

# USLEAP

Fall 2013:  
Issue #2

Fighting for worker justice in the global economy

## Continuing the Mission of USLEAP

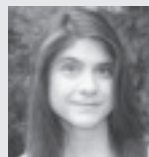
*A note from ILRF's Executive Director, Judy Gearhart*

ILRF is honored to become the new home of USLEAP and the Stephen Coats Memorial Project. Steve's commitment inspired me personally and so many others. His passing last April left a deep hole in the labor rights community. (See page 2 about the memorial on November 26.) Many of us had long come to rely on Steve's humble and deft role in connecting activists and building solidarity between the USLEAP community in North America and the workers he so loved in Latin America. Steve's brand of faith-inspired, community-to-community bridge-building earned him deep respect among everyone who knew him.

ILRF and USLEAP have been working more closely together than ever during the past couple years. I joined the USLEAP board soon after coming to ILRF and Steve was a vital collaborator and mentor for me. So when the USLEAP Board asked us to house USLEAP going forward, we were already clear on the challenges and opportunities involved.

Steve's commitment to trade union rights in the Americas never wavered. Thus many organizers have relied on USLEAP to connect their struggle to the broader trade and labor policy debates and to put out urgent actions to decry death threats and violence against trade unionists. Few foundations continue to fund this kind of work, however, and the only way to keep it going is through a community of individual supporters who take action and contribute in countless ways to the organization. The USLEAP community is the organization's greatest asset, one that Steve carefully built up over the years to support USLEAP's very special and unwavering mission. We hope you will continue to be a part of this work.

As we endeavor to continue Steve's legacy, we begin by profiling stories about violence against trade unionists in order to keep you, the USLEAP community, connected to the courageous men and women who are organizing against all odds for the ability to exercise their basic rights.



show on Radio Progreso called "Trade Unionist on Air" in which he shares information about labor rights, human rights, and citizenship with Honduras's agricultural workers and answers questions from callers concerned about rights violations.

Threats against Martínez escalated on July 5, when an unmarked vehicle staked out Radio Progreso. The vehicle circled Martínez's workplace four times in the hour Martínez was getting off air. Martínez was forced to escape through a back exit. To ensure his safety, he had to flee the country.

Two months after the threats against Martínez, on September 14, three armed attackers tried to force entry into the home of Victor Crespo, general secretary of the Sindicato Gremial de Trabajadores del Muelle (SGTM), in Puerto Cortés. They left, shouting death threats, when they became aware of how many potential witnesses they had woken up nearby. The attack followed two months of anonymous death threats telling Victor to stop seeking a collective agreement with the the new operators of Puerto Cortés, International Container Terminal Services Inc. (ICTSI). The armed attackers yelled that he should "stop making noise organizing dock workers."

The International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) has launched a global campaign to demand that the president of Honduras intervene to provide proper protection for Crespo and guarantee workers' right to collective bargaining. USLEAP and ILRF have joined with the ITF campaign and you too can support Crespo by sending a letter to the President of Honduras at [www.LaborRights.org/VictorCrespo](http://www.LaborRights.org/VictorCrespo).

## HONDURAS: LABOR LEADERS FACE DEATH THREATS

Since the 2009 coup, at least 31 trade unionists, 52 rural workers, and 28 journalists have been assassinated in Honduras. Recently, two Honduran labor leaders were forced to leave the country after receiving repeated, anonymous death threats.

On June 25, 2013, unidentified call-

ers used an untraceable number to call Honduran union leader José María Martínez of FESTAGRO demanding he "stop talking sh\*t on the radio or [they] will shut his mouth for him," and to "prepare your burial clothes because we are going to kill you." For the past 20 years, Martínez has hosted a daily radio



## Memorial for Stephen Coats

The Board of Directors of USLEAP invites you join us on November 26 to honor Stephen Coats. To our great shock and sadness Steve passed away suddenly last April. He was the Executive Director of the USLEAP since 1990.

Many of Steve's friends and colleagues could not attend the services in Chicago so we are organizing a gathering to remember, celebrate and honor his life, family and work. Steve's wife and sons will join us. We'll also spend a little time talking about the next steps for the goals and mission of USLEAP as we join with the International Labor Rights Forum.

Tuesday, November 26, 2013  
5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.  
Penthouse, Teamsters Office  
25 Louisiana Ave NW, Washington, DC  
RSVP to [tbeaty@teamster.org](mailto:tbeaty@teamster.org)

## Thank You

We wish to thank everyone who has helped carry USLEAP forward following the sudden passing of executive director Stephen Coats. This includes all board members, with particular thanks to board chair Gail Lopez-Henriquez and vice chair Tim Beaty. We thank Eric Gottwald for keeping the program work alive during the transition and for all the program work he conducted in 2012-2013 working closely with Stephen, and Liana Foxvog for transitioning communications and database systems to ILRF.

We also extend our gratitude to Mia Fill for all her work this year on fundraising management as well as essential assistance during the transition. Finally, thank you to our fall 2013 intern Mercer Gary for translations, research, and other essential office assistance.

## ***BEHIND THE RAINFOREST ALLIANCE STAMP***

Rainforest Alliance recently recertified the Tres Hermanas banana plantations in Honduras as "sustainable," despite years of systematic labor rights abuses.

Since 2009, workers at Tres Hermanas, a Chiquita supplier, have faced a pattern of labor rights violations, including failure to pay the minimum wage, unpaid overtime, and the illegal firing of workers attempting to form a union. To protect their rights, workers formed the union SITRAINBA, which was officially recognized by the Honduran Ministry of Labor on August 15, 2012. Rather than negotiate with the union, however, management at Tres Hermanas has waged an illegal campaign of targeted firings and harassment against union members.

Rainforest Alliance documented these abuses in its own audit, which found four major violations of Sustainable

Agriculture Network Labor Standards, including of Standard 5.12, which guarantees workers' rights to organize and collectively bargain. Shockingly, Rainforest certified Tres Hermanas in spite of these violations.

Rainforest Alliance's failure to uphold their own labor standards is not only a slap in the face to brave SITRAINBA members, but a disturbing show of support for employers who abuse worker rights. Rainforest has for years promoted that labor rights are covered in their standards, but now claims these are "voluntary elements" and violations of these standards are insufficient for decertification. Visit [www.laborrights.org/rainforestbananas](http://www.laborrights.org/rainforestbananas) to help us tell Rainforest Alliance to either decertify or cease the false advertising.

## **HAPPY 20TH ANNIVERSARY TO COLSIBA**

COLSIBA celebrated its 20th anniversary in May in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, with a gathering of representatives of its 70,000 members in nine countries. Founded in May 1993, COLSIBA functions as a union coordinating body representing banana and agro-industrial workers' unions in Latin America. In the two decades since its founding, COLSIBA has played a major role in supporting efforts to organize farmworkers across Latin America, while also advocating for the inclusion of social and environmental provisions in trade policies.

Liana Foxvog and Eric Gottwald attended the gathering, representing ILRF

and USLEAP as strategic partners of COLSIBA in the movement to demand respect for labor rights and dignity for workers in the Latin American agro-export industry. The event began on a somber note, with COLSIBA coordinator Iris Munguía paying tribute to long-time ally Stephen Coats, the late Executive Director of USLEAP. Munguía praised “Esteban’s” tenacious advocacy on behalf of worker rights in Latin America and highlighted the importance of continuing to develop cross-border networks of solidarity to hold corporations and governments accountable. The event turned even more somber as attendees called out

the names of dozens of compañeros who have been killed as part of the systemic violence against labor rights defenders, recognizing them as “presente.”

To mark the 20th anniversary, COLSIBA’s women leaders have published their agenda, which they are using to advocate for the particular needs of women farmworkers. COLSIBA is recognized for its pioneering work for women’s rights in the workplace, including reaching an agreement with Chiquita on a zero tolerance policy for sexual harassment on banana plantations.

### **Regional Conference**

In October, COLSIBA held its 12th Regional Conference in Managua, bringing together unions that represent workers in banana, pineapple, sugarcane, and flower plantations across Latin America. Participants reflected on the victories and setbacks in the struggle to organize plantation workers for better wages and working conditions. Trade union leaders from Costa Rica, Peru, and Guatemala highlighted recent, successful organizing drives in the pineapple, asparagus, and banana industries.

Eric Gottwald gave a short presentation on USLEAP/ILRF’s capacity to support farmworkers and unions by bringing direct pressure to bear on U.S. companies which source food from plantations that violate workers’ rights. The meeting culminated with the election of Gilbert Bermúdez Umaña, a long-time trade union leader and one of COLSIBA’s founders, as its next coordinator and Iris Munguía’s successor. COLSIBA thanked Iris for her leadership, which marked the first time a woman led the region-wide union federation.

Bermúdez and the rest of the new board adopted resolutions laying out a strategy for engaging with the fair trade and social standards industry which has made millions of dollars certifying farms across Latin America as “sustainable,” despite widespread violations of fundamental labor rights.



## **GUATEMALA: WORKERS’ LONG WAIT FOR JUSTICE CONTINUES**

Six months ago the United States and Guatemala reached an agreement to address a complaint filed by the AFL-CIO under DR-CAFTA that alleged the government of Guatemala was failing to enforce its own labor laws and investigate violence against trade unionists. The governments signed the “Enforcement Plan” on April 26, agreeing to suspend arbitration of the case for a six-month period, during which Guatemala had to

take concrete steps to implement the plan or resume arbitration.

According to an October 22 joint letter by the AFL-CIO and several Guatemalan unions, crucial parts of the Enforcement Plan have not been implemented and workers are no closer to freely exercising their fundamental rights to organize and collectively bargain. The Ministry of Labor still does not

*continued on page 4*



## ***COSTA RICA: DOLE THREATENS TO ELIMINATE UNION VIA OUTSOURCING***

In October of 2012, the Industrial Union of Agriculture Workers, Agriculture Transport and Related Sectors of Costa Rica (SINTRASTAFCOR) began negotiations through a new collective commission of Standard Fruit Company of Costa Rica, a subsidiary of the international fruit corporation, Dole Fruit Company. One year later, the union says that little progress has been made as the company has continued to postpone negotiations and make excuses.

While the company justifies a rising

rate of dismissals by claiming to have an excessive number of workers, an investigation led by SINTRASTAFCOR revealed that there were several days when Standard Fruit Company actually lacked sufficient employees, leading to an increased workload for others. The company has offered a deal including three month's wages plus benefits to any workers who agree to resign. So far, some 23 workers have accepted the offer. SINTRASTAFCOR took their complaints to the Labor Court, which

finally stopped the dismissals.

Despite this victory, union leaders worry over Dole's ultimate goal, in light of the company's actions elsewhere. In all other Latin American countries where Dole operates, the corporation has succeeded in contracting out the Operations Department and thereby doing away with unions. SINTRASTAFCOR's leadership sees Dole's delays and ambivalence in the negotiation process as disconcerting signs of what may be to come.

## ***COLOMBIA: FIRED GENERAL MOTORS WORKERS DETERMINED TO WIN***

Two years and four hunger strikes have passed without a resolution for a group of General Motors workers who began protesting their unjust dismissals from the company after sustaining work-related injuries. It's been a long haul for the members of the Association of Injured Workers and Ex-workers of GM (Asotrecol) who have been camping out in front of the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá, Colombia, to demand justice. GM has refused, however, to negotiate a settlement with the workers for the unjust dismissals and the forgery of documents preventing them from collecting workers' compensation. This stalling on the

part of GM has placed heavy burdens on the families and finances of the protestors, as well as on their deteriorating medical conditions.

Former UAW presidents Melvin Thompson and Frank Hammer and other allies showed their support by demonstrating with the Asotrecol members in Bogotá this summer. The visits were accompanied by \$900 in donations from Detroit Chrysler workers from UAW Local 869, allowing one of the protestors to receive necessary abdominal surgery. Donations such as these have enabled Asotrecol to continue their struggle for a just settlement.

Once the solidarity delegation had departed, however, the U.S. Embassy attempted to illegally evict the Asotrecol protestors from their campsite. In response, Asotrecol member Carlos Ernesto Trujillo tied himself to a cross. Fifteen hours later an agreement to stop the eviction was reached. Although GM is reported to have already betrayed parts of the agreement, the protestors were able to meet with the Colmotores plant management, which has led to safety and ergonomic improvements in the plant and an end to the dismissals of injured workers.

### ***Guatemala...***

*continued from page 3*

have the basic power to impose fines or other penalties on employers who violate labor laws. Employers continue to ignore labor court orders to reinstate illegally fired workers or issue severance payments. The letter concluded by calling on the U.S. government to re-start the arbitration panel.

In the five years since the filing of the CAFTA complaint, 58 trade unionists have been killed in Guatemala, and no one has been convicted of the crimes. According to a recent report by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Guatemala has passed Colom-

bia as the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist. Thousands more have been beaten, harassed, and threatened simply for standing up for the right to organize.

The international labor movement has rallied to the aid of Guatemalan trade unionists under attack. In June of 2012, workers' delegates to the International Labour Organization asked the ILO to hold a special Commission of Inquiry into the anti-union violence in Guatemala and the government's failure to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators. As a result of this pressure,

the government signed an agreement to accept a high-level ILO mission to investigate the violence and seek solutions.

In August, a Public Services International (PSI) delegation met with the president of Guatemala to urge him to do more to prevent and investigate attacks against trade unionists. Several members of PSI affiliates have been murdered, attacked, or threatened in the past year alone. The delegation announced it will lobby the European Union for a suspension of Guatemala's favored trade status until the government takes action against violence and impunity.