

Jesuit urges U.N. to improve international protection of workers

GENEVA – A Mexican Jesuit has urged the U.N. Human Rights Council to improve international protection for Mexican workers affected by transnational corporations working in Mexico.

“There is no real political will in Mexico to protect workers’ rights. That is why we need international action,” said Father Sergio Cobo, director of the Center for Reflection and Action on Labor Issues, at a side event to the eighth session of the council in Geneva in early June. The Mexico City-based center, known as CEREAL, documents labor rights abuses in Mexico City and Guadalajara.

Father Cobo called on John Ruggie, U.N. special representative on labor and human rights, to recommend that the United Nations put in place an international ombudsman to investigate cases of abuse by transnational corporations in Mexico and throughout the world.

“For the grievances of Mexican electronics workers to be properly addressed, it takes international pressure on the transnational companies operating here,” Father Cobo said. “We know that this is not just an issue with electronics workers in Mexico. It is happening in China and other countries throughout the world.”

Father Cobo said that although 60,000 Mexican workers are technically unionized, 90 percent of them do not know they belong to a union. Foreign companies pressure managers and sometimes union leaders to keep workers in the dark about their rights and the work of unions, he said.

The priest also listed other abuses, including demands for sexual favors from workers, of whom a high percentage are women, in exchange for vacation time.

Often, the Jesuit said, workers applying for jobs at such companies are asked if they have relatives who are lawyers, or if women are pregnant. Women workers who do get pregnant often have to work eight- to 10-hour days standing.

“Some companies have subscribed to voluntary corporate social responsibility codes,” Father Cobo said. “But despite the existence of such codes for eight years now, many cases are still not resolved by dialogue and mediation.”

He cited 47 labor rights cases in the electronics industry that have gone to court.

Mr. Ruggie said he was “deeply moved by the struggles” of Father Cobo and other human rights defenders.

He told them not to give up their struggle and said he intends to ensure his mandate will result in concrete measures that will improve the lives of those affected by corporate misbehavior throughout the world. Mr. Ruggie has just finished his first two-year mandate; the U.N. Human Rights Council was expected to renew his mandate in early June.

Mr. Ruggie has recommended a framework for transnational corporations, the international community and countries in which the corporations operate to protect human rights and provide access to remedies or redress for victims of corporate abuse.

Mr. Ruggie said there is a “governance gap” in countries of weak democracies and high corruption. Such an environment is often conducive to abuse, he said.

Father Cobo was invited to Geneva by the International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity, an international alliance of 15 Catholic development agencies in Europe and North America known by its French acronym CIDSE.

CIDSE had submitted a document to Mr. Ruggie highlighting issues raised by partner organizations in developing countries regarding alleged misconduct by transnational corporations.

In the document, CIDSE reported abuses such as the refusal by North American mining company Goldcorp to pay a fine for environmental pollution in Honduras and the destruction by another mining company of ancestral lands inhabited by indigenous Filipinos. The document also raised issues related to Mexican supply-chain workers working for electronics companies such as Hitachi, Hewlett-Packard and IBM.

CIDSE also recommended that an independent ombudsman investigate cases of abuses by companies in developing countries where governance is weak and companies can get away with behavior that would not be acceptable in countries of their origin. Other recommendations included setting up an international advisory center that would provide technical advice to developing countries on how to negotiate contracts with transnational corporations and how to ensure that workers' rights and the environment are protected.

CIDSE recommended that the home countries of transnational corporations develop extraterritorial legislation so that cases of abuse can be tried in home countries if the host country is unable to prosecute.