

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

ITUC OnLine
007/090811

Spotlight Interview with Crecencio Caceres (Chaco Inter-Ethnic Council Paraguay)

"We need help in the fight against forced labour among indigenous peoples"

Brussels, 9 August 2011 (ITUC OnLine): Pillaging of the environment, poor education, worker exploitation... the indigenous peoples of the Chaco region face a multitude of problems. Coordinator of the Chaco Inter-Ethnic Council, Crecencio Caceres, aged 47, is calling for international solidarity to help defend indigenous workers' rights and fight against forced labour. : (video of the interview: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/el-chaco-a-rights-free-zone-for.html>)

What led to the formation of the Chaco Inter-Ethnic Council?

There are seven "pueblos" (peoples) with different cultures and languages in the department of Boquerón alone. We have the Nivacle, Manjui, Ayoreo, Angaite, Enxet, Guarani Occidental and Guarani Ñandeva.

We needed to unite to defend the indigenous cause, so that the pueblos could move forward armed with a common purpose. The seven ethnic communities in El Chaco have always got along. There is no history of struggle or massacre between us.

The Chaco Inter-Ethnic Council, founded on 7 November 2008 in Filadelfia in the department of Boquerón (Paraguay), is a way for all of us to preserve our indigenous cultural identity. The heads of 80 out of the 126 indigenous communities in Boquerón have joined the Council.

An indigenous political force is needed to defend our land and natural resources. El Chaco is prey to rampant deforestation, and if it isn't adequately defended, it could be destroyed within 20 years. Many plants have been lost, and it is very difficult to recover them. Land is being cleared for cattle ranches.

Many things depend on environmental protection: natural medicine, the native trees, the flora and fauna, even the foxes. We have all kinds of wood, like palo santo, a hard wood that is sold all over Europe, and samu that is used for handicrafts.

Another important issue is that we want to be consulted when big development projects are announced for El Chaco. A number of projects have been proposed: the "bi-oceanic" route, aqueducts, pipelines, major projects.

Could you tell us more about your struggle?

We have to defend our fundamental rights. We have the right to live on our own land. We believe that the Council can serve as a channel of communication and dialogue between the municipalities, the regions and the central government. If there is no answer, then we can take these cases and abuses to the international level.

The best way forward is to educate our people and build our capacities. We want free education for our young people. We want to take control of our own education so we don't lose our culture. The elders can still teach our young people many things, so that we don't lose our traditional way of life.

Health is also very important. As well as modern medicine, we want to promote our shamanic medicine as valid form of healing. We are working to ensure it survives.

Water is a big problem, there is very little of it. We have, in fact, been suffering from drought for the last eight months. There is no access to safe drinking water in the whole central Chaco region.

You took part in the ITUC trade union workshop on forced labour in the indigenous territory of El Chaco, held in November 2010 in Asunción. How can international trade unions contribute to defending the indigenous cause?

Seventy percent of our indigenous colleagues do not know their rights.

It is important to inform them of their rights as workers. We want to form an alliance with trade unions. It is the only way to defend our rights, so that we see some improvement year by year. Workers need to be more insistent and fight harder for their rights.

Many problems would be solved if we could resolve our labour problems.

How did you benefit from the ITUC seminar?

It was very important for us. It was like a door opening and a tremendous opportunity for us to develop good relations with the trade union movement, and vice-versa.

It made us realise that there is a strong resolve to support indigenous people, especially in El Chaco, to help us achieve our objectives.

We want to build a strategy that will solve the problems we face, first and foremost the problem of forced labour.

I now believe that the ILO and international trade unions have confidence in our indigenous organisations. We want to work directly with the trade unions and not through intermediaries.

What can you tell us about forced labour in El Chaco?

The people who suffer the most are the ranch workers. If they are lucky they may earn between 800,000 and a million guarani (around 175 - 220 USD) a month. And they have to pay for their food and social security out of this. Children have to go to school and they have to pay for this too. Workers receive nothing if they are ill, and they have to pay for medicines.

They work for at least eight hours a day, often much longer; they have to look after between 3000 and 5000 cows, six days a week, in the best of cases. This goes on day after day. Our colleagues are faced with total discrimination. They should not have to live like this.

Forced labour will not be eradicated within the space of a year. It is going to take some time. But we have started now and slowly but surely we are going to eliminate forced labour in the ranches. Our aim is to create a revolution. We want a revolution, not with arms but with intelligence and wisdom. We are also capable of campaigning with force. Little by little the people of El Chaco are waking up and demanding their rights.

Indigenous women in Paraguay are in a particularly vulnerable position. How are you addressing this?

One of the Council's key aims is to encourage women to assert their rights. We are of the opinion that women should participate side by side with the men. They should not be sidelined. Women are part of the Council and we want them to organise.

Interview and photos: David Browne

-See the "Union View": The alliance between the indigenous peoples and trade unions in Latin America: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/the-alliance-between-the.html>

-Also see the Spotlight interview with Carlos Manami Condori: "El Chaco - The alliance between indigenous peoples and trade unions is very important" <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spotlight-interview-with-carlos.html?lang=en>

-Also see the written <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spotlight-interview-with-marta.html?lang=en> and video <http://www.ituc-csi.org/paraguay-better-protection-for.html> interview with Marta Dora Peralta: "Domestic workers are exploited and discriminated against"

- See Spotlight Interview: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spotlight-interview-with-crecencio.html?lang=en> and the video: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/el-chaco-a-rights-free-zone-for.html> with Crecencio Caceres (Chaco Inter-Ethnic Council Paraguay): "We need help in the fight against forced labour among indigenous peoples"

See: Guatemala: gold mine plundering sacred resources: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/guatemala-gold-mine-plundering.html?lang=en>

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