

Trade Unionism in Colombia

Mike Newman

Wrexham played host to a brave and extraordinary woman at a meeting on June 7th at the Memorial Hall. Ana Lucia Pinzon is the leader of the largest public sector trade union in Colombia, Fenaltrase, and was in the UK on a speaking tour organised by the Justice For Colombia group.

Photo: Kai Andersen



Ana Lucia Pinzon (centre) explains how trade unionists in Colombia are in constant fear of their lives

In Colombia over the last 15 years an average of four trade unionists are murdered every week by right-wing death squads, often with links to the government of President Uribe and, as Ana said at the meeting, the number of murders has been increasing this year. Amnesty International says that Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade union member.

The British government doesn't come out of its links with Colombia well; in fact the UK is one of the very few countries that provide military aid while the killings continue. Even army units proven to be associated with assassinations have benefited from UK military aid.

A war has been raging in Colombia for over 50 years now, the roots of which are based on the social and economic inequalities rife in that country. Over 1 million people have been displaced in the fighting between the government and its paramilitary allies on one side and left-wing guerrilla groups on the other. In between, peaceful movements for change calling for basic freedoms and social justice have been waging a brave campaign against almost insurmountable odds.

Ana reported that whole trade unions and political parties have been crushed and effectively 'disappeared' by a government that will allow no

opposition to function freely. In fact, while Ana was in the UK, President Uribe announced that legal proceedings will be launched against 12 leading opposition figures, in a further blatant attempt to crush dissent.

Like other leading opponents of the government, Ana lives under constant threat of murder, imprisonment or of simply disappearing, and she has previously been the subject of an assassination attempt in which she was shot in the back.

In the face of such brutal repression in Colombia, it is even more important that groups and individuals outside of the country do all we can to provide support to the peaceful opposition. Ana spoke about how much inspiration and hope is gained by the opposition in Colombia from the support they receive from around the world, and how encouraged they are by developments in other South American countries, Venezuela for example, which have successfully overthrown their own repressive regimes and elected progressive governments.

The meeting was called by the Socialist Labour Party Wales. As well as Liz Screen from the SLP speaking about the role of Coca Cola in Colombia, Steve Ryan spoke on behalf of the Wrexham Trades Council and Genny Bove for WPJF.

It is true to say that everyone at the meeting felt humbled by the quiet determination of Ana, and left determined to do what we can to assist in the quest for the victory of the democratic opposition in Colombia. Whatever problems we face in the UK were firmly put in perspective by the account from Ana.

Projects supported by Justice for Colombia

One of Justice for Colombia's principal activities is the support and sponsorship of projects on the ground in Colombia. These projects are implemented by Colombian partner organisations and are normally sponsored by British organisations affiliated to JFC.

The projects make a huge difference – for example JFC's agricultural workers' project has directly led to innocent trade union members being freed from prison, while projects to help torture victims have benefited literally hundreds of people. JFC supports female political prisoners in Colombia by providing humanitarian aid. Another project, REDVIVIR, was set up to help displaced trade union activists by creating co-operative business initiatives that provide them and their families with a viable and sustainable income.

In all there are eight projects currently supported by JFC. See the website for more information.

How you can help

Please contact **Justice For Colombia** for more information on the situation there and what you can do to help.

www.justiceforcolombia.org

or phone **020 7794 3644**.

For information on the work of the Socialist Labour Party in Wales, contact:
mike@fourdogsmusic.co.uk
or phone **01570 470270**.