

## COFFEE WITH JUSTICE IN GUATEMALA

Report by Aileen Cowan

Coffee occupies a central place in Canadian culture. For most of us, the caffeinated kick of a morning java is what gets us through the rest of the day. But what are the origins of that stimulating brew and how does it find its way into our cups? Despite its position of preeminence in our daily lives, these are questions that we, as Canadian consumers, are rarely compelled to ask. In the interest of breaking through this mystifying effect of the commodity form, Leocadio Juracan and Julian Marcelo, delegates of Guatemala's Campesino Committee of the Highlands (CCDA) and members of the El Paraiso Cooperative, spoke at York on October 22, 2002.

The event, co-sponsored by OPIRG York, CERLAC, LACS, RCDG, the Business and Society Program, and the Fair Trade @ York Campaign, was attended by faculty and students from a variety of disciplines united by the desire to understand the conditions of production involved in a cup of coffee and to support socially and environmentally responsible alternatives to the present system of international commodity exchange. Erika Fuchs, FES grad student and former volunteer in Guatemala, facilitated and translated for the event, bridging the communication gap between primary producer and final consumer

Compellingly, Leocadio Juracan recounted the crippling impact of the ongoing crisis in international coffee markets on agricultural labourers, campesinos and small coffee producers in Guatemala. In response to historic lows in the price of coffee, large landowners have been evicting entire families from their plantations, leaving them without land, shelter, or income. Thus, while massive landholdings lay idle, homelessness, unemployment, and participation in the informal labour force rise steadily. This situation has led,

according to Leocadio, to an intensification of human rights and labour rights abuses in Guatemala and in neighboring Mexico, where many agricultural labourers and campesinos have been forced to migrate in search of work.

But the hardship brought on by the current crisis merely represents an exacerbation of the already deplorable conditions typical of the industry. Even in better times, when agricultural labourers can find work, they are frequently subjected to harmful working conditions, including extensive exposure to chemicals without proper protection. Because they are generally paid half of what men earn, women are most often employed for the labour-intensive tasks of applying chemicals and picking the coffee beans. As a result, women's health is especially at risk and developmental deformations in children are common, Leocadio explained. Dependent on their earnings as agricultural labourers and/or deprived of access to land for subsistence production, the rights of plantation workers and their families are routinely subject to gross abuse.

In response to this history of exploitation and abuse, the CCDA was formed in 1982, as the 36-year civil conflict was still raging, to defend the rights of campesinos across Guatemala and to recover lands taken from Mayan communities over the past century. In 1998, the organization assisted several Cakchiquel Maya communities in the Solola province of Guatemala to purchase a local coffee plantation and create the El Paraiso Cooperative. The CCDA purchases the cooperative's best organic beans to market them as "Café Justicia" – a Fair Trade Plus coffee line, so-called because its standards exceed those prescribed by Fair Trade certification bodies. The CCDA receives extensive support from Canada's BC

Central America Student Alliance (BC CASA) which imports and markets Café Justicia in Vancouver. In addition to reinvesting the profits into social justice programs in Guatemala, BC CASA pays US \$2.00 per pound, well above the regular Fair Trade rate of US \$1.26 per pound. Café Justicia is also organically-produced and shade-grown.

As Leocadio and Julian Marcelo emphasized, Fair Trade represents a viable alternative to the historically exploitative and unsustainable patterns of international commodity exchange. In Solola, it has enabled small farmers to retain ownership of their lands in the face of critically low world coffee prices, while simultaneously supporting various grassroots development initiatives including technical training projects, the creation of a revolving loan fund, and the provision of educational scholarships for children whose parents were killed or disappeared during the prolonged Guatemalan conflict. This reality contrasts powerfully with that of unemployed, landless labourers. The meaning of Coffee with Justice could not be clearer.



On the CCDA, Café Justicia and the El Paraiso plantation:

[http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/cafe\\_justicia.html](http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/cafe_justicia.html)

This event was organized as part of the Fair Trade@York campaign. See the campaign website at:

<http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/fairtrade.html>

### The CERLAC Bulletin

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