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Latin America is still the world's most dangerous region for union activity, a recent report by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) has found. "The death toll (of union members) was slightly lower in 2005 than the previous year, but we are nevertheless witnessing increasingly severe violence and hostility against working people who stand up for their rights," said Guy Ryder, secretary general of the ICFTU upon the release of the organization's annual report on union rights violations in June. The ICFTU, which is made up of 241 member organizations worldwide, is represented by the Inter-American Regional Organization of Workers, a 33-member umbrella group representing 45 million workers in 29 countries in Latin America.

Freedom to organize requires struggle throughout region

In 2005, 80 union members were killed in the Americas 34 less than 2004 simply for being a union member or defending union rights. Also, 275 union members received death threats, far less than the 456 reported in 2004. Though the figures could seemingly be considered an improvement, violence against union members is on the rise. According to the report, the number of tortured, assaulted and injured union workers rose from 120 in 2004 to 480 in 2005. The number of workers who were unjustly fired in 2005 increased to close to 1,700, up from 1,000 in the previous year. Nearly 70% of all union member killings worldwide in 2005 were in Latin America, the report says. Colombia topped the list of union member killings, death threats and acts of intimidations, according to the ICFTU's 2006 Annual Survey on Violations of Trade Unions Rights. Colombia: inhospitable territory for unions More than 70 Colombian union members were killed during their efforts to defend labor rights. Another 260 Colombian union members received death threats in a country where impunity for these crimes continue, and where union members are increasingly targeted by armed groups. More than 90% of these crimes have gone unpunished and many of the homicides are not even investigated, the report noted.

"It has come as no surprise to learn that Colombia is still the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist," the report said. Anti-union violence mainly affected the education sector, thereby raising the number of women victims, which has been continually increasing." The figures, cited from the Colombian nongovernmental organization Escuela Nacional Sindical (ENS), show a 35.5% decrease in violations to life, freedom and personal integrity compared to 2004. But despite a drop in homicides, death threats and forced disappearances, an increase of 88.2% in harassment and other abuses against unionized workers in 2004 was registered.
The ENS says that in Colombia most of the murders, threats, kidnappings and forced removals suffered by workers have taken place in periods and contexts characterized by increased activity and pressure for workers' demands. Therefore, said the ENS, Colombian trade unionists are not "accidental or collateral victims of the armed conflict that has been raging in the country for decades."

Central America also affected

High instances of violence against unionized workers in El Salvador and Guatemala have also been reported. In an effort to undermine trade unions in El Salvador, mass dismissals of workers and union leaders without severance pay has become a common tactic. In 2005, 64 employees were fired at Hermosa Manufacturing to destroy the existing branch union at the company. A climate of hostility and intimidation, especially for women workers, continues in Guatemala.

Women are the majority of the workforce in the education, banking and agriculture sectors. Intimidation of union members usually goes unpunished in Guatemala, ICFTU says. As a result, union membership is very low in Guatemala - just 3% of the labor force, weakening possibilities for collective negotiation since at least 25% of a company's workers must be organized to participate in negotiations. But even when collective bargaining agreements are reached, these are often ignored by employers.

"The worst violators of union rights in the Americas are multinational companies, and particularly those based in the region's export processing zones," the report said.

In Mexico, clothing factory workers employed at maquiladora facilities, lose 40% of their salaries on a daily basis through "unfair cuts imposed by the company as a means of reducing costs. "In the Dominican Republic, a textile company in the free trade zone of Bonao fired 17 workers for having formed a union. Dominican maquila workers must ask permission to go to the bathroom and some female workers have been fired for being pregnant.

In a November 2005 interview with ICFTU, Ignacio Hernandez, general secretary of the Federacion Nacional de Trabajadores de Zonas Francas (FEDOTRAZONAS) said: "Here the term 'freedom of association' is devoid of meaning. It merely exists on paper in the law and in the Republic's Constitution, but not in practice. Any worker who makes a fuss and starts making demands is immediately sacked under some pretext." The annual report also notes that a general lack of respect for human rights throughout the region, the expansion of the informal economy, the lack of political will in governments to observe labor law, and an increase in contracts for dangerous jobs, further aggravate the problem.

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