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Spotlight interview with Luz Stella Cadena (Colombia - Sintramunicipales)

"Constant threats"

Brussels, 6 October 2005 (ICFTU Online): The trade unions of Colombia have to cope with the siege of violence, including numerous murders, together with the struggle to increase membership within the context of a growing informal economy," explained union leader Luz Stella Cadena, who recently travelled to Europe to receive an award for holding steadfast in her defence of labour rights despite the numerous threats levelled against her.

- Founder and president of the Municipal Workers' Union of Floridablanca (Santander district), Luz Stella Cadena's trade union activities were affected by a series of disturbing incidents in 2004: "They started to make anonymous calls to my home and to follow me back to where I live."

Her home in the Colombian town of Floridablanca was placed under surveillance for several months, "to see if there was any change that would prevent me from continuing with my trade unions activities", until the intimidation was considered to have ceased.

The precautions were justified, given that Colombia has seen the murder of hundreds of trade unionists over recent years. The latest victim was Luciano Enrique Romero Molina, a leader of the food workers' union SINALTRAINAL, who was tortured and then murdered. The ICFTU wrote to the Colombian president to condemn this atrocity on 19 September (*).

"The way of pressurising trade unions has changed," said Luz Estella Cadena. "The main form of coercion is no longer the assassination of trade union leaders but more constant threats, so that people cannot pursue their activities without fear and, in some instances, find themselves forced to leave their hometowns."

What form does this intimidation take?

"Threatening telephone calls, most of the time, but they also send flowers or letters saying that your life is in danger if you do not leave town," explained the president of the Municipal Workers' Union of Floridablanca.

The allegations concerning the murders and other acts of violence against trade union members and leaders in Colombia are set out in case 1787 of the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association. In its latest report presented to the ILO Governing Body on 17 June, the Committee deplored "the situation of impunity" affecting "the free exercise of trade union rights" and stressed the need to gather more information on the cases presented.

In the final session of the Committee, the Colombian government presented information on allegations related to 34 murders, 17 death threats, one kidnapping, a forced disappearance, an attempted murder, one forced displacement and one other type of violence.

These cases were also examined by the ILO Conference Committee on the Application of Standards, which concluded this year with a decision to approve the sending of a tripartite delegation to Colombia to hold meetings with government, employers' and workers' representatives.

"We have lost some very good leaders over recent years and starting to train new ones is complicated, given the climate of fear in the country... Not everyone feels prepared to take on the struggle we are

waging to defend our rights," said Luz Stella Cadena, referring to the situation affecting trade unionism in her country.

The Colombian trade union leader recently visited the headquarters of the ILO after receiving the 2005 award for her fight for trade union rights from the Dutch trade union federation FNV. The "De Febe Elizabeth Velasquez" award, created in memory of the El Salvadorian activist who was murdered in 1989 for defending trade union rights in her country, is granted every two years.

Cadena believes that one of the causes of the violence suffered by trade unionists and other activists is intolerance towards those who think differently. "The country is faced with a very complicated situation," she added.

In addition to this, the unions are faced with the need to renew themselves. "Trade union organisations are becoming very small in comparison to the number of workers," she commented, underlining that one of the reasons is the growth of the informal economy, a sector "which does not provide the same guarantees or social benefits".

"We are examining the reform of our internal statutes to confront this situation, as we have to find a way of ensuring that all these people entering a different economy can find a way of organising," concluded

L.A.C.

(*) More information on this case is available at:
<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991222825&Language=EN>

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