

Report of visit to the UK

Noé Ramirez Portela, General Secretary Izabal Banana Workers' Union, Guatemala (SITRABI)

26-28 November 2015

Noé Ramirez Portela, General Secretary of the Izabal Banana Workers' Union of Guatemala (SITRABI) visited the UK from 26 to 28 November 2015, during which he met UK trade unionists, government and opposition officials and journalists. He also spoke at the [Latin America 2015 Conference](#).

Noé's visit was funded by **Aslef**, **GMB**, **TUC Aid**, **UCU**, **Unite** and **UNISON**, and was co-ordinated by the TUC and Banana Link. Banana Link works towards fair and sustainable tropical fruit trade and production in partnership with plantation worker unions and small farmer organisations in Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean.

Background

Guatemala has been described as the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists by the International Trade Union Confederation. Since 2007, a total of 68 trade union leaders and representatives have been murdered, and a high number of attempted murders, kidnappings, break-ins, and death threats have been reported, along with torture.

SITRABI is the oldest private sector union in Guatemala and represents over 4000 members in Del Monte and Del Monte supplier farms on the Caribbean coast. SITRABI has good relations with other local unions in other multinational and national plantations. Noé was elected General Secretary of SITRABI in 2000, shortly after the union's Executive Committee was forced at gun point to resign their posts and call off strike action over contract violations.

Summary of meetings

Shadow Foreign Affairs office staff

- Noé explained the current union and political situation in Guatemala as well as complaints lodged under Article 16 of US-CAFTA and the pressure in the ILO for a Commission of Enquiry.
- Explained the importance of monitoring the ILO procedures to bring the new Guatemalan government to task.
- Requested Parliamentary Questions on impunity and trade union rights abuses.
- Also discussed how to raise human rights issues and links to UK business under new UK company reporting requirements.

TUC International staff and GMB international officer

- Noé explained advances in information gathering and organising work in the south of Guatemala and the alliance with the Catholic church's Pastoral de la Tierra. SITRABI is now in a position to organise a series of training workshops with community leaders in the south as part of the process of identifying workers willing to take forward organising inside plantations.
- Clarified that the mobilisations that led to resignation of the current President of Guatemala were organised by business sector, not by civil society. The new President is clearly backed by the business sector and senior military figures were behind his Presidency which starts in January. The trade union movement has low expectations of such a government.



UNISON International

- Noé explained the trade union situation and organising efforts in the south, and underlined the very real threat to unionised plantations in the north.
- Also that there is a link with Del Monte's other operations in Central America, including their new plantations in Nicaragua and the company's recent resistance to collective bargaining in Costa Rica. This would link directly with current UNISON-supported work with SITRAP in Costa Rica.
- Agreed to present a project to UIDF in January which will bring together unions from the three countries to develop a regional strategy towards Del Monte.

The Grocer magazine

- Interview with Carina Perkins on workers' rights situation in the south and pressure on decent conditions in the north. She hopes to position a story on the importance of Guatemala to the world banana market and the need for efforts to improve the conditions in the South.
- A published piece will be important as it is read by supermarket buyers and decision-makers.

Latin America 2015 conference



This annual conference, held at Congress House, provides an opportunity to share experiences of developments in the Caribbean and Latin America, and effective ways to get involved in solidarity work.

Noé spoke both at the opening plenary session along with at a seminar side event, where he shared a platform with Owen Tudor, Head of the TUC's European Union and International Relations Department.

For Noé, the conference provided a strong sign of the level of solidarity from the UK labour movement and civil society, which is vital in moving forward with dangerous organising work.

The afternoon workshop was attended by a good cross-section of activists who made commitments to put the Guatemalan trade union situation on their organisational agendas. Owen Tudor made it clear the TUC's ongoing support for SITRABI's work in defending unions in the north and building work in the south.

A video of Noé's speech to the afternoon seminar, in which he outlines the challenges and the dangers of organising in Guatemala, is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=afZi9KwJ178

Further information and contact

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Nineteen organisations, including Banana Link, from across the world have come together to campaign to Make Fruit Fair! NGOs from Europe are working in close partnership with small farmer organisations and plantation worker unions from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean to improve living and working conditions for the hundreds of thousands of people who grow, pick and pack the tropical fruit that we buy in our shops every day.

www.makefruitfair.org

