

SITRATERNIUM'S EIGHT-YEAR-LONG ROAD TO UNION RECOGNITION



The Global Network of Tenaris-Ternium Workers demonstrating in front of the Ternium plant in Guatemala. Credit: Jorge García-Orgales.

Walter Rodríguez could barely believe it. Last month, after eight years of struggle, his union SITRATERNIUM (Ternium International Guatemala Workers' Union) finally got its first collective agreement registered by the Guatemalan Labour Ministry at international steel giant Ternium's Guatemala plant. Better known in Canada as its sister company Tenaris, the corporation recently closed its Calgary facilities, with a promise to invest in its Sault Ste. Marie plant.

It must be said that the relationship between the union and the company has never been rosy. "Management would brag that it was above the law," says Rodríguez, the union's General Secretary. "They would regularly deny us of our elementary rights such as sick leave, and would sometimes force us to work seven days a week... We knew we had to do something about it."

In 2012, SITRATERNIUM was faced with aggressive union busting tactics on the part of the company, the main one being the firing of all its members, including its leadership, on the day following its foundation. Through its affiliation with the Federation of Workers in the Food, Agro-Industry and Similar Sectors of Guatemala, the newly-formed union contacted the Global Network of Tenaris-Ternium Workers – affiliated to IndustriALL – to coordinate an international campaign in order to have the workers reinstated and get the company to respect workers' rights. It was also through this global union connection that the United Steelworkers and the Humanity Fund were made aware of the case and started actively supporting SITRATERNIUM, funding a series of educational courses on unionism to its base and providing support to its leadership.

Ternium Guatemala ignored a court decision that ordered the company to reinstate the dismissed workers and refused to recognize the union and carry out negotiations. Only after another two years of bringing this fight to international labour bodies did the company finally agree to bargain a collective agreement.

"The support we received from the Steelworkers was very useful during this whole process because it allowed us to grow our base, which became crucial during negotiations," said Rodríguez. "Our hope is that Ternium will now fully comply with the agreement and respect the union as a legitimate organization."

The global solidarity movement in support of SITRATERNIUM allowed the Guatemalan unionists to hold their ground

over the years in an uphill battle against a powerful employer, in a country known for abysmal union membership, high disregard for labour laws and widespread attacks against labour leaders.



Walter Rodríguez showing the collective agreement proposal. Credit: Jorge García-Orgales

Members of the SITRATERNIUM union at work. Credit: SITRATERNIUM.



To learn more about the
Steelworkers Humanity Fund

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