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Trade union rights in the Americas: multinationals in the hot seat

Brussels, 7 June 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): There is no doubt about it. Apart from Colombia, the worst violators of union rights in the Americas are multinational companies, and particularly those based in the region's export processing zones (EPZs). The ICFTU's 2006 Annual Survey on Violations of Trade Union Rights also documents other obstacles to the respect of those rights, such as the rise of the informal economy, the lack of commitment of governments and industrial tribunals to ensure respect of labour legislation, and the huge increase in insecure employment contracts.

Despite a small decrease, the figures for 2005 remain alarming in the Americas, particularly in the southern part of the continent. No fewer than 80 people were killed simply for being union members and trying to defend their rights. 275 trade unionists received death threats, over 480 were tortured, beaten or injured and around 1,700 were unfairly dismissed.

It will come as no surprise to learn that Colombia is still the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist. More than 70 unionists were assassinated whilst a further 260 received death threats. Far from solving the problem, the new Law on Justice and Peace merely increases the impunity enjoyed by the assassins. In October 2005, a high-level mission sent by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) proved very clearly that unions were one of the targets of the armed groups and that impunity remained. Anti-union violence mainly affected the education sector, thereby raising the number of women victims, which has been continually increasing.

But Colombia is sadly not the only American country where it is extremely dangerous to do union work. In Brazil, 8 people defending the rights of rural workers were murdered and one employee in the shoe industry died of strangulation when a demonstration was broken up by the police. In Honduras, Francisco Cruz Galeano, the regional coordinator of the CGT union centre, was murdered last December.

The situation is scarcely better in Guatemala, a country where death threats and anti-union violence have long been widespread. The walls of an education union's office were daubed with red crosses as symbols of death. The leaders of a bank employees' union received announcements of their own deaths and the head office of a peasant farmers union was blatantly attacked by armed men.

Death threats are not the only form of anti-union pressure in Latin America. The workers at banana plantations received some of the worst treatment in Ecuador in 2005. 44 workers at the San José plantation were sacked simply for setting up a trade union. A protest strike was called by the workforce but the police used tear gas to quell that legitimate action. Police used the gas on several occasions, including against plantation workers at La Primavera who were seeking to obtain management's acceptance of a collective agreement.

In the EPZs, where working conditions are particularly insecure, workers' attempts to get organised have in many cases ended in failure, due to the threats of dismissal they are subjected to and employers who are quick to carry them out. This was particularly blatant in the Dominican Republic where a textile firm in the Bonao EPZ sacked 17 workers who had formed a union. Similar events took place in Mexico, where members of the textile federation say that if they are thinking of organizing it is best to keep the news from their employers.

In Peru, the tactics employed by the telecommunications company ITETE were not limited to sacking workers. After forming a union, 23 employees of the company were sacked, whilst other union members received threats of dismissal and were transferred to lower-paid jobs. No collective agreement has been signed in the company. Ajeper and Gloria S.A., both multinationals specialised in non-alcoholic drinks, used similar procedures for sacking and threatening their staff. Gloria S.A. was the recipient of a major loan from the World Bank's International Finance Corporation in 2003.

In the northern section of the continent, trade union organisations have also been victims of ploys aimed at weakening them. The government of the United States, which is clearly anti-union, has taken measures, via its National Labour Relations Board, aimed at decreasing the influence of trade unions. Many aggressive anti-union campaigns are organised to try and dupe workers into distrusting their unions.

In Canada, the provincial governments have a tendency to weaken the union rights of their employees. British Colombia, in the west of the country, used legal provisions to force through a non-negotiated collective agreement for public sector teachers. The resulting strike was considered to be illegal. The government of Quebec did the same thing to its employees. In the private sector the supermarket chain Wal Mart, which is fiercely anti-union, had been forced in 2004 to recognise a union for the first time in one of its Canadian outlets. 2005 was less rosy, however, since the chain decided to close down the store owing to the union's success. In its other stores, Wal Mart uses methods ranging from intimidation to electronic spying to prevent the creation of trade unions on its premises.

-To see the audio/ video materials covering the ICFTU Survey 2006:

http://www.icftusurvey.org/audio_video/en/

The ICFTU represents 155 million workers in 236 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. <http://www.icftu.org> The ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions. <http://www.global-unions.org>

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