

Willingness to do things differently

ITUC-Africa

In 2006 the International Trade Union Confederation was launched. **Kally Forrest** interviewed ITUC-Africa's general secretary, **Kwasi Adu-Amankwah**, to find out about his background and what ITUC-Africa is doing and focusing on.

Kally Forrest



ITUC-Africa's general secretary, Kwasi Adu-Amankwah.

Tell us something about your background.

Well I have been in trade unions most of my life. I had a short stint at the University of Ghana in Accra where as a student I was involved in activist politics. Then I moved to the Ghana Trade Union Congress where I was an educator.

It was a time of a lot of ferment in politics in Ghana. In 1979 Jerry Rawlings engineered a coup and in this transitional period students and communities supported this change

and threw up self defence committees to defend the revolution.

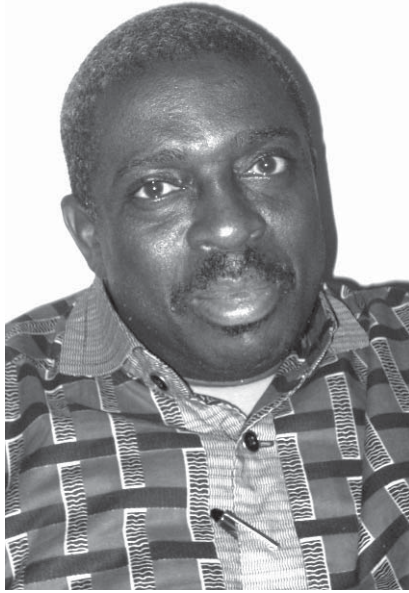
There were defence committees in the workplace as well and these became a threat to unions which resented a more radical alternative. Then the unions themselves were affected by this radical movement which took over the TUC. Rawlings previously had no support in the unions so he supported this radical movement in the labour movement. I too supported this radical movement.

After three months the TUC called an emergency congress where workers instructed the federation to restore constitutionalism and in 1983 new leadership was elected and I was appointed the political officer with a policy-making role.

Then in the 1980s there was a massive decline in membership. It was a time of privatisation and International Monetary Fund (IMF) fiscal austerity and government was instructed to create a lean public sector and it persuaded the teachers and public sector unions to disaffiliate.

By 1984 the Ghana TUC was becoming very critical of the government and at the 1986 congress it called for democracy and for a constitution. Government had attempted to democratise local structures but we now called on it to put this in a wider context. This call gathered momentum. I coordinated a task force for this purpose and then on May Day 1987 I was arrested with three others and remained in detention for two years.

Government made it difficult for unions to operate. It attempted to get its own people elected into positions on the TUC but the TUC maintained its independence. Sometimes a lack of activism has affected how the TUC operates,



especially compared to South Africa, yet it has held its own.

The weakness of the left has affected the character of the TUC. In 1966 Kwamah Nkrumah (first Ghanaian prime minister) was overthrown and with this went socialism. In 1977 a new radicalism emerged but this was aborted by a coup. This greatly weakened the left and it has not fully recovered despite taking a stronger position on democracy in 1986.

In 1989 I returned to the TUC and a 1992 congress renewed radical thinking. I was sponsored by unions for the position of deputy general secretary and in 1996 I was elected TUC secretary general. Then in 2006 I was elected by ITUC-Africa affiliates as secretary general for a four-year period.

Tell us ITUC emerged.

ITUC came out of a merger between the ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions) and the World Labour Council (WLC). After the fall of the Berlin Wall there was a renewal of

the international trade union movement although the WFTU (World Federation of Trade Unions - associated with former Soviet and eastern bloc unions) did not come on board. The ICFTU name was abandoned as a tactic to bring WLC on board.

Continental regional structures were relaunched and ITUC-Africa replaced ICFTU-Africa. It immediately made efforts towards regional unification and within a year a merger with Oatuu (Organisation of African Trade Union Unity) took place.

ITUC's founding document emphasises global solidarity in response to rapid globalisation. It needed to learn to do things differently. Old rivalries and competition were resolved and there was a greater willingness to look for areas to cooperate on. There was no ready-made model but just a willingness to do things differently.

So what does ITUC-Africa focus on?

At ITUC's founding congress certain areas were identified and we are now working on these in Africa.

These areas are human rights defence and strengthening trade union organisation. We aim to improve trade union membership and participation and create a unity of action amongst all African affiliates. We want to strengthen organisation in both the informal and formal sectors.

We also aim to create equality of social protection in the areas of gender, social security, health and safety, the environment and HIV/AIDS.

Finally we aim to promote economic and social policy formation at a country level and at an Africa level.

How are you going to work around human and trade union rights?

Well we first need to focus on strengthening our service delivery and capacity because we are dealing with 47 African countries. There are staff who work in different areas and we are supported with resources from a range of trade union federations and centres.

We want to develop a network in Africa that monitors human rights and then we hope this will assist individual countries to respond to human rights violations. We produce a human rights survey and in the area of trade union rights we will try to intervene when there are rights abuses. We'll monitor and study labour laws and conduct Africa-wide campaigns beginning in the country concerned.

We want to develop a global network that will respond to abuses in Africa and we will also visit places where there are abuses like Niger, Guinea and Swaziland to encourage our affiliates. This is still very new, the response is not as much as we would like so we are still building this solidarity.

Last year, for example, we held an Africa-wide human rights conference and invited the media and NGOs working in the area so that we can all work together and develop a human rights network. And it is beginning to work.

We want to raise human rights abuses in centralised bargaining. We have been working with the South African organisation, LRS (Labour Research Service) to develop a model for best practice bargaining for Africans to use as a resource.

What about strengthening organisation?

This year we have been meeting in different global unions such as

ICEM (International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions) and the ITF (International Transport Federation) which have representatives in Africa and we encourage them to work together especially in the area of strengthening organisation.

We respond to an expressed need, such as the Congo which has been damaged by conflict and we send an organiser to help and assist with resources in order to campaign.

We are also looking at the proliferation of unions especially in the francophone countries such as Cameroon and the DRC. We will discuss this and work out what to do.

Tell us how you approach economic and social policy formation.

We are already working with the ALRN (African Labour Research Network) to research and run workshops like on the financial crisis. We are trying to get other unions interested in participating in this research.

In the area of social policy we are trying to build union capacity to intervene and develop regional responses. We are finding out who is working in this area and then we want to train researchers to develop alternatives to neo-liberalism and how to intervene on issues of trade agreements and around budgets. We want Cosatu's research wing, Naledi, to share its experiences.

In the area of HIV/AIDS obviously South Africa is of great concern. We have met in South Africa to talk about how to equip people with what they need to know at a workplace level and to change attitudes. We have already developed a francophone

countries' network and we will return there again to consolidate.

You said ITUC engages with issues of social protection and equality especially in the gender area. How does it do so?

We are encouraging unions to do an audit around the gender balance in trade unions. Larri, a Namibian research organisation, under the auspices of the ALRN is currently doing a study on women in trade unions to see what the representivity is.

The Danish Confederation of Trade Unions is involved in supporting research in the area of social security in the informal sector in five countries in Africa - Togo, Niger, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Benin. It is trying to find out for example what vocational training exists for the sector. On the basis of this we will design an appropriate campaign.

As a body emerging originally from industrial unionism, do you engage with the informal sector?

At least 80% of Africa's workers are in the informal economy. This is a complicated area as there are for example own-account workers, people working for relatives, employees of traders and so on but they are all disadvantaged and need support in different ways.

For local entrepreneurs they need support to develop. These people are often not in unions but need help with negotiating facilities from local authorities. They need support from unions to help them bargain, develop their organisations and secure social security.

I was surprised to see that there was no reference to informal

workers in the resolutions that came out of Cosatu's (Congress of South African Trade Unions) recent congress.

How can the ordinary working person be part of ITUC's projects?

We as trade unions have an important role to play in meeting the challenges of the African people. We are the last frontier. We cannot be overcome and say Africa is completely gone. We must renew a sense of responsibility.

We all have something to say on our national economies so we must be able to influence how the rest of the world deals with Africa.

People must take an interest in what is happening around them and how they are affected. Participate in discussions and do things. Make sure the word is spread, like in Swaziland, tell others what is happening. Make a noise. There was a human rights outcry in West Africa when six Gambian journalists were imprisoned and as a result they were released. The public's voice is important.

As a starting point find out about your union, and then start looking at other things. First you develop local activism and then this widens.

Are you optimistic about ITUC-Africa's work?

Oh yes. But we have to reorient people to rise to the challenge. We can't continue with business as usual. Before things were being done but not in a systematic, structured way. We would respond spontaneously and often to other people's agendas, going off to thousands of meetings. Now we work on the basis that we must have clear objectives and plan our work.

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