

Report to CALL members on Mexico Conference

A CALL delegation has just returned from a very successful conference jointly sponsored by the Latin American Association of Labour Lawyers (ALAL), National Union of Democratic Lawyers of Mexico (ANAD) and the Union of Social Security Workers of Mexico (SNTSS).

In an historic meeting labour lawyers representing trade unions throughout the America met on July 28th – 30st in Mexico City to discuss matters of mutual concern and to form a permanent network that will allow CALL members to share information and to provide assistance to our colleagues in Latin America.

The primary purpose of the conference was to discuss strategies to defend social security regimes and public enterprise from efforts to dismantle and privatize these public institutions. ALAL however took the opportunity to invite lawyers from CALL and the National Lawyers Guild in the United States to meet with their Latin American counterparts. In attendance were labour lawyers from Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Peru, Cuba and Venezuela as well as Canada and the United States.

The conference was organized around three general themes:

1. Social Security

The conference looked at a detailed country by country analysis of the assault on social security law and its institutions in Latin America. In most Latin American countries, the model for the delivery of employee pensions, health care and workers' compensation benefits has been the Social Security Institute, a national government agency. These agencies have been under attack by the neo liberal policies of governments throughout Latin America. In Mexico, the federal government has a bill before congress which seeks to restructure the social security system. This so-called reform is strongly opposed by the Nation Union of Social Security Workers and the trade union movement of Mexico.

Simon Archer of Cavalluzzo, Hayes, Shilton, McIntyre & Cornish, of Toronto, represented CALL on a panel discussing Canadian experiences in the contexts of the federal government efforts to deregulate, privatize and shrink government services and programs.

2. Use of International Instruments

A series of delegates gave examples of the international mechanisms available to assist the promotion and enforcement of trade union rights in member countries. The conference heard from in particular:

Claude Melançon of Melançon, Marceau, Sciortino and Grenier of Montreal concerning various strategies in the fight to bring trade union justice to Wal-Mart.

Arturo Alcalde, from Mexico, on the use of the NAALC complaint procedure in Mexico.

Mary Cornish of Cavaluzzo, Hayes, Shilton, McIntyre & Cornish of Toronto on the use of international standards on gender equality to advance the rights of women in the work force.

Delegates also examines the use of ILO conventions to combat slavery in Brazil, the use of the Alien Torts Act to bring companies to justice for the murder of trade unionists in Colombia, and an international solitary campaign against the Abascal plan for right wing reform to labour law in Mexico.

3. Coordination

Most importantly for the CALL delegation, the conference agreed on a statement of principles to create a network of trade union and human rights lawyers in all of the Americas to share information and work on projects to advance our common goals. Included in the network will be the Latin American Association of Labour Lawyers and its member organizations including ANAD from Mexico, the International and Labour and Employment Committees of the National Lawyers Guild, the International Affairs Committee of CALL, the American Association of Jurists, and NGO's such as the International Commission on Labor Rights and the International Labor Rights Fund.

Further contact will primarily be through use of websites and email but the delegates also chose a commission or steering committee to oversee the work of the network. The Chair of the Committee is Luis Carlos Moro, President of ALAL from Brazil and the Canadian members on the committee are Jo-Ann Kolmes of Chivers, Carpenter in Edmonton and Claude Melançon of Montreal.

The CALL delegation consisted of Claude Melançon, Susan Philpott, Peter Shklanka, Emma Phillips, Francine Charbonneau, Simon Archer, Jo-Ann Kolmes, David Brown, Mary Cornish, Stephanie Bernstein, Mark Lewis, Nicholas Keresztesi.

Conclusion

The creation of a American wide network of labour lawyers has been a long sought goal of the Co-chairs of our International Affairs Committee, Jeffrey Sack and Claude Melancon. CALL has been instrumental in establishing this network and can take some pride in his accomplishment. We hope it will serve as a vehicle for CALL members and other lawyers thought our hemisphere to share ideas, participate in projects and advance the cause of justice for working men and women.