, including the right to social security. We are campaigning for a change in the national legislation, because domestic

workers do not have the same social rights as other workers, if they are dismissed, for instance.

At the moment, only a hundred and fifty or so domestic workers have joined CASC, as many of them are afraid they will lose their jobs if they become members. We are also hampered by cultural and traditional stereotypes whereby domestic workers are not seen as employees but inferior beings. This mindset makes it difficult for domestic workers to realise that they have the right to form or join a union.

Has the Dominican Republic been hard hit by the global economic crisis?

Over 60,000 jobs have been lost in the export processing zones. It has to be said, however, that the economic crisis has not affected the Dominican Republic as much as other countries, as we depend heavily on tourism and the services linked to it, and this sector has remained stable. We are, however, faced with a serious crisis, following the rise in the price of most basic staples.

Nonetheless, although gross GDP has not fallen, it is not distributed as it should be. Most workers are still just as poor, whilst the rich are continuing to grow richer. The gap between the rich and the poor is growing every day. The government's social programmes are, fortunately, helping to reduce the number of people living in absolute misery, but poverty is still growing.

What can be done to boost trade union cooperation in the region?

I am the president of the Caribbean Workers' Council, which ensures good cooperation between unions in several countries and territories in the region: Curacao, Aruba, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Haiti, etc. We are also trying to work more closely with trade unions from English-speaking countries, such as Saint Lucia or even Trinidad and Tobago. Most of these islands are not, however, members of the Council. There is another organisation, the Caribbean Congress of Labour. We met with the general secretary of this confederation, David Massiah, who is from Antigua and Barbuda. He is willing to come to the Dominican Republic, where the Caribbean Workers' Council is based, to initiate talks that we hope will lead to a unification of these two Caribbean organisations. We are really looking for a way for these two organisations to build better relations and ultimately progress towards a merger, to form a single trade union centre for Caribbean workers, regardless of their language. We hope that the ITUC will continue to support our trade union work in the Caribbean.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

- (1) Confederación Autónoma Sindical Clasista
- (2) Asociación Mutua de Servicios Solidarios

The ITUC represents 175 million workers in 151 countries and territories and has 305 national affiliates. <http://www.ituc-csi.org> and <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

For any further information, please contact the ITUC press department at: +32 2 224 0204 or +32 476 621 018

You are currently subscribed to ituc-online as

To unsubscribe click here: [http://forum.ituc-](http://forum.ituc-csi.org/u?id=38591.9b9f95bf74798c23c71e69445d2c53d3&n=T&l=ituc-online&o=38542)

[csi.org/u?id=38591.9b9f95bf74798c23c71e69445d2c53d3&n=T&l=ituc-online&o=38542](http://forum.ituc-csi.org/u?id=38591.9b9f95bf74798c23c71e69445d2c53d3&n=T&l=ituc-online&o=38542)

or send a blank email to leave-38542-

38591.9b9f95bf74798c23c71e69445d2c53d3@forum.ituc-csi.org