

# We Are Involved in a Joint Struggle

## Interview With Carmen Irnamberna

**H**undreds of Indigenous representatives gathered in Geneva in June of 1994 to discuss and comment on the Draft Declaration of Indigenous Rights being prepared by the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples. There, we interviewed Carmen Irnamberna, President of the Federation of Indigenous People and Campesinos of Imbabura (FICI), one of the largest highland Indian organizations in Ecuador, on the draft declaration and her experiences as a woman leader.

Are you satisfied with what has occurred here at the UN or do you think that the aspirations of Indigenous Peoples are not being heard?

Well, I cannot exactly say satisfied. But it seems to me that the initiatives proposed here are important so that with time the governments increasingly open up the barriers to the recognition that we Indigenous peoples have rights.

This space here in the UN Working Group is important for outlining a program which the Indigenous Peoples can then use. But I believe that nothing will change through this alone.

Our only guarantee is the force of our peoples. Regardless of how many laws are approved, if our communities don't struggle, there are no guarantees. Clearly the law will be a legal instrument, but its use depends solely on our strength. A slew of laws protecting our human rights already exist, but when and where have they truly been applied? When have we been protected under them? Rarely, if ever, are laws on paper complied with. More often the interests of those in power rule. So, regardless of how marvelous our program here in the Working Group is, it will never bear fruit unless we guarantee it.

How do you feel about the draft declaration, where does FICI stand in this regard?

Some people believe that, because a universal declaration of human rights already exists, that this adequately covers all of humanity. But actually, Indigenous People are not taken adequately into account under existing laws. I believe that Indigenous People need to be addressed specifically, because we are different. We have our own forms of organi-

zation, our own politics, our own forms of economic development.

There are differences between Indigenous People on the best way to express our rights. Some argue for "free-determination," others for "autonomy." Autonomy implies the expansion, the development [of rights], under already established norms and structures. With free-determination, we are petitioning the direct recognition of our rights—that governments recognize us for who we are. These differences merely indicate that the different peoples we represent confront different problems, have different struggles, and different experiences. And so for some, the declaration of autonomy is sufficient. But for those who are truly in struggle for free determination, autonomy is not sufficient. Where there is much discrimination, it will not protect us. We [of Ecuador] are arguing for free-determination, not simply autonomy. My position has always been that if we are not recognized in this manner then we cannot say that this is our law—that of the Indigenous Peoples. Rather, it is a UN law declared in the presence of Indigenous Peoples.

To conclude, could you say something about your position. You are the only female president of an Indigenous federation in Ecuador. What enabled that and what challenges do you face?

This is what everyone asks me, and I really don't have a clear response. Since the inception of FICI, for the twenty years that it has existed, there has never been a woman as president. There has been female participation and leadership, but this has always been in the role of Secretary of Women—not the presidency, not even as head of one of the other departments. So, this time there was a miracle.

How have the men in the organization responded to you, do you feel that they doubt your capacity?

Well, that depends on how you proceed in the work. Some may have doubts, but in general, I have the total support of my colleagues. If they don't support me, I say that they are not obeying the desires of the province. For I was not elected by just one community but by the provincial congress.

To date, I have not had any problems, but rather the support and respect of all the members.

**What about women's organizing within the FICI? Are there groups that work specifically on women's issues?**

Our form of struggle does not stop with specific objectives for women. I believe that this is something imposed by colonialism—that women are to fight for their rights separately, and that men then organize for the men. I don't agree with this. I believe that we are involved in a joint struggle where men, women, and children participate.

But we can have specific activities as women within this struggle and there can be specific problems between the genders, after all, *machismo* still exists. But what we, as women, are trying to promote is that everyone is respected as an equal. And that everyone understands that women are capable of assuming any responsibility.

We, as Indigenous people and as women need to have direct relations between our peoples where limitations are not imposed, where our spaces are not limited. As women, we need to understand that we are capable of taking any responsibility—that we can move forward.

Throughout the world, we heard about the Indigenous uprising last June that threw much of the country into turmoil until the Ecuadorian government agreed to negotiate with Indigenous organizations. What caused the uprising?

The central issue was the new agrarian law. Over the past few years, the National Agrarian Coordinating Body organized by CONAIE held assemblies and workshops in communities to debate agrarian reform. This popular analysis culminated in the "Law for Integrated Agriculture", which we presented to the National Congress a year ago. Yet, this proposal was never discussed by congress. In May of this year, the executive branch submitted its own agrarian law. Following our vigorous protest, congress rejected this law, but then turned around and approved a virtually identical bill of the dominant conservative party—the Social Democrats.

The national "Mobilization for Life" erupted from the political and unconstitutional manipulation of this law that directly affects the lives of Indigenous people and small farmers in Ecuador. The mobilization began on June 13 and lasted more than eight days. It resulted in many deaths, three disappearances, and 540 injured.

**Who was responsible for this violence?**

Throughout the Mobilization for Life, the government never accepted our proposal for open dialogue. Instead, President Duran's solution was to declare a State of Emergency. In this way, he began to militarize target communities. When the military and police were authorized to intervene, the killing began. The deaths and injuries were the product of the government's state of emergency.

**So, what's the current situation with the agrarian law?**

Well, the law was approved. But finally, after so many deaths, the Tribunal of Constitutional Guarantees declared the law unconstitutional. At the same time, however, the President and the Social Democrats appealed the decision to the

Supreme Court. Thus the law was still in force despite the fact that a high-level institution of the same state declared it to be unconstitutional. We, of the Agrarian Coordinating Body, have appealed to the Supreme Court that it too declare the law unconstitutional.

At the same time, a commission was established to reform the law. The commission comprised representatives of the: Catholic church, Indigenous organizations, agribusiness and ranching, the national congress, the Social Democrat Party, Ministry of Agriculture, and the President of the Republic himself. Decisions of the commission are simply recommendations, however, and must still be approved by congress where the conservative Social Democrats are the majority.

**Is the government showing good will in relation to Indigenous demands now?**

If there were good will, the government would have acted before all the violence. We don't believe there is good will. Rather, the commission was constituted because of the Indigenous movement's demands and the intervention of international organizations. That is why we have dialogue. Still, this is not a dialogue where decisive resolutions can be made. Rather, it is a dialogue similar to that occurring here in the Working Group.

Photo by: Melina Selverston



Carmen Inramberna's organization FICI represents thousands of Indigenous people in the Ecuadorian highlands, like these women from Otavalo province.