

FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION STORIES

DITA SARI

Dita Sari's first contact with the ILO's Committee of Freedom of Association came in 1998 when she was in prison in Jakarta, the capital of her native country. "At that time I was serving an eight-year sentence and a delegation of the committee came to see me," she says. "They issued a statement and a demand that I should be released unconditionally," says Ms. Sari who is a leader of the National Front for Indonesian Workers' Struggle. Ms. Sari believes the ILO's involvement in her case helped her to regain her freedom.

"I was in prison because of my activity in building up trade unions and in leading a mass strike in 1996. At that time the Indonesian government was still ruled under the dictatorship of [former President] Suharto. ... Trade unions were banned, except for one set up by the government, and the military intervened in labour disputes," Ms. Sari says. The Indonesian government opposed the trade union movement Ms. Sari was active in because it was independent and criticized the military's involvement in labour affairs, Ms. Sari says.

Ms. Sari is one of the hundred of trade unionists whose cases are investigated each year by the ILO, through its Committee on Freedom of Association. This body was set up 50 years ago and is made up of representatives of employers, governments and trade unions. Its delegations often visit countries that are the subject of complaints involving trade union rights. Freedom of association is a fundamental right protected by ILO conventions.

The ILO works with governments to help ensure that laws and practices guarantee the right of workers and employers to join the organization of their choice. In Indonesia, for example, ILO representatives took part in a parliamentary hearing on new trade union legislation. Although Ms. Sari says trade unionists still face problems and receive jail sentences in Indonesia, the situation is better than in the past. "I got arrested again, but now it is only for 2 nights, not for three years like it was before," she says.

BASILE MAHAN GAHÉ

"If I and my friends are still alive, it is thanks to the ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association," says Basile Mahon Gahé, founder and general secretary of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Côte d'Ivoire (DIGNITE). The story of Mr. Gahé's trade union is a vivid example of the struggle faced by people seeking to ensure that their voice is heard in the workplace and in society.

DIGNITE, which means dignity in French, was born on May 1, 1988 out of the desire of a number of workers in Côte d'Ivoire to create an independent trade union that did not have any links to the government, political parties or religious organizations. These workers did not feel that their interests were properly represented by the country's existing trade union centre

because it was too close to the government.

But the government at that time in Côte d'Ivoire saw DIGNITE as a threat to its control. Many of the workers who joined the new trade union were fired from their jobs. Some were thrown into jail. Mr. Gahé and other DIGNITE leaders were sent to jail many times. "I went a dozen times to the Abidjan correctional facility, where there were at least five and as many as 15 deaths each day," Mr. Gahé says. He believes that the intervention of ILO helped to ensure that he got out of jail with his life.

The ILO became involved after it received a complaint in 1991 about suppression of the right to freedom of association in Côte d'Ivoire. The Committee on Freedom of Association, which is made up of government, trade union and employer representatives from the ILO Governing Body, pursues these kinds of complaints. The committee works with governments to ensure that a country's laws and practices respect the right of people to join the trade union or employers' organization of their choice.

In 1992, the government of Côte d'Ivoire officially recognized DIGNITE. After a visit in 1994 by the Committee on Freedom of Association, the government also adopted other measures to ensure trade union freedom. For example, employers were obliged to allow workers to vote on which union they wanted to join. Employers were also banned from automatically deducting the membership fee for the official trade union centre from a worker's salary.

Now DIGNITE takes part in the annual May Day demonstrations. It is represented in Côte d'Ivoire's delegation to the annual conferences that the ILO holds in June in Geneva. And Mr. Gahé was able to come to a meeting in Geneva marking the 50th anniversary of the Committee on Freedom of Association to tell his story.