

In Honduras and El Salvador, “trade union leaders are vulnerable to possible assassination at any moment”

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On an average day, Joel Almendares is counselling Honduran middle and high school students about how to excel in school and plan their futures. But he is also fighting off worries about violent attacks on himself and his unionised colleagues. Almendares is secretary general of the *Confederación Unitaria de Trabajadores de Honduras* (CUTH), a confederation of trade unions from a breadth of sectors, like agriculture, textiles and education. He belongs to the latter group ; before working with teenagers, he taught primary school children and university students. But teaching in Honduras can be perilous work : according to UNHCR, [90 teachers were murdered by gangs](#) between 2010 and 2019. Almendares is also a public critic of the ruling power structure in Honduras. All together, this is a dangerous combination.

The region in which he lives, central America, is [one of the most violent in the world](#) by homicide rates. An exodus of migrants and refugees – [an average of 265,000 per year](#) – fleeing to places like the United States, Mexico, other countries in Latin America and even Europe, has attracted international attention in the past decade. The flight patterns have split and multiplied as draconian immigration policies from the Trump administration in the United States attempt to repel them, deporting most back to the region or forcing them to wait in Mexico for their asylum applications to be processed. Once deported, [those fleeing threats cannot stay home](#), so they immediately leave again, trying as many times as necessary to make it to the US or another destination.

In Honduras and neighbouring El Salvador particularly, the strife people are fleeing is borne of converging factors that include corruption, street gangs, the drug trade, repressive security policies and a long history of violence ingrained in social relations.

An additional factor is poverty and remarkable inequality : Honduras is the sixth most unequal country in the world and the most unequal in Latin America, while in El Salvador, 70 per cent of workers do not have stable, salaried work, and are constantly scrambling to survive. Union organising brings Honduran and Salvadoran workers into contact with all of those factors. It is risky work.

In the International Trade Union Confederation’s (ITUC) [2019 Global Rights Index](#), Honduras was given a ‘rating 5’ (only a 5+ is worse), which indicates a country where there is absolutely no guarantee of trade union rights. Attacks for union activity are not uncommon. In December 2019, the Honduran Network Against Anti-Union Violence [decried the vulnerability of its members](#), spurred by the 16 November murder of a member of the Tela Railroad Company Workers’ Union (SITRATERCO), Jorge Alberto Acosta Barrientos, who was gunned down in a pool hall after having previously received death threats.

“The government has enabled our attackers”

One sector in which such violence is particularly common is agroindustry. The harvesting and processing of palm oil exemplifies the problem. Systematic injustices are rife. Most companies don't meet even the Honduran minimum wage, which ranges from US\$269 to US\$327 per month, Almendares tells *Equal Times*. “They basically see people as animals.”

Since 2011, more than [100 farm workers are reported to have been executed](#) on plantations owned by just one palm baron family, the Facussés, in a long-running land and labour battle. The Facussés are amongst [the most powerful people in central America](#), and the murders are largely alleged to have been committed by the family's private security guards. The conflict stems from a sweeping dispossession of thousands of farmworkers from their land in the 1970s, legitimised as part of structural adjustment economic reforms. The World Bank was quick to provide funding to the private companies like Dinant – one of the biggest palm oil and food producers in central America, owned by the Facussés – which in turn took over mammoth swaths of land. It seeded tensions that grew with time.

As palm oil becomes increasingly lucrative in the global economy, union organising has been one of few levers to pull to intercede in the situation. Workers at two palm companies are currently unionising. Yet, for the past two years, the Ministry of Labour in the ruling administration of President Juan Orlando Hernández has refused to approve the unions, says Almendares. The Ministry has consistently cancelled meetings meant to advance the certification process. Meanwhile, some of the organising workers have been threatened with death or fired without cause, he says.

The Ministry of Labour has engaged in the same foot-dragging in response to melon plantation workers, according to Almendares. “These are clear violations of international treaties,” he tells *Equal Times*. “The government has enabled us to be attacked.”

Amidst the struggles, a bright spot came in January 2019, when the Dublin-headquartered global fruit giant Fyffes – a subsidiary of the Japanese multinational Sumitomo – [officially recognised](#) the *Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Agroindustria y Similares* (STAS) in its Honduran operations. However, the agreement came on the back of [a global campaign](#) to call on Fyffes to remedy decades of labor rights abuses suffered by melon plantation workers in Honduras, including the illegal firing and harassment of union members, wage theft and exposure to toxic agrochemicals. The general secretary of STAS, Moisés Sánchez, was kidnapped in 2017 and threatened with murder if he did not leave the union ; [now the persecution](#) appears to have expanded to the courts, via criminal charges of ‘usurpation’, as intimidation and surveillance continue.

Another sector unfriendly to unionising is textiles, a sector that employs upward of 150,000 Hondurans, according to the government, and generates over US\$440 million annually. Organising often leads to workers being fired or threatened with harm, Almendares says, and companies increase their leverage by utilising corrupt courts to override the weak existing labour legislation. Textile and agroindustry workers appear amongst the 89 documented cases of death threats against CUTH-affiliated union members. The threats often appear to be connected to their unionising. But they can also be related to politics.

“In Honduras, silence is a form of survival”

In 2009, a coup reshuffled the country's corporate and political elite, empowering actors with significant links to drug cartels. The coup ousted democratically elected leftist president Manuel Zelaya, and ushered in a series of right-wing leaders, mostly from the National Party.

President Juan Orlando Hernández has ruled Honduras since 2014. While in office, he has [softened anti-corruption initiatives](#), [militarised public security](#) and sought to [restrict US-bound emigration](#). The latter two policies have won him strong support from the administrations of both presidents Trump and Obama, even when President Hernández was dogged by strong evidence of [electoral fraud](#) – and even when, last year, he was named as an unindicted co-conspirator in a drug trafficking trial in New York.

In that trial, the president's brother, Antonio Hernández, was [found guilty](#) of producing and distributing 220 tons of cocaine meant for sale in the United States. Star witnesses took the stand to allege that Antonio repeatedly accepted millionaire bribes from narcos to fund his brother's political career – including from Mexican drug lord El Chapo Guzmán.

But cartels are just the newest iteration of an old problem. “Honduras is also more than a narco-state,” [writes Honduran journalist Jennifer Ávila](#). Before cartels ran the country, it was “a corrupt group of elites, as well as a fruit company [United Fruit Company, today known as Chiquita Brands International], that wielded power over the president. The state was designed to facilitate crime and the enrichment of a select few,” she states, continuing, “In both setups, silence is golden. Silence is a form of survival.”

However, trade unions are anything but silent. “Union leaders receive threats after organising strikes,” says Almendares, but “they almost always also have strong public stances against the regime.” This visible bravery endangers them in a tiered way ; that is, violence can be the culmination of a domino effect.

A common pattern is this : unions confront congressmen for blocking union certification processes, or for weakening labour laws. Those politicians are also business owners or allies of business owners, who resist labour rights in the name of profit. And in the post-coup reality, it's not uncommon that the congressmen or businessmen are allied with drug cartels. So when workers confront the business or political elite, they are often simultaneously confronting narcos.

The last domino can involve street gangs ; in Honduras, cartels often contract gang members as hitmen, so the people who pull the triggers that kill union organisers can be gang members, even though the scheme was planned far above them. “All union leaders are vulnerable to possible assassination at any moment,” says Almendares. “Most [Hondurans] just stay silent, because everyone wants to preserve their own lives.”

Surviving gangs and impunity in El Salvador

In neighbouring El Salvador, union activity faces two principal obstacles : violence, and an old anti-union culture encouraged by the new political leadership. The country is known internationally for its struggle with street gangs, particularly three main groups : the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), and the two-factioned Barrio 18. The gangs prey on workers by extorting money from them. They control “the economic livelihood of the country,” says Francisco Quijano, the general secretary of the *Central Autónoma de Trabajadores Salvadoreños* (CATS). “In the neighbourhoods is where you truly feel it.”

Neighbourhoods are also where gangs limit workers' mobility. Gangs have divided the country into small patches of territory that are always in dispute, invisible borders that can put citizens' lives at risk upon crossing. People are considered marked by the gang that controls their home communities even if they have no connection to the group, and thus are seen as enemies –potential spies, for example – in areas run by the rivals.

In order to enter many municipalities to meet with workers, “it’s necessary to let the young people know,” says Quijano, referring to the gang members. He says that workers face intimidation and danger when their jobs require entering any neighbourhood where they don’t live, because it can be unclear which gang is in control in any given moment. CATS-affiliated sanitary workers have been killed, for instance, because their route started at one end of a municipality and ended at the other, controlled by rival gangs.

One way that workers try to protect themselves is by not carrying their national identification cards, called the Documento Único de Identidad (DUI), which states the bearer’s home address. Gangs often demand a stranger’s DUI before letting them enter a neighbourhood. Many unions counsel affiliated workers to avoid carrying their DUIs, so if stopped, they can say whatever “gives them much more of a possibility of getting away,” Quijano tells *Equal Times*.

But the problem with not carrying a DUI is that it’s required in the paperwork to create or join a union. Home address information ends up submitted to both the employer and the Ministry of Labour. Unions fear the information could be leaked when convenient ; they advocate that workers avoid listing their home addresses in such documentation whenever possible.

An added complication drives to the very heart of community : gangs aren’t foreign invaders. “The young people who are in the gangs are our young people, from our communities,” says Marielos de León, the general secretary of the *Confederación Unión Nacional de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores de El Salvador* (UNTS). The gangs are populated by the children, relatives and neighbours of union members, and the lack of real political interest in solving the root causes of gangs – coupled with the constant police brutality and short-sighted security policy – weighs heavily on workers.

As in Honduras, de León says that some gang attacks on Salvadoran union members are not planned by the gangs but instead are hired hits. [Impunity is a shared problem](#), so hiring gangs as hitmen can enable anyone who sees labour organising as a threat, because the justice system rarely identifies intellectual authors. “Anything that could happen to someone, it’s easy to call it ‘delinquency,’” explains de León.

Yet, the gangs have been used by the country’s political parties for [their electoral benefit](#) ; the sitting mayor of San Salvador is the [most recent](#) to be implicated in paying them for votes. In addition to empowering the gangs, this heightens the risk of union organising in areas where political leaders are anti-union, Quijano says. In two municipalities where gang-allied mayors were against labour rights, CATS representatives could no longer enter the area, even though once, they tested their luck. “We had to leave with police escorts,” Quijano says.

“Fighting for the right to migrate, but also for the right not to migrate”

CATS, a confederation composed of 28 unions spanning sectors from public and private transportation, agriculture, municipal workers and self-employed people, also confronts problems caused by the new presidential administration. President Nayib Bukele took office in June 2019 and is wildly popular. But “he has not even the most minimal intention of making changes in the economic model,” says de León. “He represents other interests, corporate interests,” she tells *Equal Times*.

Bukele, who at 38 is the country’s youngest ever president, has a penchant for ruling from Twitter, and he has used the platform to fire workers he saw as allied to his political rivals. In fact, he has fired hundreds of government workers since taking office “because of the political party they belong to,” says Quijano. At the same time, a severe backlog in courts stymies workers’ abilities to reclaim

their jobs after unjust terminations. Many workers wait interminable periods for their cases to be heard and end up emigrating, says Quijano.

Bukele also caused international uproar last month when he tried to force the parliament to vote on a loan to fund his security plan - [a policy he has never presented](#). The president called a special vote on a weekend, and when legislators didn't show up, he removed all of their bodyguards, called on the citizenry to rise up, and marched the military and police into the congressional building. "Bukele sees himself above the norms of his job, as well as free of legal formalities," [wrote](#) editor-in-chief of the Salvadoran news outlet *El Faro*, José Luis Saenz.

Bukele's "strength is deceitful publicity - fake news, trolls," says de León. He is "a figure who gained a lot of popularity among young people. He's the 'cool president,'" she says. Quijano agrees : "Anyone who thinks differently than him or questions him is his enemy," he says.

For women in unions, gender-based discrimination adds to the load. "There continues to be discrimination because of machismo. There's a lack of empowerment of women because they have to be homemakers, so we have to do double the labour if we want to gain space," says de León. "There have been advances but it's not sufficient."

The same is true in Honduras, according to María Gloria García, the finance secretary for the *Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de la Agroindustria* (Festagro) "We women are marginalised by bosses because [we suffer sexual harassment](#), income inequality, because they pay us less than the men," [she said](#) to the Honduran publication *Pasos de Animal Grande*. "And the Honduran government doesn't have a policy to improve these labour conditions."

Workers see the region's shared problems - including access to labour rights - as clear drivers of the current refugee crisis. They denounce draconian immigration policies in countries like the United States that repel people who are fleeing for their lives, but they also argue that central Americans should have the right to not emigrate ; to live from birth to death in their homeland. For thousands in the region, that is not possible. They're forced out for reasons largely rooted in economic injustice.

"We're fighting for the right to migrate, but also for the right not to migrate," says Quijano. "In our Latin America, the development model must be different from the neoliberal one."

Danielle Mackey

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