Mother’s Day Brings Extra Strain for Colombian and Ecuadorian Women Workers

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Mother's Day is the second biggest day for cut flower sales in the US, but this heightened demand by US consumers puts extra pressure on the Colombian and Ecuadorian workers, most of whom are women, who are already subjected to harsh working conditions by their employers.

The International Labor Rights Fund’s (ILRF) Fairness in Flowers Campaign has found that women flower workers in these countries suffer from discrimination, sexual harassment, and health problems caused by the many toxic pesticides used on the plantations.

ILRF’s 2005 study in Ecuador found that over 55% of flower workers (and 71% aged 20-24) had been the victims of some kind of sexual harassment. 19% had been forced to have sex with a coworker or superior.

70 percent of Colombian flower workers are women.

A 1990 survey of 8000 workers in plantations near Bogotá found that workers were exposed to 127 different pesticides, three of which are considered extremely toxic by the World Health Organization. Pregnant flower workers were found to have an elevated rate of miscarriages, premature births, and congenital malformations. In one group of children born to former flower workers, 222 of 1,320 children (17%) had congenital malformations.

ILRF works with a number of organizations and unions in Colombia and Ecuador to promote respect for these workers’ rights according to local labor law, including the elimination of the practice of discrimination, proper health precautions, and respect for the right to freedom of association.

Conditions at Dole’s Plantations in Colombia

Miami-based Dole Fresh Flowers is the sole U.S. wholesaler that owns flower plantations abroad. Dole owns and operates 23 farms in Colombia and controls 20% of the flower export from that country. ILRF and the US/Labor Education in the Americas Project (US/LEAP) have been working to pressure Dole into sitting down and negotiating with the independent union at Dole-owned Splendor Flowers in good faith for over a year.

Colombian flower workers are often terminated or do not have their job contracts renewed if they become pregnant while employed at the plantation, according to the union. During the peak seasons around Valentine’s and Mother’s Days, employees at the Splendor plantation say they work up to 80 hours per week, without overtime pay, and earn less than $180 per month. In November 2004, flower workers at the Splendor plantations formed the first independent and democratic union at Dole’s operations in Colombia.
To date, Dole Fresh Flowers denies any wrongdoing in Colombia and despite a commitment in September 2005, executives at the company have still not negotiated with union representatives in good faith.

Miami Mother’s Day Action at Dole Fresh Flowers

A growing number of US groups are becoming concerned about the issues addressed by ILRF’s Fairness in Flowers Campaign.

On Friday, May 12th, an alliance of mothers, faith leaders and community members will rally in front of Dole Fresh Flowers headquarters at 10055 NW 12th Street in Miami to urge the company to keep its promise to negotiate with unionized flower workers in Colombia, most of whom are women.

Backed by a wall of paper flowers representing the 700 workers at the Dole-owned Splendor plantation in Colombia, a delegation of local mothers will present a Mother’s Day card to the company in support of the women flower workers. The rally is organized by a coalition of groups in Miami consisting of Jobs with Justice, Unite for Dignity and Women’s Fund of Miami-Dade-County.