

Selfa Sandoval, defending workers' dignity in Guatemala

Selfa is a member of the Executive Committee of the Banana Plantation Workers' Union of Izabal (SITRABI). Two SITRABI leaders were killed in April and May by unidentified gunmen. She talks here to the International Union of Food and Agricultural Workers (IUF) Latin America journalist Girogio Trucchi about the union's 64 years of defending workers' dignity.

On 9th June, SITRABI celebrated 64 years as an independent trade union. Now one of the five biggest organisations of banana plantation workers in the world, SITRABI mainly represents workers on plantations owned by Del Monte subsidiary Bandegua.

In 1947, workers in the Morales region of Izabal founded SETUFCO, the United Fruit Company Workers' Union. Following an anti-trust ruling in the USA in 1972, the company (now known as Chiquita Brands) was obliged to sell some of the huge extensions of land it owned in the country. The plantations came into the ownership of Del Monte and the union changed its name to SITRABI.

"These last 64 years have been marked by some glorious times, but also by some very difficult ones. A history of struggle in which we have suffered some serious setbacks, but which we were able to overcome and move forward", recalls Selfa, Culture and Social Protection Secretary of the union.

"The union had to face direct repression at the time of the coup (against the Arbenz government) in 1954 and then we had to fend off attempts by the Solidarismo movement to weaken the organisation, but we were able to do intense awareness-raising work amongst our members. After many years though, we won the battle."

In 1993, the union led a 39-day strike which ended in the workers' demands being accepted. But the consequences of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 left workers facing enormous difficulties that nearly destroyed the union.

"In 2000, the company tried to sack more than 900 workers, in violation of the Collective Bargaining Agreement which regulates the issue of redundancies. We had to come up with survival strategies but were met with brutal repression."

Selfa remembers that one of the armed paramilitary groups operating in the area entered the union's offices and threatened members of the Executive Committee. *"They wanted to destroy us, but we did eventually get those responsible brought to justice and punished. However, the insecurity led to seven union leaders having to leave the country and seek exile."*

Despite the regular death threats and the murder of three leaders between 2007 and 2011, and a series of natural disasters, SITRABI has continued its tireless efforts to defend its members' rights.

"Everything we have done in the last 64 years has served to ensure workers have job security, better living conditions and significant social benefits, achieved through collective bargaining agreements that cover all workers on the pay-roll. SITRABI's strength is also explained by the international support we have received over the years. The IUF has given us vital support and never left us on our own. This gives us hope."

As her colleague Noé Ramirez, General Secretary, concluded: *"International solidarity makes us feel that we are not alone."* Noé's brother Marco Tulio was killed in September 2007. The perpetrators have still not been brought to justice.