

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU OnLine...

124/171005

Murders and death threats against trade unionists in the Americas on the rise, Colombia the bloodiest of them all

Brussels, 18 October 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): Murders and death threats against trade unionists in Colombia and the Americas generally are on the increase, according to the latest ICFTU worldwide Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights, published in Brussels today.

Throughout the region, 114 unionists were killed, 456 received threats, 120 suffered torture, beatings or injuries while over 200 were arrested and nearly one thousand were arbitrarily dismissed in 2004. The overwhelming majority of these events took place as a direct result of legitimate trade union action.

In Colombia alone, 445 trade union members received death threats and 99 were murdered - nine more than in 2003. In Colombia's Arauca province, three trade union leaders were assassinated by the army in cold blood. Two of them, Héctor Alirio Martínez and Jorge Eduardo Prieto Chamusero, were covered by special protection measures provided by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) since 2002. The year was marked by continuous and increasingly violent attacks by the government, employers and the courts on collective bargaining, the right to strike and social dialogue as a whole. The Labour Day celebrations were harshly repressed by police, leaving 12 people seriously injured,

Abuse of workers' rights was most extreme in Central American and Mexican 'maquilas' (enterprises located in Export Processing Zones) and especially in those exporting to the United States. In Nicaragua's "John Garment" maquila, a woman worker was refused permission to go to the toilet and had a miscarriage at the factory as a result of the pressure she was under. When she returned to the factory after her recovery week, she was fired. Women, who make up to 80% of the maquilas workforce, are continually subjected to wage discrimination, increases in working time, a lack of benefits and sexual harassment.

Colombian-style violence, including death threats and murders of trade unionists, has become increasingly frequent in other Latin American countries. Two trade unionists were also killed in Guatemala. The first one had attracted attention through his role in tackling local corruption. The other had been attacked and had received numerous threats, including threats of rape against his daughters, if he continued his work defending workers or reported the incidents to the authorities. When he did do so, the authorities refused to grant him protection. As in many such cases, official investigations into his death produced no results.

Two members of an agricultural workers organisation, ONAC, were killed in Paraguay when police opened fire on the lorry taking them to a protest against the use of toxins in agriculture. In Brazil a prominent member of a rural workers' union was shot dead in his home, while a visit to El Salvador to help local unions organise transport workers resulted in death for Gilberto Soto of the USA-based International Brotherhood of Teamsters, murdered by hired killers.

In the Dominican Republic eight people died and scores were injured in clashes with police during a general strike organised by trade unions and other popular organisations. In Haiti, attacks against trade unionists, which started in January when nine men and one woman were held in prison for one month after a raid on union offices, continued after the fall of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in February. The new government dismissed striking teachers and a drivers' union delegate was murdered.

Elsewhere, independent trade unionists remained in jail in Cuba, President Chavez of Venezuela publicly stated his desire to see the national union centre CTV "turn to dust". Unionists were attacked and others arrested during a major dispute at a Coca Cola bottling plant in Peru, where a national union leader escaped an assassination attempt, while the daughter of a construction worker was kidnapped after he had received threats. But in September, construction workers signed a collective bargaining agreement with the Peruvian Chamber of Construction, after 13 years of fighting for the right to negotiate a sectoral agreement.

Meanwhile, in the United States, employers continued to use anti-union tactics allowed by law, such as hiring union-busting consultants, forcing workers to attend anti-union meetings, threatening to move plants and challenging union elections in order to block contract negotiations, sometimes for years.

In one of the few bright spots on the horizon, the fiercely anti-union Wal Mart company was obliged to recognise a union at one of its Canadian stores, the only Wal Mart in the world to be unionised in 2004.

The ICFTU represents 145 million workers in 234 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories (www.icftu.org)

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