

PRESS RELEASE

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ICFTU MISSION STUDIES SITUATION OF ALGERIAN REFUGEES IN TUNISIA

An ICFTU mission has returned to Geneva from Tunisia where it has been studying the situation of Algerian refugees there.

The mission was sent in accordance with the decision of the ICFTU's eleventh Sub-Committee meeting held recently in Brussels.

The ICFTU issued the following communiqué :

From 28 March to 2 April 1958 a mission of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions inquired into the situation of Algerian refugees in Tunisia. The mission was composed as follows : Giacomo Bernasconi, Secretary of the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions (SGB) and substitute member of the ICFTU Executive Board, Luigi Parini, member of the confederal office of the Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori (CISL) and Herman Patteet, ICFTU representative in Geneva.

During visits to refugee camps the mission was accompanied by Abdelaziz Bouraoui, member of the executive committee of the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (U.G.T.T.) and Bendriss Brahim and Sakhri Allaona of the Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens (U.G.T.A.).

On 30 March (Algerian National Day) and 31 March the mission visited refugee camps in the regions of Souk el Arba, Ain Draham, El Babouch, Ain Khamouda and Sbeitla along the Tunisian-Algerian frontier where the French Army is presently setting up a so-called "no-man's land". The mission also visited the ruins of the village Sakiët-Sidi-Youssef, bombed by French planes on 8 February 1958.

Everywhere the mission went it was able to realise the lamentable and inhuman situation of the refugees, of which two-thirds are women and young children. Despite the great and praiseworthy efforts of the Tunisian Red Crescent, helped by the authorities and by international organisations, there are thousands of human beings who are just managing to survive. In certain places the refugees still fear possible reprisals; they hide on the mountain-sides and give their children grass and bracken to eat.

Every day they are joined by others, often complete families, but children are usually lost during the flight; some are killed, others have had to be left behind, their wounds or burns not having allowed them to follow their parents.

Mostly they are small-holders or farm-workers driven away from their farms, plundered of their cattle and other belongings. This has been proved by examination of identity cards undertaken by the mission.

During interviews with the Governors of Le Kef and Sbeitla, the representative of Ain Draham, and the local leaders of the UGTT, the mission verified that great efforts are made to aid the refugees, but the authorities fear for the future. The situation can become untenable if the Algerian war continues and if the number of refugees increases.

The mission announced that the ICFTU's International Solidarity Fund had decided to place 50,000 dollars, as a first allocation, at the disposal of the UGTT and the UGTA. This sum will be used to aid about 300 families of Algerian workers, to give professional training to young workers and to cover the costs of leadership training of young UGTA members.

Mr. Bernasconi, speaking on behalf of the International Labour Assistance, announced that that organisation would give 60,000 Swiss francs to the UGTA to finance the trade union training of young Algerians. This contribution comprises gifts received from the Swiss Foreign Aid Organisation, Swiss Labour Assistance, the Norwegian Labour Welfare Organisation and other bodies affiliated to the International Labour Assistance.

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

MISSION TO TUNISIA - ALGERIAN REFUGEES

I. Composition and mission of the delegation

1. Following a recommendation made by the Special Conference of North African Trade Union Centres affiliated to the ICFTU (Geneva, 8-9 March 1958), the ICFTU Sub-Committee decided at its Eleventh Meeting (Brussels, 17-19 March 1958) to send a delegation to Tunisia in order to appreciate the seriousness of the Algerian refugee problem in that country.

2. Furthermore, the ICFTU International Solidarity Fund Committee, meeting in Brussels, 20-21 March 1958, accepted a request from the UGTT and the UGTA and decided to place at the disposal of those two organisations a sum of 50,000 dollars in order to finance, during six months:

- (1) trade union training for young Algerian refugees in Tunisia;
- (2) vocational training for young Algerian workers in Tunisian establishments;
- (3) assistance to some 300 Algerian workers' families in Tunisia.

3. The delegation was composed as follows:

- Giacomo BERNASCONI, General Secretary of the Swiss Trade Union Federation and President of International Labour Assistance
- Luigi PARINI, General Secretary of the Italian Federation of Hospital Workers' Unions (CISL)
- Herman PATTEET, ICFTU Geneva representative.

L. Parini and H. Patteet arrived in Tunis on 28 March 1958 and G. Bernasconi arrived on 29 March 1958.

The delegation left Tunis on 2 April 1958.

II. Activities of the delegation

4. The delegation met several times with the responsible leaders of the UGTT and the UGTA in order to reach agreement on a plan of work and to formulate the conclusions of the mission.

It was able to observe the way in which the UGTT and the UGTA have studied the situation and the extent to which it is possible to do positive work on the basis of the plan accepted by the International Solidarity Fund Committee.

Both the UGTT and the UGTA expressed their keen satisfaction at the aid which the ICFTU had just granted them. Although the plan is foreseen for a period of six months and although it had already been partially applied from 11 February 1958 onwards, the intention is to manage the ICFTU fund with a maximum degree of economy in order to be able to prolong the assistance beyond the period of six months.

5. In connection with the ICFTU aid, Brother Bernasconi was able to promise a sum of 60,000 Swiss francs, from gifts received from the Swiss Labour Assistance and different organisations affiliated to International Labour Assistance. This sum will be placed at the disposal of the UGTA, in particular for financing the vocational training of young Algerian workers in Tunisia.

In the light of this promise, the delegation noted the intention of the UGTT and the UGTA either to increase the number of participants in the vocational training scheme, or to spread the assistance over a period of one year. This latter formula seems to be preferred by those concerned.

In any case, the ICFTU will receive regularly reports on the use made of the funds, so as to enable it to decide on its future attitude.

Furthermore, it is estimated that, after some months' apprenticeship, certain beneficiaries from the vocational training aid will be able to find paid employment. They will automatically be replaced by other candidates, so that the total number of those benefiting from the aid will remain appreciably the same during the whole period of the application of the plan.

6. On 30 and 31 March 1958, the delegation, accompanied by Brothers BOURAOUI, of the UGTT, BRAHIM and ALLAONA, of the UGTA, visited the Tunisian-Algerian frontier region, where the refugee camps are located, especially in the neighbourhood of Souk El Arba, Ain Draham, El Babouch, Ain Khamouda and Sbeitla. It also visited the ruins of the village of Sakiet Sidi Youssef, destroyed on 8 February 1958 by French aircraft.

7. The situation of the refugees varies considerably from one region to another. In the North, where the majority of the refugees have been arriving in small groups over the last 16 months, it has not proved possible to adopt the formula of the concentrated camp. The families live scattered about the mountain-sides, protected by the forest. There are few tents. In general, 10 to 15 persons, most of whom are young children, girls and women, live in kinds of shacks, built with such materials as come to hand. It is extremely difficult to carry out a census and to make feeding arrangements, owing to the fact that the refugees, who are still prey to acute anxiety, refuse to group themselves in organised camps. They prefer the protection of nature, and live more or less camouflaged, through fear of possible reprisals, as the frontier is only a few kilometres away. Needless to say, their living conditions are lamentable and inhuman. There is a lack of food and clothing, and it is quite usual, as the delegation was able to observe, to see children being fed on a broth of grass and bracken. As for the almost complete absence of medical attention, the less said the better.

In this region, the big problem continues to be that of fear. At several places, when the delegation approached, the women tried to hide, carrying their children off with them, and it was necessary to explain to them, in very simple terms, that we were friends and that they should trust us.

The men meet, generally, in the nearest village. They are waiting for a possible distribution of food. At the very best, they receive every ten days an amount which is barely sufficient for 2 or 3 days.

The Tunisian authorities and the Red Crescent do everything they can to improve the situation, but it will remain difficult until such time as the refugees become reconciled to the idea of a greater concentration in a few main centres.

8. At Sakiet Sidi Youssef and in the Sheitla area, the situation is different. The refugees have recently arrived, and there are new arrivals every day, from the area where the French Army is establishing the no man's land.

The Tunisian authorities and the Red Crescent have been able to set up "tent villages". Aid is well-organised and fairly adequate, as regards food, clothing and medical attention.

The problem which is worrying the authorities is that of knowing how long it will be necessary to continue the aid. For the time being, the resources are adequate, but everything will depend upon the length of the operation and the number of persons who may still arrive. An effort is being made to set the men to work, either in agriculture or on public works, but there is also a rather large number of Tunisians unemployed in the area, and the solutions are not only difficult, but also delicate and provisional.

As regards the children (at the Aim Khamouda camp, there are 1,200 children under 10, out of a total of 3,400 refugees), it is hoped to be able to give them a minimum schooling, but the gap between good intentions and practical possibilities is very wide.

Everywhere, there are families of small-holders or agricultural workers, driven from their farms and their land under fire from the French Army. Sometimes, the families are complete, but in general there are some children or relatives who have been left behind and whose fate is unknown. All the refugees have identity cards issued by the French authorities. The nationality given on these cards is "French" or "French Muslim".

9. The delegation was able to discuss all these problems with the Delegate of Aim Draham, the Governor of Le Kef (M. Bechir, former leader of the UGTT) and the Governor of Sheitla (M. Mabrouk), as well as with the responsible UGTT officials in the area. These discussions made the situation all too clear.

10. On 1 April, at the UGTT headquarters, the delegation held a press conference attended by some thirty journalists.

III. Conclusions and recommendations

11. Although it is difficult to quote exact figures, as there are some "recognised" refugees and others who are not recognised, it may be estimated that there are approximately 125,000 refugees of all kinds in Tunisia. This represents a very heavy burden for this small country, which has 500,000 unemployed and which is going through a rather serious economic crisis.

International aid, although less immediately urgent, will remain indispensable if on the one hand the number of refugees increases and if on the other hand a final solution to the Algerian problem is not found.

The ICFTU and its affiliated organisations therefore have the duty of drawing the attention of international bodies to the seriousness of the situation, so that aid can be given with the same efficacy as in the case of the Hungarian refugees. However, it does not seem possible to plan the emigration of the refugees to other countries. Their integration into the Tunisian economy is very problematic. Indeed, the real solution is to be found in the political field. The free world bears a heavy responsibility in the search for a rapid solution to the Algerian problem, by putting an end to the war and reaching agreements which correspond to the aspiration of the Algerian people.

12. Within the more limited framework of the common UGTT-UGTA-ICFTU action, a positive meaning must be given to our aid, as carried out through the vocational training of young workers and the trade union training of young UGTA militants.

The plan adopted by the Solidarity Fund Committee will have to be applied flexibly, at the same time foreseeing the need to make a further allocation of funds, on the basis of reports to be communicated by the UGTT and the UGTA.

13. As the present report includes no testimonies obtained in the camps about the atrocities of which many refugees have been the victim, despite the fact that the delegation heard such testimonies, it would be advisable for the ICFTU to examine the question of the best use which it can make, especially in its publications, of certain detailed reports which are already in its possession, as well as a considerable quantity of photographic material.

9 April 1958

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