

Weaving a union network around the garment sector – An example from Central America

Building power in global networks: The International Union League in Central America

A case study by Karla Molina and Ernesto García

An international workers' union has been rewriting the relationship between garment sector workers in Central America, their employers, national governments and international brands, thanks to savvy communications and global consumer support.

La Liga Sindical Internacional para Responsabilizar a las Marcas (International Union League for Brand Responsibility) was created in 2012 out of a merger of several unions active in the *maquila* sector in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. *Maquila* is the Spanish term used to describe factories in the region that import materials duty-free, assemble or manufacture finished goods, then re-export them immediately, often to the same country.

The organization is in its early stages, but has already succeeded in bringing pressure on those ultimately responsible for working conditions – the international brands, not just the local bosses.

La Liga, as it is better known, is now developing a global structure to unite union efforts internationally and articulate a credible discourse, which is crucial for building public support for the trade unions and the workers.

The network's success has led to international expansion as far as Asia, where many workers suffer from the consequences of the same corporate structures and market dynamics, and where La Liga's expertise and experience may be of assistance.

Fruit of the Loom in Honduras, and the founding of SITRAJERZEES

Fruit of the Loom (FOTL) is a leading US producer of cotton t-shirts, underwear and sportswear. It has plants in El Salvador, southern Mexico and Honduras. In the latter, where it was established in 2006, it has 9 plants and 10,000 workers.

In 2007, workers at the company's Jerzees plant in Honduras formed a union. FOTL responded by dismissing most of those involved. But in January 2008, thanks to international workers' complaints and the support of the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC), the 145 fired workers were reinstated with back pay. In April of that year, the union was formalized as the *Sindicato de trabajadores de Jerzees* (Union of workers of Jerzees, or SITRAJERZEES), and negotiations on a collective agreement began.

But during negotiations in 2009 the company announced the closure of the factory, citing market difficulties despite the apparent anti-union motivations. Several organizations jumped

in and helped raise international public awareness, including Canada's *Maquila Solidarity Network* (MSN), the WRC, and the US student organization United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS). Then US universities started boycotting garments produced in Jerzees.

By the end of 2009, 110 of the 140 US universities that traded with FOTL had suspended procurement and cancelled million-dollar contracts. In November 2009, SITRAJERZEES and the country's *Central General de Trabajadores* (General Confederation of Workers, or CGT) signed an agreement in Washington, DC, establishing the reopening of the factory under the name *Jerzees Nuevo Día*, meaning "New Day". Around 1,200 workers were reinstated.

The union, renamed SITRAJERZEESND, now boasts the best social and economic benefits of the *maquila* in the region. Its workers earn up to 600 dollars per month, well above the national and regional minimum wage of approximately 260 dollars in Honduras and 210 dollars in nearby El Salvador.

In El Salvador, two other trade unions sought to copy the Jerzees model in their relationship with FOTL, but with mixed success. The *Sindicato de Trabajadoras, Trabajadores, Sastres, Costureras y Similares* (Union of men and women workers, tailors, seamstresses and similar, or SITRASACOSI) reached an agreement with FOTL to guarantee freedom of association and led the creation of a dialogue committee. But their efforts failed to secure the reopening of a factory closed in 2014, leaving 1,200 workers jobless.

But La Liga helped secure some level of victory for the workers. Through an international investigation, it identified several major brands involved, notably HBI, Lacoste and Levis, as well as FOTL, and discovered the corporate owner of the El Salvador plant, the Mexican group Argus-Kaltex. This investigation and a global campaign ensure these companies paid the 1.7 million US dollars owed to the workers involved.

Campaigns and structure

The milestone 2010 success of SITRAJERZEESND was an inspiration to form La Liga, the latter's president Estela Ramírez said.

"We realized that we faced the same problems in Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic," he said. "We organized and managed to hold a regional union meeting in Honduras at the end of 2011."

In February 2012, trade unions from these countries met and agreed to the creation of La Liga, with the support of other allies from further afield, such as the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), as well as USAS.

La Liga's first two campaigns involved the companies Adidas of Germany and Gildan of Canada. The first, under the slogan "Adidas Workers United!", was accompanied by a statement from La Liga, demanding that international brands be held accountable for their suppliers' practices, and to start negotiations on working conditions.

In 2014, the president of La Liga travelled to Germany and made a presentation to Adidas shareholders. He described the practices in supplier factories back in Central America, and outlined several of the disputes with the unions there, including some that had been resolved, and others still on-going.

The Gildan campaign was launched under the slogan "United, we demand respect for our labour and human rights". Trade unions from Honduras, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic and Haiti participated.

The international campaigns highlighted the difficulties of maintaining effective communications across language differences and different local priorities. In response, La Liga established its Technical Team and a Founding Coordinating Committee. The latter comprised delegates from the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador, as well as Cambodia, Bangladesh, India and Indonesia. In 2014 it held its first world meeting in Hong Kong.

The future

A structure such as La Liga is extremely complex, incorporating a web of communication between and within unions as well as allied institutions, and across different countries, languages and time zones. For this reason, decisions are often made by individuals than according to institutional procedures. This can have negative medium- and long-term consequences, as it can allow the management of power and resources to drift away from the people and the workers, and become concentrated in the higher echelons, which goes against the principle of the unions.

The creation of union networks around brands and the same multinational employer in Central America, however, was a good strategic choice and leveraged the structural power of the unions. The social power accumulated by trade unions in their respective countries also boosted the impact of the international campaigns.

The union capability that has seen the most development through La Liga's campaigns has been an increase in learning and experience, even if this has not always translated into an increased associative capacity – meaning more members. It is noteworthy that those organizations with higher membership when they joined La Liga are the ones that proved best able to overcome the challenges they faced.

All of its triumphs and learning experiences make La Liga a clear example of how successfully to build a transnational union network. It is an inspiration and encouragement to other unions on how best to explore international alliances and campaigns.