



TUC London, East
& South East

*SERTUC International
Affairs Committee Welcomes*

**HUBER
BALLESTEROS**

*Wednesday 13 September 2017 (6-8pm)
@ TUC Congress House, London*

SERTUC International Affairs Committee and guests - would like to say it is was a privilege to meet Huber Ballesteros, a trade unionist who has stood up for his principles in the face of oppression, imprisonment and the ever-present threat of violence. It is a sobering reminder of what trade unionism is all about, and how our movement embodies and upholds the most progressive principles.

The Committee thank Huber for his visit.

Colombia is the most dangerous place in the world to be a trade unionist. Every year numerous union leaders, union activists and union members are assassinated - simply because of their trade union beliefs and activities. Over 2,500 trade unionists have been murdered in the past 20 years, more than in the rest of the world combined.

After 40 months in jail, Huber Ballesteros has finally been released. On Friday 13 January 2017, the court lifted the preventive detention order against the prominent trade union and peasant farmer leader, allowing for his release from La Picota Prison in Bogotá.

Huber, one of the leaders of the Patriotic March, a member of the National executive of the Colombian trade union congress (CUT) and Vice-president of the agricultural workers' union FENSUAGRO, was arrested in 2013 when he was leading the National Agrarian Strike.

Huber Ballesteros @ TUC Congress House –
Wednesday 13 September 2017

Bob Archer and Jack Taylor (International Affairs Committee Officers) introduced Huber Ballesteros and thanked guests and unions for their support.

There was a short film screened documenting the Justice for Colombia campaign supported by TUC and affiliates calling for Huber's release from prison.

Justice for Colombia (JFC) is a British NGO which campaigns for human rights, workers' rights and the search for peace with social justice in Colombia. Established in 2002 by the British trade union movement, JFC was created in response to the appalling human rights crisis in Colombia, and particularly the abuses committed against trade unionists and other civil society actors. Though their core backing continues to come predominantly from the trade unions, JFCs support base has expanded to include the legal profession, the student movement and numerous politicians, journalists and academics and also have a chapter in the Republic of Ireland, JFC Ireland, and supporters in several other European countries.





Huber Ballesteros thanked everyone for the opportunity, and said this was his last meeting before leaving the UK.

He made the following comments:

Huber has been in the trade union movement for 31 years - he thanked the International Committee for the opportunity, and unions and comrades for their ongoing support. He expressed his happiness at being invited to speak to the committee.

Huber is Vice-President of the Fensuagro agricultural workers' union, and elected National Committee of the Colombian equivalent of the TUC - The CUT, Colombia's largest trade union confederation. Shortly after being elected, Huber was arrested and imprisoned 2013, released in January 2017 after three and a half years in prison, and am now re-involved in union work at both central and regional levels, working various projects including the implementation of the peace process.

The situation regarding labour and human rights has not improved in Colombia. Upwards of 150 politically-motivated murders have happened in the last year, 20 of these 150 have been union leaders. Concurrently legislation has hampered trade union organising and activism.

Unstable and dangerous conditions are common in the workplace and there are approximately 8 million people working in the informal sector*. Young workers are particularly vulnerable. They receive contracts worth 1-3 months which impedes their union participation or ability to join a union.

However, despite these obvious hurdles, Huber is optimistic due to the signing of the peace process - very important for the future of Colombia - following 50 years of conflict, if

the agreement is implemented as agreed within the terms. However, the Government is failing to comply with the terms agreed. Colombia's ultra-right would like to overturn the agreement and continue in the context of war.

In this difficult situation, we also contend with the Colombian Government's support of the attacks by the United States of America on our brother country (Venezuela). Venezuela have always shown solidarity with the Colombian people and played a significant role in supporting the peace process.

The implementation process is taking place in a complicated period because we have Parliamentary elections in March 2018 and Presidential elections May 2018.

An important aspect of the vote is the recognition of victims / truth and justice programmes / compensation for victims / future citizen rights and security guarantees. An important international aspect is the eradication of crops, particularly coca, marijuana, etc (i.e. narcotic crops)

This is the general situation in which we conduct our union duties to improve social conditions and genuine peace with social justice for the Colombian people.

Una Doyle, NUT/NEU International Solidarity Officer, asked what the situation was like for the teachers' unions - are teachers particularly targeted?

Huber responded: the principle teacher unions are: - Fecode (Colombian Federation of Education Workers)

<http://fecode.edu.co/>
ASPU (Association of University Professors)

<http://aspucol.org>

The education sector is in a permanent state of struggle. Finance does not come from student demand, but is obtained from the state through the number of applications for studies.

Fecode recently completed strike action, demanding better salaries, but more so to demand necessary resources for the educational system in Colombia. Of the 322,000 teachers who teach classes in the country, 122,000 do not receive the salary they deserve for the work they do, nor do they perceive the established benefits.

Education in Colombia is not regarded as a public or state service. This offers opportunity for privatisation of war on all levels of education. This uses state money and subsidies to advance private interest and is profit driven. There is no University autonomy, therefore pensions and policies are formulated externally.

In the funding system labour is unstable and the annual valuation system - whereby if your valuation is below average you lose your employment.

John Rutter, UNISON, asked what can be done in the UK to assist the fight in Colombia.

Huber Responded: Although in UK and Europe workers' situation is much better, there is general tendency internationally in the capitalist world towards worsening working conditions in which services are provided and sold to the market place. International solidarity is essential for Colombia's struggles. If capitalism is a globalised phenomenon, the struggle in response must also be an international globalised phenomenon.

Charlie Kiss, UNISON, asked what Huber's conditions in prison were suffered - were you treated the same as general prison population, or did you receive special attention?

Huber Responded: when you enter prison as a political prisoner, from the beginning you are considered an enemy of the state and treated worse - and for that reason you are located with people with different charges far away from political awareness. The prison system is designed to push (pressure) you to a level where you denounce your ideas and retreat.

Thankfully this was not my story and my will to better the lives of Colombian people was helped by the amazing international solidarity I received worldwide, including the UK trade union movement. Such support from social leaders, social activists, political leaders, members of the Labour and other parties, trade unions (UNISON, Unite, etc), TUC and everyday people, reconfirmed I was doing something honourable.

As a social activist and revolutionary I was always conscious that in Colombia being a member of the opposition could be at risk to your life (murdered) or liberty (prison).

Dave Lovelidge, Unite, asked if the restraints on trade unions will be still inevitable after the signing and developing of the peace process. Should the international community apply pressure for continued change through trade unions?





Huber responded: the peace agreement is an important commitment made by the Colombian Government and will address many important issues.

We are conscious that it will not resolve all problems faced and the class struggle will continue. Social inequality, lack of economic opportunities and non-existing real democracy in the political system makes us realise that we will only really be able to resolve these issues when workers themselves have power in Colombia.

Our opportunities to work together must always be improved upon between workers in Britain and Colombia. This decade of the implementation of the peace deal are going to be a difficult road and all support from international partners is welcomed.

Danny Hogan, Unite, asked about the Patriotic March and the struggle for peace in Colombia and the link to trade unions and socialism.

Huber responded: the link between the Patriotic March and the trade union is an organic link. Huber is the National Organiser for Patriotic March and elected member for the Colombian Trade Union Congress.

There is a coalition of approximately 1,500 civil society organisations (30 per cent trade unions). Grass roots organisations from the most conflictive rural zones, as well as national trade unions, student groups, leading peace activists and many more, declaring the formation of the Patriotic March: a social and political movement giving voice to the concerns of some of the most marginalised sectors of Colombian society.

The Patriotic March is not promoting a socialist programme. We are focussed on promoting a democratic transitional government. A government that guarantees the implementation of the peace deal.

Richard Chilvers, Suffolk CATC, asked the statistics for fatalities in the Colombian prison system. How dangerous is the situation in Venezuela – how much support does the Santos Government give to the opposition, and relationship between surrounding countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru?

Huber responded: there is often violence by the prison guards as they are not trained properly to deal with the prison population. There is also violence connected to corruption side of prison activity. #

Deaths in prisons are usually due to lack of healthcare for prisoners, rather than suspect circumstances or violent confrontations.

There was a period in Colombia 2005-2006 when there was a pattern of violent confrontations between Guerrilla and Paramilitary inmates, including prison murders. Fortunately, this situation has improved over the last ten years.

We cannot look at what happens in Venezuela outside the context of Latin America generally. There is a clear plan orchestrated by the European Governments' corporations - alongside United States of America Government and corporations - to take back Latin America to serve their objectives. This plan was initiated a few years ago with clear objective to take power and reinjecting neo-liberal ideology in countries that had left the control of the IMF, World Bank and World Trade Organisations – countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela.

This is almost a reinvention of the previous plan introduced to Latin America which saw the installation of dictators in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay.

In this previous era military coups were weapon of choice, whereas now these are legal coups as witnessed for Brazil, or political intervention as seen in Venezuela. But the objective always remains the same, to recuperate and gain power back from these countries seen as a threat. In 1950s to 1970s the excuse was the fight against communism. Today it is the theatrical fights against corruption or promotion of democracy.

For Colombia, the peace deal would have been impossible without the support of the citizens of Venezuela. Today the Colombian Government and press are shamefully participating in the media campaign against Venezuela. What is being applied in Venezuela now is the reminiscent of tactics previously seen for Chile, used by capital forces to attack and under domestic socialistic governments, involving economic war to create social discontent.

The clear demonstration that this is an orchestrated plan is that in Colombia with 50 years of war we have suffered 285,000 fatalities, 60,000 disappeared, 6.5 million forced to be displaced, and never any statement from the organisation of European (UK, Germany) or USA governments, United Nations – stating that in Colombia democracy does not exist.

Charlie Kiss, UNISON, asked what the future of Farc as a political force is.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc, after the initials in Spanish) are Colombia's largest rebel group.

They were founded in 1964 as the armed wing of the Communist Party and follow a Marxist-Leninist ideology. Their main founders were small farmers and land workers who had banded together to fight against the staggering levels of inequality in Colombia at the time. While the Farc have some urban groups, they have always been an overwhelmingly rural guerrilla organisation.

Huber responded: Farc have always been a political force. Before they were a political party operating with arms, whereas today they are a political party who have laid down their arms. Farc throughout the years have always had important social support. It is impossible for any Guerrilla organisation to survive so long without the support of the people. Farc have never received financial support from the Soviet Union. Cuba. East Germany. No financial support from no communist or socialist country. Just sustained by the everyday Colombian population.

Farc realise that they may never be in an outright position to gain power through presidency, but they are in full support and promoting the idea of a coalition of parties, social movements of civil society, to come together as one and put a combined candidate for 2018 elections, who could help ensure the implementation of the agreed peace process.

The Farc also realise they have immediate challenges to eliminate the stigma that shadows them and coverage dominated in Colombian press with them labelled as kidnappers, murderers, or drug traffickers. They also need to convince the Colombian population on the campaign trail with their policies for needed change.

Jim Hillier, NUT/NEU, asked for an update on how many political prisoners were incarcerated, and the percentage being members of Farc.

With the peace process are people who were jailed for their politics now being released, or do unjust arrests continue?

Huber responded: In Colombia 138 prisons host 153,000 prisoners. In terms of political prisoners in 2016 at the beginning process of amnesty with regards to the peace deal there were 6,000 political prisoners.

The peace deal and the subsequent pardon amnesty deal, passed December 2016, this allowed for the freedom of political prisoners and prisoners of war, but only those belonging to or accused of belonging to Farc.

Farc produced a list that documented 3,500 Farc members incarcerated. Close to 3,000 have now been released, with the rest remaining incarcerated. These also include prisoners accused of alleged links to the National Liberation Army (ELN). ELN is a guerrilla group involved in the Colombian conflict since 1964

There are still members of the trade union movement or social political activists continue to be detained, due to Colombian law that criminalises social protest which carries a sentence of 8 years.

On return to Colombia Huber's threat of criminal action and persecution does not stop, as he continues social protest on behalf of the Colombian people.

This is the reality, and risk, of being a trade unionist in everyday Colombia. Just because I attend this meeting today at TUC Congress House, it does not secure my life for tomorrow as a trade unionist and my colleagues.

Maggie Griffin, UNISON and SERTUC Disabled Workers' Network, said she appreciated the importance of Huber travelling back from Brighton, TUC Congress 2017 to attend this special meeting in London organised by the International Affairs Committee.

She relayed her family history of resistance in Ireland and experiences in fight for freedom, but also said this in no way was a comparison to the courage displayed by Huber and others in fighting for peace and a better way in life in Colombia.

She thanked Huber for his time and promised to support Huber and others in all their struggle for peace.

These sentiments were unanimously supported by all meeting participants.

The SERTUC International Affairs Committee, pledged its ongoing support for Colombia, and promised to publicise through its networks the developing movements in Colombia, but also highlight the continued movements of the inspirational Huber Ballesteros.

Thanks to supporters:

SERTUC International Affairs Committee
www.tuc.org.uk/international-affairs-committee-0

Justice for Colombia
www.justiceforcolombia.org

Parliamentary Friends of Colombia
www.justiceforcolombia.org/parliament/members

UNISON Waltham Forest
www.unisonwalthamforest.org.uk

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