



Autumn 2005

BUILDING BRIDGES OF SOLIDARITY

One of the most important tools for bringing an international perspective on solidarity to the United States is building connections between individuals and unions as they participate in debates around the broad issues of labor rights and economic globalization.

In addition to our delegations to Central America, STITCH employs this strategy by bringing our partners from Central America to the United States to speak with U.S. union women, U.S. activists and organizers, and U.S. policy makers.

Sisters in Solidarity

The United Association for Labor Education (UALE) has organized regional Summer Institutes for Union Women for 30 years. For the last 4 years, STITCH has provided the opportunity for U.S. union women to hear directly from their sisters in Central America and to develop a better understanding of international labor solidarity.

The theme for this year's Northeast Summer School for Union Women, held in Ithaca, NY at Cornell University, was "One World, Many Union Voices." One important union voice was STITCH colleague, Maria del Carmen Molina. Carmen is an elected leader from SITRABI, a banana union in Guatemala. Carmen has worked with STITCH on a number of other projects. She is a member of our Advisory Committee for the Women,

Work and Labor Curriculum Project and is profiled in our most recent (and bilingual) publication, *Pushing Back: Women Workers Speak Out on Free Trade*.

At the NE Union Summer School, STITCH presented to 160 workers, from approximately 21 U.S. unions and a few international unions. Beth Myers, STITCH's Executive Director, gave an overview of globalization, and Mary Bellman, the Director of STITCH's programs in Central America, provided background on the banana sector in Central America. Carmen, however, connected those overviews and the corporate policies behind them to the everyday realities of workers in a Guatemala banana plantation.

U.S. workers heard how Wal-Mart's search to sell the cheapest bananas meant that she and her co-workers now wash, pack and weigh bananas at breakneck speed for less pay and no overtime. And that the big-box retailer adds additional tasks, such as pricing, without reducing production goals. U.S. workers also heard how Carmen's union is planning to organize banana workers on Guatemala's south coast in order to strengthen their ability to combat the banana company threats of moving production to where labor costs are lower, a tactic U.S. workers know too well.

STITCH also brought Carmen to meet with unionists and activists in New York City. STITCH and Carmen met with immigrant

union leaders and activists from the New York Civic Participation Project – a collaborative of union locals that include building service workers, hotel and restaurant employees, municipal workers, as well as non-union activists—that advocate for low-income workers and immigrant rights.

At both the Summer School for Union Women and the NYC community meetings, personal connections led the workshops and broader discussions on the differences and similarities between the impact of globalization in communities in Guatemala and the United States – drawing rank and file workers into conversations about local organizing and the global impact of corporate policies. Through these discussions, individual workers, local unions and community organizations are beginning to engage in international issues and make important links.

At these events, U.S. workers were beginning to strategize on how to connect with international unions. Workers wanted to figure out how they could contribute and make a difference, including how their unions could give direct support to other unions, as well as reflecting on how their purchasing power impacts workers internationally. Workers came up with slogans and organizing chants to use to highlight Wal-Mart’s anti-worker behavior.

Internationalizing Debates in the U.S.

In addition to bring together workers and activists, STITCH brings Central American voices to U.S. policymakers.



Below: Mary Bellman (left), and Carmen Molina (right).
(Photo: Kevin Stearns/University Photography – Cornell University)

During global events in the U.S. such as the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride tour and the Miami protests against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) – STITCH ensured that the U.S. activists and policymakers not only heard about women in Central America but also from them.

Especially during the hard fought debate on the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), STITCH made sure Central American women’s voices were present. As part of the International Gender and Trade Network, STITCH worked with Yadira Minero Rodas, the coordinator of the Women and Maquila Program of the Centro de Derechos de Mujeres (Women’s Rights Center) in Honduras. Beth Myers and Yadira together visited Congressional Offices, and they spoke at a STITCH community meeting in addition to a Congressional Briefing on CAFTA sponsored by Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur.

Solidarity in Action!

When workers call for actions in solidarity with their struggle, STITCH needs to call you. **Your solidarity** is vital for our common movement. Join online at <http://www.stitchonline.org>

STITCH: 1525 Newton Street NW
Washington, DC 20010
4a Avenida, 21-38, Apto. B, El Zapote,
Zona 2, Ciudad de Guatemala, Guate.