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Date of publication: February 16, 2011

Source: ILRF Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Union representing rubber workers receives award for work to end child labor

The International Labor Rights Forum and Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF) congratulate the Firestone Agricultural Workers' Union of Liberia (FAWUL) on its selection by the U.S. Department of Labor as the 2011 recipient of the [Iqbal Masih Award](#) [1]. The annual award was established by the U.S. Congress to recognize the work of an individual, company, organization, or national government to end the worst forms of child labor. It will be presented to FAWUL by U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield today in Liberia's capital city of Monrovia.

The Bridgestone/Firestone Tire Company has owned a rubber plantation in Liberia since 1926. For years, child labor and other worker rights violations have been rampant on the plantation. Workers were subjected to unreasonably high production quotas in order to receive their meager wages and as a result, were forced to bring their children with them to work in order to survive. Workers on the plantation held an historic and heroic organizing campaign on the plantation to form an independent and democratically elected union on the plantation, often in spite of intimidation carried out by the company.

After historic union elections in 2007 and a long struggle to gain recognition, the workers were able to sign their first true collective bargaining agreement in 2008 and signed their second agreement in 2010. The contracts included key improvements for workers including lower production quotas, higher salaries and greater benefits. The latest contract also includes an agreement to update a burdensome system where workers carried two buckets of latex weighing often a total of 150 pounds on either end of a stick on their backs for miles. Firestone has agreed to improve this archaic system, but progress is slow in coming.

Throughout the struggle, the Firestone workers in Liberia were supported by international human rights, labor, and environmental organizations as part of a global campaign to end centuries of abuse on the plantation. The International Labor Rights Forum and Foreign Policy In Focus worked with other allies to mobilize consumers and activists in the United States to support workers in Liberia including flooding the company with e-mails and phone calls, delivering letters to Firestone stores all across the country, issuing reports on the abuses, bringing workers to the US for speaking events and more.

ILRF Campaign Director Tim Newman said, “We congratulate FAWUL on this important recognition of their efforts and their tireless work to bring dignity and respect to Firestone workers in Liberia. Their work has inspired workers all around the world and helped show the critical role that unions can play in ending the most egregious labor rights abuses and improving conditions for adult workers. It is truly an honor to have been able to work closely with FAWUL over the years.”

Emira Woods, Co-Director of Foreign Policy In Focus at the Institute for Policy Studies said, “After decades of exploitation, the Firestone workers in Liberia have found their voice. Their calls for dignity are being heard around the world. There couldn’t be more valiant recipients of the Iqbal Masih Award. The award honors a courageous Pakistani boy forced to work in a carpet factory at age four, escaped at age 10, then became an international spokesperson against child labor until he was brutally murdered at age 12. The Firestone workers and their struggle to end child and forced labor will continue to be a beacon for human rights and justice, not only in Liberia but throughout the world.”

For more information about the International Labor Rights Forum, please visit www.LaborRights.org [2].

For more information about Foreign Policy In Focus, please visit www.FPIF.org [3]. FPIF is a project of the [Institute for Policy Studies](http://www.ips-dc.org) [4] (www.ips-dc.org [4]), a community of public scholars and organizers linking peace, justice, and the environment in the U.S. and globally.

Source URL: <http://www.laborrights.org/stop-child-forced-labor/stop-firestone/news/12461>

Links:

[1] <http://www.dol.gov/opa/media/press/ilab/ILAB20110176.htm>

[2] <http://www.LaborRights.org>

[3] <http://www.FPIF.org>

[4] <http://www.ips-dc.org>