



SUMMER UPDATE 2004*

2004 Spring Language School Delegation

Who Came?

The STITCH Women's Language School Delegation took place May 29th to June 6th with fifteen union and community activists, STITCH staff and Gloria Kanu Vicente, a STITCH Board member and staff person at US/Leap.

A good cross section from across the United States, the delegates came to Guatemala to engage with local women workers and activists. The U.S. women included seven current and former union members. There was a wide diversity in ages and profession—a 20 year span between the oldest and youngest member of a group which was composed of students, engineers, professors, organizers, and union members who had been press workers, agricultural workers and professional organizers.

These women have fought for various social justice issues in the United States – the rights of women, immigrants, GLBT community, poverty rights, fair trade, and peace – and tied it all into international solidarity on labor issues.

Some of the unions represented in this delegation included the Graphics Communications International Union (GCIU),

Service Employees Union (SEIU), Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the United Steelworkers of America (USWA).

Highlights from the delegation

STITCH's delegations are not like any other organizations, we make the connections on women's issues, labor and globalization. Below are some stories from the trip.

Women Building Maquila Unions

On the first day, delegation attendees traveled into the slums that surround Guatemala City to meet Maquila workers in their homes. One delegation group met with a labor leader in her small shack, made of sheets of metal and blazing hot under the sun. She told participants about how important the union has been to her life ensuring that now she was able to take bathroom breaks, have access to safety equipment and to better provide for her family. Yet there are still many challenges ahead for all of us. One participant noted: "What an eye opener! We may think things are bad in the U.S. but they are nothing compared to here in Guatemala. It frustrated me to learn that the U.S. is basically responsible for these conditions because we buy everything they make/finalize."

Solidarity: Now and Then

Women on the delegation were thrilled to meet with the leaders of the historic Coca

Cola Union in Guatemala City. In the early 1980's, these workers took over their factory rather than give up their union. The group also met with a young union that has been organizing in a maquila for under a year. These women described their experiences, including recent death threats. The workers all spoke about how much power there was in solidarity work.

In the Banana Fincas

The group traveled six hours to reach the banana fincas where the labor Union SITRABI has been a fixture for years. We met with women leaders fighting to improve the lives of workers in the fields. Yet we did not see everything as a company representative followed us during the whole tour! The women told us about how they had to negotiate for protection from the pesticides and how workers were still fighting for better working conditions. AND they showed us the schools that the union had fought for and won from the company. It was an important experience as one delegate observed –“It was enlightening to see how the most rudimentary functions of cutting and packing bananas is part of and affects global trade and western consumers. I'll never look at bananas the same again.”

Putting Information Into Action!

These women did not just go on the delegation to watch and learn! They are activists and will go back to the U.S. and make a difference. Delegates will write stories in their union newsletters, give speeches to University classes, work with their local fair trade coalitions and Jobs With Justice chapters. One member of the delegation has made an audio documentary that will be available on the web and

potentially played on a local radio station. You can listen on her website:
<http://www.tripolty.org/projects.htm>

Join us for our fall delegation!

We will be setting a date in the next couple of weeks. Send an email to bmyers@stitchonline.org to receive more information.



Picture: Some STITCH delegates meet with a Maquila worker and her family.

Up and Coming Events and STITCH Updates

*This news update is a new feature from STITCH to give you periodic updates on events and programs at STITCH. In our next volume, we will focus on our trainings in Central America.

Our upcoming events in Central America will include a first ever training and support exchange between unions in Honduras and Guatemala. And we will also continue to build our new union training curriculum and start testing some of the modules that will be utilized by women throughout Central America.