

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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Spotlight Interview with Zuliana Lainez (ANPP- Peru)

"The impunity enjoyed by those murdering journalists has given rise to self-censorship"

Brussels, 31 March 2009: The repression of freedom of expression and trade union rights in Latin America takes a heavy toll on the continent's journalists. Women journalists are targeted differently, based on their gender. How can the trade union movement and international solidarity come to their aid? Zuliana Lainez, general secretary of the National Association of Journalists of Peru, ANPP (1), provides the answers.

What are the main actions of the Peruvian journalists' union?

Aside from defending workers' rights and providing our members with training, we devote a lot of energy to defending freedom of expression and association. Peruvian law recognises the right to organise and bargain collectively as well as the right to strike, but Peru has been heavily influenced by the neoliberal model since the 1990s. This change of policy has virtually wiped out the labour movement, including the journalists' unions, as the threat of dismissal is used against anyone trying to organise. There are some 30,000 journalists in Peru. Around 9,000 of them are affiliated to our union, but as individuals, as there are no longer any unions in the media industry.

What is the scale of the violence against journalists in Peru?

It has to be said that journalists in Peru are not murdered on the same scale as in Colombia or Mexico. The last murder dates back to March 2007 and the victim was a radio journalist, Miguel Pérez Julca, who had broadcast incriminating information about people "with connections". Peru is, however, the country with the region's highest rate of non-fatal attacks against journalists. There were 212 physical assaults against journalists in 2008. The greatest enemy of democracy and journalists' freedom of expression in Peru is intolerance, as the authorities (national, regional or local) almost invariably put pressure on journalists when they see something they don't like in the media. This pressure can take the shape of violence, death threats, legal action, etc.

Who carries out the physical assaults?

They are usually individuals who are paid to carry out attacks. Over the last two years, however, we have seen a distinctive development in the interior of the country: the perpetrators are direct representatives of the authorities. A radio journalist, for example, was in the studio, doing his programme, when a representative of the Mayor came to beat him, at work! They also face assaults during demonstrations, when the stance of a media outlet is taken to be the personal stance of the journalist. There are even cases of demonstrators assaulting journalists, as they fail to realise that they are workers too.

What can your union do in such cases?

We have a department in charge of defending journalists' human rights that is not only open to our members but to all journalists. It operates a hotline through which we can be contacted around the clock. We put journalists who have been attacked in contact with the lawyers from this department, who guide them on the procedures to follow. In very serious cases, such as murders, we organise mobilisation and awareness raising campaigns to put pressure on the authorities to ensure that those responsible are brought to justice.

Does this lead to prosecutions?

Impunity is very common in such cases. Proceedings are initiated against the perpetrators or the instigators of the crime but they usually go no further than the police investigation. There has been no conviction in 80% of the cases reported between the eighties (the worst period) and now. In the small minority of cases leading to convictions, the perpetrators are sentenced to 25 years in prison at the most. The instigators are rarely identified. The impunity enjoyed by the murderers gives rise to self-censorship, which results in the press losing credibility and impinges on civil liberties. It's the same in several other Latin American countries, such as Colombia and Mexico.

You are in charge of human rights at FEPALC, the regional organisation of the IFJ (International Federation of Journalists) in Latin America. Are you able to organise solidarity between the journalists of the region?

Yes, the IFJ has affiliates in every country of Latin America, and they are interconnected through us. A journalist was recently murdered in Mexico and we immediately sent the information to all our affiliates, who showed their support by sending letters of solidarity.

You are also a member of the ITUC Women's Committee. One of its priorities is combating violence against women. What role does the media play in this respect?

The media is partly to blame because of the content of the news, the stereotypes it uses in advertising, and the way it covers stories (2). In Latin America, some media outlets are more interested in reporting on violence against women as a means of selling papers than as a way of fighting against such violence, which is almost always covered in the "news in brief" section. There is a lack of self-criticism on the part of the media.

What action can trade unions take in this area?

We organise programmes to educate the media about how to cover gender related issues, violence against women, etc. In Peru, we have linked up with an NGO to study how women are portrayed in the media. This research is used as the basis for meetings with journalists, to look into what improvements can be made.

Our union also has a department in charge of gender related issues, which was set up in 2004. We organise a meeting of women journalists in Peru every year, on 8 March, to assess women's working conditions and to develop strategies to give women access to top positions in the media and trade unions. We are also carrying out research into violence against women journalists, which has shown that the type of threats and attacks directed at women journalists are different from those directed at men. Women are more often the victims of defamation. When, for example, a woman journalist reports that a politician has threatened her, he responds that it is linked to sentimental issues.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau and Mathieu Debroux

(1) The National Association of Journalists of Peru (ANPP) is affiliated to the International Federation of Journalists and to the Autonomous Confederation of Workers of Peru (CATP), which is one of the ITUC's affiliates in the country.

(2) On 25 November, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) published recommendations on how to report about violence against women (www.ifj.org <<http://www.ifj.org/>>).

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