

Spotlight interview with José Escolástico Pinzón Salazar (CGTG - Guatemala)

“Fear drives me to protest against injustices”

Guatemala is one of the most dangerous countries for doing union work. Murders, threats and dismissal are the rewards for union activism. The public authorities are complicit in these violations when not actually committing them directly. José Escolástico Pinzón Salazar, General Secretary of the CGTG (1), explains the situation.

Almost 6,000 people were assassinated in Guatemala in 2006. Could you explain why the situation is so violent?

The main cause of the violence is the national civilian police force. There is a covert policy of using death squads in Guatemala and they are found within the civilian police force. Government and employers collude with each other, which leads to widespread breaches of trade union rights. Between January and May 2007, there were around a dozen deaths of trade unionists from the various trade union centres. The violence is organised by politicians and linked to organised crime and drug trafficking. It is hard to combat violence when its source is the government itself, through the Ministry of the Interior.

On 15 January this year Pedro Zamora, the leader of the dockers' union, was murdered. What were the circumstances surrounding the murder?

Pedro Zamora was leading a union campaign aimed at blocking the government's plan to restructure the state-owned port of Quetzal. He had received some death threats. The day on which he was murdered, he was driving his children to a health centre when the assassins intercepted his car and shot him. He used his body to protect his children and was killed, riddled with bullets. The attack had been carefully planned and it is certain that the killers knew the route he would be taking.

Both the way the enquiry was conducted and the manner in which the crime was committed suggest that the Port Authority was implicated. If that is the case the

perpetrators will enjoy impunity. An international trade union mission (2) visited Guatemala shortly after the murder and held talks with the civilian police, who admitted that they had taken 2 weeks to start their investigation. If the international mission had not been held there might not have been an investigation at all, even though we are not optimistic about its results given the general climate of impunity.

In addition to the murder of Pedro Zamora, we complained about the sacking of nine trade unionists by the Port Authority, following some tough collective bargaining. The Chairman of the Port Authority had sent a report to the private secretary of the President of Guatemala stating that he could not reinstate the nine dismissed workers or else he would “lose the battle”. We believe that is partly why all this repression has been organised by the port authorities. Clearly, they did not actually shoot Pedro Zamora themselves, but they may well have hired people to do it.

Following the visit of the international trade union delegation the nine sacked workers were reinstated and the authorities agreed to discuss the possibility of collective bargaining. It is a very concrete example of successful international solidarity.

On 6 February 2007, two other members of your union, Walter Anibal Ixcaquic Mendoza and Norma Sente de Ixcaquic, were murdered...

Both of them were members of the union branch that organises workers in the informal economy. Their murders are also examples of impunity, as again the investigation has produced nothing. They were doing their work as street vendors when they were shot and killed. They were only ordinary union members and had not received any previous death threats, unlike the leaders of the union. They were members of the “6th Avenue union”, based in one of the main streets in the historic centre of the capital city, where many informal street vendors work. We have no proof that they were killed for being trade unionists but that is what we suspect, since the union has been under a lot of pressure to get the vendors to leave that avenue. The authorities have been wanting to remove the informal workers from the area for a long time. We resisted that pressure.

The two murders are a clear message to the union.

What are the main services that the CGTG provides to workers in the informal economy?

Organising, training and legal assistance. We talk to the city authorities about getting a collective agreement to ensure that the street vendors can stay where they are. We negotiate how long they can stay in a particular place, for example. The authorities lay down their own requirements, such as keeping the place clean, not blocking the street or paying a local tax. We have also set up a micro-credit fund. That prevents informal workers, who generally cannot get credit from banks, having to turn to unscrupulous money lenders. Organising the informal economy is still in the early stages: though over 70% of workers are in the informal economy, just 5% of that 70% are organised.

Which countries could most effectively influence the government of Guatemala?

The European Union is currently negotiating a trade agreement with Central American countries. It should not become complicit in human rights violations in Guatemala: if it really wants to help Central America, it should not condone impunity, anti-union attacks, violence against women, etc. Aid should be conditional on respect of human rights, otherwise nothing will change. At the moment, the aid provided by the European Union is not really helping the people much, owing to the corruption in Guatemala. The ITUC and the ETUC can play an important role alongside the Guatemalan trade union movement in convincing the EU governments to pursue those concerns. There is some hope here, I feel, if only limited.

I am less hopeful of a positive contribution by the US government, since there is a lot of hypocrisy in its action in Central America. It will not put pressure on a government like the one in Guatemala, since if the government were to change it might then harm the interests of the United States.

What has been the impact on workers of the coming into force in July 2006 of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, which most trade unions opposed?

The agreement is good for the government, capitalists and companies, but very bad for small enterprises and agricultural workers. It has caused mergers of companies and an invasion of foreign products, for example in the agricultural sector. These products mainly come from the USA. The peasant farmers of Central America do not receive the same level of subsidies as Europeans or Americans. That means that American farmers can lower their prices and we simply cannot compete with them. A “quintal” of maize can

cost 100 dollars if it is sold by a Guatemalan farmer, but Americans are selling it for 50 dollars.

Life is very hard for peasant farmers in Guatemala. Many have no land and have to work for large landowners as there has been no agricultural reform allowing for a better distribution of land. Their working conditions are inhuman, partly since the Labour Code does not apply in practice in this type of sector. The wages do not allow for decent living conditions: a peasant farmer can earn 7 dollars a day but you need at least 200 dollars per month to cover a person's basic food needs, let alone health care, education, housing, etc.

Is it possible to create trade unions in the export processing zones?

There are 250 companies in the EPZs, mostly in the textile industry, and just three have recognised a trade union. Conditions in these zones are very tough, and unregulated. There are South Korean and Taiwanese companies and since the governments of their countries pay a lot of money to the government of Guatemala it does not check what is going on in these zones. It is hard to organise workers in any company in Guatemala owing to the widespread anti-union policy, but it is even harder to do in the EPZs, where the government avoids making any checks.

How do you keep your motivation as a union leader in such a situation? Aren't you scared for your life?

My job is to help people. I have always wanted to do that since I was a child. My father was a community leader and I followed his example. I am less fearful for my life than in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. If they had wanted to kill me they would have done so long ago. The government knows where I am and checks my mobile phone. I don't hide and I denounce problems, blaming the government where necessary. Fear does not silence me. My own fear does not stop me acting but strengthens me and drives me to protest against injustices. That does not mean they won't decide to kill me one day.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau and Mathieu Debroux

(1) The "Central General de Trabajadores de Guatemala - CGTG" (General workers confederation of Guatemala) is one of the two ITUC affiliates in Guatemala, the other being the "Confederación de Unidad Sindical de Guatemala" (CUSG).

(2) this joint mission by the ITUC and the ITF (International Transport Workers Federation) was informed that the Guatemalan police had failed to cordon off the crime scene correctly and to collect essential evidence and that the investigators failed to use the clues that could have enabled them to identify the perpetrators of the crime.

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