

# Committees

The members of the 2005/2006 Committee for Equality and Social Action were:

- Maureen Ashfield (Chair)
- Ernie Hilland
- Larry Bryan
- Kimball Finigan
- Thalia Vesterback
- Pam Bush (Staff)

New members for 2006/2005 are:

- Rachel Tutte (Chair)
- Agnes Jackman
- Mike Trelenberg
- Rosalie Fedoryshyn
- Marcela Dudas
- Pam Bush (Staff)

For information on this committee, contact Pam Bush at 604/439.0994 or 1.800/663.2017.



**Kimball Finigan reports on the tour of Central American partners**

## EQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

### Solidarity tour underscores importance of strong communities and workers' rights

by KIMBALL FINIGAN

**D**uring February and March of this year I was fortunate to participate in a tour and see first-hand the difference HSA's support of projects in Central America makes. I – along with HSA members Sonia Marino (case manager, AIDS Vancouver) and Eileen Kosarek (social worker, Providence / Brock Fahrni) – joined a delegation to Central America organized by Codevelopment Canada, a BC-based non-governmental organization promoting international solidarity.

On this tour of our southern partners, we visited Honduras and Nicaragua to learn from civil society groups operating in these countries.

The groups we visited, Women Workers' Collective of Honduras (CODEMUH) and the Maria Elena Cuadra Movement of Working and Unemployed Women (MEC) are working to advance human rights – in particular women's rights – as well as to educate workers, and guide public policy in their countries.

This tour gave me an opportunity to see how HSA members' donations, made through the union's Committee for Equality and Social Action are put to use. As an added personal bonus, I got an unfettered insight into the lives of the people in these countries.

It was clear that great disparities in personal wealth exist and that these are more pronounced than in Canada. It was equally clear to me how valuable our public services actually are – particularly when we could see the effects of their absence. Fundamental things that we take for granted like clean air and water, trash removal, and health care simply aren't available to everyone.

We learned of CODEMUH's efforts to help Maquila workers gain knowledge and confidence to assert their rights. CODEMUH offers workshops to mainly women factory workers after their work days are complete. Topics of discussion run from reproductive health to economic literacy and occupational health and safety. In addition, the CODEMUH trainers help them learn to advocate for themselves and their communities.

We visited one of the Maquila "neighbourhoods" at shift change and were astonished at the mass of people who work within a single "free trade zone" factory. At the end of the day, a flood of humanity washed out of the factory through two guarded gates. Most of these workers then jammed themselves onto school buses like sardines in a can so they could get dropped off near their home communities.

This is a daily part of their work life – going back and forth to the factory in overcrowded buses from their homes – sometimes quite a distance away.

**R**oughly 60 per cent of these Maquila workers are single mothers. Not only do they work for up to 10 hours a day in the factory, they then return home and put in significant work to care for their family.

Given their low wages and lack of access to public services you can appreciate that the lives of these people are dramatically different than our own.

In Nicaragua we saw similar conditions to



**HSA's support of projects in Central America contributes to improved working and social conditions.**  
Kimball Finigan photo.

those in Honduras. We also saw the effects of two major events in the recent past.

The first was the 1982 earthquake that flattened much of Managua, the capital city. To this day, there are very few buildings taller than three or four stories, and there is a large number of condemned buildings in the centre of Managua inhabited by people who would otherwise be homeless.

The second event was the revolution to overthrow the Somoza family dictatorship and the counter-revolutionary war sponsored by the US government. The scars of the decades-long wars are still visible – in particular, extreme poverty. At one point in a “sightseeing” tour of Managua we were taken to the city dump where, reportedly, 1,200 people live and 8,000 people make their livelihood.

The highlight of the tour in Nicaragua was our visit to four Maquilas. We were allowed to go inside the factories and see the actual working conditions.

This was quite an eye-opener, considering the hor-

ror stories I had heard about workers locked into factories at night or prevented from using a toilet. There was, in fact, a range of working conditions in the four factories. While certainly none would be considered good by our standards, even though all four factories were “showcase” sites approved for foreign inspection, they weren’t as poor as I had imagined.

The best conditions overall were in a worker-owned and operated factory – clearly an example of what is possible in the industry. Sadly, it was quite evident that improvements are needed to bring work conditions up to a standard that would respect these workers’ rights and contributions.

My tour of Central America served as a good reminder that while we are very fortunate in the developed world, we cannot get complacent about the advantages we have fought for. In addition, we have the ability and, in my view, a responsibility to work to support working people and their families not just here at home, but also in the developing world. **R**