

Unity, solidarity, struggle

Global Justice Forum highlights privatization challenges and solutions

By Dale Whitford

VANCOUVER—Thanks to its two guest speakers, CUPE's Global Justice Forum at National Convention (November 2-6, 2015) provided much insight into the challenges posed by privatization and the resulting struggles for justice and fairness that working people face in countries such as Greece and Colombia.

George (Yiorgos) Archontopoulos, president of EYATH, the water workers' union in Greece, told delegates about a government plan to sell off a majority share in public water and turn it over to the Thessalonika Water Supply & Sewerage Co. Before 2009, he said, public water was accessible and inexpensive. Of all utility bill costs, it was the most affordable for residents. Since then, however, mounting debt and unemployment (36 per cent across Greece), have forced the government to sell off assets and bring in austerity measures.

Archontopoulos recalled how he helped found the SOS water campaign, which led to a successful referendum opposing water privatization in Thessaloniki in May 2014. Moreover, the Union was successful in convincing the company to forgive the debts of those who unable to pay due to unemployment. When Greece voted to reject the Euro, the conditions attached to any financial aid for Greece created a situation where wages stayed the same but the costs of goods and services continued to rise.

Berenice Celeita, director of the Colombian human rights group NOMADESC, was the evening's second speaker. Colombia is one of a few countries where CoDevelopment Canada is in partnership with CUPE to provide assistance, education and solidarity to working people. Celeita updated delegates about the ongoing violence against those who resist the multinational private companies operating in her country, the drug cartels that have taken over one third of the prime grazing land, and the displacement of six million people by governments, drug lords and guerrillas.

Those who resist are often killed, said Celeita, herself the target of surveillance and death threats in a state-wide government campaign she refers to as "blood and fire." Due to security concerns, she is unable to live with her young son and, as of this writing, her family was under surveillance by vans parked outside her residence. The 50-year war in Colombia, she said, has left more than 350,000 dead – more than 3,000 of these people trade unionists.

Colombia has wealth from both agriculture (palm oil) and natural resources (gold/oil). This has led to 17 international free trade agreements, including one with Canada, that have led to the erosion of individual land rights, local autonomy and sovereignty. To counter this, Celeita co-founded the Intercultural School of

Knowledge, a research and education centre that puts the focus on human rights and strategies to resist privatization. The 750 activist graduates have learned how multinational companies gain control of local economies, how grassroots solidarity movements can be created, and how partnerships (such as NOMADESC's partnership with CoDev) can have a significant effect in pressuring governments and raising awareness. In a very real way, the school (now a university) is creating and mobilizing community leaders just as CUPE organizes campaigns against privatization and injustice.

It was a good evening. I learned a great deal about how our Union is making a real difference, how solidarity is our strength, and how CUPE is seen as a global leader on issues of equality, fairness, and justice. Thanks to everyone who participated and helped organize the event, which also featured fine music and dance—including a musical tribute to Che Guevara.

Dale Whitford is a member of the International Solidarity Committee and the Vancouver Island District Council.