

Voices

STITCH AUTUMN UPDATE 2007

NEW US PROGRAM THE OTHER IMMIGRANTS: WOMEN WORKERS IN THE US LABOR MOVEMENT

- There are over 2 million foreign-born Central Americans in the United States (the majority from El Salvador and Guatemala.)
- Women immigrants are 5% of the total US population.
- Women are 44% of the low wage immigrant workforce.
- 45.2 % of Hispanic single mothers live in poverty. They are working but are under-paid and do not have benefits.
- The average wage for undocumented women is 46% that of an undocumented man.
- In areas where women do the same tasks as men, such as building services, women still only earned 50% of men's average wage.

After almost a year of planning and interviewing women across the United States, STITCH is excited to launch a brand new project on immigrant women workers in the United States.

The project grew out of STITCH's recognition of the lack of women's voices in the national debates on immigration and the worker justice movement. Despite almost half of new immigrants being Latina women, the image of the male worker dominates the public's mind.

STITCH is working with labor unions and immigration groups to address the needs of Latina women as workers.

New Publication!

The first part of the project is the 70 page bilingual booklet that highlights the struggles that women workers face in Central America, throughout their immigration journey, and in their fight for economic justice in the U.S. To purchase a copy of this publication, go to www.stitchonline.org or call us at 202- 265-3790

"That's when I learned everything about the union and realized that, unlike in my country, where I was defenseless, here I had the



Photo: Peter Holderness,
www.peterholderness.com

chance to defend myself. We were told, "You can go on strike for respect and dignity, and because they pay you a miserable salary and you don't have any job security." So I decided to join my co-workers and go on strike because I didn't want anyone to go through an experience like mine."

Quote from a Miami, FL Worker

Other Program Activities

STITCH has a history of documenting the stories of women. We are putting this strength to work with a new national program to hold a series of Latina dialogues.

These dialogues give Latina women a space where they can talk about their lives in their home countries and their hopes and dreams of immigrating to the US and the reality of what they are currently living.

We also recognize the struggle of all working women of color and are putting together a series to discuss not only the challenges to working as a Latina but inter-ethnic issues as well.

From these dialogues will come trainings and workshops for both the women and their organizations (especially unions) to address the issue presented.

We have had a great meeting in Miami working with SF Jobs with Justice and are looking to partner with other organizations, unions, and women's groups.

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OP-ED
IMMIGRATION FROM THE SOURCE

Denise Riley

Political Director Maryland/
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It takes several hot and bumpy hours to drive to the town of Morales more than 128 miles from Guatemala City. It is the home of the banana workers' union, Sindicato de Trabajadores Bananeros de Izabal (SITRABI), Guatemala's oldest and largest local union. We are here to see the impacts of globalization and CAFTA (the Central American Free Trade Agreement) on the workers in Guatemala on a delegation coordinated by STITCH, a non-profit that unites Central American and U.S. women to fight for economic justice.

We meet with SITRABI leaders Carmen Molina and Selfa Sandoval. They highlight what their union has done for Morales. Decent pay for the workers feeds the economy and union dues support community programs, sports leagues, and those in crisis.

Yet all the great programs of the union can not change the fact that work on the banana plantation is brutally hot and dangerous. SITRABI members receive a little more than Guatemala's minimum wage, about \$6 US a day. They may also live on the plantation's small houses (shared between two often large families) rent and utilities

free. There is a school and daycare for the children, healthcare facilities, and a small pension for retirees.

The members of SITRABI have a good relationship with their employer, Del Monte, but highly complex issues that workers have little influence over could soon affect their jobs. Banana trees can be moved from Guatemala plantations to take advantage of cheaper (and un-unionized) labor in South American countries like Brazil or Ecuador. Complex international trade policies have encouraged some companies to go to Africa.

Without their jobs, SITRABI members will share the same fate as the majority of Guatemalans. Eighty percent of the population lives in poverty. This kind of destitution fuels migration. Currently, remittances to Guatemala from immigrant family members in the US make up more than its exports.

Recently, with a decrease in demand and production, SITRABI members had little choice but to support a new contract Del Monte signed with Wal-Mart. Unfortunately, it has increased the number of bananas that workers must box per hour—from 30 to 44—but with no additional pay. This is beyond the capability of some, mostly older women, workers. The union

reports that this year, 90 of the members who lost their jobs, took their severance pay and immigrated to the US.

In addition to hard work, poverty and low pay, violence is a part of daily life for unionist in Guatemala. As recently as 1999, five SITRABI leaders were kidnapped and tortured by a town mob (some of whom were identified as working for the company) when trying to organize a strike protesting the lay-off of over 900 workers. Last January, Pedro Zamora was killed while driving home with his two young sons. Zamora, General Secretary of the Port Workers Union (STPEQ), was leading a campaign to stop the government's plan to restructure the Port of Quetzal. And two vendor union leaders were fatally shot on February 6, 2007. No arrests have been made.

The US had the opportunity with CAFTA to strengthen worker protections and better conditions for Guatemala but failed. The trade agreement could have compelled signing countries, including Guatemala, to adopt basic workers' protection laws established under United Nations and International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions. But CAFTA only requires countries to enforce

their own labor laws—laws judged by the ILO as weak and inadequate to protect workers.

In the midst of immigration battle in this country, it's important to look at what drives people to risk their lives, tear their families apart, and gamble all the money they have, to come to the US. Some of it is poverty but some of it is horrendous exploitation, ignored, and sometime supported, by our own trade policies and corporations. Good jobs and protections for workers guaranteed by a fair trade policy would allow workers to support their families, wherever they live.

NEW! LABOR RIGHTS BLOG

Denise's Op-Ed recently appeared on the new blog "Labor is Not a Commodity." This blog is jointly sponsored by STITCH and a number of other labor rights groups. Check in often to learn more about campaigns and interesting stories not covered by the mainstream press. Also, submit your stories to stitch@stitchonline.org to be considered for publication! For more stories check out our blog at <http://laborrightsblog.typepad.com/>

Don't forget to check in regularly at our general site at www.stitchonline.org