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Programme

Globalization and union strategies in Niger

Souley Adj
Sociology Department,
University of Niamey

P.O. Box 6
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Tel. 004122/7998496
Fax. 004122/7998542
E-mail: INST@ilo.org

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Globalization and union strategies in Niger

(A bridged version of the French original)

Souley Adjì

International Institute for Labour Studies Geneva

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1. *The context of the social struggle*

Since the installation of a democratic government in 1991, and particularly since the inauguration of the Fourth Republic in 1996, many of the recognized rights of workers and unions have been challenged, if not severely restricted, by the state authorities and employers. This is because successive governments have been trying to meet the conditions of the structural adjustment programme (SAP) advocated by the international financial institutions. The successful implementation of such an economic policy is bound to have a significant impact on the purchasing power of workers, and on the living and working conditions of all social groups, particularly since the devaluation of the CFA in 1994. The unions were not slow to react and, since independence in 1960, the country has never known such intense social conflict as during the present decade. However, the results of union action are rather limited.

1.1 *The first adjustment programmes and their consequences*

Niger began its catastrophic decline in the early 1980s, when the government first appealed to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). One of the 30 poorest nations in the world, Niger was still the richest country of the Sahel, thanks to its mineral resources. It was the fourth world producer of uranium at that time. Twenty years later, with an education rate of 29 per cent, an illiteracy rate of 83 per cent, access to health services for 32 per cent of the population and clean water for 41 per cent (10 million people) Niger is still one of the poorest countries.

In 1980, uranium represented 40 per cent of state revenue, bringing in 28,000 million FCFA. The government invested in ambitious prestige projects at that time, but the collapse of the uranium market put an end to the euphoria. During 1981 the repercussions of the world economic crisis and the cancellation or reduction of nuclear energy programmes began to hit Niger. The sale of minerals brought in a mere 6,700 million FCFA in 1982, only 7 per cent of government revenue, while the debt rose to 16,600 million FCFA the same year. There were food shortages and price rises: this trend continued in the years that followed, as the economic crisis deepened.

Faced with this catastrophic situation the government signed an agreement with the IMF in October 1983, whereby the Fund provided significant financial assistance on certain conditions. Some years later the IMF effectively imposed an SAP which was expected to improve the country's economic position. The drastic measures consisted mainly of a significant cut in the number of government employees, a reduction in the volume of state subsidies and price controls, as well as the liberalization of banking and commerce. It also advocated government withdrawal from the education and health sectors, and the privatization of many enterprises. In a poor country, where the State is the main employer and where the modern private sector is very small, such measures are likely to drive down still further the living conditions of the majority of workers.

It was in this context, and after 30 years of political monolithism (including 15 years under a military regime) that Niger entered its Second Republic with the election of a National Assembly. But the elections were not democratic as the President of the State Party was the only candidate. At the same time the international financial institutions took charge of economic policy, notably in the implementation of structural adjustment.

The austerity measures which were introduced resulted in a popular discontent which was without precedent. Moreover, the foreign debt, and particularly debt servicing, became a real problem at this time, even though the sums involved were smaller than those owed by several other countries. Since the beginning of structural adjustment in 1983 the country has seen an exponential growth of its foreign debt.

In these circumstances the government was unable to honour its commitments to its workers or to its foreign partners. The state was in a crisis that the very young Second Republic could not survive. From that time on, economic liberalization and democratization have gone together.

1.2 The union awakening

Since its 1978 Congress the USTN (Union des Syndicats des Travailleurs du Niger), the only federation of unions, had advocated 'responsible participation', and collaborated with the military regime. However, the weakness of the government at the end of the 1980s gave the union movement an opportunity to separate itself from the State Party. The real turning point came on 1 May 1990 with the demand for a multiparty democracy and a National Conference. Since then, together with the student movement, the USTN has been at the forefront of the struggle for democracy.

This awakening promised to be fruitful but the rank-and-file workers quickly became disillusioned. Having based their hopes on solving the economic and social problems which were at the root of the social conflict, workers became the victims of economic stabilization. During the transition, as under the Third Republic and even more under the Fourth Republic, their purchasing power collapsed. The drawing up of a new Constitution and the creation of democratic institutions did not compensate for this economic failure. Furthermore, the unions had to face the growing economic hostility of the democratically elected authorities.

It was in this context of economic and political liberalization that the cohesion and unity of the labour movement, so remarkable during the struggle for democracy, began to break down. There were conflicts between unions affiliated to the federation and divergences among union leaders suspected, rightly or wrongly, of playing the political game.

1.3 Planned reforms under the new programmes

The struggle against the economic measures recommended by the IMF and the World Bank, particularly in the field of education, led to the fall of the Second Republic and the introduction of political democracy. The National Conference rejected the SAP and adopted a series of measures designed to stimulate the national economy. The transitional government was faced with a great challenge. The fall in the uranium market meant a reduction of 34.48 per cent in the value of mineral exports between 1986 and 1990, according to the IMF. Disruptions in distribution, the destruction of equipment and the closure of more than half the country's small and medium-sized enterprises left the economy in a desperate position. According to the World Bank, Niger's foreign debt amounted to 1340 thousand million FCFA at the end of 1989, including 331 thousand million FCFA of long-term debt. There were shortfalls in tax revenues, overdue salaries in the public sector, and unemployment in the private sector. One-fifth of the population of the capital city was without an income as a result of the closure of numerous small businesses. Employment fell by 22.68 per cent between 1978 and 1990.

Incapable of mobilizing internal resources and faced with the timidity of development partners, each successive government has appealed to the international financial institutions. Formerly decried and contested by unions and political parties the SAP thus came back through the front door.

Niger's financial situation had deteriorated to the point where it was necessary to give priority to budgetary adjustment. The imperative reduction in salary costs required a restructuring of the public service and a revision of government objectives in education. Significant measures were introduced to cut production costs in order to make the economy competitive. These were the principal IMF recommendations which were made in 1992, and successive governments have attempted to implement them despite the reluctance of many social groups. Owing to political instability, however, no government has been able to carry out the reforms in full and the programmes and facilities have been continually renegotiated.

Nevertheless, massive lay-offs have occurred in both the public and the private sectors, and workers' interests have been sacrificed. The sacrifice is all the more painful as unions have not been involved in economic reform, despite the fact that Niger has ratified international Conventions which prohibit this type of action without prior consultation. It must be said that the political context of the Fourth Republic is not favourable to negotiation.

1.4 Union attitudes

There are many obstacles to the implementation of economic reform. But despite union opposition unpopular measures have generally been applied and workers have suffered. The lack of real direction on the part of leaders has meant that unions have not been very effective in their efforts to defend workers' interests. The USTN document *Analysis of structural adjustment in Niger* gives the impression that the federation considers structural adjustment as a neutral technique for solving economic and financial problems, and that the SAP is inevitable.

The federation seems to accept lay-offs as workers' contribution to national recovery, despite the fact that the burden is not spread evenly over all social classes. Nevertheless the unions are trying to initiate strategies to combat the social cost of globalization. Their demands relate to four vital areas: preserving democratic structures, safeguarding union rights, protecting employment and defending wages. The following chapters describe union strategies in the face of globalization.

2. Recent reforms and their effect on production

2.1 Reasons for privatizing enterprises

Privatization/restructuring is one of the principal elements of the SAP. The entire public sector is affected by economy measures and retrenchment. Salaries were cut by 30 per cent across the board in 1997, and early retirement became mandatory for everyone aged 50 and over, or having 30 years service. Eight enterprises are concerned by the reforms foreseen in the structural adjustment programme.

2.2 The institutional framework and collective agreements

Employment in public sector enterprises is governed by the Labour Code and by collective agreements. In other words, public sector workers are treated like those in the private sector. They are automatically promoted every two years, moving from one grade to the next.

Strictly speaking there is no collective agreement between the State and the public sector unions. The negotiating body is the Consultative Committee of the Public Service, which has six members representing government ministries and six representing employees. The Committee gives an opinion on human resource policies and practices in the public sector: it also studies draft texts dealing with changes in the status of government employees.

There is a collective agreement between employers and unions in the private sector, which dates from 15 December 1992. This agreement incorporates the principal union rights enshrined in international texts; it also outlines the practical modalities of applying the provisions of the Labour Code, particularly those relating to acquired rights. It stipulates that an employer cannot discriminate against an employee who belongs to a union. Discrimination is also forbidden on grounds of the political, philosophical or religious beliefs of employees. With regard to union rights the agreement authorizes absence from work to take part in union activities, the provision of premises and facilities for union meetings and the collection of union dues inside the enterprise. Like the Labour Code, the collective agreement protects unionists from discrimination. The dismissal of a union delegate is not valid unless approved by the Inspector of Labour.

2.3 Effects on employment

Between 1988 and 1992 about 5000 people who were employed in public enterprises lost their jobs. Many of these people will join the ranks of the unemployed as there are few openings for

job seekers in the context of privatization and restructuring. 'Voluntary retirement' is really a disguised form of lay-off. Workers are offered an attractive payment if they resign rather than wait to be dismissed. They are encouraged to start their own business and create new jobs, but many of these enterprises fail. The reason generally given is the lack of institutional support and the unfavourable economic situation.

2.4 Effects on acquired rights

- The 30 per cent reduction in public sector wages was a heavy blow to government employees. Salaries have also been cut in private enterprises, ostensibly to save the enterprise and thus preserve the jobs. In other words, workers are given the choice of accepting a lower wage or losing their job. Unfortunately many workers have suffered both.
- Public sector wages have been withheld because of strike action, without regard to actual responsibility for the stoppage. These strikes have been justified by the non-payment of wages, so that the State (the employer) is responsible because it fails to honour its commitments to employees. Withholding salaries is thus a step backwards. Civil servants have also lost the right to a salary increase on promotion. This allows the State to save on salaries, at the expense of workers.
- The check-off system which assured the payment of union dues has been challenged by the Ministry of Finance, in order to weaken the unions.
- The President of USTN, the main union federation, automatically chaired the Administrative Council of the CNSS (Caisse Nationale de Sécurité Sociale), which made it possible for the unions to promote the social rights of workers. This privilege has now been withdrawn.
- The right to strike has been seriously undermined by individual and collective reprisals. Picketing is forbidden and unionists have been arrested and imprisoned. Government forces have been deployed at workplaces to obstruct the action of union delegates by violence or intimidation.
- Union leaders have been imprisoned and dismissed, in contravention of the Labour Code. Strikers have been wounded during protest demonstrations.
- Temporary workers have been hired in order to break strikes. These workers are not familiar with the equipment they have to use, and they often damage it, which makes the conditions of work more difficult after the strike. Some employers dismiss strikers.
- Two police unions were dissolved by the government, in defiance of international Conventions, the police having made many demands for improved pay and conditions. The pretext for dissolving the unions was that police strikes were against the public interest. The union representing customs officials was also dissolved, as a strike in this sector would sabotage the government's economic programme.
- The freedom of the labour movement has been seriously threatened by state intervention in union affairs. Government has made appointments to union offices and created new unions favourable to the ruling party.
- Unions have lost the right to organize demonstrations as marches are forbidden on the pretext that municipal services cannot cope with them. Only meetings are allowed.
- Unions have lost their access to the public mass media.
- Unions are not involved in the privatization process.

Since a democratic government was installed at the beginning of the 1990s unions have managed to preserve some of their rights by resorting to judicial procedures. They have prosecuted employers, including the State, who do not respect their obligations to workers. Some positive results have been achieved, notably:

- the reinstatement of workers who were illegally dismissed;
- the restitution of their salaries and other rights and benefits;
- the release of imprisoned unionists;
- the preservation of threatened jobs;
- the cancellation of arbitrary assignments of unionists;

- the recruitment of young graduates to the public sector, notably in health and education.

Under the authoritarian government of the Fourth Republic economic liberalization seriously affected workers, enterprises and business. The immediate effects were felt in:

- purchasing power – workers were impoverished;
- civil liberties – demonstrations and marches were forbidden, and unions were denied access to the media;
- enterprise productivity – workers were demotivated by salary cuts;
- foreign investment – industrial unrest deterred foreign investors;
- union activities – some unions lost the right to organize meetings at the workplace;
- union militancy – loss of workers' rights undermined union action, particularly among women and young people. Some workers were obliged to take a second job in order to make up the income lost as a result of salary cuts. They were discouraged and had no time for union activities.
- degree of mobilization – the massive demonstrations organized in protest against public sector wage cuts failed to achieve any result. This caused workers to lose heart and leaders to become apathetic. Some union leaders were suspected of colluding with the government.

2.5 Union strategies

In the period before privatization began unions preferred action which required a minimum of human and material resources. This stage was generally peaceful as unions were trying to ensure a 'soft' process of privatization which would not be prejudicial to workers. Six types of action were undertaken during this period.

2.5.1 Before the reforms were implemented

Preventive action

Unions carried out research and collected data on the enterprises which were to be privatized and on the public sector generally. The information allowed them to combat the options preferred by employers, which threatened workers' interests. Unions made counter-proposals which they publicized in the media and among their members. They only accepted measures which they considered were justified and only on condition that unions took part in the entire process.

Internal promotion

Unions denounced certain enterprise directors who deliberately mismanaged the company in order to profit from privatization. They fought for internal promotion so that people inside the enterprise would be appointed to management positions. They believed that directors appointed from outside were not able to defend the enterprise and the people working there.

Negotiation and mediation

In order to obtain the reinstatement of workers illegally dismissed the unions denounced the lay-offs and demanded talks with the employer. If employers refused to negotiate a strike warning was issued. The strike was highly publicized to gain public sympathy and alert other unions. The strike was also brought to the attention of unions in other countries.

Judicial proceedings

For private sector employees hearings were held at works tribunals. The first recourse in the public sector was to the bipartite authorities, before going to the Supreme Court. In the case of

imprisoned unionists publicity campaigns were organized to exert pressure on the government and the matter was brought to trial if there was no response from the authorities.

Lobbying

Unions lobbied the government for the reinstatement of workers. If negotiations broke down they also lobbied influential politicians.

Administrative measures

The union defended workers who were illegally dismissed and helped them prepare the documents necessary to challenge the employer through the official channels.

2.5.2 After the reforms were implemented

If the types of action described above were not effective, the unions moved on to different strategies. This has caused considerable disturbance because the unions are trying to achieve by force what they failed to achieve by peaceful means. This stage continues as the privatization programme is still being pursued. Three principal strategies are deployed:

The indefinite strike

The traditional union strategies of strikes and negotiations are still preferred but their nature has changed since the introduction of the SAP and economic reform. Thus, when the government refuses to negotiate, or if negotiations fail, the unions individually or collectively decide to:

- call an indefinite strike, sometimes with no guaranteed minimum service;
- suspend activities because of the 'impossibility of working'.

These methods were used during the political struggles of 1991 when, for the first time in its history, the USTN called an indefinite strike to demand a multiparty government and the withdrawal of structural adjustment measures. This strike, which was massively supported by workers, students and the general population, led to the fall of the Second Republic and the introduction of multipartism.

Under the democratic regime the USTN used this strategy in 1994 to combat government measures affecting salaries and unionists. The federation organized an indefinite strike which lasted for 55 days but achieved no more than a promise of arbitration. This did not meet the expectations of workers, particularly as the authorities had drafted in temporary workers to maintain skeleton services in the public sector. The strike thus had very limited success, particularly as workers were not paid during the action. Indefinite strikes seem to have given way to intermittent strike action now, although the suspension of activities is still used.

The strike relay

Under this strategy all the unions affiliated to the USTN declare a strike in turn. As soon as a strike is called off in one sector employees stop work in another sector, so that the authorities are constantly importuned. Sometimes no skeleton service is maintained, which is a real declaration of war on the government. Unions in the health sector, education and electricity are able to use these strikes to the best advantage as they cause the most serious problems for the government and employers. This strategy has made it possible to start a dialogue and even to satisfy some union demands.

The general strike

Unions paralyse all the vital sectors of the economy for one or two days, thus disrupting national life and embarrassing the government. This strategy is used when the political situation is extremely critical, when negotiations have failed or the government offer falls far short of workers' demands, and also when democracy and national unity are under threat. It was effective in 1991 in the struggle for democracy, and also in 1992 and 1994 against an army mutiny during which the established authorities were illegally confined by rebellious troops.

3. Union structures and finances

3.1 Reconfiguration of the union landscape

Niger now has five unions affiliated to the Confederation Nigérienne du Travail (CNT) and 21 which are not affiliated. A total of 26 unions are not affiliated to the USTN, which is the principal federation. These fall into three main groups:

- The disaffiliated unions which created a new federation, the CNT, with five members. The CNT represents workers in the parapublic and private sectors, and is discussing whether to extend its membership to unions in the public sector as well.
- Many new unions which have been created because of a split in existing unions. Most new unions would like to be affiliated to one or other of the federations but the USTN has to submit applications for the approval of existing members in the same sector. Approval is unlikely to be given when the new union arose out of a clash of interests between leaders.
- Autonomous unions which prefer to remain outside the existing federations. These mostly represent white-collar workers.

It is possible that new federations may be created, particularly if the USTN refuses requests for affiliation from new unions. Economic liberalization and privatization have influenced the union movement in Niger. In the context of globalization the authorities, always inclined to divide and rule, have encouraged the quarrels between union leaders. This situation has affected both the structures and the finances of the labour movement.

3.2 Effects on USTN functioning

- The withdrawal of four unions from the USTN has not affected the structure of the federation, as they represent only a few urban sectors which are also represented by other unions.
- Since its last Congress in 1996 the USTN has stopped producing the membership cards which were sold by its local offices to subsidize their activities. These offices are no longer effectively supported financially and consequently they are unable to address local needs adequately.
- The CNT has recently created a network of structures below the national level, and these seem to be functioning well.
- The federations and the non-affiliated unions advocate centralized democracy as an organizing principle. The impulse for action comes from the centre and the communal, local and regional offices implement decisions and orders from the national executive office.
- Training is the prerogative of the national level and depends on financing from (northern) partner unions, international bodies to which the national unions are affiliated, or state subsidies. The lack of training at grassroots level means that the labour movement is not very democratic as rank-and-file workers are not sufficiently informed to play a meaningful role in union affairs. The movement tends to be unbalanced, with the mass of workers unaware of their rights and the leaders holding too much power, for which they are not held accountable.

Unions can be grouped into five types according to their internal structures:

- those which have local structures with regular activities, an accounting system and a procedure for renewing mandates as they expire;
- those which have found ways to finance themselves, through local subscriptions or the direct payment of dues;
- those which are subsidized so that they can organize conferences in their locality and benefit from the proceeds;
- those which have effectively suspended operations and which rely on the USTN to support unionists in their area;
- those in difficulties because of unfair competition which is undermining the sector (e.g. taxi-motos which are destroying the urban transport business in some towns).

3.3 *New types of relationship between the different structures*

Relations between the different unions generally reflect the solidarity which is the cardinal principle of union action. Nevertheless, there is some degree of polarization between unions representing workers in the parapublic and private sectors on the one hand, and those in the public sector on the other hand. The disparity of interests often makes it difficult to organize a common struggle in support of specific demands. This situation requires the USTN to make its own structure flexible enough to take account of the interests of its various affiliates. Respect for the federation's basic documents on the part of its affiliates and its own leaders is a necessary condition for good relations between them and for viable democratic unionism. Unfortunately, however, it should be noted that:

- only 10 per cent of affiliated unions paid their subscription to the USTN in 1998;
- the mandate of 80 per cent of union offices expired long ago, but they continue to operate;
- some labour leaders openly declare their political allegiance, despite the fact that the statutes insist that unions remain apolitical;
- weak USTN leadership has led to a crisis of confidence, with affiliates tending to act independently.

Relations between the CNT and its affiliates are based on the principles of equality and equity. They all have the same rights and duties and they act together to solve individual problems.

There are no formal or official relations between the two federations. When the CNT was first created there was open hostility between them and no attempt was made to come together. They now seem to be moving towards an understanding, however. They need to agree to differ on certain points in order to work together and develop a common platform.

3.4 *Relations between the union federations, the employers and the State*

Relations between unions on the one hand and employers and the government on the other hand may be considered at two main levels, i.e. respect for union rights and liberties, and the viability of the social dialogue. Union rights and liberties are enshrined in the Constitution and the law, as well as in the national and international Conventions ratified by Niger. However, only limited progress has been made in the exercise of these rights, which often means a battle. The resolute action of unions has sometimes succeeded in dissuading employers and the State from disputing workers' rights and forced employers to go back on measures which would threaten them. Examples include:

- non-access or restricted access to the mass media;
- interference in union business;
- violation of agreements concluded between the State and workers' organizations;
- suppression of workers' demonstrations permitted by the Constitution and international Conventions;
- reprisals against union leaders;

- threatened or actual lay-offs of workers involved in union activities;
- suspension or dissolution of unions.

The social dialogue is ineffective. There is no systematic discussion and dialogue serves as part of the employers' strategy, notably the government's strategy in its role of employer. The State ignores its obligations towards the social partners, giving priority to its commitments under the SAP. Workers remain fairly passive; they do not insist on being consulted on decisions which concern them very closely. Nevertheless, bipartite discussions between unions and the sectoral authorities are an effective forum for dealing with many problems. In addition, non-affiliated unions are included in many USTN meetings and they contribute to clarifying the union position.

A change of attitude could improve the tripartite mechanism. For many years the unions projected an image of 'political opposition', which aroused the hostility of the government in power and undermined the establishment of a constructive partnership.

3.5 Effect of the reforms on union finances

As shown in the table below the USTN has lost about 87 per cent of its income since 1993.

Table: Changes in USTN revenue

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Cards bought & union contributions	3.380.000	2.338.000	2.099.000	1.209.000	400	433
Overall receipts	128.173.861	55.963.362	67.110.585	43.644.591	69.688.857	42.985.818

USTN revenues 1993-1998

It is difficult to estimate CNT losses, but some of its affiliates are suffering financial constraints, which have repercussions on the federation.

3.6 Services for union members

Health

The USTN is developing a health insurance project in collaboration with the Confédération Française de Travail (CFDT). The union representing employees working for the national social security scheme (CNSS) is preparing a social fund designed to provide a supplementary pension and to pay the 20 per cent of medical expenses which are not covered by the national scheme.

Training

The USTN is running a project to provide low-cost training to workers and one of the unions is organizing and training workers in the sectors which it represents. In January 1999 an international cooperation project was launched (ILO/DANIDA) with the aim of supporting the efforts of USTN and CNT to provide workers' education in the informal sector. The three-year project has the following objectives:

- to organize informal sector workers into representative structures;
- to draw up a list of trade union indicators and seek to improve them;
- to combat child labour;
- to fight against illiteracy;
- to promote union solidarity.

The USTN is also running a training school and an agricultural project.

Financial services

Loans and financial support may be available through the federations or some of the unions. But they depend on the financial situation of the union itself, and very often members have to make a special effort to help colleagues who are in difficulty.

3.7 Effects of budgetary constraints on union functioning

The USTN and its affiliates have been seriously affected by budgetary constraints. The USTN has great difficulty in covering its running costs and paying salaries. The telephone and fax have been cut off for three years, so that it is difficult to communicate with local offices. Activities have therefore slowed almost to a standstill. Even worse, the USTN cannot keep up its subscription to international federations, which means that the training programmes supported by international cooperation are under threat. The union councils and the Congress cannot be held as often as the statutes require. The mandates of about 80 per cent of the offices of USTN affiliates have expired, which casts doubt on their representativity and legitimacy. The government's economic measures are demoralizing unionists as unions seem unable to defend their members and safeguard their interests.

The CNT is in a similar position to the USTN, although the problems are less acute. The services offered to members have shrunk and those that remain depend heavily on international union cooperation.

3.8 Strategies for financial viability

The double strategy consists of cutting the budget for some activities in order to maintain others, at the same time as attempting to increase revenues. The measures include:

- imposing special subscriptions on affiliates which can afford to pay them;
- making the payment of membership fees obligatory by introducing proportional representation;
- organizing informal sector workers in order to enlarge the union base;
- holding campaigns to make unionists aware of the importance of finance for union activities;
- undertaking income-generating activities such as buying crops at harvest time to sell when there is a shortage;
- requesting special contributions from members to cover the most urgent needs;
- maintaining good relations with the social partners to favour the collection of union dues at the work site, particularly in the public sector;
- striving to get the check-off system accepted as the normal way to finance unions;
- managing the income generated by conferences as economically as possible.

4. Building alliances

Unions often undertake collective action with other groups, notably political parties, humanitarian associations and student bodies. Collaboration with women's groups is discussed in Chapter 6. These alliances have become much more important since 1990-1991, when the State entered an unprecedented period of crisis.

4.1 Characteristics and objectives of the partner organizations

At the beginning of the 1990s the groups fighting for a democratic government had certain characteristics in common:

- They were hostile to the one-party state. At that time the multiparty system and freedom of association had just been authorized after a 30-year ban. The new associations and political parties were thus practically unknown to the public, and they had no experience of mass organization.
- They had no real roots among the people, and they were identified only by the charisma of their leader. They were thus built up on the model of union structures and they echoed union demands.

The most important occasions in the building of alliances were:

- 1990-1991: Unions were involved in the Preparatory Commission for the National Conference and took an active part in the Conference itself. Most members of the Preparatory Commission represented groups fighting for democracy (the 'democratic forces'), while the Conference brought together all sectors of society.
- 28 February 1992: Five months after the transition government was formed there was an army mutiny and political leaders were seized. The democratic forces, notably the unions and political parties, acted together to oppose this challenge to the democratic process.
- 1994-1995: The democratic forces struggled to maintain national unity in the face of an armed rebellion in the north of the country.
- 1996-1997: The USTN formed an alliance with the non-affiliated unions. The objectives of the alliance are the preservation of constitutional liberties and the defence of employment and workers' rights. The alliance itself is open only to unions but a subgroup fighting for freedom of association is open to community organizations.

Since the political parties became more firmly established in Niger there has been little collective action between them and the unions. They no longer share the same interests and objectives.

4.2 Union involvement: Problems and interests

In 1990, in the absence of any political opposition, workers and students led the struggle against the SAP and they dominated the fight for democracy. Union structures compensated for the lack of direction and leadership in the battle against one-party government. They acted as a kind of political opposition.

In principle the labour movement is 'apolitical', being neither for nor against any party: unions are autonomous and independent. But the USTN reserves the right to express an opinion on questions concerning national life, and until 1990 it maintained relations with successive governments. It even sat on some of the one-party political authorities. This practice was known as 'responsible participation'. It is only since the early 1990s that the USTN has really been politically independent. During the early 1990s it became closely involved in the national political debate. The stakes were high, with five crucial questions to be addressed at that time:

- The future of the country's schools, which were threatened by project 'Education II' designed by the international financial institutions. The proposals included two sittings in primary and secondary schools (morning classes and afternoon classes, i.e. half-day schooling), restrictions on the number of students admitted to higher education, and massive reductions in teaching staff.
- The end of the one-party state.
- The holding of a National Conference to evaluate 30 years of authoritarian government.
- The installation of a transition government paving the way for the creation of democratic institutions.
- During the army mutiny of 1992 the newly created democratic framework was at stake, as well as the transition government. These had to be restored and strengthened. It is important to note that no alliances were formed during the military coup of 1996, the unions being hostile to the coalition which was overthrown. A few months later, however, they rallied to combat the junta in power.

4.3 The formation and management of alliances

During the early 1990s the USTN was the only union federation, and it had branches throughout the country. The opposition parties had only recently been created, so that the USTN effectively controlled the new socio-political scene.

- The Secretary-General of the USTN acted as spokesman for the opposition.
- The Assistant Secretary-General of the USTN chaired the Preparatory Commission for the National Conference.
- The USTN was a kind of headquarters for the opposition and many meetings were held there.
- Unions affiliated to the USTN had 100 seats at the National Conference, the non-affiliated unions and the students also had 100 seats, and the 24 political parties had 14 each.
- The preliminary address to the National Conference was made by the President of the Preparatory Commission. The conference was opened by the Head of State.

All the collective action led to positive achievements in the fight for national unity. The government ceded to demands for the withdrawal of Education II, the introduction of multiparty politics, the holding of a National Conference and the ending of the army mutiny.

On the other hand, the alliance between USTN members and non-affiliates has not produced the expected results. Nevertheless, it has raised awareness among workers of the interests at stake.

5. The trade unions as development partners

5.1 Workers' organizations and economic development

Agriculture

The USTN is implementing a rice-growing project in the Niger river valley. The scheme provides employment for workers who have lost their jobs as a result of retrenchment. The project includes housing, a school and a dispensary for workers' families. The government made the land available to the USTN, which allocated the plots and organized the workers into a cooperative. The project is currently under threat from the local population, which is claiming better compensation for the land.

Education

More than ten years ago the USTN created training schools for young people aged 20-25, whose families could not afford to educate them. The two-year course prepares them for office work and more than 1000 students enrol every year. There are already four schools and the federation plans to open four more in regions which are not yet served.

Health

Action is taken in response to epidemics and widespread health problems, such as poor eyesight. Unions in the health sector organize the free distribution of vaccines, medical consultations, surgical operations and the provision of spectacles.

5.2 Collaboration with government-led social development efforts

Unions participate in the conception and execution of government policy in public health, education and social development. The most notable example was the creation of the national social security system in 1965. The Caisse Nationale de Sécurité Sociale (CNSS) is administered by workers, employers and government. Until 1996 the Secretary-General of the USTN was President of the Executive Board of the CNSS. Collaboration with state institutions, however, depends on relations with the political authorities. In view of the tension between unions and the state active collaboration between them has almost ceased during the last five years.

5.3 Interventions made in the general interest

Certain types of concession are granted by the government to beneficiaries supported by unions. These facilities are usually of an administrative nature, such as a permit, but they may also take the form of a land grant, as in the USTN rice-growing project.

In response to currency devaluations and salary cuts which hit the general population very hard, unions intervened to obtain price reductions on basic goods and housing rents. All union programmes include the defence of democracy and human rights, which necessarily involves them in the political struggle.

On the other hand, the democratization of union structures themselves has made little progress. Union life is very often confined to the activities of the leaders. Links with the rank-and-file workers are distant, despite the fact that their genuine participation in the movement is essential to the promotion of a democratic society.

5.4 Development cooperation

Like the government, unions depend on foreign partners for financial assistance and training. All unions have a special department responsible for strengthening existing cooperation, establishing new contacts and diversifying the development partners. The traditional partners are, of course, the international federations, but unions are forging more and more links with foreign governments, usually through their embassies. The strategy consists of four main elements:

- Appealing for solidarity and interunion cooperation in the request for funding.
- Dealing directly with development partners by drafting projects which are likely to be accepted by the funding agency to which they are submitted.
- Using the possibilities provided by agreements between the State and the development partners, such as World Bank facilities for reducing the social costs of adjustment.
- Applying for sponsorship. The appeal for class struggle and condemnation of Western imperialism is giving way to pragmatism in face of the need to gain financial support from the governments and state authorities of wealthier countries.

6. Union interventions in favour of women and youth

Women continue to be underrepresented in union structures and activities as working women do not mobilize sufficiently to break the male monopoly of union leadership. Top unionists have become more aware of the need to involve women in their activities, however, particularly as many women's organizations, which were created to fight for democracy, are now competing with unions for new members.

6.1 Women workers

The USTN and the CNT have both created a department responsible for recruiting and involving more women in the union movement. The women's department has a network of links at local and regional level, which means that it participates actively in union affairs all over the country, although the four women in charge of the department have not taken on a wider management function. Under two international cooperation projects (ILO/DANIDA and PANAF) efforts are being made to organize women in the informal sector and to train them in workers' education.

6.2 Young people

Young people are even less involved than women in union activities, mainly because unions have no structures or departments to deal with their special concerns. One of the objectives of the ILO/DANIDA project is to benefit young people in the informal sector. The project provides literacy classes for them and facilitates access to credit. The union training schools mentioned in Chapter 5.1 also assist young people of both sexes.

The unions have initiated a national plan of action to combat child labour, in the context of the ILO international programme known as IPEC. In view of the scale of the problem in West Africa, unions have created a non-governmental organization called *Fight against Child Labour*.

6.3 Relations with women's organizations and youth groups

The women's departments of the union federations have a working relationship with women's organizations and NGOs defending women's interests. They take part in each other's activities and contribute their own particular expertise.

Relations with youth groups are less formal, largely because of the lack of structures. The federations maintain solidarity with the Union des Scolaires Nigériens (USN), a students' union which is the only organized youth group in the country, and which represents more than 10,000 students at university, college and high school. In 1990 the trade unions drew up a common platform with the USN to fight for democracy and to defend Niger's educational system against the SAP.

6.4 Recruiting and training unionists

Unions make great efforts to provide members with workers' education. The USTN aims to create 250 study circles which will raise awareness among 2000 members. Women make up a quarter of the beneficiaries of training seminars and study tours, but few young people take part. Unions cannot maintain their independence without a sufficient income, and some are planning to create their own enterprises or cooperatives in order to raise revenue or provide services for their members in addition to workers' education.

6.5 Strategies on women and youth

The strategies adopted by unions in Niger are inspired by the resolutions taken at international conferences. They fall under six main headings: advancing the interests of women and young people; promoting equality between men and women; fighting discrimination against women; educating and training women and young people; strengthening relations with women's organizations; and promoting the union movement. It must be said that these points are more an expression of principle than of practice, in view of the lack of any clear policy on women and youth. Union leaders themselves need to be sensitized to gender issues before the status of women in the labour movement will be enhanced to any significant degree.

7. Summary and conclusions

In a context marked by structural adjustment programmes and the continuing impoverishment of many social groups, trade unions have to redouble their efforts to find redress for workers' grievances. This is becoming more difficult as the scope for action becomes more limited. Under such conditions, unions are obliged to join forces: they have to fight together to maintain an organizational framework, to improve the conditions of work and increase recognition of civil and political rights.

The political context is likely to determine union responses to globalization. This paper has identified the measures and strategies employed to safeguard workers' acquired rights and adapt to the new economic environment. The strategies described in Chapter 2 relate to the following concerns:

- paying salaries, pensions and arrears;
- protecting jobs and reintegrating redundant workers;
- improving the conditions of work;
- ensuring social benefits;
- defending political and civil rights.

7.1 Strategies relating to traditional union demands

In the absence of any real social dialogue, unions resort to strikes: intermittent 48-hour strikes, strikes of indefinite length, and work stoppages because of 'incapacity'. Depending on the relations between unions, strikes may be general or sectoral. The authorities remain indifferent to this type of action, reacting neither to length nor type of strike.

Many unions hesitate to call a strike in view of the boomerang effect that generally occurs: non-payment of salaries, requisitions, arrests of strike leaders, selective lay-offs and failure to mobilize the rank and file. But unions do not always accept this situation. Some have initiated "contingency strikes" and others use work stoppages.

Contingency strikes

These strikes aim to exploit the possibilities of a special event or circumstance. For example, before a World Bank or IMF mission to Niger, or during a political conflict, unions might threaten to take strike action if working conditions are not improved. The government is obliged to

negotiate or to satisfy at least some of the union demands in order to reassure the financial institutions. When this type of strike occurs in education, industry or health, humanitarian groups immediately try to bring the social partners together in order to avoid the closure of schools or medical services, especially if no minimum service is guaranteed by the strikers.

Work stoppages

Another strategy for gaining the attention of employers and the general public is to stop work because of 'incapacity'. Officially there is no strike, simply a situation where it is impossible for workers to do the job in the absence of a decent salary or working conditions. The government generally yields in this situation, or partly gives way, because the suspension continues until at least some demands are granted.

The rare successes, apparent or real, of union strikes, are seldom the fruit of any careful preparation: they owe more to the political situation or to the nature of the opportunity than to a planned mass action. Already in 1990 the demand for democracy overtook USTN leaders, who had no coherent overall vision. The USTN had simply followed in the footsteps of academics and students whose protests against the SAP had set off a general political outcry.

Although unions continue to favour strike action they do not always take account of its scope or consequences. A number of social movements are so badly prepared that it seems that union leaders wish them to fail. This is one of the reasons why USTN strike calls get little support and why few people attend the meetings. A badly managed strike has repercussions on later strikes and on workers' morale.

Indefinite strikes generally get a bad press among unionists partly because of mismanagement, partly because they often have a negative effect on the strikers. This leads to demoralization and apathy among workers.

The legal approach

The limited results from strikes have led unions to turn to the courts as a way of achieving their traditional demands. They also use an administrative approach, notably through the Consultative Council of Public Sector Workers.

Unions hope that lawyers will listen to them and examine their complaints, if they cannot get a hearing from politicians or employers. This strategy has made it possible to address a number of contentious issues, as the judiciary has remained fairly independent.

Since a legitimate government was installed the unions have not hesitated to bring their disputes with employers before the courts. This is not only a way of recognizing the role of magistrates, but also a way of saving financial resources. In addition, it puts pressure on legislators to respect the laws they make. Through this approach unions are trying to adapt to the legitimate government, to explore the mechanisms open to them and to use these means to settle labour disputes. As a last resort, unions appeal to international organizations such as ILO in the case of violations of labour Conventions.

Active prevention

Unions are trying to adapt to globalization, knowing that privatization and lay-offs cannot be avoided. The strategy of 'active prevention' means to anticipate privatization decisions, which are the cause of lay-offs or loss of social advantages. The unions make a study of enterprises which are to be privatized to discover their exact situation. The information gained is presented in a memorandum to decision makers and the public, and all the possible ways of preserving jobs are set out. Efforts are made to avoid unjustified privatization, or the loss of a significant number of jobs.

In this way unions have managed to preserve all the jobs in some companies. In other companies they have negotiated agreements providing for 'voluntary redundancies' under conditions which are acceptable to workers.

7.2 Financial strategies

Union finances demonstrate that they have shown imagination in adapting to the new political and economic environment. The measures outlined above have allowed them to ensure the survival of their organizational framework, while maintaining a relative independence from employers. We should point out that under the Fourth Republic the CNT and certain unions were created at the instigation of the government in order to weaken the USTN. These newer union bodies enjoy better operating conditions than the USTN and the independent unions.

While unions have shown imagination, certain of the measures they have adopted give rise to some reservations. For example, if the check-off system promotes trade unionism, it also tends to make unions dependent on the government, which can paralyse their activities by refusing to apply the check-off. Even if the authorities agree to apply the system they may demand a truce or the postponement of a strike in exchange. This undermines union independence from the country's main employer.

The second reservation concerns the funds generated by trade union conferences. When a union is reduced to relying on conferences or congresses for finance, it is in trouble. Big meetings do not take place frequently and they do not generate a significant amount of money.

More fruitful are union initiatives to organize informal sector workers; this has great potential for improving union finances in view of the number of workers concerned. Nevertheless, investments are required in order to unionize this sector. Other praiseworthy initiatives include the introduction of special contributions from unions which are in a better financial situation; this is likely to strengthen solidarity between workers and unions. Another approach is to promote income-generating activities such as the sale of staple commodities, which will improve workers' standard of living and strengthen unionism.

7.3 Alliances with community organizations

Unions have made little effort to ally themselves with humanitarian associations, women's groups, political parties or cooperatives. Links with such organizations are very weak; sometimes there is even distrust and suspicion between them. There is thus a need for unions to develop strategies which will gain the support of such groups and mobilize them in favour of the workers' struggle.

7.4 Attracting new members

Strategies relating to women are mostly inspired by the recommendations of international conferences and by the ILO. Unions have shown little imagination here.

It is unfortunate that the unions do not invest sufficiently in attracting young people and looking after their interests. They have left this field open to the political parties. Unions need to extend their contacts with young people beyond the traditional links with students' associations.

As the image of unions is inextricably linked with the image of their leaders it is important for top unionists to be seen as models of integrity and rectitude. The absence of such qualities among many leaders influences employers' perceptions of the labour movement. It also influences rank-and-file workers and the general public. This affects the climate of negotiations and undermines efforts to mobilize unionists and partners in the community.

In sum, unions in Niger are poorly adapted to the new economic context of globalization in that their strategies are often traditional and inappropriate. Workers are therefore becoming defenceless against employers in a rapidly changing environment.

7.5 Outlook for the future

According to the most optimistic forecast, Niger will take at least ten years to recover from the multisectoral crises which have marked the last decade. Certainly, the Fourth Republic is no more, but much remains to be done to stimulate the economy and ensure the well-being of workers. The political creed of the Fifth Republic proclaims good governance, the stabilization of government finance and the mobilization of national resources, but election pledges have yet to be fulfilled in

practice. There is a strong probability that living and working conditions will continue to deteriorate, particularly since the privatization programme begun under the previous government will be pursued with even greater zeal.

One of the ten poorest countries in the world, Niger can no longer count on her principal export, i.e. uranium, of which she is a major world producer. Owing to the collapse of the international markets Niger is now selling only 2000 tonnes of this mineral. The government has encouraged the production of cash crops, notably cotton (40,000 tonnes), but this has not achieved the expected results. (A neighbouring country, Mali, produces more than 500,000 tonnes). Oil has been discovered in the north-east of Niger, but no steps have been taken to exploit this new resource.

The privatization of public enterprises, which are a serious drain on the State, thus seems to be a way for the government to raise revenue and use its financial resources to better effect. This is particularly important in view of the foreign debt burden. In 1999 foreign debt exceeded 842,000 million FCFA (67 per cent in multilateral loans) while annual revenue was about 110,000 million FCFA. Financial constraints are formidable and the inflation rate, currently among the highest in the region at 4.5 per cent, could go up rapidly with the introduction of new tariffs in the UEMOA countries (Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest-Africaine).

Economic and financial prospects are sombre and Niger continues to depend heavily on other countries, even to keep the State running. The national budget includes significant contributions from abroad, both multilateral and bilateral. Since the new government took power public sector salaries have been paid with assistance from Belgium and France. For the last ten years the country has not formulated its own economic and financial policy, being effectively obliged to follow the recommendations of the international financial institutions. It is only out of courtesy that one speaks of the sovereign state of Niger today.

As it is required to apply structural adjustment measures which mean reducing the size of the public sector, the government will cease to be the biggest employer. The privatizations which have been announced, notably of Nigelec (electricity), SNE (water) and Sonitel (telecommunications), will be a heavy blow to employees in these sectors and to the union movement. Thousands more workers will swell the ranks of the unemployed. Job security, previously guaranteed in the public sector, will be a thing of the past and recruitment will be competitive. This means that unskilled workers will be the principal victims of the government withdrawal from state-owned enterprises. Older people and women will be disproportionately affected by compulsory retirement at the age of 50, or after 30 years' service. Young workers with more skills should benefit from this situation but the labour market is so constrained that many will remain unemployed. They will drift into the informal sector and the future will see more and more 'little jobs', and temporary and part-time work.

It is clear that the labour movement in Niger will be seriously weakened. The two existing federations will be undermined and new unions will emerge. In the best possible scenario these will be affiliated to the USTN or the CNT, unless they form a third federation consisting mainly of private sector unions. Given the sharpening of class conflict and the inglorious past of the two existing federations, there is reason to fear a strong deunionization of the world of work.

Private sector unions today are not very active in defending workers' rights, and new unions are likely to follow their example of conformity and passivity to avoid putting jobs at risk. Many workers are not psychologically prepared for the private sector, where they are at the mercy of an employer whose only goal is to accumulate wealth.

The struggle to preserve acquired social and political rights will continue to be the role of traditional unions in the public sector, notably those in education and health. The initiative for social and democratic reform will probably come from these unions, supported by their partners in the community and by youth organizations. But by accentuating social inequalities, rampant globalization may blunt all inclination to fight, and may even cause the most vulnerable workers to withdraw from the struggle.

This trend has already begun. The unions often fail to work together, although their goals are the same. At best they organize their efforts on an inter-union basis, as the federations have no impulse to fight and take no initiatives. With the current deepening economic crisis, and the

growing number of unemployed people and part-time workers, the break-up of the union movement is probably irreversible. Its fragmentation is made more likely by the failure of many union leaders to project a positive image of militant unionism to workers and the general public.