

STEELWORKERS *Humanity Fund*



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Steelworkers Help Tackle Scourge of Violence Against Women in Latin America

Canadian Women of Steel are helping labour and human rights activists in Latin America tackle alarming rates of violence against women in the region.

USW Local 7975 President Kim Bryson (Flin Flon, Man.) and USW Local 2724 President Lisa Dale (Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.) were part of a Canadian delegation that travelled to El Salvador in November for the Conference on Women Against Violence – Women, Peace and Security.

Labour, human and women's rights activists from several Latin American countries attended the conference, organized by the Organization of Salvadoran Women for Peace (ORMUSA), a regional learning network on violence against women.

Kim Bryson and Lisa Dale were joined by Woman of Steel Laura Ramirez of the Steelworkers Humanity Fund and representatives of Horizons of Friendship, a Humanity Fund partner organization. Horizons of Friendship co-ordinated the Canadian worker exchange to El Salvador.

Members of the Canadian delegation shared their experience and knowledge while learning of the incredible work being done by Latin American activists to combat violence against women. They heard how the region's disturbing rates of violence against women, from domestic abuse to murder, continue to increase.

CONFERENCE ON WOMEN AGAINST VIOLENCE EL SALVADOR, NOVEMBER 2014



Girls and women in countries like Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua are victims of political, cultural, criminal and patriarchal violence, in a culture dominated by men that gives little value and decision-making power to women. They are subjected to economic and social structures that marginalize them, push them into poverty and disease and

restrict their access to education and medical and social services.

In 2011 and 2012, there were more than 2,000 reported murders of women and girls in Central America. Thousands more were victims of war crimes, physical and sexual abuse and exploitation.

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Exchanging Experiences with Women Workers



By Kim Bryson

Kim Bryson is President of USW Local 7975, an amalgamated local that includes an assisted community living workplace and two school divisions in Flin Flon, Manitoba.

I had the honour to represent the Steelworkers on behalf of District 3 as we traveled to El Salvador to take part, along with our sisters from Nicaragua and Bolivia, in a worker exchange organized by the Steelworkers Humanity Fund to meet with women's organizations and participate in the Conference on Women Against Violence.

The need for change is evident. The women we met are strong and fighting

Although we live many miles apart, this opportunity has created a network to spread their stories and a determination to keep fighting beside them.

for change. Fighting to be respected. Fighting to be heard.

The most surprising and powerful experience from the trip was discovering the similarities in our challenges. The women from El Salvador had no idea that we face some of the same circumstances in Canada – violence, harassment, abuse – and the same need to fight for women's issues in our workplaces.

I was so inspired by our meeting with the women from Las Melidas (MAM). We had the opportunity to share our experiences as union members and learn of MAM's success in organizing domestic workers. There was keen interest in our experiences in Canada and how we have worked to overcome issues.

In our meeting with FEASIES, we learned about women's working conditions and struggles as they fight for basic rights. Imagine working 12 to 14 hours a day, being told you must meet a quota of 1,500 pieces per day, suffering abuse,

both physically and mentally on a daily basis, just to be able to provide a life for yourself and your children.

Most sweatshop workers are between the ages of 16 and 24 and the majority are single mothers earning approximately \$200 a month or 43 cents per hour. Of \$8 earned in a day, a woman spends \$3 on transportation to get to and from the factory, \$1 for lunch and \$3 for childcare. That leaves only \$1 a day to support a family.

We told the women we met about Canada's shame – our 1,181 murdered and missing aboriginal women and our government's refusal to recognize or take action on the issue. These are daughters, sisters, aunts, mothers and friends! They need a voice, just like the sisters in El Salvador.

I have a newfound respect for these women fighting for change. They have a commitment and drive second to none. Although we live many miles apart, this opportunity has created a network to spread their stories and a determination to keep fighting beside them.

Since returning, I've had the chance to share my experiences on the El Salvador women's worker exchange with my union local at our USW Presidents' Meeting that included District 3 Director Stephen Hunt, USW staff representatives and presidents from all over Manitoba, as well as at a Women of Steel course.

On Nov. 16, eight women in the Humanity Fund's delegation left their countries to come together for this conference. We faced language barriers and differences in our respective fields of employment. These barriers made us more determined to learn about each other and what we face. On Nov. 23, we left El Salvador as friends and sisters in solidarity! ■



Fundamental Connections Among Activists

"We knew this worker exchange would bring together a diversity of women, but the richness of the knowledge and experience of these activists was truly impressive. We discovered the

fundamental connections between women activists in Canada, Bolivia, Nicaragua and El Salvador. Each had a story to tell and we all took strategies and ideas home with us. Even with language barriers and the necessity for translation, the term 'Women of Steel' took on a meaning of its own within the entire group."

- Tara Ward, Horizons of Friendship

Eliminating Inequality and Violence Against Women in Canada

Canada is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, but it has a long way to go to address violence and persistent economic and social inequality faced by Canadian women and girls.

Equality for women remains well out of reach when it comes to leadership positions in business, politics and other major societal spheres.

Women account for only one in four senior management positions in the corporate and political arenas, where employment levels also remain consistently below those for men.

The percentage of Canadian women living in poverty has actually increased over the last 20 years and remains significantly higher than levels of poverty faced by men. Poverty levels are even higher among aboriginal and racialized

women, women with disabilities and women in LGBTQ groups.

Almost 40 per cent of children in families with single mothers are living in poverty, while 30 per cent of First Nations, Inuit and Metis women live below the poverty line.

Canada continues to bear the shame of alarming rates of violence against women, including murder, sexual assault,

Solidarity in the Struggle for Justice



"In Canada, we too have our stories of violence against women. But we can lobby and be politically active in demanding progressive change. We can negotiate language in our collective agreements for equal rights, pay equity, harassment-free workplaces and personal leave. My week in El Salvador showed how the Steelworkers Humanity Fund builds solidarity internationally with those who are fighting against poverty and injustice. It left me with a refreshed and humble approach to my solidarity and my passion and respect for being a labour activist."

- Lisa Dale, USW Local 2724 President

domestic violence and violence and harassment in the workplace. Aboriginal women and girls face even higher rates of discrimination and violence.

Steelworkers are actively engaged in public advocacy and political action to eliminate inequality and violence against women. As Steelworkers we know that, through solidarity and progressive action, we can make a difference. ■



Delegates attending the Women Against Violence Conference November 19–21, 2014



Left: FEASIES informal sector workers' representative

Below: Panel on Peace and Safety: Contexts of Conflict



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Throughout their visit, the Women of Steel worked side-by-side, learned from and developed close ties with members of two partner organizations of the Steelworkers Humanity Fund – CEPROMIN of Bolivia and FESIMINI of Nicaragua. Together they met and held discussions with representatives of several other groups promoting women's rights, including the Federation of Independent Associations and Unions of El Salvador (FEASIES) and the Melida Anaya Montes Women's Movement Association.

United Nations representatives delivered a presentation to the conference about UN efforts to compel governments to bring about progressive change through legislation, sanctions and prevention measures.

Delegates heard women from the Colombian organization Rebuilding Faces discuss the now common practice

of men in Colombia burning women's faces with acid. A representative of Plan El Salvador spoke about the "institutional" practice of raping girls in certain regions of El Salvador. The Association of Women of Guatemala presented very unsettling information about the trade of women by organized crime.

The conference examined different contexts of violence, the role of government organizations in eliminating violence, violence against women in regional security programs, access to justice and the progress of strategies used by various organizations.

Delegates looked at the achievements of activists and groups working to expose violence against women as a political issue that cannot be ignored. They discussed strategies and policies to present to governments and international organizations to give visibility to the issue

and exert pressure for meaningful change.

Throughout the conference the Women of Steel participants were confronted by overwhelming and heartrending stories of shocking violence against women and girls in Latin America. But they also were exposed to the incredible determination, energy and resolve of fellow activists who are committed to achieving real change and progress in their respective countries.

"Working side-by-side and learning from these amazing activists was an inspiring and solidarity-building experience," said Lisa Dale.

"It was a unique opportunity, made possible by the Steelworkers Humanity Fund. It empowered everyone who participated. And for us, as Women of Steel, it will certainly strengthen our activism in our locals and in our communities," Lisa said. ■



UNITED STEELWORKERS
USW
MÉTALLOS

Steelworkers Humanity Fund
234 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 800
Toronto, ON M4P 1K7
Phone: 416-487-1571
Fax: 416-487-9308

Email: humanityfund@usw.ca
www.usw.ca/humanityfund
Registered Charity Number - 11917 2278 RR0001.