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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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Spotlight interview with Erasto Reyes (Honduras)

"Twelve trade unionists have been killed since the coup"

Brussels, 12 October 2009 ITUC OnLine): Workers are the main casualties of the coup d'état that overthrew the Honduran president, Manual Zelaya, on 28 June. Trade unions continue to mobilise to demand a return to democracy, although many of their members have been killed, imprisoned and tortured. The de facto government controls the press. Erasto Reyes, a lawyer working for the trade union movement and one of the leaders of the National Resistance Front against the Coup (1), denounces the abuses committed since the overthrow. He calls for international trade union solidarity.

Thousands of Hondurans took to the streets to peacefully protest against the coup, but met with brutal repression at the hands of the authorities. What is the toll so far?

The repression of coup opponents has claimed over 20 lives in total. Another 500 have been injured and 3000 have been arrested. Twelve of those killed were trade unionists. Some were killed in their homes, others during demonstrations held in protest against the coup. Women and young people are particularly involved in the peaceful resistance against the coup.

There have been numerous cases of physical and psychological torture. A photo reporter from the *El Libertador* newspaper, Delmer Membreño, was abducted and tortured. A teacher active in the trade union was raped by four policemen. I could quote many other cases like these, such as that of Augustina Flores López, a member of the Civic Council of Indigenous Peoples' Organisations in Honduras (2), who was severely beaten by the police, in public even, in front of the media. Images of the beating were recorded and presented to a judge, but he refused to take them on board. She is still in prison, on charges of "sedition and terrorism". Dozens of Hondurans have been arrested on these grounds, including elderly people.

To the great rage of employers, President Zelaya had increased the minimum wage from 126 to 202 euros at the end of 2008. Is this increase one of the reasons behind the coup?

President Zelaya had adopted a whole range of measures in favour of the workers. Quite astonishingly, given that he is from the Liberal party, he also turned towards the left in the area of international relations, joining the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas - ALBA (3). He had also invited the unions to a dialogue on a whole range of issues, including subcontracting. Legislation was proposed aimed at regulating the use of subcontracted workers, to curb the precarisation of labour. The current authorities want to go in the opposite direction, by promoting temporary contracts, for example, that can be renewed for three years. If their plans are approved, there will not be a single trade union left in Honduras at the end of the day, as it is extremely difficult to organise temporary workers.

Is there any reason to believe that anti-union forces have taken advantage of the repression of coup opponents to have trade unionists assassinated?

It is possible, because most employers support the coup.

It has to be said, however, that being a trade unionist was already a dangerous activity when President Zelaya was in power, as seen with the killings and shootings of several trade unionists in 2008...

It's true, and trade union membership rates were already very low: barely 3% of the workforce in the maquilas (4) and 8% of the total active population, which amounts to 3.5 million workers. There were a number of disturbing incidents. In 2008, for instance, trade unionists from the National Autonomous University of Honduras intercepted so-called police officers who had infiltrated the campus. They were carrying a list with the names of trade unions to be targeted along with the names of numerous trade union leaders, including that of the general secretary of the Honduran workers' confederation, CTH, Rosa Altagracia Fuentes, who was assassinated in April 2008 (5). In spite of the trade union rights violations prior to the coup, the unions are nonetheless demanding the restitution of the former president, as the situation has seriously deteriorated since 28 June.

Have Honduran trade unions been able to operate since then?

All trade unions have seen a fall in activity for fear of being attacked during any meetings held. All trade union leaders are receiving threats. A bomb exploded in the toilets at the head office of the beverage industry union STIBYS (6); no one was hurt because the incident took place just after the departure of the members who had gathered for the funeral of a trade union leader who had been assassinated.

Some trade unions brave the danger, such as STIBYS, which even held its congress in August of this year. It also has to be said that many trade unionists have less time for their union activities as they are also involved in the National Resistance Front against the Coup.

Do you not fear for your own life, having denounced the abuses committed since the coup?

Yes, of course. Anyone who speaks out is taking a serious risk, but we cannot remain silent in the face of what is happening in our country. That is why we are asking the ITUC and all its affiliated organisations to support us, to do everything they can to draw attention to the abuses committed in Honduras, so that they are stopped.

How can national and international unions help you?

Firstly, by condemning the coup and disseminating information about what is happening in Honduras. Secondly, by sending trade union missions to see the situation on the ground, to observe the human and trade union rights violations for themselves. We would, in addition, like trade unions to press their governments not to send observers for the elections of 29 November (the present government is counting on these observers and financial aid for the holding of the elections). We also need material and financial assistance, especially food and medical aid. Many trade unionists are suffering from fractures as a result of the repression, but the hospitals no longer even have pins to mend broken bones.

The international community has widely condemned the coup, but this does not seem to impress its instigators much...

Things will not be resolved overnight; it's going to be a long hard fight, but, at the end of it, we want to see those responsible for these human and trade union rights violations answer for their crimes. We hope it will serve as an example, to prevent other atrocities and coups in the future. If the international condemnations have not had any impact so far, more concrete measures must be taken, combined with continued pressure from the people of Honduras. The international trade union movement could call for economic sanctions against the current government. Simply threatening to exclude Honduras from the Central American Free Trade Agreement could have an effect, as the economic losses would be huge.

How would you describe the economic situation of the average Honduran?

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the region. President Zelaya had increased the minimum wage to 202 euros, but this is still 20% lower than the income needed to cover a person's day-to-day needs. On top of that, very few workers receive the minimum wage. The global economic crisis has also affected Honduras: some 20,000 jobs have been lost since the beginning of the year. It's not going to get any better, as companies say they have been losing millions since the beginning of the coup, for numerous reasons, including the roadblocks and the fact that many people have not been able move freely to get to work. Employers in the maquilas are now forcing the workers to do very long overtime hours, to make up for the time lost because of the state of siege declared by the de facto government.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) Frente Nacional de Resistencia Contra el Golpe de Estado. The ITUC's three affiliates in Honduras (CUTH, CGT and CTH) are part of this movement

(2) Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares Indígenas de Honduras (COPINH)

(3) ALBA is a political, social and economic organisation promoting cooperation between the socialist countries of Latin America and the Caribbean

(4) Export processing zones

(5) For more information on this subject, please consult the ITUC Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights

<http://survey09.ituc-csi.org/survey.php?IDContinent=2&IDCountry=HND&Lang=EN>

(6) Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria de las Bebida y Similares, affiliated to the IUF

- Also see the latest ITUC press release (23 September 2009) reiterating its condemnation of the coup and the serious human and trade union rights violations perpetrated by the authorities:

<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article4340&lang=en>

-The resolution adopted by the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA) on 8 July 2009 can also be consulted at:

http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/Resolucion_Honduras_CE_de_la_CSA_-_EN.pdf

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Website: <http://www.ituc-csi.org> and <http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

For more information, please contact the ITUC Press Department on +32 2 224 0204 or +32 476 621 018.

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