

SURGE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST TRADE UNIONISTS IN GUATEMALA

The government of Guatemala ratified the Dominican Republic – Central America Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) on March 25, 2005, which entered into force between the United States and Guatemala on July 1, 2006. The government made several promises prior to the ratification vote in the United States to substantially improve the administration of labor justice in the country. However, the political will necessary to achieve these changes never materialized, and the United States has applied little visible pressure on the country to comply with the labor provisions of the trade agreement. Moreover, the level of physical violence against trade unionists surged in 2006-08 after a lull, apparently artificial, during the years in which the trade agreement was under consideration. The government has yet to conduct a serious investigation into any of the murders, attempted murders and rape described below. No one has yet been arrested.

Mar. 2, 2008: Unknown armed assailants murdered Miguel Angel Ramirez Enriquez, a co-founder of the SINTRABANSUR union. The men broke into his home at approximately 8p.m. and shot him repeatedly. Mr. Ramirez had helped found the union, which represents banana workers at the Olga Maria plantation, located in the South Coast region of Guatemala. The Olga Maria plantation supplies Chiquita and is currently owned by Fernando Bolaños, a powerful Guatemalan citizen.

Mar. 1, 2008. Several shots were fired into the home of Carlos Humberto Carballo Cabrera, General Secretary of CUSG. CUSG is the labor federation to which SITRABI, the union representing workers on banana plantations supplying Del Monte, is affiliated.

Feb. 29, 2008. Six armed men ambushed family members waiting at a bus stop for the return of Jose Alberto Vicente Chavez, a trade union leader. The union leader's son and nephew were killed; his daughter jumped into a nearby river, escaped and is currently hiding at an undisclosed safe house. Mr. Vicente was a member of the executive committee of SITINCA, the union that represents workers at the INCASA Coca Cola bottling plant in Retalhuleu. He was also a member of the union's negotiating committee that finalized its collective bargaining agreement on February 21, 2008. In the week before the murders, Mr. Vicente had reported that he had been followed after a production manager reportedly told several temporary workers that the union and the terms of the recently negotiated agreement were to blame for their lost jobs. Mr. Vicente was returning from Guatemala City after filing a complaint about his safety when his son and nephew were killed.

Feb. 2, 2008: Sandra Isabel Ramirez, the daughter of the General Secretary of SINTRABANSUR, was abducted and gang-raped by four men who had interrogated her about her father's union work. Both the rape and the murder of Mr. Ramirez occurred in the context of a vigorous and violent anti-union campaign at Olga Maria over the past several months that has involved death threats, kidnapping, and firings.

Jan. 22, 2008. Minutes after filing a complaint with the local public prosecutor regarding a labor dispute, Rosalio René González Villatoro, the General Secretary of the San Benito Independent

Farmworkers Union (SBIFU), was gunned down as he got out of his car on his way to lunch. The murder occurred just one day after outbreak of a labor dispute at the San Benito farm.

Dec. 31, 2007: Several shots were fired into the house of Carlos Enrique Mancilla Garcia, Secretary of Conflicts of CUSG. Mr. Mancilla had recently been appointed by his confederation to follow up on the murder of a SITRABI trade union leader that occurred in September 2007 (see below).

Sept. 23, 2007: Early that morning, armed masked men murdered Marco Tulio Ramirez Portela, a leader of the oldest and largest private sector union in Guatemala, in front of his company-provided housing on the Yuma banana plantation. Mr. Ramirez was a member of the executive committee of SITRABI, the banana union that represents workers at Del Monte's Guatemalan subsidiary. His brother is the General Secretary of the union. No one has been arrested in his murder.

Feb. 6, 2007: Walter Anibal Ixcaquic Mendoza and Norma Sente de Ixcaquic, two members of the Frente Nacional de Venderores de Guatemala - affiliated to the Federacion Sindical de Trabajadores Independientes (FESTRI - Union Federation of Independent Workers) - were shot and killed in downtown Guatemala City by unknown assailants. Both leaders were actively involved in seeking a resolution to a trade union conflict related to safety of street vendors. By the way in which the crimes were committed, the unions have rejected the idea that the murders were related to robbery or common crime.

Jan. 15, 2007. Pedro Zamora, the General Secretary of STEPQ, the union of Puerto Quetzal workers, was riddled with bullets and killed while driving home with his two children. His three-year old son suffered gun shot injuries but survived the fuselage. No one has been arrested in the murder. The union had been fighting an opaque and corrupt port privatization and expansion plan, the firing of union nine activists, and the port's refusal to negotiate a new contract at the time of his murder.

July 2006: Unknown assailants shot STEPQ's Secretary of Labor and Conflicts, in the chest. He luckily survived the attack.

Since the implementation of DR-CAFTA, there have been at least:

8 Murders
1 Attempted Murder
2 Drive-By Shootings
1 Gang Rape

All of these crimes are directly related to trade union activity, and in all of the cases the government has undertaken no serious investigation nor has it made any arrests. To this list we could add countless death threats, break-ins, physical and psychological abuse by management, and unlawful dismissals. The government of Guatemala must take action immediately to end the violence, and to end the impunity.

For more information, please contact the AFL-CIO at (202) 637-3904.