

A Call for Global Awareness

On October 25th – 29th, 2011 the IAM in partnership with the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center organized a Union Leadership Exchange. This exchange allowed for three IAM Leaders to go to El Salvador to meet and exchange information with the Leadership of two recently organized unions that represent airport workers. I was honored with the opportunity to be one of the IAM's representatives. The other representatives were fellow District 142 General Chair, Frank Schifano and District 140 member and Local Lodge 764 Educator, Wes Sim of Aveos (parent company of Aeroman) in Vancouver B.C.

The first day of the exchange each union did a presentation about itself and we had discussions about methods and ways to build and strengthen a union. As part of the IAM's presentation we (the IAM Representatives) presented to the Leaders of the two Airport unions IAM lanyards and organizing pins. The whole exchange really boosted the motivation of the two Salvadoran airport unions and it has really inspired them. There was also an informative presentation done on Aeroman's operations in El Salvador. Aeroman is the Company that performs the Heavy Aircraft Maintenance for Airlines such as Southwest, USAirways, Air Canada, and many more.

The second day we did a visit to the airport itself, meeting with groups of workers (maintenance, firefighters, freight, and ramp workers) and taking a drive-by look at the Aeroman facility. In each location we visited we were surrounded by the IAM lanyards and service pins we had given the union Leaders the day before. These workers were so excited to have our support that they were willing to risk discipline or termination by wearing our Logo. While driving by the Aeroman Facility, management came out of the hangar with video cameras and recorded our drive-by. After our meetings with the Airport Firefighters we discovered that Aeroman has forbidden the Airport Firefighters from entering their facilities even though they are legally responsible for those facilities, thus endangering the workers and the aircraft they are contracted to work on. During a fire drill the Airport Firefighters are only allowed to sit on the ramp in front of the Aeroman facility but are not allowed to enter. Aeroman then calls the San Salvador Fire Department (a 30-45 minute drive away) to walk through the facilities. The only difference between these two fire departments aside from distance and the Airport Firefighters superior training and equipment is the fact the Airport Firefighters are UNIONIZED. We then returned to the meeting room at the hotel to hear directly from an Aeroman worker and did an exercise on developing a strategic plan with SITEAIES and SITIAPES (the two Airport Unions of which I have spoken).

Note: After our visit one company, Aerodespachos, did terminate 16 workers and put many more on notice. The two Airport Unions and the Federation they belong to filed a complaint/suit with the El Salvador Ministry of Labor. Their unity resulted in the terminated workers being reinstated and the company being compelled to negotiate for a Collective Bargaining Agreement.

On the third day we went into San Salvador (the airport is actually about 30 - 45 minutes outside the city) to attend a forum on a law being proposed on Public-Private Partnerships that the El Salvadorian Union movement is very concerned about and against. We also met with the Frente Sindical

Salvadoreno (FSS) and the Confederation Sindical de Trabajadores Salvadorenos (CSTS) which gave us a little broader understanding of the Salvadoran labor movement, their plans, and challenges.

While in comparison to the IAM's 100 plus years of experience the El Salvadorian Labor movement is still relatively in its infancy but yet we still face similar challenges. The El Salvadorian Leadership is very passionate and motivated toward organizing workers and protecting their Human rights and face unique challenges in their Country that we can hardly imagine. For example El Salvador is truly a Police State. In El Salvador there are 8 private security guards for every member of the police force, And, until the 1990's there were Death squads that killed union organizers. In spite of corporate violations of the law and Governmental corruption/ in-action the Labor movement has consistently taken the high road and is up to meeting the challenges they face in El Salvador.

I would like to thank the IAM and the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center and especially Stephan Wishart, the Solidarity Center's Director of Central American Affairs for this great opportunity. I have learned that Global Corporations require Global Unions. Just as the International Corporations respect no borders when it comes to violating Human/Workers rights so should the Unions ignore borders when fighting for those Human/Workers rights.

In Solidarity,

Randy Griffith
General Chair
IAM District 142