

BULLETIN

## Reaching out: solidarity work inspires hope

April 1, 2004

### The Report: April / May 2004 vol.25 num.2

by BUD GODDERIS



**few months ago** I was part of a meeting with HSA's Committee for Equality and Social Action (CESA) to talk about the human rights and social justice work of the Ecumenical Task Force for Justice in the Americas (formerly Christian Task Force on Central America). As a retired member of the HSA and its Solidarity Committee (forerunner of CESA), our conversation brought back many good memories of travels to the south and the solidarity work that emerged.

Perhaps the most memorable experience for me was the endorsement I received from an HSA convention just before I was to accompany exiled Guatemalan labour advocate and Task Force staff member Marta de la Vega (Torres) to a human rights gathering in her still very dangerous homeland.

How strong I felt, and how grateful I was to know that I was not alone in accompanying Marta, because the convention had confirmed that all the HSA members were with us!

It turned out that we needed that support when a coup erupted shortly after we arrived and Marta and I had to immediately get out of the country as her life was in danger. I know all the phone calls from Canada truly made a difference and helped ensure our safe return to Canada.

This was by no means the first time that Marta had experienced union solidarity. She has been a legal advisor to the Coca-Cola workers union in Guatemala since the 70's and even when she was forced into exile in the early 80's she continued to work internationally on behalf of the union.

Here, from a recent presentation Marta gave to the Council of Canadians' annual meeting in Vancouver is her description of the union's struggle, which I think also speaks to what we need to be in Canada today:

Over the past 27 years, eight Guatemalan Coca-Cola workers: Pedro Quevedo, Manuel Lopez Balam, Marlon Mendizabal, Arnulfo Gomez, Ricardo de Jesus Garcia, Edgar Rene Aldana, Ismael Vasquez and Florentino Gomez were killed because they exercised their rights to form a union.

What have been some of the elements of our struggles and success?

We've worked together to form our union. Many people did not know how to read or write, yet they learned that they have rights and they were ready to stand up to defend those rights. We have struggled not just for ourselves, but also for our children.

We've turned crisis into opportunity. In 1984, Guatemala was experiencing terrible repression and it was at a time when more than 200,000 people had been killed. Despite having been threatened, we occupied the factory, and during that year of occupation the workers learned to read and write. It was an opportunity that

we couldn't afford to waste.

□We also asked for help and international solidarity was mobilized inside Coca-Cola factories in Europe and Latin America. This made it possible to pressure Coca-Cola's head office in Atlanta to face its social responsibility.

□If we can do this in Guatemala under very difficult conditions, other countries with more political space can also force corporations to face the social responsibility that comes with profit. For example, in the last four years, at least seven Coca-Cola workers have been killed in Colombia, and there is again a major campaign to boycott Coca-Cola and to force the corporation to respect the rights of workers.□

I have never forgotten the experience of our HSA tours to Guatemala and El Salvador where we came into direct contact with the people who were part of the projects we helped to support.

The sharing of experience and the relationships we developed are examples of what I call □the mutuality of solidarity.□ Who would have thought that we would now be starting to experience the same exploitation and oppression in Canada as our brothers and sisters in the south have endured and suffered for so long.

That same corporate agenda, now embodied in □free□ trade agreements, has taken control of the Canadian economy, including its health and social programs, and we are losing ground, day by day. Today it's us Canadians who have the opportunity to learn from our friends in the south how to resist with hope and courage.

Now that I'm retired, I'm very grateful to be able to continue being in solidarity with friends in the south through my work with the Task Force.

I also want to thank CESA and other HSA brothers and sisters for their support of our human rights and justice work. Your gift to us this year has made an enormous difference in our ability to continue our Urgent Action, information sharing and educational activities.

I will leave the last words to my compañera Marta, from whom I have learned, and continue to learn so much. She quotes Gandhi who said □The economics that disregard moral and sentimental considerations are like waxworks, that being life-like, still lack the life of the living flesh. At every crucial moment, these newfangled economic laws have broken down in practice. And nations or individuals who accept them as guiding maxims will perish.□ This is applicable to the Central America Free Trade Agreement, the Free Trade Area of the Americas and the North American Free Trade Agreement.

□In the Americas, there is resistance to the 'free trade agreement' because the people are not free. Furthermore, it cannot be called 'trade' because it is in reality the looting of our resources. It is not an 'agreement' because many of us feel that it is an offer that we cannot refuse.

□We are not in a position to refuse, but we will. The American continent deserves much better than 'free trade.' All of us dream that every person will have a place, and each nation will have peace as described by Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador: 'Peace is not the product of terror or fear. Peace is not the silence of cemeteries. Peace is not the silent result of violent repression. Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all. Peace is dynamism. Peace is generosity. It is right and it is duty.'□ 

*Bud Godderis retired in 2002 from his work as social worker and HSA chief steward at Trail Regional Hospital.*

Type:

[The Report](#)

- [Print](#)
- [PDF](#)