

Rights Action  
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“We are under an economic dictatorship. Our poverty produces wealth for others” ... and the 2009 coup in Honduras has made virtually everything worse in the country

The violent, exploitative and oppressive situation in Honduras remains ... violent, exploitative and oppressive. U.S. and Canadian government policies (“Free” Trade Agreements) and North American companies and investors are profiting from the poverty, violence and lack of the rule of law.

- See Below: How to support the Honduran people’s pro-democracy movement that is fighting for an end to the military backed regimes of the post coup era, the return of the democratic order, and the building of a just and fair economy and country.

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### **Trade, Violence & Migration: Honduras**

National Catholic Reporter, Michael Sean Winters, Jan. 15, 2015

Monday, I attended a briefing at the U.S. Capitol by Larry Cohen, President of the Communications Workers of America, and AFL-CIO Executive Vice President Tefere Gebre, both of whom were part of a fact-finding mission to Honduras this past November. It turns out that the Catholic Church and the AFL-CIO are just about the only two organized groups in the U.S. who even discuss the root causes of immigration, and what can be done in both countries to improve the lives of our citizens.

“What I saw continues to shock me,” said Cohen, and he has seen a lot of poverty and cruelty over the years. He spoke with evident passion as he described the conditions of violence and impoverishment that the group witnessed. “For working people, it couldn’t be more distressing,” he said. Cohen spoke about visiting a deportation center where one or two planeloads of people per day are flown back to Honduras after being apprehended trying to cross in the United States.

He related their stories, many of which concluded with a determination to try again. “We have nothing here,” one man told the group according to Cohen and, indeed, they have no future in Honduras.

After the Central America Free Trade was passed in 2005, many people in Honduras were pushed off their land. They had been subsistence farmers and had little to live on, but at least they could subsist. They were easily enticed to enterprise zones and maquiladoras, producing intra-national migration patterns from rural areas to the cities. Their land was sold to multinational corporations which now produce mostly palm oil.

When the factories failed to produce the economic benefits the proponents of CAFTA predicted, the people were unable to return to the land. In the cities they had no jobs. They are easy pickings for violent gangs many of which have ties to the drug trade.

When the AFL-CIO delegation met with government officials, they were told that the government does not have the manpower, nor the control in various violence-prone cities, to enforce the country's labor laws, which is a key requirement of CAFTA and was one of the promises made by its advocates to guarantee that the new trade rules would not fail to actually help the people in Honduras and other Central American countries.

According to Tefere Gabre, 70% of employers do not honor the country's minimum wage law – and the minimum wage is \$100 per month. When he shared that figure with Honduran government officials, they contested it. The government estimates that only 60-65% of companies do not honor the minimum wage law.

The traditional economies of Central America were thoroughly overturned by CAFTA. Patterns of living that stretched back into the pre-Colombian era are no more. But, instead of a booming economy, there is only violence and desperation.

If a large multinational corporation has a grievance, it is quickly given a hearing. Meanwhile, union organizers are beaten up or fired. 35 union activists have been killed since the coup in 2009, and that is only the documented cases. There is a 2 percent conviction rate in the country.

“We are under an economic dictatorship,” Nelly del Cid of Foro de Mujeres por la Vida told the group. “Our poverty produces wealth for others.”

The 2009 coup in Honduras has made virtually everything worse in the country. The report issued by the AFL-CIO after their visit states, “Throughout the delegation visit, workers and community leaders spoke not only about the extreme levels of corruption, but also the increased militarization of the country, and widespread corruption among security forces and the impact it had on their daily lives.” Even a government probe found that as much as 70% of the nation's police forces are corrupt.

The report also cites one success story: Fruit of the Loom, which is one of the nation's largest private employers. In 2009, the company, after pressure from the Workers Rights Consortium, the AFL-CIO and United Students Against Sweatshops, negotiated a collective bargaining agreement with workers. But, even this success story is threatened. If the U.S. government proceeds with a trade agreement with Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam, the jobs at Fruit of the Loom will soon head there.

Mr. Gebre spoke about his own experience as an immigrant, and how troubled he was by the images this summer of violent reactions to the unaccompanied minors crossing the border into

the U.S., many fleeing the violence in Honduras and its neighbors. “They are clearly refugees,” he said. It is ironic that opponents of comprehensive immigration reform like to claim that they are merely trying to uphold the law, but U.S. law allows for refugees to enter the country and stay.

For Gebre, the situation touches his life story. At thirteen, he fled his native, war-torn Ethiopia and went to Sudan. At the time, Sudan was still hosting Al-Qaeda, so it was not exactly a bastion of enlightenment values. But, even they did not send back children to a violent homeland.

Perhaps the most shocking fact presented at the conference was this. The U.S. government spent \$3.7 billion on deportations last year. The entire Honduran government budget is \$4.4 billion. And, a recent IMF report recommends that the Honduran government cuts its budget by a third in the kind of austerity program that will only further impoverish the people.

Later this spring, the U.S. Congress will engage in a major debate about U.S. trade policy. No member of Congress should be permitted to vote on the proposals unless they go to Honduras and see what the AFL-CIO team saw.

To say that CAFTA did not meet its promises is the understatement of the year. As Mr. Gabre said, “It’s not working for us. It is not working for them. We ask for solutions from the people in this building.” Many of the problems in Honduras are beyond the control of the U.S. government to be sure. “Trade agreements we can control,” Gabre told group of congressional staffers and members of the press. But will we? Or will we just auction off another slice of the common good to the highest bidders?

Source: <http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/trade-violence-migration-honduras>

AFL-CIO report: <http://www.aflcio.org/content/download/147761/3770791/file/Honduras.PDF>

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### **Honduras: A Country Of Repression, Impunity And Global Business Opportunities**

The extremely high levels of repression and violence in Honduras are not a “Honduran problem” – they are also a U.S. and Canadian problem.

Since the June 2009 military coup, that ousted the last democratically elected government, Honduras has become the ‘Murder Capital of the world’, the ‘Repression Capital of the Americas’. Since 2009, the U.S. and Canadian governments have supported and legitimized a succession of illegitimate, repressive regimes. North American companies and investors, and “development” banks (World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank) have increased business activities in: African palm production, maquiladora sweatshops, privatized “model cities”, tourism and mining. The Honduran regime remains in power due, in large part, to its political, economic and military relations with the U.S. and Canada and the “development” banks.

Across Honduras, community based organizations – struggling for fundamental reform to the Honduran State and society - need considerably more human rights accompaniment, funding, media attention on the harms and violations and education and activism in Canada and the U.S.

**Contact:**

- Member Of Parliament:  
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To support community organizations working for locally-controlled development, the environment, human rights and the rule of law in Honduras and Guatemala, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

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