

Where union membership can be a death sentence

Imagine holding a job where the working conditions involve death threats and harassment. These are some of the hazards Berenice Celeyta faces as a human rights defender and director of NOMADESC (the Association for Social Research and Action) in Cali, Colombia.

A key mission for NOMADESC is raising international awareness about the human suffering and rights violations caused by five decades of civil conflict in Colombia.

In March, Celeyta visited a number of Canadian cities, including Vancouver, during 12 days of speaking engagements and interviews. Her stay included a stop at BCGEU headquarters in Burnaby.

“The objective of the tour is to help people understand what’s going on in Colombia,” Celeyta said through a translator. “The media doesn’t really cover much of what’s going on in terms of the reality there.”

NOMADESC conducts human rights training and research, provides legal assistance to indigenous peoples, peasants, trade unionists, afro-Colombian communities and other groups, and creates community-based peace and social justice programs.

The organization also monitors incidents of violence plus judicial executions, massacres, assassinations, arbitrary detentions and torture.

The BCGEU supports the work of NOMADESC through its more

than two decades-long partnership with CoDevelopment Canada, a global justice organization that assists groups in Latin America.

The reality of being a union member in Colombia is often ignored and is “basically a death sentence,” she said. According to Celeyta, more than 2,500 Colombian unionists have been killed for defending their rights.

Many more have been fired from public sector jobs. NOMADESC has been working to get workers reinstated whenever possible. A recent court case was settled in NOMADESC’s favour and ordered the reinstatement of 54 workers to their civil service jobs.

“We were able to take their case to an international court,” she said. “It took 6 or 7 years, but the court is now asking the Colombian Government to reinstate those workers.”

Celeyta is especially concerned about government workers in Colombia, a worker sector vulnerable to massive layoffs as the national government pursues an agenda of mass privatization.

“They replace workers with many years of experience with contract workers. This is leaving people in the street and often in great poverty,” she noted.

Celeyta said international solidarity and the support of organizations such as the BCGEU and its members are vital to the defense of human rights in Colombia. She urges union members to keep speaking out against worker oppression and demand the Government of Canada direct



Photo: Joshua Barron

LABOUR RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS – Berenice Celeyta, director of the Association for Social Research and Action (NOMADESC) visited the BCGEU headquarters in Burnaby as part of a 12-day Canadian tour to raise awareness of human rights violations in Colombia, including the targeting of union activists and public service workers.

the Colombian Government to respect human rights.

Believing “a new Colombia is possible”, Celeyta plans to continue fighting against human rights violations, drug trafficking and corruption in a public way, despite the ever-present dangers to her personal safety.

“We must have justice, equality and dignity for the Colombian people. They kill us for telling the truth. But there are many men and women, like me, who are ready to not lie,” she said.

“My commitment begins by being at the side of peasants and indigenous people and workers and really seeing in their eyes the situations they are living. You can’t do nothing after seeing that.”

For more information about the work of NOMADESC, visit the CoDevelopment Canada web site: www.codev.org.



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