

#06

UNION VIEW

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→ Jacky Delorme



Guinea: The trade union movement as an engine of change

By successfully mobilising vigorous elements within the country in early 2007, the unions generated immense hope among a population that has always been denied democracy. More than eight months after the general strike was brutally put down, with much bloodshed, the challenge facing the unions now is to keep firmly closed ranks and capitalise on their popularity to get the country embarking on reforms as quickly as possible.

Here's a report on the situation.

On the path to change? A tentative preliminary assessment

The first signs of social progress are already visible, but corruption and insecurity cloud the future

Timeline of events

- 5 January 2005: Creation of the trade union movement CNTG-USTG. The National Confederation of Guinean Workers (CNTG), which was previously the only trade union centre, and the United Trade Union of Guinean Workers (USTG) are the most important trade union centres in the country.
- May 2005: CNTG issues a list of demands to the government, mainly to do with price control and wage increases.
- 15 November: After negotiations fail, CNTG calls the first 48-hour token general strike.
- 10 February 2006: The trade union movement CNTG-USTG presents another list of demands to the government, this time regarding support for purchasing power, promotion of employment and social protection, reinforcement of dialogue and respect for trade union freedoms.
- 27 February: The trade union movement calls a 5-day general strike.
- 3 March: A Memorandum of Understanding is signed by the government, employers and the trade union movement.
- 8 June: As the Memorandum of Understanding has not been respected and the price of fuel has been increased, the trade union movement calls another general strike, which leads to violence (11 people killed). The trade union movement suspends the strike after receiving further assurances from the government.
- 10 January 2007: As the Memorandum of Understanding is still not being applied, the trade union movement CNTG-USTG, which now includes ONSLG and UDTG, calls another general strike, this time of indefinite duration. The unions also denounce the head of state's decision to release two representatives of the private sector who were accused of corruption.
- 14 January: The newly extended trade union movement puts forward its proposals for a way out of the crisis situation

Are changes afoot in Guinea, or is the country still slipping into darkness? One thing is certain: in Conakry, which is reputed to be the darkest capital in Africa, and in the parts of the country hooked up to the national grid, power cuts are now less frequent. The availability of water supply – where supply networks exist – also seems to have improved. The cost of fuel has gone back down to 4,300 Guinean francs a litre (1). The prices of essential foodstuffs are continuing to fluctuate wildly. At the start of October, the cost of rice, a real barometer for measuring Guineans' purchasing power, varied by up to 100%. And whereas the supply of subsidised rice available for 80,000 Guinean francs per 50-kilo sack provided some relief for the population of Conakry, prices still remained very high (as much as 150,000 Guinean francs!) in the country's most landlocked regions. The ban on exports of agricultural produce, fishery and forestry products, which will run until the end of 2007, is being universally heeded. These products are now more widely available, and at prices that are mostly lower than were charged in 2006. Despite these measures being deemed "unproductive" by the World Bank and the IMF, Guinea's main donors of funds have agreed to help the country by freeing up emergency aid and reactivating longer-term aid programmes. The main macroeconomic indicators are improving: the rate of inflation, which had reached a level of 38% back in March, dropped back to 18% in September. The currency's value steadied and the net external assets of the Central Bank of the Republic of Guinea were built up again, albeit only to a minor extent. At last, progress is now being made in the country's top priority, namely getting its economy off the ground by overhauling its mining code and mining agreements. For the time being, the emphasis is on combating embezzlement and bribery and also tax and customs exonerations, which have in the past stood in the way of any fair, transparent redistribution of the country's



potentially very high income from the mining industry. The greatest headway has been made in connection with working conditions and freedom of association. In the companies run by the RUSAL group, which has often been singled out for its abusive practices, wages have risen (by 50%) and collective agreements are being better respected. According to the mining unions, this change in attitude by the management is directly linked to the events that took

following a meeting with the President, including the proposal that he should step down for health reasons.

● 17 January: Due to a lack of tangible results, peaceful demonstrations are organised throughout the country. In Conakry, repression of the strike by the police leads to many injuries. The following days see the first deaths.

● 22 January: The trade union movement and various groups representing civil society bring together tens of thousands of demonstrators in Conakry. The police force retaliates, killing over 40 people. The Labour Exchange is destroyed. Trade unionists are badly affected by events, especially Ibrahima Fofana, the General Secretary of USTG. They are arrested, then released later that evening.

● 27 January: The strike is suspended after the trade unions are promised that a consensus Prime Minister with extended powers will be named, the social demands that have been requested for so long will be met and an inquiry will be set up to deal with the violence committed during the strikes.

● 9 February: President Conté names his right-hand man, Eugène Camara, as Prime Minister. Demonstrations resume immediately and riots claim new victims. A state of siege is declared and police searches are often used as pretexts for more acts of violence (thefts, beatings, rapes and murders).

● 22 February: The President finally agrees to choose a Prime Minister from the list of 5 candidates put forward by the trade unions and civil society.

● 25 February: End of the strike. Official figures say that at least 129 people were killed and over 1,700 were wounded during the repression of the strike, but according to the trade unions, the true figures are much higher.

● 26 February: Lansana Kouyaté, one of the candidates put forward by the trade unions, is named Prime Minister and on 28 March, the consensus government comes into power.

place early this year and to the bolstered legitimacy of workers' organisations. In the administration, the high staff levels (some being 'virtual' civil servants, e.g. who have abandoned their posts, been 'posted' elsewhere, or are continuing to draw salaries even after their death, etc.) are on the way to being "tidied up", as the new minister for employment, public service, and administrative reform put it before going on to announce the imminent recruitment of 9,705 civil servants and 6,705 police officers. Social dialogue is now under way at national level again with the country's employers, who have become more approachable following the departure of their former president suspected of corruption, and with a consensus government that retains the union's trust despite the snail's pace of its reforms and the fact that the existing framework (Economic and Social Committee, Labour Advisory Committee and social legislation, joint committees, and so on) does not work very effectively at all. In the education sector, whilst school-leavers' exam results at the end of August proved catastrophic (20% received by 45,545 candidates), highlighting the failure of education and leaving youngsters distraught, they nonetheless underscored the apparent determination of the new powers-that-be to stamp out the cheating that permeated the system to its core, by conducting as objective an assessment as possible.

Union leaders still under threat

The continuing corruption at every level is a cause of concern for the unions as well as other organisations of civil society. This is the main obstacle preventing change throughout the system, from the lowly civil servant seeking a way of complementing a meagre income to the ultra-rich, dishonest businessman who benefits from a high level of protection (2). Corruption is also perpetuated by former dignitaries from the regime who remain very much within the orbit of the head of state. The unions refer to them as the "parallel government" or "reactionary forces". Another sticking point comprises the decrees governing the appointment of ministerial aides, who have to be approved by the president. So the country's present ministers are having to make do with senior officials who were not chosen by them and in whom they have little confidence. Total

● Poverty: 40% of Guinea's population of 9.2 million live below the poverty line. Guinea ranks 160th (out of 177 countries) in the UNDP's human development index.

● Millennium Goals: Guinea is performing below the average for the African continent re the main indicators associated with attaining the Millennium Development Goals (health, education, etc.). Worse still, according to the World Bank poverty and malnutrition there are on the increase, bucking the trend for Africa as a continent. This situation is being blamed on insufficient public funds channelled into ensuring access to education, health and essential foodstuffs.

● Corruption: According to Transparency International, Guinea was the most corrupt country in Africa in 2006.

(sources: World Bank and www.irinnews.org)

impunity persists with regard to any crimes committed. The committee of inquiry into human rights violations during the strikes had not even started work by the end of September, and there is little chance of it doing so in October, owing to a strike by lawyers (the committee's members include 6 lawyers) called in protest at the violent treatment dished out to one of their colleagues by the police. A deep sense of insecurity still reigns today in Guinea. At the beginning of May, soldiers left their barracks to protest about back pay owed to them. Shots they fired killed 2 people and wounded many others. The lives of trade union leaders remain under threat. In April, the plantation of CNTG General Secretary Rabiattou Diallo was set alight. In July, the home of USTG General Secretary Ibrahima Fofana was ransacked. Lastly, the disagreement between the country's political parties regarding the composition of its independent national electoral commission have postponed the general election once again.

(1) In October 2007, one euro was worth roughly 6,000 Guinean francs.

(2) One of the causes of the general strike in January the release from prison at the end of 2006, by order of President Conté, of the top employer's boss Mamadou Sylla, who had been suspected of embezzling public funds.

The trade union movement's busy schedule

Broken windows, smashed doors and cupboards, bullet holes in the walls: the Labour Exchange, the headquarters of CNTG (which used to be only trade union centre in Guinea), still bears the scars of the repression of the strikes in early 2007. But now more than ever, large numbers of Guinean workers and foreign visitors gather at this very building every day. This is a typical day for the universally popular trade union movement.

"Rabiattou has shown that she is a very brave woman. Everyone in Guinea trusts her," says Alima Camara. The president of the Guinean Association for Women and Orphans Infected and Affected by HIV/AIDS has been waiting two hours for a meeting with CNTG's charismatic leader. In the past, Ms Camara has taken part in awareness-raising events for trade unionists, and she would like to convince the CNTG leader to launch a new health and safety programme. However, there is little chance that they will have this discussion today. Rabiattou Diallo, like all the main trade union officials in the country, has an overloaded schedule.

At the moment, they are all in the conference room at the Labour Exchange with a delegation from the World Bank and

the IMF. For a few months now, the trade union movement CNTG-USTG, which now includes ONSLG and UDTG, has been consulted by these two international financial institutions on a very regular basis. Their representatives are in general agreement with the trade unions' demands featured in the road map (1) and with the content of the tripartite Memorandum of Understanding which was signed in January 2007 and is to be implemented by the consensus government. However, they are critical of rice subsidies "which will have to be financed by cutting back on spending" and of the suspension of food and forestry product exports, "which represents a step in the wrong direction and is depriving the country of a significant amount of income".

→ Boris Naudin

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After a few civilised exchanges, voices are raised. Louis M'Bemba Soumah of the USTG asks the World Bank and IMF representatives what exactly they are going to do to help the country get back on its feet, "because your past interventions in Africa have had catastrophic results". Rabiatou Diallo tries to be appeasing and asks for more dialogue "to avoid more unfortunate World Bank projects like the market kiosks which were meant to protect saleswomen from the rain and the sun, but were badly designed and ended up being abandoned by the women, who did better business outside them".

Highly solicited

After the meeting, the trade union officials consult one another and adjust their list of appointments. An official delegation from the European Union is coming to the Labour Exchange tomorrow. The Minister for Trade has asked to meet the trade union officials to discuss what to do about wood supplies which are currently blocked in Conakry harbour. Ringing mobile phones suggest other urgent appointments. The requests are never-ending. They come from embassies, employers, civil society organisations and the press, but also from ordinary people who are convinced that their salvation can only come from the trade unions. Ibrahima Fofana, the General Secretary of USTG, admits that the people's expectations are a very heavy burden on the trade unions:

"Everyone in Guinea is ready to join our organisations. They look to us to solve all their problems. Even soldiers and customs officers come to us to air all their grievances. Corruption in this country is such that you have to pay for every judicial decision. But we managed to have Supreme Court decisions repealed, and so, it is true, we are very much in demand." Ibrahima Fofana laments "the incompetence of our members of parliament, the lack of any proper opposition and the non-involvement of intellectuals in the political life of our country".

A need for specific skills

Dilé Diallo, a trade union instructor and senior official at the Ministry for Employment, Public Service and Administrative Reform, believes that it is absolutely necessary to capitalise immediately and fully on the process of change that the trade union movement has unleashed: "The best intentions in the world are not enough. We really need to make our organisations more professional and more autonomous. They need to develop skills within themselves. We need to train trade union instructors and, most importantly, train specialists in economics, law, negotiation, communication, and so forth. We lack so many specialists at the moment, and this lack is really noticeable in negotiations with employers"

(1) Last May, the ITUC and the enlarged Inter-Union Group organised an international conference on democracy and sustainable development, at the conclusion of which they presented the authorities with a roadmap.

Everyone in Guinea is ready to join our organisations. They look to us to solve all their problems,"

Ibrahima Fofana,
USTG.

Tinsmiths in the Matato district of Conakry, October 2007.



The informal economy is Guinea's largest employer

Between 65% and 80% of the population are involved in the informal economy, accounting for between 45% and 65% of GDP in economic terms.

A look at the informal economy in Matoto

Five out of every six workers affiliated to the local union of the municipality of Matoto are actively involved in the informal economy, a lively force that is playing its full role in changes throughout the country and thus also in Guinea's unions.

Matoto is the most highly populated part of Conakry (with some 450,000 inhabitants) and is overflowing with life. All the minor professions are exercised there with tremendous intensity, since the resulting earnings are often derisory and there are so many mouths to feed. In a corrugated iron shed, women make soap, pouring red oil into huge barrels and mixing in caustic soda, yellow colouring and an aroma. The resulting paste is then kneaded and shaped into balls. The Matoto soap cooperative is affiliated to the CNTG. The work is done by women, but also by children. Fanta Diallo, general secretary of the local union of the municipality of Matoto, and one of only three women to have reached such a level of responsibility at the CNTG, said: "Most of the women are very poor. They're widows, divorcees or retired. The profits are negligible. But at least the women no longer have to buy their soap and detergent, and they can also distribute the products to their nearest and dearest. For them, this is a way of feeling useful and regaining a little dignity". Around their hands and arms they've wound old clothes, and on top of that they wear odd bits of plastic, held in place by elastic.

"Many cooperatives are affiliated to trade unions"

Beside the motorway, the sound of foundry workers or tinplate workers drowns out vehicle noise. Nearly 900 of them are working there in a maze of courtyards and workshops. Their main raw material is damaged metal sheeting that a nearby factory agrees to sell to them at a knockdown price. Using what they rather indulgently call 'shears' and 'sledgehammers', they make buckets, funnels and stoves. Their main clients are prospectors eager to go off to try their luck at finding gold. Whatever the men produce is sold by their wives. The sharp metal sheeting causes many injuries. The average age is very low.

Mamadou Dioulde Diallo is just 10 years old. He comes from the town of Labé in Fouta-Djalon. Three years ago his parents assigned him to a 'master' who works here. The child receives no pay, but is said to be fed and taken care of. In reality, Mamadou sleeps at work, like other abandoned or

similarly 'apprenticed' children. During the day they work, and in the evening they guard the workshops and merchandise. Of course, their presence there doesn't deter raids by thieves, who are often barely any older than these young guards and who strip and beat them. Eradicating child labour and ensuring education for all is a universal aim of the Guinean trade union movement. It is an aim, however, that remains very much a distant reality in present-day Guinea, where "there are so many children roaming the streets," laments the general secretary of the Matoto Tinsmiths' Union, Sara Diouma Diallo. She, like many others here, thinks "they are better off in the workshops, where at least they learn a trade".

Soap makers, foundry workers, cobblers, butchers and carpenters are the main professions associated with the informal economy in Fanta Diallo: "Less than 1,000 out of 6,000 affiliates are active in the formal economy! I'm constantly being asked by informal workers to help them resolve a problem with their landlord, neighbours, town hall, tax inspectors, and so on. Now the slaughterhouse cooperative is appealing to me for help because the prime minister wants to close down the abattoir. His residence isn't very far away. But where will they go if they have to leave?".

In recent years, many cooperatives have joined trade union centrals, especially the CNTG. And that trend is continuing. Madeleine Tounkara, who is in charge of the informal economy at the CNTG, said: "Last year, workers in the informal sector were the first people hit by spiralling prices and plummeting purchasing power. The men and women in question are living on a day-to-day basis. If the rot isn't stopped, they and their families will end up in dire straits. One positive thing is that they have often formed cooperatives, both in urban and rural areas. We are trying to set up mutual benefit societies to provide health cover. We're helping them to the best of our ability. They can see this, so they're joining our ranks. The State does nothing at all for these cooperatives. It just takes away a little money in tax and lets them carry on working".

"Unions are best placed to protect our interests", said Mariama (Dyers' Union of Central Guinea)

It was the strike, the solidarity between all those of us who are suffering, that opened our eyes.

"When a general strike was called, we had no hesitation at all in heeding it, even though doing so constituted a first for us. Until then, we had imagined that strikes were only something for civil servants, teachers and transport workers. But there was such widespread discontent about poverty and corruption. Here too, a long way away from the capital, it was noticeable among the population. It was the strike, the solidarity between all those of us who are suffering, that opened our eyes. Just imagine, even our imam urged us to go ahead with the strike, so overwhelming was the poverty among the people!

Then the CNTG's local organisations invited us to some awareness-raising meetings. The union contacted us when we were already well organised; for example we are already represented in the local chamber of commerce. But that's not enough. We're well aware now, both locally and nationally, that unions are the organisations best placed to defend our interests".

Rabiatou, Taïbou, Mariama and all the others... the dogged determination of women in the union movement

Aside from transcending ethnic differences, the Guinean trade union movement has another particularity underpinning its popularity: women, who are better represented in trade unions than in the rest of Guinean society, and to whom the movement owes a great deal.

The CNGT, the country's largest trade union confederation, is headed by a woman, Rabiatou Diallo. The ONSLG has a large number of women on its executive. The USTG too, which has two female Assistant General Secretaries. Guinean women indeed have plenty of grievances to voice and the unions are undeniably among the structures best equipped to defend their rights, so often flouted, in present-day Guinea of today. But these women had to display dogged determination to get this far. As Taïbou Diallo, Assistant General Secretary of the USTG (1) explains: "When I first became active in the movement, we were no more than stooges, only good enough to take on subordinate roles. The establishment of the "gender" departments was a first step forward. Now, 11 out of the 21 Executive Bureau members are women!"

During the USTG's early recruitment campaigns, Taïbou had noticed that women were afraid of joining. Aside from her work on the USTG's Technical Committee of Women Workers, Taïbou decided, in 1997, to set up the Association for the Defence of Children's and Women's Rights (ADDEF), to raise consciousness among the general public about these closely linked issues.

Guinea has ratified numerous conventions and international legal instruments concerning the protection of women and children, but they are rarely applied in practice. Determined to fight this immobilism, the ADDEF's members decided to inform women about their statutory rights by training legal assistants in the main languages of the country and before posting them to the various regions. Thanks to this initiative, later relayed by other NGOs, large numbers of women have been informed of their rights, leading to fewer women falling in the abusive practices in their communities and greater equality in legal rulings. But Guinea's legislation remains incomplete, which is why ADDEF is pursuing a fierce lobby for the ratification of ILO Convention 183 on maternity protection.

Education is the key to promoting women's rights

Other USTG members have taken an interest in the gender perspective. They can be found in large numbers within the Free Trade Union of Teachers and Researchers of Guinea (SLECG). Education is, of course, a key concern when it

comes to promoting women's rights. Girls have limited access to education (see page 12) and this affects the male-/female ratio of male to female in the teaching staff in primary education (30% women) and even more so in secondary education (4% women). To counter this, SLECG launched two very interesting activities over recent years, with the help of Canadian development co-operation. The first programme was aimed at combating discriminatory stereotypes and socio-cultural prejudices affecting women and girls. Various methods were used to get the message across to the teachers themselves as well as to the children and parents, such as comics, posters and a play. A second programme was aimed at preventing violence against girls at school (2), since the main obstacles reside in the persistence of outdated traditions, socio-cultural prejudices and religious beliefs. Still today, customary law very often prevails over civil law. "What hurts me most," explains Taïbou, "are the early marriages. What a scourge! The law sets the minimum legal age for marriage at 18 for boys and 17 for girls, but it is by no means respected. Many young girls are married off at the age of 12 or 13. The trade unions and other civil society organisations denounce this, but families give false information in the declarations they sign and present fake birth certificates, or only hold a traditional or religious ceremony."

Female circumcision, forced marriage and levirat (wife inheritance) are also very common civil rights violations. Likewise, polygamy is the most common marriage practice throughout Guinea, including, confirms Taïbou, "among trade union leaders".

(1) Mariama Penda B. Diallo also holds the post of assistant general secretary of the USTG.
(2) SLECG and ADDEF are members of Guinea's National Coalition for Women's Rights and Citizenship (CONAG-DCF).

Rabiatou Diallo, general secretary of the CNGT, on a visit to the country's inland regions in October 2007.



"Combating the persistence of outdated traditions, socio-cultural prejudices and religious beliefs that are detrimental to women"



Mines: a treasure chest to be unlocked

Inequitable mining codes, appalling working conditions, the Guinean mining sector does not have a good reputation. In recent months, considerable progress has, however, been seen thanks to trade union action.



Port terminal for the export of bauxite, Conakry, October 2007.

Two thirds of the world's bauxite reserves, huge quantities of very high grade iron ore, diamond deposits from which some of the biggest diamonds in the world have been extracted, gold, nickel, and recently discovered uranium and oil... Guinea's subsoil is overflowing with wealth, but it is poorly exploited. In 2005, the mining sector accounted for 80% of the country's external revenue, but only provided the Public Treasury with 130 million US dollars. This trifling figure is the reason why Guinea, like other very poor countries with a great wealth of mining potential, is described as a "geological scandal".

Bad governance, compounded by a deficient legal framework, is at issue. Huge exemptions from taxes and customs duties are granted to foreign mining companies, which are able to conclude all kinds of special arrangements, "protected by business secrecy", with the Guinean State. In 2005 and 2006, contracts for mega-projects were still concluded in this shady manner, in breach of the principles of the "Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative", a coalition grouping governments, industrialists and civil society organisations.

"Guinea's workers and people have only received the crumbs so far. But the context has changed since the events of early 2007. The inter-union group is currently closely involved in the works of the Inter-Ministerial Committee for the Renegotiation of Mining Conventions and Agreements, and we are starting to get results," explains Mamadouba

Soumah, General Secretary of the Trade Union Federation of Mines, Quarries, Chemical and Associated Industries (FSPMCICA, affiliated to the CNTG). Cases of embezzlement were recently unveiled at Hyperdynamics (hydrocarbon) and Aredor (diamond). The US company, which was about to exploit Guinea's offshore oil for a pittance peanuts is going to have to revise its arrangements from top to bottom. As for Aredor, its exports have been frozen following the discovery of financial irregularities committed over recent years. "All the companies working in the sector should expect to see radical changes," adds Mamadouba Soumah. "In the case of Rusal, for example, there will have to be a complete overhaul."

With a 50% rise in wages, the early victories are very encouraging.

The mining union has long had its eye on this Russian group exploiting several sites in Guinea, given the outrageously favourable deal it enjoys and the fact that the largest foreign employer in the country has a reputation for not treating its workers fairly and even less so the trade unions, as confirmed by the dismissal of several members over recent years. Even the situation at the Rusal group has considerably improved over recent months, as is confirmed by Kalil Dombouya, the union leader at the mining port in Conakry: "Several of our demands were met in June. The wages were increased by 50%, seniority is taken more into account, and the negotiations have become more frank since the political

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change. The collective agreement is far from respected, however." At the other sites, such as Debele, the trade unions have seen similar progress. They remain cautious, however, and realise that a lot remains to be done as regards the workers' accommodation, medical care, large-scale subcontracting, etc. They are also appalled by the absence of Guineans on the management boards (there is only one Guinean director at the mining terminal in the port of Conakry).

Added to this is the immeasurable environmental damage caused by RUSAL and other mining groups, as Mamadouba Soumah confirms: "The local inhabitants suffer from the pollution. The fields and villages are covered with reddish dust. Water full of silica flows underground, spoiling the rice cultivated there. But the villagers' complaints are never heard. They receive no compensation." Cases of accidental pollution are very common. In September, a mining train derailed, discharging huge quantities of toxic products into the surrounding countryside. In October, a soda leak from a plant in Fria, southern Guinea, flowed into the river and injured around 15 local residents.

Meanwhile, the mining groups' communication departments, more powerful than any of the independent local papers, spread propaganda about the grandeur of their social works. But even the World Bank is not impressed by this contribution, estimated at 20 million US dollars since 1987: "The sector could have contributed more to community development and the improvement of living conditions for a large number of Guineans. In short, the sector could have been a motor for growth and the reduction of poverty."

As pointed out by a Guinean: "The local population cannot be fooled. ««« It knows that televised inaugurations of schools

opened by mining companies come to nothing, that there are no teachers and, sooner or later, its classrooms will end up serving as shelters for goats."

To become the engine of the country's development, the sector should also invest in processing ore on site. Practically all of the bauxite, by far the country's main source of revenue, is exported untreated. The only aluminium oxide plant (the product derived from bauxite to produce aluminium) has very little capacity. The new government is determined to reverse this trend, by no longer granting exploitation licences for the extraction of bauxite alone and imposing the condition that investments must be made in refining. "To tell the truth," confides a trade union leader, "we have perhaps been a bit too quick to point the finger at the mining companies. Bad governance, the business climate and insecurity have also had a devastating impact on the sector. Why is it that these companies make long-term investments without any guarantees? And why should RUSAL be incapable of agreeing to sit around the negotiating table with the government and the unions? After all, a mining agreement is binding on both parties."

Everything would seem to indicate that the country's determination to re-appropriate its resources by no means conflicts with its ambition to develop this industrial sector (1). More than ever before, foreign companies are tripping over each other to obtain exploration and exploitation licences. Huge investments are scheduled for the years to come. The number of workers currently employed (little more than 10 000) by mining companies could soon double or triple, not to mention the number of indirect jobs.

As Joseph Stiglitz, winner of the 2001 Nobel Prize in Economics, and former chief economist of the World Bank declared: The Bolivian State has just renegotiated its contracts with oil producers. Prior to that, the country only received 18% of the revenues in return. After this renegotiation, it receives 82%. And yet the oil groups have stayed." Le Soir, 16 October 2007.

Port terminal for the export of bauxite, Conakry, October 2007.



Guinea's workers and people have only received the crumbs so far... but we have been progressing over recent months



Mamadouba Soumah, FSPMCICA

Road slaves

Faced with great difficulties, the drivers and hauliers of Nzérékoré, in Guinea's secluded forest region, are sticking together.



The state of the roads, especially during the rainy season, creates serious difficulties for Guinea's population and economy, October 2007.

A thousand kilometres from Conakry, the Nzérékoré bus station cuts a fine figure. The road hauliers' and drivers' unions make sure their members' customers are well looked after. Here, the taxi-brousse drivers do not fight over passengers, proper counters have been set up, and there are benches where people can sit whilst waiting for the vehicle to reach its quota of passengers. It is as if a way had to be found of compensating them for the ordeals and uncertainties of the road. There is a hall to accommodate large meetings a few metres away from the two trade union offices. "When the general strike broke out at the beginning of 2007, we barely had enough room in there," recalls Sékou Souare, president of the Road Hauliers' Union. That's where the mobilisation took place. Drivers, hauliers, we all gave it 200% support. We emptied the bus station of any activity."

The road transport unions in Guinea's forest region, as in the rest of the country, played a key role in the success of the general strike at the beginning of 2007. They managed to bring the country's towns and cities to a standstill within hours. All supplies were cut off, the roads were practically deserted, and thousands of workers were ready to march at the word "go". The transport workers, more than anybody, have long had to cope with all the problems hitting Guinea: the insecurity created by the barrages set up by "road

blockers", to rob passengers, or by the "force of law and order", to extort money from the drivers; the widespread corruption leaving roads in a sorry state because part of the gravel or cement assigned to build or repair them has been misappropriated; the collapse in purchasing power, etc.

Since the consensus government took office, significant improvements have been seen in all these areas, but the local population continues to be handicapped by its distance from the capital. Following the memorandum of understanding signed with the unions in January 2007, the price of fuel was capped at 4300 Guinean francs, but the supplies to this region are not guaranteed and when the tankers are blocked en route, the price per litre can rise to GF10 000. The region's remoteness also affects the price of rice, which has only been brought down to GF80 000 per 50kg in Conakry, because transport costs imply substantial surcharges in the country's inland regions.

Making up for the public authorities' deficiencies

In this region where the rainy season is very long, transport workers take yet another gamble with every departure. Their cars, minibuses or trucks are in as bad a state as the roads. "The banks don't trust us, so we have to buy used vehicles

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imported from Europe and elsewhere," laments Sékou Souaré. The number of wrecks abandoned on the roadside bear witness to the risk taken to reach the neighbouring town or a more far-off location, at any cost. The delays caused by breakdowns or extremely bad sections of road are countless. Drivers, passengers and cargoes can remain stranded at the same spot for several hours or even days, waiting for assistance, a spare part, or a bulldozer.

"We have rented a bulldozer for the Beyla road. It has repaired all the blackspots, where even four-wheel drives used to get stuck. We are making up for the public authorities' deficiencies. The 682 transport workers from Nzérékoré, all union members, are sticking together. We have a mutual fund that we can draw on in case of a major breakdown, an accident, etc. If one of our members is stuck in Liberia, for example, and has depleted all his resources, we send assistance," explains Sékou Souaré. As for goods transport, the union centralises the orders and allocates them in a way deemed fair by all the members.

Solidarity and awareness raising to fight HIV/AIDS.

Solidarity is strong among all transport workers. There is, moreover, little distinction between the two unions. Maurice Mensare, treasurer of the Drivers' Union, which has over 1000 members, explains: "The hauliers all started behind a wheel, just like us. Some of them are still driving. We also hope to become bosses one day. That's why the relations between us are so good. There are no employment contracts

as yet, but tacit rules exist and are generally respected by both parties. There is no way a haulier would arbitrarily dismiss one of us. We also have a mutual fund to assist the drivers when they fall ill." Union meetings are frequent. Every Friday, the Drivers' Union brings together the members who are available for information session on all kinds of subjects, such as health, sexually transmitted diseases, etc. "It's a risky occupation," confirms Maurice Mensare. "The drivers are often away for several days. The temptations are many. With the massive influx of refugees fleeing civil wars in the neighbouring countries, the whole region was a risk. Today, it would seem that the epidemic has passed its peak, but we are not lowering our guard. Several of us have received training from the National Committee for the Campaign against HIV/AIDS. We are now peer educators."

A piece of welcome news is that a large share of the recently reactivated aid from the European Union has been earmarked for the badly needed works on a major regional road link. It is only a small step, however, towards the complete disenclavement of Guinea's forest region and other isolated areas. At present, the hundreds of kilometres of rail lines in the country are only used for transporting bauxite to the mining ports. Likewise, the Trans-Guinean rail link project (1) does not include passenger transport and the only planes landing at the local aerodromes are chartered by mining companies or the World Food Organisation.

(1) A rail link between a port terminal and Mount Nimba to the east of Nzérékoré, where iron extraction is due to commence within a few years.

Nzérékoré bus station, October 2007.



The transport workers' unions played a key role in the success of the general strike of 200



Little shadows

73% of Guinean children work, all too often in the worst forms of child labour, such as mining. Trade unions have a hard task tackling this problem, which is so part and parcel of the informalisation of the economy.



Young school dropouts hawking at the Mamou bus station, Guinea, October 2007.

They blend into the landscape, from the capital, Conakry, to the depths of the Guinea's forest region. They work in all trades, save those paying fixed salaries or offering decent pay and conditions. "They" are children who work. Does anyone still notice them? Most Guinean families see it as only natural that children should contribute to day to day survival. In the cities, many families with a more comfortable living have long forgotten their promise to take good care of the young domestics entrusted to them.

What about the State? A bill concerning a Children's Code has just been submitted to the National Assembly. But the Children's Department of the Ministry of Social Affairs is an empty shell. The only other hope is the few NGOs trying to fill the gap left by the State in the area of "YWC", that is, "young working children", an abbreviation that speaks volumes about the banalisation of this scourge. It's the start of October and all the children are in the street. The start of the new school year has once again been postponed for several weeks and it's considered quite normal that, between a couple of football matches, children should help their parents or engage in activities that allow them to earn a little money to take home. "It's nearly the end of Ramadan, it's expensive to put food on the table, and cost of school supplies is exorbitant," explains a public servant from the National Directorate of Labour Inspections in Conakry, as if to justify the fact that a child is in the process of shining his shoes.

What about school? "Some progress has been made," says Bamba Camara, General Secretary of the Free Trade Union of Teachers and Researchers of Guinea (SLECG). The rate of primary schooling has gone from 30 to 80%. The figures for secondary schooling are not so good: only 30% of children have access to it, and the percentage of girls is much lower still (1). Furthermore, the conditions are abysmal, both for the teachers and the pupils. Classes of 150 pupils are not uncommon in the public education system." In 2006, the rise in inflation and the fall in purchasing power led to a considerable drop in school attendance (2) in the capital, Conakry. Then came the dramatic events of January and February 2007, before the slow return to political normality led part of the child population back to school.

Child labour in exchange for a few sacks of rice

Whether they attend school a little or not at all, 73% of children work, according to the figures of the ILO. For Jean-Louis Maomy, head of the Guinean Research-Action and Literacy Association (AGRAAD), the phenomenon of child labour is clearly linked to African tradition, whereby children are seen as an added source of income for their parents. "It's always existed: children entrusted to acquaintances in town so that they can go to school or learn a trade in exchange for some domestic tasks; young street vendors; kids who help their parents in the fields or the plantations... But African-style

African-style solidarity and apprenticeship no longer work as they used to

Jean-Louis Maomy of the Research-Action and Literacy Association AGRAAD.

Publisher responsible in law:
Guy Ryder, General Secretary

ITUC

5 Bld du Roi Albert II, Bte 1, 1210-Brussels, Belgium
Tel: +32 2 2240211, Fax: +32 2 2015815
E-Mail: press@ituc-csi.org • Web Site: <http://www.ituc-csi.org>

Report: **Jacky Delorme**

Photos: **Jacky Delorme**

Editor in Chief: **Natacha David**

Layout: **Vicente Cepedal**

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solidarity and apprenticeship no longer work as they used to. The misery with which so many families have to grapple is at issue. There is a sharp rise in the use of children during periods when people's rice stocks have run out but the rice sown is not yet ready. Many parents take their children out of school during this period to look after the rice paddies. The poorest go as far as to trade their children's services in a neighbour's rice paddies for the promise of a few sacks of rice."

For Alpha M. Diallo, Director of Sabou-Guinée, it's essential to focus on the worst forms of child labour: "There are big principles and the realities on the ground. The development conditions mean that choices have to be made. Frankly, in my opinion, I don't consider it a failure to place a child of 12 with an employer offering work that is not too heavy. The risk of seeing that child fall into delinquency is too great when there are no other prospects, and that's often the case today. "Sabou" translates as hope, cause or relay in several of the country's languages. And Alpha M Diallo and the twenty or so social workers need a lot of hope to fuel their efforts day after day despite the enormity of their task and their scant budget. Sabou-Guinee has several branches throughout the country and a provisional help centre. Its efforts are focused on street children and young delinquents. Its social workers travel around the country, visiting the problematic neighbourhoods of the major cities and the police stations. Its expertise is unanimously recognised by the Administration, the union and international partners. But the NGO nonetheless pays for the bad reputation suffered by most of NGOs in the country. "There's no denying that it's a big business and most of them are corrupt and incompetent. Most of the former ministers and CEOs, moreover, have their own NGOs, that they manage to make work thanks to their contacts. But the big international NGOs are also on the chase for funding and constitute ferocious competition, but once they have won the "market" they then go on to work with local NGOs with no credibility. It's often a farce. These big NGOs should be more selective. For my part, I'm sick of hearing white "experts" telling me that they are going to train me, "to build my capacities", especially when the expert in question is clearly less qualified and experienced than I am."

Difficulties raising awareness at the grassroots

And what about the trades unions? After having fought for the ratification of the core international conventions, they realise that even the partial application of these legal instruments was never really a priority for previous governments. Although they have been involved in many events and projects on this issue, they have just as many difficulties getting the message across to the grassroots organisations. In Matoto, just 20 minutes from the head offices of the CNTG and the USTG, the heads of informal economy cooperatives do not always know what to say when we

ask how many members they have, so vast is the use of child labour in these structures affiliated to trade union.

The informalisation of entire branches of the national economy has also led to the mass employment of children in extremely heavy and dangerous activities such as mining or quarrying. In Maneah in southern Guinea, on the road between Conackry and Kindia, there is a billboard boasting "quality gravel produced by Somiag to build the Guinea of tomorrow". But as Mamadouba Soumah, General Secretary of the Trade Union Federation of Mines, Quarries, Chemical and Associated Industries (FSPMCICA, affiliated to the CNTG), explains: "It's a company on the decline, is very badly managed, and has abandoned several sites. So, the poor people from the neighbouring villages started to exploit these quarries themselves, with the help of their children." That Saturday evening, we expected to find the site deserted, with the end of Ramadan being so close, but we found around a dozen children still busy pounding the granite under the supervision of an adult. The youngest was 8 years old. He had been working since dawn and had not eaten anything all day. "Next time we'll go to Siguiri," concludes Soumah, "Over there, there are thousand of women and children working in the gold mines.

(1) The breakdown of the figures by gender reveals huge disparities: 87% of boys attend primary school as compared with 71% of girls; 34% of boys and 17% of girls attend secondary school.
(2) <http://www.irinnews.org/PrintReport.aspx?ReportId=61512>

Child worker at the Manéah granite quarry, Guinea, October 2007.



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The conditions in schools are abysmal, both for the teachers and the pupils

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Bamba Camara,
General Secretary
of the teachers'
union SLECG.