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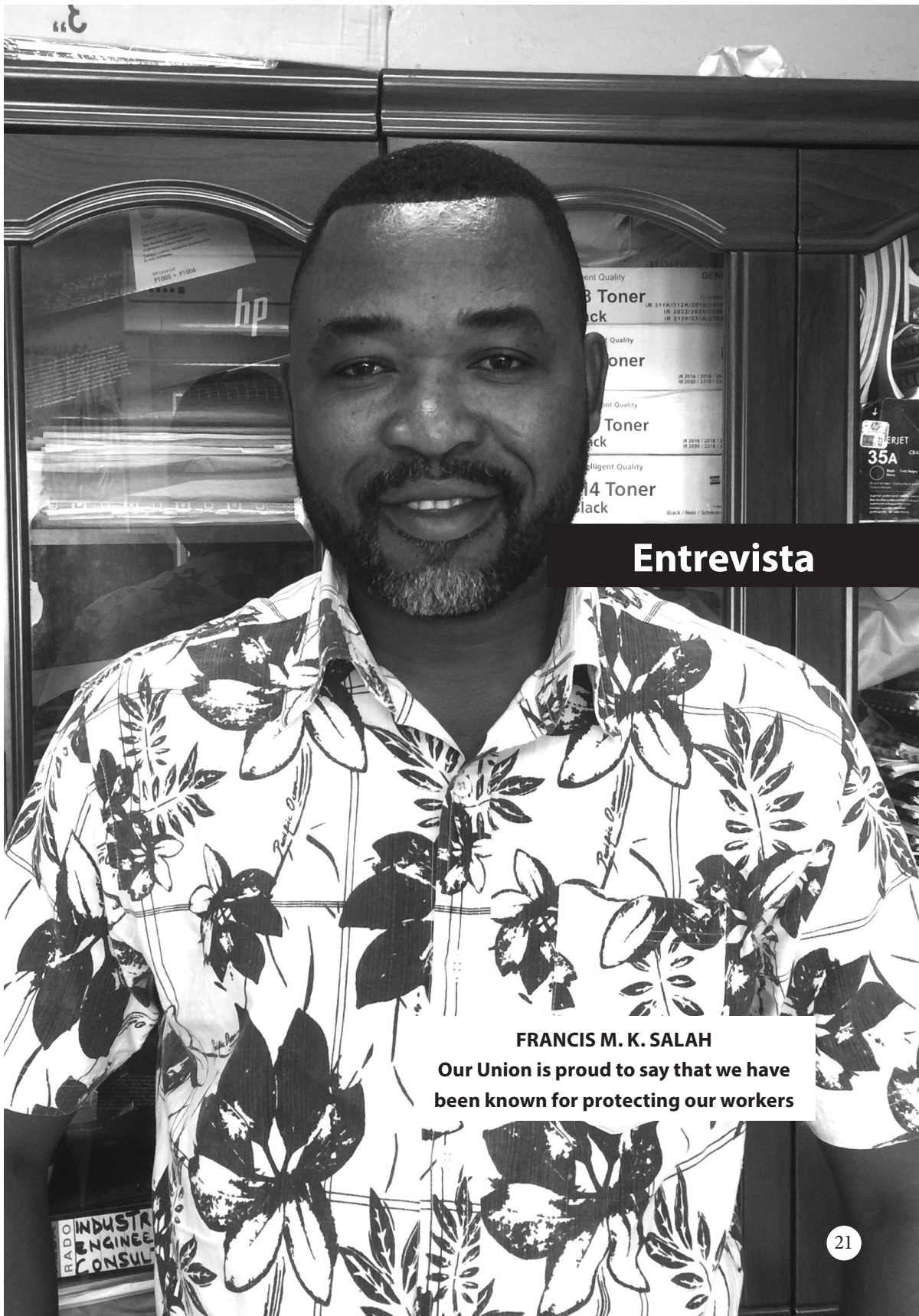
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Entrevista

FRANCIS M. K. SALAH

Our Union is proud to say that we have been known for protecting our workers



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Our Union is proud to say that we have been known for protecting our workers

Interview led by **Maciel Santos*** and **Marco Alvarez****

March 31, 2017

Francis Sallah is currently the Deputy General Secretary of the General Transport, Petroleum and Chemical Workers' Union in Ghana, a Trade-Union covering the Transport and the Petro-Chemical sectors.

Their actions and strikes fostering the demands of better wages/salaries for workers against some of the big multinational oil companies now operating in Ghana raised the image of the Union to be known in other parts of the world.

Francis Sallah took part in the Porto Conference "Trade unions and Labour in Africa" in March 2017 where he briefly described most of his Union activities in Ghana.

Maciel Santos/Marco Alvarez: You have mentioned that the General Transport, Petroleum and Chemical Workers' Union (GTPCWU) is an amalgamated union. Can you tell us which sectors are represented in this union?

Francis Sallah: In this union there are two major areas that we cover: the transport, and the petro-chemical sector.

The general transports is inclusive: the air and road transport are included. As regards the road transport we cover both the formal private and public sector. We do not cover the very informal sector because it is very amorphous. There is a different union that is in charge of that.

MS/MA: Is there a Union for the informal sector?

FS: Yes, and they try to foster their own struggles.

MS/MA: As for the petroleum: do you deal with the big corporations?

FS: Yes, we have Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (ENI GHANA), Ghana National Gas Company (GNGC) and Ghana National Petroleum Corporation (GNPC), which is the regulator in the Oil and Gas industry and Unionised by the GTPCWU. We also have the service companies in the country and the only refinery that we have in Ghana, the Tema Oil Refinery (TOR). We also have the major Oil Marketing Companies (OMC's), which are Ghana Oil Company (GOIL), Total, and Shell, now Vivo Energy. They have been with us for a very long time now.

MS/MA: How many corporations are now Union-organised?

FS: Looking around there are forty organizations and counting. We are more than that but some organizations have folded up due to the downturn witnessed in Oil and Gas sector across the world. Before, we could count around fifty. But now we have forty or near forty because we are still having discussions to have some companies pay off redundancy packages to their workers

* CEAUP.

** CEAUP.

as these organisations have been affected by the downward prices of crude oil.

MS/MA: And as regards the number of affiliated members, what would be your estimate?

FS: Considering the road transport made up of Metro Mass Transit Ltd, Inter City State Transport Company (ISTC), Pergah Transport Ltd., the logistics sector made up of Antrak Ghana, Gateway Logistics Ltd, Bajfreight Ltd, Ghana Petroleum Tanker Drivers Union and aviation sector made up of KLM, Air Brussels, Kenya Airways and ground handling Services (Aviance Ghana Ltd) - we have over eight thousand members. We have other areas, as I told you, the petro-chemical sector.

MS/MA: Now, tell us something about how the union works. Tell me how the Board is composed, what the plenary does when in session, and who votes.

FS: The union goes to quadrennial delegates Conference which is held once in every four years. We elect the national officers, made up of the national chairman, the vice-chairmen, the second vice-chairwoman, a position which is preserved for women in our Constitution. The General Secretary, who is the Chief Executive, is also elected, as well as the Deputy General Secretary as the Deputy Chief Executive, who is myself. The two positions are full time officers. The first and second National Trustees are also elected. Of the seven officers who are elected every four years, five are part time officers so it's only the General Secretary and the Deputy General Secretary who are full time Officers but must also be elected back to office or otherwise. There are other Finance Committee Officers also appointed with a financial analyses background to help Management Committee manage the Union finances. We were elected nearly a year ago, in March 2016, and we have three more years to go.

We also have a National Executive Council (NEC) meeting two or three times a year, except when there is an emergency.

There is a constitution that guides the union. The NEC can take decisions in the absence of the Conference: NEC is the next highest decision-making body of the Union which meets two times in a year to pass budgets before money can be spent by the Union and to take other decisions on behalf of the Delegates Conference.

The Constitution says that in the absence of NEC, the Management Committee made up of 11 Officers, that is, the seven elected officers and other four Officers appointed at the Delegates Conference, meets intermittently and takes decisions on behalf of NEC. We have to keep in mind that if we want to call NEC at any time, we need to spend more.

Income: we solely depend on dues from the workers to run the Union. But there are some international donors who also support us with funds to run projects and training of our members and Officers because the Union usually lacks funds for all such activities

MS/MA: Let us talk about the Union income structure. What would you say is the percentage of Union dues relative to wages?

FS: Each member contributes two percent of his basic wage before taxes. That is by law. The check off is mandatory by law in the country.

When this is done, the local Union Executives take ten percent to run their local office. Fifteen percent goes to the Trades Union Congress (Ghana) and the remaining seventy-five percent comes to the National Union (GTPCWU).

MS/MA: How important are dues for the Union? Do they represent the whole income of the union or are there others?

FS: No, for us there is no other income now. We solely depend on the deductions from the workers. That is why the ten percent goes to local executives. We pay the salaries of the staff from the dues, we run the administration with it. We do not have any other means of income.

There are times when we realize that we are unable to run the secretariat because of lack of available funds. Sometimes we have international partners who sign contracts or deals with us for training and other items; they also support us. We have had this support for three years running in order to train our local staff and Union members as well as the elected local executives and to support the logistics of the office. But basically this is not used for salary purposes; just to reinforce the power of the union.

MS/MA: How many officers does the Union have on its payroll?

FS: We have seventeen staff members in the Union including the General Secretary and the Deputy General Secretary. We also pay monthly allowance for the nine part-time Officers.

MS/MA: And they are all paid out from the Union dues?

FS: All of them.

Industrial conflicts: it is the duty of the Union to go and negotiate

MS/MA: Now we come to industrial conflicts. When there is a conflict, who negotiates? The shop stewards or the Union officers?

FS: When it comes to negotiations, it is the Union's duty to negotiate. You know, nor-

mally the employees - even those elected at that level - are employees of the corporation. So if we leave them to negotiate on their own, we expose them to hazards and that is why it is the duty of the Union to go and negotiate. When it comes to negotiations on anything, it is the Union.

Local workers only handle internal grievances between themselves and their employer. We train them to handle those petty, petty things. When it gets to a point where the issues can not be handled by them, the Union goes in. We do not want to expose them to the ambiance of their employer. By law we have the Labour Act to operate from; by the Labour Act we are supposed to have the standard negotiations committee, comprising of the employer or the employers' representatives, the Union, the employees and their representatives. And once it is mandatory, the employer is obliged to make sure that we meet.

MS/MA: What about collective agreements?

FS: Now, when it comes to issues such as redundancies or terminations, we have a collective agreement that both parties are supposed to negotiate on and sign. In the absence of the collective agreement the Labour Act is what operates between the employer and the employee. The Act is wide; it has a wide range of issues but the collective agreement is directed to each industry. So, it contains all the laws about dispute procedures and grievance handling; we renegotiate the wages/salaries every year and other components are reviewed every other year to make sure that the employee's conditions of service are current. Then, we sign it. Now again, in the Act, if there are issues that you cannot address in the collective agreement, then you have to follow the Labour Act. But when you have it in the agreement, the collective agreement becomes superior to the Act.

Union environment: there are some corporations in which we have two separate conditions of service - one for the upper class and one for the lower class

MS/MA: One of the bigger problems in Portugal and in other European countries is what you can call the precarious workers. How is this dealt by the Union?

FS: It is a very frequent phenomenon in Ghana: precarious work is there. Now, our law is also clear: every worker can join a Union of their choice. So, whether you are a temporary worker, a casual worker or a paid by hour-worker, you are a worker; you can join a Union.

MS/MA: All workers, even the white-collar workers?

FS: There are no exceptions, the rights of a worker actually emanate from the Constitution of the Republic of Ghana and the Labour Act 2003: Act 651 addresses it.

Now, it does not matter how much money you have: about those high class people of the corporations the Labour Act says they may not join the Union, it does not say they cannot. Again, this comes to negotiations between the employer and the worker. If they still want to join the Union, the employer cannot stop them because that is the country's law.

So, if you get to some organizations, you'll realize that we have the junior staff, the basic category of union, but we also have the senior staff Union or the Professional Managerial Staff Union (PMSU). So, there are some corporations in which we have two separate conditions of service: one for the upper class and one for the other class.

MS/MA: Does the Union send its own newsletter or sort of information to the affiliates?

FS: We all try to work under the TUC of Ghana, which releases its quarterly BULLETIN. So, we feed them with issues from the various unions and then they use it to publish the quarterly BULLETIN.

MS/MA: Do you have staff training?

FS: Yes. It is our duty because of the changing dynamics in the industrial relations. We have to educate the workers. And we have even extended it to the local unions, as executives, because we are aware that technology is changing, the ways of managing are also changing. So, almost on a quarterly basis, sometimes once in every six months, depending on funds, we take them and try to help them because the General Secretary and the Deputy General Secretary cannot be everywhere. So, we have industrial relations offices.

In fact, that was where I grew up from. I was a mechanic in a transport company and then I was moved to become an Industrial Relations Officer of the Union. It was when the oil business started in the western region of Ghana. I was really from the ground and gathered all the necessary experience from where I was working as a Mechanic in Transport Company and became a Union Executive at the Local level. That was a challenge that I had and from there I moved on to become Deputy General Secretary at the Secretariat of the Union.

MS/MA: Now, about informatics and internet. Does the union have a wide access to internet and how is it used?

FS: Yes, the Union has an internet office. We have officers who handle all our internet issues. For instance, if you come to the secretariat now, you shall see that we have the administrative assistant secretary who is in charge of the internet. Information coming to the union goes directly there. The General Secretary and myself are supposed to have access to it. The two of us

and some other officers have access to it. So, we try to control it: not everybody can access the information out there.

MS/MA: About cooperatives: does the Union have any links to cooperative organisations?

FS: No, we do not have. We are not related to any at all. What we do is purely a Union activity, a Union business. So, we do not link to that.

Multinationals: this is Ghana; you are in; we work with you but it does not mean you should take us for granted

MS/MA: The last question is about the international affiliations of the GTP-CWU. Can you name them?

FS: We are affiliated to ITF (International Transport Workers Federation) based in the UK. We are also affiliated to LO-Norway and to IndustriAll. These are the three major international affiliates that we belong to.

Industri Energi¹ has been dealing with us for some time, since 2014, under LO-Norway, because of the extraction of oil. They have played a major role and help in training us on how to handle the multinationals in the Oil Sector. The Multinationals are very, very, stubborn. Those multinationals are kind of profit-oriented. They do not care to do anything at all. They can even buy their way out with the authorities.

MS/MA: Yes, the oil multinationals are giving you most of the trouble now. What is there to be done?

FS: We need to build a Union that is strong to handle those areas. And for now, our Union is proud to say we have been known for protecting our workers in the industry.

We try to foster a good relationship with the employer in the sense: this is Ghana; you are in; we work with you but it doesn't mean you should take us for granted. Some of them have been very stubborn. Very, very stubborn. And we have been able to handle them. We have not succeeded hundred per cent. At least, we are above 70 % mark.

We have problems in the oil sector now, so our power has slowed in that sector because if you do not have workers you cannot shout, you cannot make noise, you cannot properly protect them. So at this time we need to slow down a bit and get the workers back: then you will have your voice. That is the strategy we are adopting. When we have them then we can fight to protect them. They already know what we did for them whilst they were in employment.

Marginally, you could tell that most of them are happy with the Union. It is clear that some of them thought paying those two percent was too much. So, they are not eager to join the union. But when they realize that the oil sector is starting to go down and they will need somebody to negotiate for them, they quickly start joining the Union and of course, we shall have to help them. They will have appreciated what we have done for them so far. I think it is for a good cause.

¹ Industri Energi is the LO Union for oil and enegery workers.