

#02

UNION VIEW

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Algeria – Women are making progress in the unions

Thanks to an ambitious organising campaign by women throughout the country, women's participation is on the increase everywhere. This is the first report on a very promising campaign.

A long-term investment: direct contacts at the workplace

The campaign focused on direct contacts with women at their workplaces to combat discrimination and the threat of insecurity.



"Prior to the 2004-2006 campaign, quite a few women already held elected positions at grassroots level, although not in proportion to the number of female members. The participation of women in positions of responsibility was extremely low, or non-existent in some areas, even in sectors with an almost equal percentage of women members, such as health, education or textiles," explains Soumia Salhi, coordinator of the campaign to unionise women, backed by the ex-ICFTU and CLC – Canada.

The initial campaign goals included unionising and improving the status of women workers, identifying the obstacles to women's integration within the trade union movement, and gathering statistics on women at work and in the trade union movement.

The work carried out on the ground included factory visits, general meetings of women workers in the various regions of the country and study days. Questionnaires were distributed to gather information and a procedure was set up to evaluate the project step-by-step.

The Algerian campaign initially targeted women working in state-owned textile, clothing and leather enterprises. "We decided to tackle the public sector, where unions already exist but very little attention is given to the problems facing women. The rate of union membership among women is estimated at 75%, and despite there being numerous women in elected positions at factory level and several female general secretaries of branch unions, not a single

woman is present in the federal leadership structures. Our aim is to place the issues affecting women higher on the trade union agenda. The fact that textile factories are spread throughout the country means that we can involve a considerable number of trade unions," explained Soumia Salhi at the beginning of the campaign.

Textile industry hard hit

The government's decision, announced in early 2005, to sell 1200 public enterprises in all sectors heightened the already serious concerns in the textile, clothing and leather sector. The activities organised within the framework of the campaign obviously provided many occasions to discuss the sector's future with the women concerned. Over 9000 jobs out of a total of 43,000 have been lost in the sector. In the context of unfair competition from imports most often sold in the informal economy and the rise in second hand clothing sales, the trade unions fear that the real motive behind these privatisations is to close down the companies and recover the land. "Our number one problem is the wages, but we are constantly being threatened with closure, and don't know whether it's true or not," explain the workers. Promoting women's trade union rights is no easy task under such circumstances, when the very survival of their jobs is at stake.

"These developments in the textile sector prompted the campaign organisers to reorient the campaign, adopting the more global approach of promoting the participation of

Algerian women in trade unions

The 10th UGTA Congress in October 2000 included the establishment of women's committees at all levels in its Statutes. Furthermore, a directive of the general secretary requires the presence of women (although a quota was not set) among the Congress delegates and elected representatives.

The Congress of October 2000 established a National Committee of Women Workers (CNFT-UGTA), which was elected in March 2002 by a constituent assembly of 350 delegates from 48 wilayas (regions), in the presence of representatives from the international trade union movement and the Algerian women's movement.

It has a National Council of 91 members (which is unable to meet regularly owing to the lack of funds) and a National Bureau of 6 members, who meet monthly. The only elected female member of the UGTA executive (out of a total of 182 members) is also the president of the National Committee of Women Workers. Since 1997, the UGTA has set up numerous women's committees at local and regional level, but their actual status is unequal and their existence often precarious owing to the lack of funding.

"Thanks to the campaign, we have been able to set up or consolidate regional women's coordinating committees (in Boumerdes, Biskras, Médéa, etc.) and have also started to set up committees at the level of the federations (energy, oil and chemical, textile, finance, health, occupational training)," explains Soumia Salhi.

women at all levels of the trade union movement, placing particular emphasis on the education, health, banking and public administration sectors," explains Soumia Salhi.

Grassroots organising

As regards the organising approach, "we opted to work at the grassroots, approaching the women in small groups at work, raising their awareness about the need to unionise and to promote the election of women representatives from among their ranks. Women organisers went from door to door, to many different workplaces, factories and offices. They organised meetings of women's groups formed by the union. They discussed general problems such as wages and working conditions, and the more specific problems faced by women, such as maternity rights or sexual harassment. The important thing is to make women understand that if they don't get involved, their problems will not be taken on board," says Soumia.

Precarious employment

"They expressed indignation at their marginalisation and the lack of attention given to women's issues by the union. They also expressed concern over the precarious nature of their situation, the threats to their jobs, and the problem of wage arrears. The general rise in temporary contracts was pinpointed as an obstacle to the effective unionisation of women, along with the burden of family responsibilities or religious and cultural constraints. In spite of these obstacles, the woman nonetheless proved to be highly motivated. Some women from the remotest regions travelled for over 1000 kilometres, braving the cold and the snow to take part in our activities!" rejoices Soumia.

Materials to support the campaign were distributed, such as leaflets, stickers, bags, T-shirts, and brochures on women workers' rights. A documentary film was made on the campaign activities in the various regions. "On seeing the video presenting the campaign activities in Algeria as a whole, I cried, because I realised the magnitude of the work

accomplished, I saw the fruit of our work," confided Souad Belaidi, campaign coordinator for the Tlemcen region (1).

Wide media coverage

The campaign inspired dozens of press articles, numerous reports on national and local radio stations and televisions broadcasts. This media success was a great source of motivation for women such as the UGTA's local campaign coordinators. "The trade unionists would fight to have the campaign filmed in their factories," explains Soumia Salhi. The same complaints would invariably be gathered during the factory visits, such as "we have always paid our union dues, but it's only the men who benefit..." or "you can get anything you want, loans, wage advances, permission to take leave, etc. if you give your superior a smile. But if you put him in his place, he'll make your life hell."

Various women's campaigns converge

The campaign to unionise women and the parallel campaigns on issues such as sexual harassment and violence against women converged in a totally natural way, given that they were all aimed at improving women's rights. This natural convergence contributed to giving union action greater credibility and strengthening the women's motivation and commitment.

"We met with a lot of negative reactions at first from the men, who asked themselves "what is this nonsense about women's unions?" explains Karima Boudrouaz (2). But they have seen, with time, that women are capable of being effective and producing results. Their views have changed. Now there are even men who come to the women's committee with their problems. It's incredible how much the situation has changed in just three years."

Fruit still to be gathered

"The campaign has contributed to increasing women members' involvement in the union, as well as the number

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Algerian women on the labour market

- Women's participation on the labour market rose from 2.4% in 1977 to 7% in 1996, then to 14% in 2002, and 17% in 2005.
- In comparison with similar countries in terms of traditions, culture and religion, the proportion of women in the total active population is low. The situation is paradoxical given the high educational performance of girls and the legislative progress in the area of sexual equality (recruitment, promotion and social protection).
- The female workforce is concentrated in the public sector, i.e. administration, health and education. Women represent 40% of the salaried employees in the health and education sectors.
- Most Algerian women workers are qualified, urban (81%) young (aged 25 - 29), and the majority (55%) are unmarried.
- The presence of formally employed women is non-existent or negligible in agriculture, and very low in industry. The situation is nonetheless changing rapidly, with a notable increase in female activity in the services, commerce and small businesses. The absence of gender-based statistics on the informal economy rules out any real visibility with regard to women workers in the informal economy, particularly in the agriculture and handicrafts sectors.
- Informal work is particularly widespread among housewives, who contribute to the household budget through the income they generate by multitasking. This type of activity is spreading to a growing number of qualified women who have not been able to find salaried employment and have to rely on "odd jobs" to cover their basic needs.
- Homework is also on the rise among women. This type of work, traditionally carried out in response to family pressures, is now becoming increasingly common for wider reasons, such as the widespread job instability, unemployment and falling purchasing power. The kind of work done by women at home is generally linked to the production of textile goods (sewing, upholstering, knitting, embroidering, weaving) sold on the informal market.

Source: "L'Emploi féminin en Algérie", Institut National du Travail, in conjunction with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Alger - 2005).



Women's participation in trade unions remains too symbolic, but is progressing on all fronts."



...

of female candidates and elected representatives," says Soumia Salhi. Female membership went from 127,940 in 2002, to 153,962 in 2005, then to 175,000 in 2006. "Despite this major progress in the membership figures, we feel that the proportion of women remains too low," adds Soumia. As regards the women holding elected positions in the regional and national federations, according to the figures gathered in over half of the wilayas (regions), there were 133 female elected representatives in 2006, as compared with only 30 prior to the campaign. Around fifteen women are now on secondment, as compared with around 10 prior to the campaign. But the numbers are still too low. There is still only one woman on the UGTA executive committee, and 181 men. Most of the trade union organisations haven't yet celebrated their Congresses, so their leadership structures

remain the same as in 2003. We have not yet gathered all the fruits of the campaign," concludes Soumia Salhi.

As regards the objective of reaching female participation of 20% in training sessions, the figure was reached in 2004, then surpassed in 2005 (46%). "Around a dozen women members have also been able to follow training sessions at the ITC in Turin, thanks to our parallel campaign to promote the training of women," explains Ouahiba Bouguerra, head of the training campaign. Women were at least symbolically represented at most of the events organised by the national and international trade union organisations (ICATU, ICFTU, etc).

Budding young leaders

"The campaign has clearly promoted the emergence of many young female trade union leaders who have sprouted



(*) The International Trade Union Confederation is carrying out an ambitious international campaign with the Global Union Federations (GUFs) aimed at organising women workers around the world called "Unions for women, women for unions". The campaign is focusing primarily on women workers in the exporting processing zones and the informal economy, and on migrant women workers. Fifty-five ITUC-affiliated trade unions from 43 different countries and at least 20 GUF affiliates from 20 different countries are involved in this global campaign, which is part of the campaign to organise women workers originally launched by the former ICFTU in 2002 and then re-launched in 2004.

Under that global campaign the former ICFTU had launched a two-year organising campaign in three countries in the Maghrib region: Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania, supported by the publication of a campaign guide in Arabic.

In September 2006 a seminar was held in Marrakech to evaluate the campaign's achievements in Morocco and Algeria with the support of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). Over forty Moroccan and Algerian women trade unionists were thereby given the opportunity to evaluate the initial results of the campaign in their respective countries and to exchange their experiences at local level.

(*) See also the Briefing "Morocco - Raising Awareness and Visibility: Women Make progress", at: http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/maroc_EN.pdf

up in all the regions of the country and are showing great promise. No one denies it, not even the general secretary of the UGTA himself. They are of course backed by the work and the fight waged for many years by the women who have long been active in the movement. But these new leaders are emerging just in time, just as a new lease of life is needed to press forward with the woman's cause in the trade union movement," rejoices Soumia Salhi.

But the road ahead is by no means easy. "The nomination of ordinary women members to take part in international trips creates endless rivalry and destabilises the beneficiaries. The number of meetings and events to which the emerging young women leaders are called disrupts their everyday union work and places a strain on their relations with the grassroots trade union structure and their employer," explains Soumia, who is nonetheless confident in the future.

Unionising the private and informal sectors

"We don't really have much problem recruiting in the public sector; people join the union without any problem. But the situation is totally different in the private sector. Organising the men and women in the private and informal sectors is the great challenge lying ahead of our trade union organisation," predicts Soumia Salhi.

In the context of economic liberalisation, the informal

economy is in the full throes of expansion in Algeria, accompanied by deplorable working conditions and the absence of any kind of social security. "Even legally established private companies don't declare most of their employees, depriving them of all their rights. They have neither the minimum wage, social security nor a pension," protests Soumia Salhi. "In the private sector, as soon as you mention the word 'union', the boss tells you to get out. How is it possible to unionise workers in such a hostile context?"

"According to estimates, one woman in three works in the informal economy, where they are stripped of all their rights and maintained in a regressive state, often evocative of women's traditional seclusion."

Given the number of women who mentioned the violation of the right to maternity leave and breastfeeding breaks at work in the privatised and informal economies, Soumia Salhi warmly welcomes the international trade union movement's decision to make this a central theme and prioritise the defence of these rights on International Women's Day on 8 March 2007.

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- (1) See the full interview of Souad Belaidi (Algeria – UGTA), entitled "The campaign has given women a taste for asserting their rights" at <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article635>

- (2) Also see the full interview of Karima Boudrouaz, entitled "We have to fight to ensure that the law on equality is implemented" at <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article630>

From education... to over-qualification and the "waste" of diplomas.

Algeria has made substantial progress in the schooling and the training of girls. Both in secondary general and technical education, as well as among Baccalaureate candidates, the proportion of girls surpasses 56%. Women also form the majority in higher education.

In the area of occupational training, they are making major inroads into branches previously reserved for men, such as information technology, where they now represent 62% of the total.

The progress made in the area of education and training is undoubtedly a key to women's access to the labour market. In the current economic climate, however, the impact on women's participation in the world of work has been minimal. One factor is the "waste" of higher education diplomas - over 6 out of every 10 graduates are unemployed, together with the general economic crisis, accounting for the increasing numbers of young unemployed women.

Those women who employed tend to be much better qualified than their male colleagues holding the same posts.

Source: "L'emploi féminin en Algérie", Institut National du Travail, in conjunction with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Alger- 2005).

"Making room for the youth"

Plagued by unemployment and the casualisation of work, young Algerians also have to struggle to make themselves heard in the trade union movement. The decision of the last UGTA Congress to set up a youth committee offers hope for the future.

● What are the problems specific to young workers in Algeria?

Karima Boudrouaz (1): The main problem facing young people is unemployment, especially in the big cities, and fixed term contracts. Everyone would like to have a stable job. Young people often find themselves unemployed again and without any kind of compensation after working for six months. There are many young graduates, engineers, doctors, etc. who form part of the "young unemployed workforce". Some go back to live with their parents, but it's very difficult, so many are forced into the informal economy."

What practical measures do you intend to take to give young people a greater role in the Algerian trade union movement?

Karima Boudrouaz: "The last UGTA Congress decided to set up a youth committee, but it has not actually been formed yet. I recently took part in a meeting of young trade unionists from the Maghreb, held in Tunis, by the UGTT (Tunisia) and CFDT (France). I learned about the experiences in other countries and at the end of the meeting, as the Algerian delegate, I committed to taking part in setting up a concrete action plan by the end of 2006. It's an opportunity I wanted to seize, given that the UGTA Congress decided to set up a structure for young members and its time the idea was put

into practice. I'm working with other young trade unionists, such as Souad Belaidi (2), who is also actively involved in the campaign to recruit women, to complete the setting up of this youth committee, and am willing to take on the role of provisional president until the structure takes on its definitive form."

Souad Belaidi (2): "Young people have always been marginalized in our confederation. And yet, in my view, it's very important to prepare the next generation of leaders. There are many old trade unionists in the Arab world who don't want to give way to the young. They accuse them of not having being involved, like them, in the hard battle for independence, because in their day, the trade union struggle and the fight against colonialism were inextricably linked. They mistrust the youth because of this historical gap. Yet these young people are achieving miraculous things through their work. They have to be given a chance, a role.

It's true that young people are quicker to protest than their parents, At university already, if something displeases them, they complain and put up a fight. They want jobs that correspond to their qualifications and training, decent work, permanent posts. They're not ready to except just anything, to put up with what their parents have endured.

I'm very keen to get involved in setting up a youth committee. I want it to be set up as it ought to be, not rushed into head on. I'm confident it will happen and am ready to commit to it."

(1) Read the full interview of Karima Boudrouaz at <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article630>
(2) Read the full interview of Souad Belaidi at <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article635>

Sexual harassment: Enough is enough!

Awareness raising, a help centre, legal sanctions... the UGTA women's campaign against sexual harassment is a success that could serve as inspiration for other countries in the region.

“We have discovered that sexual harassment, which we had thought generally limited to the big cities, is, in fact, a problem that exists throughout the country. We also thought that certain groups of women, such as divorcees, for example, who are seen in a negative light and are consequently pushed to the margins of society, would be the main victims. But not at all; we have realised that all women, married or not, are potential victims. We also thought that sexual harassment was generally directed at young women, believing older women to be better protected. But not at all; we have received testimonies from women over 50 years old. It can, in fact, affect all women,” insists Souad Charid (1).

For trade unionists, the rise in this sorry phenomenon is a consequence of the widespread pauperisation and job insecurity affecting all too many women and making them more vulnerable to blackmail. Coming out of isolation is the only way the woman concerned can regain confidence and, with the help of solidarity, be in a position to overturn the balance of power. That is, in fact, the principle behind the help centre set up by the women from the UGTA.

“Thanks to the courage of those who were brave enough to talk on the radio, to help other victims, our campaign has changed people’s outlook; it has encouraged the victims to speak out and intimidated the aggressors. The campaign has succeeded in breaking the taboo that keeps the problem hidden. It has been widely covered by the press, which has helped to build awareness about the issue whilst avoiding sensationalism, which could have been detrimental to our campaign objectives,” rejoices Soumia Salhi, president of the UGTA women’s committee and the initiator of the help centre project.

“There was recently the case of a unionised worker from the health sector, recognised by all for her exceptional professional skills, who was dismissed by the head of her department after having defended a colleague whom he had sexually harassed. She contacted the women’s committee in a terrible panic. We immediately met with the hospital director, who committed to reinstating her on the spot. The news spread like wildfire at the hospital, and boosted the image of the women’s committee, which subsequently had five other cases of sexual harassment referred to it,” says



Karima Boudrouaz, the campaign coordinator for the Bordj-Bou-Arredj region (2).

A wealth of experience to be shared

Despite the still limited approach of the law and the mentalities that continue to stop all too many women from talking, “the campaign has been an incredible success. Sexual harassment has now become the subject of theses and study days at universities. We would like this campaign to serve as an experience that can be reproduced in other Arab countries. We’re also planning to create a website, because we have a wealth of materials to be shared,” explains Soumia Salhi. As the general secretary of the UGTA admits: “Talking about sexual harassment is a revolution in the mentality of trade unionists”.

See the complete version of the Spotlight Interview with Souad Charid, entitled “It is time for women to say ‘enough is enough!’”
<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221351&Language=EN>
(2) Also see the full interview of Karima Boudrouaz, entitled “We have to fight to ensure that the law on equality is implemented” at <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article630>

- March 2003: Ministry of Justice called on to amend the penal code so as to make sexual harassment a criminal offence.

- December 2003: Opening of a help centre offering legal aid and support from a team of qualified psychologists to victims of sexual harassment.

- November 2004: Official inclusion in the penal code (Art. 341) of sexual harassment as a criminal offence punishable by fines and prison sentences.

Asma’s fight for her daughter

Asma Zinai, the director of a school in Constantine, a union activist since the nineties and a member of the UGTA national bureau, recounts the story of her daughter. “When she was 23, my daughter, an accountant at an electronics firm in the Constantine region, was sexually harassed by her regional director. Several other women from the company had already been sexually harassed by this man, but my daughter was the first one to stand up for herself. The first time he saw her at work, he immediately started to harass her with incessant phone calls. He asked her to take part in trade fairs in other towns, so that she would have to stay in a hotel. She refused on numerous occasions, on the pretext that her parents would not allow it. He pressurised her, saying that she had a professional duty to take part, adding that she should dress “more femininely” for the occasion. My daughter couldn’t stand it anymore, and wanted to change jobs to escape the situation. But she held out and, with the help of a lawyer, managed to trap her boss. She agreed to meet him at the hotel as told. She recorded everything he said with a hidden Dictaphone, allowing him to be caught red-handed and arrested by the police at the hotel itself. The case was widely covered in the press as it was linked to the UGTA campaign against sexual harassment.”