

Union demands answers in leader's shooting death

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Teamsters are pressuring the El Salvadoran government to thoroughly investigate the shooting death of a labor leader from Cliffside Park who was organizing truckers in the Central American country.

Jose Gilberto Soto, 49, was shot in the back on Nov. 5 by three men who waited in front of his mother's house in Usulután, El Salvador. Soto died immediately and the trio fled in a car. Authorities said robbery did not appear to be the motive, as no money was taken. No one has been charged.

Teamsters President James P. Hoffa sent a letter this week to Secretary of State Colin Powell asking him to urge El Salvadoran officials to capture the killers.

"To date, the police have done little to apprehend what appears to be a death squad that killed our representative," Hoffa said in a statement.

Soto grew up in El Salvador and immigrated to the United States in 1975. He settled in Hudson County, working as a trash collector, waiter, cook and landscaper before joining the Teamsters in 1985.

He rose through the ranks, becoming president of Local 11 in Haledon and later business agent for Local 723 in Montville.

For the past 2½ years, Soto tried to organize truck drivers at ports from Elizabeth to Boston. Although no union was established, "he built a very strong, vibrant organization at Port Newark," said Soto's boss, Ron Carver, assistant director of the Teamsters Port Division.

Soto traveled to Central America on Oct. 30 to investigate the working conditions of port drivers in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras.

Friends said he was looking forward to the trip as a chance to visit family and help truckers from his native country. They said Soto was not concerned for his safety.

"We knew that the unions faced a lot of repression, particularly from the right-wing governments and the steamship lines," Carver said. "And though some local leaders have been killed and intimidated, no U.S. labor leader had been killed before. I guess we should have taken some more security precautions."

Soto's brother, Francisco, said Soto had received several threatening phone calls at his Cliffside Park home, but never thought they would be carried out.

"He always thought he fought for people's rights, for their respect on the job," said Francisco Soto. "That was his motivation. He was the voice of the people who didn't know how to defend themselves against the others."

Soto was also a fixture in Hudson County outside his union activities. He organized and managed the El Sirpo soccer team. He petitioned county officials to build a soccer field in North Hudson Park. He was a founder of CEUS, an organization that sent financial aid and computers to El Salvador.

Soto was remembered Friday for the honesty and kindness he showed many people, even strangers.

In March 2001, he found a wallet in a parking lot and drove 21 miles from Cliffside Park to Wyckoff to return it to its owner, Margaret Craig.

"Every god-blessed scrap of paper and money was there," said Craig, who wrote a letter to The Record in 2001 detailing Soto's kind act. "You hear so many horrible stories, but here was a man who made a special trip to bring it over to me."

Soto is survived by his wife, Alva; his children Blanca, Rosalva and Edson; his mother, Blanca Rivas; and siblings Henri, Julio, Francisco, Yolanda, Araly and Mayra.

A funeral Mass will be held today at 10 a.m. at St. Augustine Roman Catholic Church on New York Avenue in Union City.