

Background

Concerning the Presentation of the International ethecon Blue Planet Award to Huberto Juárez Núñez (Mexico), Trade Union Movement and Workers' Movement Activist¹

Huberto Juárez Núñez was born on 3rd November 1951 in Santa Cruz Itundujia, a small traditional village in the Mexican federative state of Oaxaca², the eldest of 11 children.

His father was the head of the local primary school, and his mother was a teacher. Going beyond the scope of their activities as educators, both worked tirelessly for justice and for the interests of the rural population.

It was because of his family environment that Huberto Juárez Núñez was confronted with social injustice, exploitation and the effects of capitalist power early in his life. The indigenous communities of Oaxaca suffered – and still suffer – from poverty, marginalisation and racist hostility. Fighting and barefaced land grabbing³ by caciques⁴ and other local leaders were always present.

When Huberto's father campaigned so that the local school would get back a plot of land that the church had appropriated without having the right to do so, this had severe consequences for the family, including Huberto. While his father's campaigning was successful and the school got its land back, the priest decided to take revenge by mobilising the caciques. Together, they threatened the family to such an extent that they had to flee from Itundujia. Huberto was only one year old at the time.

When Huberto was five years old, a similar event took place. After their evacuation, the family settled in Tataltepec, another small place in the state of Oaxaca. Constant land grabbing by members of the local elite occurred here as well. Once again, Huberto's father campaigned for the rights of the residents, ensuring that the victims of land grabbing got their land back, and again the family received death threats and had to flee.

Afterwards, the parents and their children moved to the father's home village in Santa Catarina Tayata, also in the state of Oaxaca.

However, when Huberto was 11, their stay ended with the family being forced to pack up and leave. Once more, this happened because Huberto's father had defended the interests of the poorer population.

When Huberto was a 17-year-old school student, he joined the 1960s civil rights movement in Mexico⁵. His father took him to various events and rallies.

1 This background information is based on personal conversations Sarah Schneider had with Huberto Juárez Núñez as well as students Huberto has worked with.

2 Oaxaca is the most diverse state in Mexico, where 15 different groups live together. The Mixtecos form the largest group, followed by the Zapotecos.

3 More information about land grabbing in Mexican history (in German) can be found on www.welt-ernaerung.de/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/124_05_Clausing-u-Goschenhofer.pdf

4 'Caciques' is the Mexican term for indigenous leaders or rulers.

5 In 1968, Mexico – like all large capitalist countries – saw major protests by workers and students.

While Huberto was not involved in the large protests of October 1968, his first boycott action took place in that year. When the massacre of students during the Mexican mass protests⁶ became known, he and his friends boycotted the official celebration of the end of their time at school. This was the true beginning of his political engagement.

In 1970, Huberto Juárez Núñez, now 19 years old, left his family and moved to Heroica Puebla de Zaragoza (Puebla for short). It was another world. After living in villages and small towns with his family, he now found himself in a large city. Puebla, the capital of the Central Mexican state of the same name, had far more than a million inhabitants. Here Juárez Núñez studied⁷ at the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (UAP).

Life in Puebla, especially at public universities and schools, was strongly influenced by the great social struggles of that time. When Núñez arrived, the railway workers' and teachers' movements, and especially the after-effects of the public protests of the students' movement in 1968, had already left an important mark on political debates in Puebla. The UAP played an important part in this. Many students and lecturers were leaders and activists in the local struggles, taking on important tasks.

At the beginning of his time at the UAP, Huberto Juárez Núñez gained important theoretical foundations for his political practical actions, basing himself on the works of major bourgeois and socialist thinkers such as Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, José Martí and Lenin. At the same time, he became more and more involved in the political fights in the streets. As early as 1970, he campaigned against the price increase for staple foods as a leading member of a people's initiative⁸.

In 1971, this movement developed into a free, nameless network in which hundreds of farmers were organised. They did not only fight the price increases in public protests, but also gained theoretical political knowledge. To raise public awareness for the network and its demands, Juárez Núñez was commissioned with writing a manifesto. It was held up for debate, approved and then published. Consequently, a large part of the population as well as the state authorities became familiar with the name Huberto Juárez Núñez for the first time.

This promptly resulted in the first warrant for his arrest. After a friend who looked very much like him was arrested, Juárez Núñez was certain that he had to go into hiding and leave Puebla.

He escaped to Cuernavaca Morelos. Sergio Méndez Arceo (1907-1992), a liberation theologian⁹ and fighter for socialism who went down in history as 'The Red Bishop', housed

6 State brutality during the Mexican mass protests reached a peak in the Tlatelolco massacre on 2nd October 1968, when the police and the military had marksmen/snipers kill just over 300 activists, who were demonstrating peacefully. See also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tlatelolco_massacre)

7 The educational system in Mexico is divided into four sections. It begins with the Primaria (primary education), which lasts for six years. This is followed by the Secundaria (secondary school for ages 12 to 15) and then the Preparatoria (for students between 15 and 18), which prepares students for vocational or university studies.

8 In the 1970s, price increases for staple foods were enforced in Mexico. The relevant plans were implemented in 1973.

9 Liberation theology is a form of Christian theology that arose in Latin America. It is a theology of the poor that sees itself as the 'voice of the poor' and wants to help liberate them from exploitation, deprivation of rights and oppression. Considering the situation of socially disadvantaged parts of the population, it interprets Biblical traditions as impulses for comprehensive

him in the cathedral. When that sanctuary was no longer safe, the clergyman took Juárez Núñez to the 'Communist Priest' Pablo Link in Jantetelco Morales. Pablo Link was another leading liberation theologian of his time.

With support from some respected professors, Huberto Juárez Núñez returned to Puebla in 1971 to sit his exams. After that, facing political hostility and difficult conditions, he started his economics studies at the UAP.

Despite all adversity, he successfully finished his studies and started working for his doctorate in 1974. In 1977, he was eventually appointed professor at the UAP's economic faculty.

At the time, in the late 1970s, many workers of the VW MEXICO corporation in Puebla were enrolled at his university where they wanted to qualify for their career. Huberto Juárez Núñez saw this as a challenge and mainly taught political economics.

The years between 1970 and 1980 were the central years of Juárez Núñez's political socialisation. He was active in various political groups, meeting some people who mainly wanted to be the centre of public attention, but also those who were not motivated by a desire for personal prestige and who were willing to actively confront the ruling class.

Driven by the influence of José Revueltas¹⁰ and the Espartaquista movement¹¹, Huberto Juárez Núñez eventually decided to be active in a group that was interested in the works of Karl Marx and whose main field was political theory. That group was looking for a way of scientifically establishing Marxism in Mexico.

His intense contact with Marxism made Huberto Juárez Núñez fight for workers' rights more and more determinedly. The workers from the automotive industry especially tested him. He attempted to create a framework for discussing the issues in his courses by offering to study Marx's work *Das Kapital* with his students. This led to vivid and challenging discussions and debates. New questions kept coming up, mostly concerning specific issues regarding the automotive industry.

In addition to working as a professor and carrying out the connected research tasks, he was also directly and actively involved in the workers' struggles for their rights and improved working conditions from 1977. In 1981, Juárez Núñez experienced his first strike against working conditions at Volkswagen Mexico.

From 1984, he organised a research team of students and VW workers that were concerned with the central issues of the local automotive industry. Together they developed a catalogue of demands to reduce working time from 46 to 44 hours per week. Their studies had a major impact: the 44-hour-week as the regular working time was taken up as a central

social criticism. It refers to an independent analysis of politico-economic dependence and works for a social system that is grassroots-democratic and mostly socialist.

¹⁰ José Revueltas (1914-1976) was a famous Mexican writer and political activist.

¹¹ English: Spartacus League. A Marxist group in Mexico that saw as its roots the Spartakusbund in Germany, a group that was founded in the early 20th century in opposition to the Social Democratic Party, which approved of the war credits for the First World War.

demand by the union leadership of the Sindicato Independiente de la Industria Automotiz VW, Similares y Conexos, Mexico, and eventually pushed through after hard struggles.

When, in 1987, the management of VW tried to cut their workers' wages, Juárez Núñez, amongst other matters, established connections to the German research group 'Arbeitsforschung & Raumentwicklung' (Labour Research and Spatial Development) at the Gesamthochschule Kassel (Comprehensive University of Kassel). This allowed him to reach awareness from the general public with support from the Mexico-related group¹² of the IG Metall (Industriegewerkschaft Metall, industrial union of metalworkers) at the company's head office in Germany. Huberto Juárez Núñez met Dr Karl Tjaden and Jutta Weber, who conducted research about VW in Mexico. Their cooperation made it possible to expose the arguments of the VW management as lies, significantly strengthening the position of the workers in Mexico.

The IG Metall in Germany as well as Walter Hiller, head of the joint works council at VW, expressed their solidarity, declaring: 'We will now urge the board of the VW corporation to influence the management of the VW DE MEXICO so it accommodates your demands by making a reasonable offer, and so there is a positive solution to the conflict in Puebla.'¹³ This meant that the tireless work of Juárez Núñez and his allies paid off: after the workforce in Puebla went on strike for 58 days following international shows of solidarity, the VW workers and management agreed on a pay rise of 78%.

From 1986, in addition to campaigning for the VW workers, Huberto Juárez Núñez developed a method of analysing the cost and earning structures of Mexican corporations in their annual tax returns. The Oficina Internacional del Trabajo Mexiko (OIT)¹⁴ invited Huberto Juárez Núñez to present his method at a workers' gathering in Cuernavaca, Mexico.

Among those present at the event were representatives of the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT)¹⁵ Brazil and the Transnational Information Exchange (TIE)¹⁶ from Brazil. Immediately convinced by the new method Juárez Núñez had developed, they invited him to Brazil.

Due to the international respect that he had gained, he eventually came to Germany in 1986. Here he visited the Comprehensive University of Kassel and the University of Marburg.

Having been highly successful in his fight for the rights of the Volkswagen corporation workers, Huberto Juárez Núñez continually used the know-how he had gained there for other class struggles. For example, he was actively involved in the fights at Ford Hermosillo in Puebla in the early 90s.

12 <http://www.igmetall-wob.de/gruppengremien/intersoli/archiv/laendergruppe-mexiko/> (in German)

13 Ibid.

14 Mexican branch of the International Labour Organization. The ILO is a special organisation of the United Nations with the task of promoting social justice as well as human and labour rights.

15 Central workers' union in Brazil.

16 Transnational organisation for the exchange of information.

Ford came to Puebla, Mexico in 1985 and started producing a Toyota model there. Workers in the company faced large workloads, low wages and little protection. In the mid-90s, Ariel Burgos, then leader of the trade union at Ford Hermosillo, started the fight to improve the situation within the plant. With him, Juárez Núñez analysed Ford's financial balance sheet.

The Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM) – the largest Mexican trade union federation, an organisation that was close to the government – rejected all protests against the circumstances at Ford Hermosillo. This meant that alternative forms of fighting had to be considered.

Eventually, in 1997, the workers decided to carry out an action that they called 'Falta Colectiva', in which all workers who were affected stayed away from the factory without an official call for a strike. Instead of working, they held a rally. Due to their absence, a major part of the production in the plant had to be stopped. Through this action, the workers enforced better pay and fought off punitive measures against the colleagues who had participated. There were no acts of repression whatsoever; and in particular, there were no dismissals. Due to Juárez Núñez's qualified analyses, the workers received the pay rise they had demanded.

In 1993, Juárez Núñez visited the US and was a guest of Northwestern University in Chicago as well as Wayne State University in Detroit. This journey also brought him into contact with a large American automotive union, United Automobile Workers (UAW). Due to the size and reach of this union, Huberto Juárez Núñez could rely on even more international support in his future campaigns for workers' rights.

Huberto Juárez Núñez also met Dr Steve Bobson of Wayne University and Mayne Lewchuck of McMaster University of Canada. With them, he developed a project in which scientists from Mexico, the US and Canada all participated. Its goal was to record the extent and consequences of 'lean production'¹⁷ in the car industry. The project was conducted in cooperation with the three countries' automotive unions. Its results are described in the book *Confronting Change – Enfrentado el Cambio*¹⁸.

In the 1990s, Huberto Juárez Núñez was a member of the trade union Sindicato de la Universidad de Puebla¹⁹. However, that union was abolished and transformed into a kind of 'cooperation of academics'²⁰ in the late 90s. Juárez Núñez did not become a member because the new association's approach did not refer to trade unions in any way and, in Juárez Núñez's opinion, the association was more of an 'elite club'.

In the early 2000s, Núñez participated in workers' fights in an export-oriented textile factory in Mexico. The employees were mainly women, who were forced to work in conditions resembling a concentration camp and were paid less than the minimum wage.

17 'Lean production' means the attempt to lower costs through very strong automation.

18 Nunez, Huberto J: *Confronting Change - Enfrentado el Cambio*, 1998.

19 Trade union of the university in Puebla

20 'Asociación de Académicos'

He was particularly impressed by his involvement in the events at Kukdong International, a Korean company in Atlixco, Puebla. A workers' strike was organised because of unacceptable working conditions. It was violently suppressed by the police, and the action of the protesters related to labour rights were unsuccessful. Huberto Juárez Núñez has written a book about the incidents, which contains eye-witnesses' statements about the events at the company.²¹

Until 2011, Juárez Núñez mainly concentrated on his work as a professor to further qualify and publish his studies and the analyses he had made. He continually urged his students to actively support and promote the fight against underpayment and severe working conditions in Mexico.

In 2012, Huberto Juárez Núñez supported the workers of the company Flex-N-Gate, a supplier company for the automotive industry, in their fight for the permission of an independent trade union. At Flex-N-Gate, the decisive union was the Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM), a union that was close to the government and acted in the government's interest. It was remarkable for company-friendly rather than company-critical statements and actions. When, eventually, the trade union supported the interests of the management instead of standing by the workers, the conflict escalated, and the workers demanded an independent trade union.

The conflict reached a peak on 20th June 2012, when the workers at the plant downed tools and a large show of solidarity took place outside the plant.²² Not only was Núñez actively involved in the strike and the demonstration; he also became a member of the arbitration commission, which managed to negotiate significant improvements to the situation at the factory.

Following this development, the CTM made accusations against Huberto Juárez Núñez; for example, a smear campaign within the union (incited by the state) accused him of being a 'foreign agent' whose 'only goal was to destroy the trade unions'. There were attempts to weaken his influence with the aim of bringing the opposition movement to a standstill. Public threats were uttered against him. Núñez, however, was not to be deterred. He continued to receive support from friends and comrades and steadfastly continued his fight for workers' rights.

In addition to his university research and participation in diverse social movements such as Morena²³, Huberto Juárez Núñez has regularly published texts in various newspapers such as 'La Jornada de Oriente'²⁴.

Núñez is currently concerned with the rights of workers in Mexican gasworks and mines.

Huberto Juárez Núñez (Mexico), activist of the trade union movement and workers' movement, defends human rights despite the risk to his own safety and stands up against

²¹ Witnesses' statements about the conflicts can be found in the book 'Rebelión en el Greenfield'.

²² www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXTRIMcttgw

²³ 'Movimiento Regeneración Nacional' – a left-wing movement in Mexico

²⁴ www.lajornadadeoriente.com.mx/author/huberto_juarez/

corruption, exploitation and crime. He not only supports human, labour and trade union rights; he also campaigns for extending them. His actions benefit the human community. He holds up morals and ethics and ensures that these values will prevent the Earth turning into a black planet.

In a world where profit is becoming the only criterion for any decision and development, ethecon considers the actions of Huberto Juárez Núñez an outstanding contribution to saving and upholding the standards of our blue planet. For this admirable cultivation and development of human values, ethecon – Foundation Ethics and Economics honours Huberto Juárez Núñez with the International ethecon Blue Planet Award 2016.

Books and Publications

Selected books and publications by Huberto Juárez Núñez

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