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## **Fighting The Rising Cost Of Bananas In Guatemala With Assassination And Union-busting**

by LADB Staff

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The price of bananas has drawn the attention of US consumers. The product that is traditionally the cheapest fruit available in their grocery stores is now inching toward US\$1 a pound. People are concerned, so much so that The New York Times has published an op-ed piece explaining everything citizens need to know about banana pricing, right down to the history that includes, "In 1954, United Fruit helped arrange the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Guatemala."

Times Op-Ed contributor Dan Koepfel acknowledges, "Labor is still cheap in these countries, and growers still resort to heavy-handed tactics," but his article ignores entirely that tactics aimed at keeping bananas cheap still include murder and union-busting, and they are happening now in Guatemala.

A release from the AFL-CIO and other union and human rights organizations on March 2, 2008, says that a co-founder of the Sindicato de Trabajadores de Bananeros del Sur (SINTRABANSUR), Miguel Angel Ramirez Enriquez, was murdered. The assailants were unidentified. The union represents banana workers at the Olga Maria plantation on Guatemala's south coast. Plantations have been moving to the south coast in recent years, in large part, say analysts, to avoid or nullify labor commitments on older properties on the Caribbean coast.

SINTRABANSUR was founded in July, 2007. Since then members have been harassed by hirelings of Frutera Internacional, S.A. The company is a grower for Chiquita Brands under contract. The murder of Ramirez follows the rape of the daughter of SINTRABANSUR's general secretary and the murder of SITRABI leader Marco Tulio Ramirez Portelo. SITRABI, the Sindicato de Trabajadores Bananeros de Izabal, is the country's oldest local union. Chiquita has a long and bloody history. Most recently the company, based in Cincinnati, Ohio, admitted to, and paid US\$25 million in fines for, its financial support of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), Colombia's top paramilitary group (see NotiSur, 2007-05-18).

Guatemalan media have been silent on the killing of Miguel Angel Ramirez, but international pressure has been brought to bear through labor and human rights organizations. President Alvaro Colom has said he would see that action is taken on the SITRABI case. In the SINTRABANSUR case, the president would pit himself against Olga Maria owner Fernando Bolanos, a powerful anti-unionist who has successfully fought organized labor for years.

### ***How to break a union***

The SINTRABANSUR case is illustrative of how a union is broken. According to denunciations and petitions filed by the Unidad de Proteccion de Defensores de Derechos Humanos (UDEFEQUA),

the company, in violation of its contractual obligations, failed to pay workers the minimum wage, failed to pay into worker's Instituto Guatemalteco de Seguridad Social (IGSS) accounts, and limited the length of workers' contracts to avoid paying benefits. By November 2007, the union was broken through intimidation resulting in workers agreeing to being laid off in return for payments.

Miguel Angel Ramirez was not a union officer and was not in contact with union officials. He was one of the workers who agreed to dismantling the union and taking biweekly payments of 500 quetzals (about US\$67, 1 quetzal = US\$0.134) until the sum of 5,000 quetzals was paid. Although he agreed to this, he never formally quit the union. On March 2, 2008, two unidentified men with ski masks covering their faces chased the victim into and through his house, caught up to him, and shot him several times. Neighbors called the municipal fire department, as is the custom to avoid corrupt police. He died on arrival at a hospital. Ramirez's wife said that a couple weeks prior to the murder he had been asked to sign forms for quitting the union and attesting that he had received all the money owed him by Olga Maria. He was told that, if he refused, he would die. He had also gotten phone calls threatening his life.

In the same time frame, other workers had been intimidated by unidentified men. Among them were Victor Manuel Gomez Mendoza, the union secretary of conflicts and labor, and Alberto Lopez Perez, member of the SINTRABANSUR Consejo Consultivo. In both cases, their houses were entered and their lives threatened. UDEFEGUA also denounced the official response to the murder of Ramirez. Specifically, the crime scene was not properly protected, and prosecutors never acknowledged the case. The union has sought protections but to no avail.

This is one of the ways bananas are kept affordable in the developed world. Before it became Chiquita, the company was called United Fruit Company, and it is credited in the Times piece with figuring out "how to get bananas to American tables quickly by clearing rainforest in Latin America, building railroads and communication networks, and inventing refrigeration techniques to control ripening." The piece does refer to "iron-fisted control" when "workers could not be allowed such basic rights as health care, decent wages, or the right to congregate." But that was in 1954, or even further back in 1929, when "Colombian troops shot down banana workers and their families who were gathered together in a town square after church."

Labor remains the only variable in the cost equation that can be controlled. There is not much the fruit companies can do about the price of oil, reduced supply because of flooding in Ecuador, or the latest variant of Panama disease that threatens to wipe out the Cavendish banana, the only variety grown for export in the world (see NotiCen, 2003-02-13).

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