

The union movement in Senegal and migrant workers

The mirage of rich countries is attracting thousands of African workers to brave the rigours and humiliations of exile.

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The structural crisis currently affecting the majority of southern countries has had a profound impact on the labour market. Faced with a spectacular increase in unemployment, poverty and social exclusion, people are tending to implement individual survival strategies.

The magnitude of the resulting migratory flow prompted the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions to organize in May 1999 an international seminar entitled "Migrant workers: Challenges for new forms of cooperation".

The diversity of participants made for productive face-to-face exchanges on emigration and immigration, with the ILO/Sahelian Africa Multidisciplinary Advisory Team (EMAS), and representatives of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT-France) and the union federation for workers in the postal, telecommunications and broadcasting sectors *Sud PTT (Solidaires, Unitaires et Démocratiques – Postes, Télécommunications et Télédiffusion)*. It was all the more successful since a group of emigrant workers, forcibly repatriated by chartered plane, had just formed the Senegalese Committee for Illegal Workers Expelled from France (*Comité Sénégalais des Sans Papiers Expulsés de France-CSSPEF*) affiliated to the CSA.

This problem remains one of the union movement's prime concerns and was the

subject of a forum, held on 23 August 2002, bringing together the National Senegalese Workers' Confederation (CNTS), the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (CSA), the National Union of Independent Trade Unions (UNSAS), the *Union des Travailleurs Sénégalais en France/ Action Revendicative* (Union of Senegalese Workers in France UTSA/AR) and the National Council of Non-Governmental Organizations involved in Development issues (CONGAD).

Although the level of participation ensured that the issue was viewed primarily from the point of view of concerns over Senegalese emigrating to France, it nevertheless offered a revealing insight into the reality of the situation in a context characterized by the harmonization of European policies and legislation on immigration.

Now more than ever, national groups of affiliated trade unions, together with their international counterparts, human rights organizations and migrant workers' associations need to show solidarity and fight together to defend this category of workers and to ensure a legal and economic environment that respects their dignity.

In that vein, the forum held in Dakar on 23 August 2002 highlighted several approaches:

- fighting for extending democratic, union and trade union rights;

- creating conditions of sustainable unity and joint action at national, regional and even continental level between groups of affiliated trade unions, civil society organizations and migrant workers' associations, based on autonomy with respect to political power and pressure groups;
- devising mobilization campaigns to cancel debt and fight Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs);
- promoting real national policies to create jobs to prevent the "brain drain" and to ensure that workers receive basic training in their home country to protect them from overexploitation associated with illiteracy; and
- striving for national promotion of a real integration policy to benefit the children of emigrants, in particular in terms of obtaining proof of status from consular and residency services in the country.

Such plans ought not to stand in the way of countries' responsibilities and the measures that need to be taken at institutional level. Workers will have to take action to make governments take the appropriate measures:

- creating a ministry for cooperation with a sizeable department responsible for migrant workers;
- resolving – on-the-spot in the country of origin – all issues concerning pensions for returning emigrants;
- providing for medical cover and family benefits to which emigrants' families who remain in the country are entitled; and
- reviewing the foundations for international cooperation and allowing unions and associations from civil society to become more involved in developing real, mutually beneficial cooperation policies.

From now on, it is vital for the union movement, human rights organizations and emigrant workers' associations to become involved in a major international campaign to ratify ILO Conventions Nos. 97 and 143 on migrant workers.

This will make it possible to create a sustainable legal and institutional framework that will help to develop initiatives to safeguard their interests without prejudice to their host countries.