

ACTION IN THE AMERICAS

The newsletter of the U.S. Labor Education in The Americas Project



Dear Friends,

As I reflect on what a challenging year it has been for workers at home and around the globe, I am deeply moved by the resilience and tenacity of our partners in Latin America. Despite threats to their livelihoods and even lives, they continue to demand decent wages and working conditions. For over 30 years, ILRF has stood alongside working women and men who organize for justice. And our fight continues.

This year, our USLEAP program staff have spent countless hours supporting various global struggles, including the resistance against destructive trade deals and the fight for justice on the Honduran melon fields.

I was lucky to be able to attend the annual meeting of the regional banana unions' federation, COLSIBA, in October. I was impressed by how the confederation has prospered and how many women are in leadership positions within the unions.

At ILRF, we operate on the premise that social change is made by workers and their organizations with the support of global solidarity actions.

We hope you will continue to stand with us as we take on a new era of challenges!

In Solidarity,

Judy Gearhart
Executive Director

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Fyffes' Workers Continue the Fight for Justice on the Honduran Melon Fields

Thousands of miles away from U.S. supermarket shelves, Oglis Mejia (pictured below, middle standing) gets up at 4 a.m. to prepare the meals of the day for her children. She subsists on a diet of rice and beans, and occasionally chicken, which is all she can afford with her wages working at the melon plantation. Her workday starts at 6 a.m., and consists of planting, cutting and harvesting the melons for 8 to 12 hours a day, a strenuous job that requires her back to be hunched over to the ground to plant the seeds.

Oglis works for Suragroh, a melon plantation owned by Fyffes, one of the largest fruit companies in the world and the largest supplier of melons (sold under the  label) to the U.S. market. Fyffes' plantations are located in Choluteca, the southernmost state of Honduras, and employ around 4,500 workers, the vast majority of whom are women. For over ten years, workers have been claiming egregious human and labor rights violations on Fyffes' melon plantations.



Job Insecurity: Despite laboring on the same plantation for decades, most Fyffes workers are hired on short-term contracts each melon season. Local management uses these precarious working conditions to threaten, fire and deny contract renewals for workers who speak out against abuse.

Poverty Wages: While Fyffes claims to pay the daily minimum wage of 228 lempiras (USD \$9.73), workers report they often work more than eight hours a day and receive no overtime pay. A 2015 U.S. Department of Labor [report](#) found that Fyffes subsidiaries consistently failed to give or pay mandatory holidays, vacation or school vouchers.

Inhumane Working Conditions: Workers [describe](#) being ordered to enter fields which are sprayed with toxic chemicals, without appropriate protective equipment such as boots and gloves. They say the labels on the pesticide containers are ripped off before use. Last year, The Guardian [reported](#) that Suragroh workers use Gramoxone [also known as Paraquat], a chemical with well-documented health risks, including links to Parkinson's disease. The EU banned Gramoxone in 2007, but its use is not in any way restricted in Honduran law.

Gender-Based Discrimination: In October 2015, Marys Suyapa Gómez was fired for being pregnant after 15 years of working for Suragroh. Women workers say that maternity leave rights are unheard of and the company provides no support for childcare.

Denial of Healthcare and Social Security: Fyffes' plantations have failed to pay into the state-run health care and social security programs as required under Honduran law, leaving workers without vital benefits. Maria Gomez, 65, (pictured left, sitting right) says, "They never contributed to social insurance and now I will not be able to retire and finally rest after so many years (nearly 30) spent on the plantation. I have to continue working to survive."

Fighting Back with Union Power

In January 2016, Suragroh workers achieved a historic milestone. With the help of the Honduran Agricultural Workers Union, or STAS, they were the first melon plantation to organize workers in the entire sector. STAS' efforts to collectively bargain for better working conditions have been met with a violent anti-union campaign from Fyffes' local management.

Union members have been subject to blacklists, intimidation, threats, bribes and scores of illegal firings. The violence reached a peak in April of this year, when Moises Sanchez, secretary general of the union was robbed, beaten and held at gunpoint by unknown men. His brother Misael was seriously injured on his face with a machete when he tried to free Moises. The message was clear: stop organizing.

Fyffes has consistently refused to sit down and negotiate with STAS, instead pursuing a legal strategy which wrongfully argues that temporary and subcontracted workers have no right to organize under Honduran law. STAS has appealed against this interpretation of the law with the Ministry of Labor. If the appeal is approved, this would set a historic precedent, clearly establishing that all temporary and subcontracted workers in Honduras have the right to organize local union branches. STAS and its union federation, FESTAGRO, say the appeal has been sitting on the Labor Minister's desk for over a year, refusing to sign it due to pressure from the business community. Fyffes yields a lot of political and economic power in the region and workers report that

the local government reliably sides with the company.

The fight continues, despite [reports from FESTAGRO](#) that employers have bussed people in company vehicles to [protest against STAS](#) and have created a management- friendly union, which is awaiting registration at the Ministry of Labor. ILRF, along with our European allies have been leading the **Freedom and Fairness for Fyffes' Workers** campaign for the past year, calling upon supermarkets and consumers to hold Fyffes accountable for labor rights abuses on its Honduran melon plantations.

For the women pictured above, this union fight is no longer just about their own jobs, but for the well-being of future generations. Herminia Carranza, 61 (pictured above, sitting left), told a crowd of supporters in Washington D.C. that she fights so that her children and grandchildren can have dignity at work and a better life. For them, joining STAS has been a way to build collective power against a company where the quarterly bottom line takes precedence over the inherent rights of workers.

In solidarity with Fyffes' workers, the campaign is demanding that:

1. Fyffes' local management end discrimination and the anti-union campaign against STAS union members.
2. Formally recognize STAS and engage in collective bargaining as required by national and international laws.

Photo via Valérian Mazataud.

Sitting, Left to right: Herminia Carranza, 61, Maria Gomez, 65

Standing, Left to Right: Ana Jilda Lopez, 60, Oglis Mejia, 35, Petrona Diaz, 45

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Fyffes will only listen when consumers demand action.

1. [Send an email to Fyffes' parent company, Sumitomo telling them to recognize STAS!](#)
2. [Print this letter](#) and deliver it to the manager at your local grocery store. Tell them you are concerned about the human rights violations on Fyffes' supply chain and ask that they raise the issue with Fyffes' parent company, Sumitomo. Don't forget to take a picture of your action, tweet at us @ILRF and @USLEAP or email gabby@ilrf.org



Fyffes' pineapple plantation in Costa Rica

Fyffes, Pineapples & Costa Rica

Fyffes is also a major supplier of pineapples to U.S. supermarket shelves.

In January of this year, Campaigns Associate, Gabby Rosazza met with organized workers on Fyffes' pineapple plantation in Costa Rica (Anexo S.A). They expressed serious concerns about trade union discrimination, in which Fyffes' local management unfairly subject union members to verbal abuse, strenuous work tasks, and constant vigilance.

The National Private Sector Workers Union, or SITRAPEM, has [alleged](#) serious health and safety concerns, including:

- Workers being transported in dangerous trucks, overloaded with more than 100 people.

- Safety equipment that is not appropriate for the tropical climate and hot temperature which exposes them to agricultural lime, a product that fatigues workers with extended use.
- Agrochemicals used in areas that contain potable water.

“They treat us [union members] like dogs so that other workers don’t see the value in joining the union. But when they abuse us, the union is there.”- anonymous worker

Workers are asking the **Freedom and Fairness for Fyffes Workers** campaign to demand that Fyffes resolve pending issues/violations and establish effective respect for freedom of association at Anexo.

Historic Victory for 20,000 Colombian Banana Workers Despite Uptick in Violence

Last November, the longest running armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere formally ended after a historic Peace Accord was signed between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC. 52 years of civil war left 25,000

disappeared, 7 million internally displaced and over 267,000 killed, of which 80% were civilians. Human rights defenders, particularly trade unionists, journalists, indigenous, peasant and Afro-Colombian leaders have disproportionately been the targets of violent crimes.

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USLEAP's long-time partner SINTRAINAGRO – Colombia's National Union of Agricultural Workers – knows this reality all too well. SINTRAINAGRO is a trade union that represents 35,000 workers in the banana, sugar cane, palm, rice and flower sectors of Colombia. For more than 45 years, SINTRAINAGRO has fought to defend the rights of workers' despite being targeted by illegally armed groups. They have seen some 1,300 of their affiliates, union leaders and members, murdered over the course of the armed conflict.

in the fields for up to 14 hours a day and make as little as \$200 dollars a month.

Despite these attacks, the Colombian government recently withdrew protective measures for SINTRAINAGRO's leaders, citing the end of the civil war and demobilization of the FARC. In response, ILRF supporters took action by sending over 3,100 emails directly to Colombian President, Juan Manuel Santos, demanding his administration fully investigate the murder of Alberto and restore protection services for the threatened union leaders.

“The agreement marks a historic moment in our union’s history. Years of struggle have proved it is possible to better the lives of workers through open and honest dialogue between the employer and the union.”

- Adela Torres Valoy, General Secretary of SINTRAINAGRO

But 2017 proved to be a trailblazing year for the union. In August, SINTRAINAGRO signed an industry-wide collective bargaining agreement with the Colombian Association of Banana Producers, AUGURA. The agreement protects over 20,000 banana workers across 268 plantations, guaranteeing them, among many other benefits, a 5% salary increase, zero tolerance for gender-based or age discrimination and job security via permanent employment. It also allots social funds for education, culture and sports programs on each plantation.

The SINTRAINAGRO-AUGURA agreement sets a historic precedent for the global banana industry, proving that mature industrial relations are possible in the agricultural sector when workers and employers engage in meaningful dialogue to improve working conditions and productivity.

Despite the victory, SINTRAINAGRO remains under serious threat. In 2017 alone, the union's leaders have faced a number of brazen attacks designed to stifle their advocacy on behalf of workers. Their headquarters in Magdalena suffered a grenade attack in March and a union leader's home was shot at by unknown gunmen in November. On July 1st, Alberto Román Acosta González, president of the Guacarí branch, was gunned down by two hired men while watching his son play soccer. For over ten years, Alberto fought for the rights of sugarcane cutters who toil

ILRF also coordinated 27 U.S. labor unions and civil society organizations to send a letter to U.S. Ambassador to Colombia, Kevin Whitaker, urging him to call on the Colombian government to restore protective services for SINTRAINAGRO's leaders and carry out its responsibility to guarantee the safety of its citizens.

The Peace process gives Colombian society an opportunity to build stable and lasting peace for future generations. And SINTRAINAGRO is an example of how collective bargaining can raise the standard of living for workers. They are a beacon of hope for Colombia. But in order to realize this goal, trade unions like SINTRAINAGRO must be free to participate fully in Colombia's democracy, including organizing agricultural workers into independent trade unions.



Adela Torres Valoy, General Secretary of SINTRAINAGRO

We Must Replace NAFTA

On the campaign trail, candidate Trump often denounced the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as a bad deal for the U.S., specifically citing the loss of good paying manufacturing jobs to Mexico. So when President Trump announced he would seek to renegotiate NAFTA, hopes were raised that his Administration would fix the agreement's many shortcomings, including unenforceable labor standards that encourage a race to the bottom in wages and working standards.

The Trump Administration got off on the wrong foot by conducting the NAFTA renegotiations behind closed doors with 500 corporate advisers granted special access and the public locked out. As a result of the extreme secrecy, very little is known about the exact text being proposed by any party.

With regards to worker rights, what we do know is not encouraging. The Trump Administration reportedly objected to a Canadian proposal that would have required all three NAFTA countries to ratify all 8 of the Core ILO Conventions (the U.S. has ratified only 2) and eliminate the so-called "right to work" laws that have prevented union organizing in many U.S. states. In terms of substance, all indications are that the Administration may be planning to simply cut and paste labor provisions from prior free trade agreements that have largely proven to be unenforceable.

Still, the news isn't all bad. The Administration has proposed allowing any party to "opt out" of investor state dispute settlement (ISDS), a controversial private court system that allows corporations to challenge any local, state, and national government decision

that (allegedly) reduces their profits. ISDS has been used by corporations and wealthy foreign investors to win multimillion dollar settlements (paid from public treasuries) from countries around the world and to bully governments into withdrawing laws and regulations protecting the environment, worker safety, public health, and more.

It's not too late to fix NAFTA's flaws and create a balanced trade deal that benefits working people, not just large multinational corporations. ILRF has joined a coalition of unions, family farmers, consumer safety activists, and environmental organizations that has collected over 100,000 signatures demanding a better NAFTA, including:



- 1. Strong labor standards that require all parties to adopt and enforce the labor rights contained in the ILO's 8 Core Labor Conventions;**
- 2. Specific labor protections for migrant workers;**
- 3. An independent enforcement body to monitor and enforce the agreement's labor standards;**
- 4. Elimination of ISDS (Investor-State Dispute Settlement).**

To get involved, the most important thing you can do right now do is ask your member of Congress to speak up for higher wages and labor standards in NAFTA. We must keep pushing for trade rules that work for all working people.

[Send a letter to your members of Congress now!](#)

**Support workers' rights and an end to violence
against trade unionists in Latin America!**

[Make a donation to USLEAP@ILRF](mailto:USLEAP@ILRF)