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Remembering Where Flowers Come from on Valentine's Day

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Every year on Valentine's Day, millions of Americans head to their local florist or supermarket to buy flowers for a friend, spouse, or family member. If there's a romantic relationship involved, we're mainly concerned about getting our gift to the recipient--on time. Few of us ever ask where all these flowers come from or who helped grow and pick them.

I never thought much about the human beings behind our bouquets either--until I traveled to Colombia last year and talked with a group of "floriculture" workers in a village near Bogota. I quickly discovered that our domestic expressions of affection, which reach their largest volume on Valentine's and Mothers' Days, require painful, low-paid labor by a global workforce that's largely female.

America's main flower supplier is Colombia, the world's second largest exporter of fresh-cut flowers next to the Netherlands. More than 100,000 workers help grow, sort, and package the nearly \$1 billion worth of flowers produced there each year.

Originally spurred by tariff incentives designed to induce farmers to switch from coca cultivation, the industry is now dominated by local plantation owners and multi-national corporations like Dole Food.



Photo: Gabriel Castillo

NO LOVE FOR WORKERS

The Colombian flower workers I met received little love or appreciation from management, on Valentine's Day or any other. During a visit by a delegation of American labor and student activists, members of a union called Sintrasplendor described the many occupational hazards they face.

They complained about the lack of protective equipment and clothing, which leaves them exposed to pesticides in the fields and to the fungicides that flowers are dipped in prior to shipment. These chemicals can cause severe headaches, asthma, nausea, and impaired vision, as well as miscarriages among pregnant women. The repetitive tasks and long hours in assembly-line jobs have also left many flower workers with painful carpal tunnel injuries.

Like Coca-Cola and other foreign firms in Colombia, Dole has taken full advantage of the country's weak labor laws and climate of repression. When workers at Dole-owned Splendor Flowers tried to organize two years ago to win better pay and conditions, management conducted an aggressive anti-union campaign.



Photo: Jeff Crosby

According to the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF), this included "bringing in a company-backed union, firing union leaders, challenging the union's legal registration with the Colombian government, and refusing to re-instate fired union leaders despite court orders to do so."

To add insult to injury, Dole recently announced the closing of its Splendor plantation, blaming the layoff of one-third of its Colombian workforce on lower-wage competition from Africa and Asia. Within the next decade, most roses available in the U.S. will likely be "Made in China," because that nation is currently gearing up to undercut exporters in Ecuador, Kenya, Malaysia, and Thailand, as well as Colombia.

On China's new flower farms, workers are already clipping roses in giant greenhouses, taking them to huge sheds to remove the thorns, and then wrapping them in paper and plastic for shipment to Los Angeles and Moscow. With few workplace rights and no union protection, young women in China working on these farms face the same occupational safety and health problems as their South American counterparts, and earn just \$25 per month.

RAISING AWARENESS

Human rights and labor solidarity groups like Witness for Peace, Global Exchange, the Colombia Support Network, and U.S. Labor Education in the Americas Project have taken up the cause of the displaced Splendor workers. They are focusing on the conditions of flower workers in other nations as well.

Their goal is not to cast a pall over Valentine's Day. They just want more consumers to choose flowers that have been certified as "VeriFlora" products. VeriFlora growers don't use the pesticides that sicken flower workers and they agree to respect local labor rights and environmental regulations.

Unfortunately, only two flower-sellers in the entire country, Freshblooms in New Jersey and Organic Bouquet in California, have thus far embraced this higher standard for business behavior.

If the thorns in the global flower trade begin to prick a few consumer consciences, abusive floriculture employers may be censured as well. If enough of us question and complain, more flower importers in this country will begin using suppliers certified as socially responsible and worker-friendly.

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Photo: Gabriel Castillo