

DEFENDING WORKERS' RIGHTS IN BANANA PLANTATIONS IN GUATEMALA

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TUC Aid, in partnership with Banana Link and UNITE, has been helping build the capacity of trade unions in the banana plantations in Guatemala through a programme of training and education launched in April 2013. The programme also includes support for the building of social dialogue with independent banana producers and the government.

The work is led by SITRABI, the union of Del Monte workers, who have suffered some of the worst violence against trade unionists in what is now the world's most dangerous country for trade unionists, with 68 murders since 2007. Twelve of these were leaders and members of SITRABI, killed between September 2007 and February 2012. Nobody has yet been convicted for any of these murders.

Training in dialogue bears first fruit

The training workshops for the executive committee members of six local trade unions of workers employed in independent producers that supply Del Monte in the Bobos District of Izabal in Northern Guatemala have succeeded in changing some of the confrontational tactics that were regularly adopted as a response to violations of the collective agreements signed with the companies. The barrier that was used as a means of protest, preventing any fruit from leaving the nine plantations in the district, has not been used for nearly a year. Although some major issues remain unresolved, the local union leadership are seeking solutions through dialogue rather than direct action through blockades that affected all their colleagues on neighbouring farms.

SITRABI's experience in building mature industrial relations with the multinational company Del Monte has proven to be crucial to the training and education process. The efforts of the union in permanent dialogue and collective bargaining with their employer were recognised recently by the Labour Minister. The experience has also been documented for a publication by the World Banana Forum on good practice in industrial relations to be published later this year.



SITRABI General Secretary (left) and Del Monte management receive an award from Labour Minister

Banana Industry Round Table in Izabal

SITRABI and the other unions in Bobos, together with six unions in the Chiquita owned plantations, succeeded in getting the Labour Ministry to set up the banana industry round table in late 2013. Since then, eight meetings have been held, with the participation of the Minister or the Deputy Minister, and representatives of almost all the companies operating in Izabal. The meetings have involved 23 trade union representatives, 10 company representatives and 5 representatives of the Labour Ministry.

This is the first ever sector-specific tripartite dialogue in the turbulent history of Guatemala's banana industry and the very fact that the parties have met and talked around the same table is historically significant. However, two critical issues remain unresolved: the non-payment of contributions to the Social Security institution, leaving some workers without healthcare cover, and the failure by two companies to hand over union fees collected from members to the unions concerned.

In March, in the presence of the British trade union delegation, the Labour Ministry announced that it would convene a special commission of the Round Table to resolve these issues. Unions are hopeful that these problems will be resolved in the near future.

SITRABI and other unions also participated in a Forum in Guatemala City on good practices in social dialogue and collective bargaining organised by the Labour Ministry and the ILO, with the participation of the National Agricultural Chamber of Commerce. The trade union leaders who took part felt that this initiative opens the way for work beyond the Izabal banana industry.



Organising workers in the South

The key challenge for unions in the North is to ensure that trade unions emerge in the plantations of the Pacific South that now account for over 80% of the country's banana exports. Otherwise, the higher costs of production in the North threaten the industry's future.

With support from the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center, the unions have been mapping plantations in the South and exploring the potential to build trade union organisation. The dialogue established with one of the major producers has broken the taboo around the idea of trade unions in the South, but the general environment remains hostile.

Very long working hours, lower wages and violence towards trade unionists have now become the subject of a debate in Latin American trade media in recent weeks (see below). At a meeting in Washington in March, Banana Link met with US trade unions and NGOs, opening the way for close collaboration on the work that is beginning in the South.

Media coverage includes:

<http://www.ticotimes.net/2014/04/22/guatemalan-banana-bosses-deny-theyreexploiting-campesinos>

<http://www.freshfruitportal.com/2014/05/02/low-wagesand-union-violence-tarnish-guatemalas-banana-trade/?country=united%20kingdom>

British delegation helps open doors

A delegation of British trade unionists met with SITRABI and other unions on a week long visit that took in the northern Bobos and Motagua plantations that produce Del Monte bananas as well as a visit to a Guatemalan company plantation in the South.

The delegation, including representatives of the TUC, Unite and the GMB, as well as Banana Link and COLSIBA, the Latin America banana unions' coordinating body, also accompanied SITRABI on a series of high level meetings with government and business. These meetings were intended to progress the current policy of mutual reform and détente, but also to press the government to pursue justice for murdered SITRABI leaders.

The accompaniment of the British delegation facilitated meetings with the outgoing Attorney General, Claudia Paz y Paz and her trade union crimes unit, and with senior representatives of the Ministries of Labour and Security, all of whom gave valuable insights into the progress of investigations as well as welcome promises to pursue stalled cases and review security for trade unionists.

It is easy to either dismiss or to exaggerate the impact of international visits, but it was clear that SITRABI in particular found the presence of the British delegation valuable in gaining access to officials and in getting candid answers to difficult questions. The challenge now for the international trade union movement is to find new ways to offer the same support from a distance so that the openness displayed by the government during the visit is consistent and ongoing.

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