

GLOBALIZING ORGANIZING BAR-B-QUE CHICKEN AND BANANAS

By Cassandra Baker

Not your typical summer meal or a tasty combination, but this July, STITCH combined workers from a Banana plantation in Guatemala with poultry workers in the Southern United States. Carmen Molina works at a Del Monte packing plant in Guatemala and has been a proud union member for over 15 years. For 10 days in July, she and I traveled throughout the Mid-south region of the US meeting with Latino immigrants working in food processing and manufacturing.

We began our journey in St. Louis at the MidWest Summer School for Union. Carmen was surprised and excited to meet so many women working in non-traditional jobs like mechanics, carpenters and proud builders of the Humvee. She remarked that in Guatemala, she has never heard of a woman in any of those professions.

At the conference she shared the struggle her union has had to survive including facing the kidnap and assassination of their leaders, a devastating hurricane, and constant death threats. Despite the violence they face, in 2008 the union celebrated 61 years!

She also helped many American union members understand why so many from her country abandon their homes and families to make a harrowing journey to the US to work. She also told of the near impossibility to gain a visa to come to the US legally. An applica-

tion costs \$150, over one months salary. Carmen estimates that 9 out of 10 do

not gain approval. She says it seems like a rip-off by the US embassy because they keep the \$150 non-refundable application fee.

Carmen and I then began our long drive to Morton, a small town in south-central Mississippi that is centered around poultry processing. There we met with MPOWER, a worker center that works with African American and Latino workers on wage theft, discrimination, and harassment. Carmen and I facilitated a workshop with a number of women.

We then traveled to Memphis, TN where Rebekah Jordan and Alfredo Pena of Workers Interfaith Network (WIN) hosted two meetings with a worker center and community supporters

Finally, we ended up in the Fayetteville/Springdale area of Arkansas which is the home of Tyson's Chicken and Wal-mart. There we met with Rachel Townsend and several workers to train women on learned oppression and leadership. (over)



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The woman workers of Arkansas were very excited and have begun planning ways to reach out to the wider Latino community through events and radio programs.

Throughout our trip Carmen and I made connections between the struggles of union banana workers of Guatemala and the poultry workers of the south who are struggling to organize into workers centers and unions. The common struggle of workers knows no boundaries. Our discussions and trainings with union women helped foster ideas of union solidarity and sisterhood across borders.

Update: In August of this year the largest ICE raid was conducted in Laurel, MS near where we visited and over 600 workers were imprisoned.

MPOWER, continues to educate workers in the region on their rights.

For more information about the immigrant rights program and worker exchanges, contact

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Other Recent Events in the United States

In addition to the worker's tour, STITCH also has presented and participated in a number of other conferences and events:

The Annual Teamster's Women's Conference in Ft. Lauderdale, FL.

Participated in a Youth Education Class in the Washington, DC Public Schools.



This Fall STITCH will also:

Moderate a conversation with students at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA about women and the labor movement.

Convene a Regional-wide meeting of women unionists in Central America.

Provide support to a woman who was sexually attacked for her family member's labor organizing in Guatemala.

Words Have Impact

By Beth Myers, Executive Director, STITCH

When we talk about politics and other issues that are important to us, we all know that the language we choose has impact. And how we argue about our deeply held beliefs can be just as important as what we believe. I do a lot of research on the internet especially around labor rights in Latin America and immigration in the United States. Sadly, over the past year, this task has gotten harder to stomach.

If you want to read some of the most incredibly hateful language on the Internet, I encourage you to read one on-line article about immigration at any media outlet that allows users to comment. The comments that follow these articles (on any news site-liberal, conservative, nonpartisan) will make you sick to your stomach. The language that is used is offensive and should be condemned by all. But sadly, language is becoming the least of our problems as unfortunately we are starting to see that the ongoing debate about immigration in the United States is spilling from the blogosphere and having a violent impact on the millions of immigrants in the U.S. This language that de-humanizes and vilifies hard-working people has led to increased and much more heinous violence against immigrants.

In Pennsylvania, three teens are on trial for [beating an immigrant to death](#). And this is not an isolated incident. According to a recent article in the Chicago Tribune, "With Mexicans the focus of anger over illegal immigration, reported hate crimes against Latinos increased to 576 in 2006, or 25 percent more than three years before, according to the most recent FBI report on such incidents. Latino activists argue the trend has only gotten worse as the debate rages over immigration reform."

As unionists, we have a long history of standing up for and marching next to our brothers and sisters in our struggles for a better life and economic justice. I believe that we can and should do better in our discussions about immigration policy and immigrant workers. Do we all have the right to discuss what we think the best policy on immigration is? Absolutely. But why is it so much easier for us to blame the workers for problems at work and in our community and country than it is for us to take a more critical look at the government and corporations? Why do we look at the often most powerless person in the equation and say, ah it's his fault? Why does this debate very easily devolve into discussion that emphasize race? And finally, if we are talking about immigrants as less than human, are we to blame when people begin to treat them as such?

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