

Community projects in El Salvador, Honduras gain unions' support

For BCGEU activist Yvette Ortiz, a recent tour to Central America provided a first-hand opportunity to see how community-based organizing is improving the lives of urban and rural workers.

Joining a tour of registered nurses who are members of the B.C. Nurses Union, Ortiz travelled to El Salvador and Honduras earlier this year to meet activists from two organizations that are funded by BCGEU and other B.C. unions through CoDevelopment Canada.

Her delegation's first stop was El Salvador, where Ortiz was originally born. There they saw the work of APSIES (Salvadoran Association for Integrated Health and Social Services) in a small rural community two long hours from the capital San Salvador. Government social services are non-existent in rural areas, so APSIES offers a variety of programs including health promotion, community development and prevention of domestic violence.

"I've lived in Canada most of my life, so it was hard to go back to El Salvador with all of its problems and the huge gap between the rich and the poor," says Ortiz, who is a program coordinator at a family resource centre in Surrey, and a member of BCGEU's International Solidarity Committee.

Later, the B.C. delegation moved on to neighbouring Honduras. They met with activists in a women's collective group called CODEMUH which has successfully campaigned to amend that country's labour code to strengthen health and safety protections for women workers in maquila factories—modern day sweatshops owned by multi-nationals.

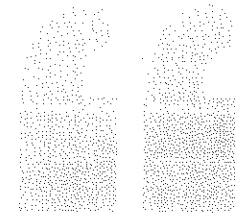


WE'RE THE WISER — BCGEU's Yvette Ortiz, (back row second from right), with activists from APSIES community organization who are making a difference for women and rural workers in Lolotique, El Salvador.

"CODEMUH is like a community social service agency in Canada, and the work is similar to my own," says Ortiz. In addition to health and safety efforts, CODEMUH meets a wide variety of needs. They help women and children who are escaping domestic violence with legal aide and advocacy services, and promote basic human rights.

"As a union we in BCGEU are the wiser from building relationships with these groups," she says.

Each year, BCGEU allocates \$80,000 for international solidarity projects like the ones Ortiz visited. BCGEU also provides resources to support the work of progressive organizations in Nicaragua, and Columbia, along with support for AIDS relief in Africa. We also help community health workers organize in the Philippines, and sponsors worker safe houses in Burma.



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