



WOMEN'S WORK

Organizing for Change Across Borders

STITCH SUPPORTING WOMEN WORKERS IN THE U.S. AND CENTRAL AMERICA

First Issue! August/September 2002

In the Factories and in the Fields:

Talking Union with Women in Maquila Factories and Banana Plantations

This spring, STITCH held an organizing workshop with STEYY, the Union of Yoo Yang Factory Workers in La Lima, Honduras. This new textile union won its first contract with management last December and is now focused on training and developing new leaders among its young, largely female workforce.

During that workshop, STEYY was joined by COSIBAH, the Coordination of Banana Unions in Honduras. The banana unions have a long and powerful history in Honduras, and many of the workers live and work in the same communities as the maquila workers. Also, COSIBAH has a strong women's secretariat (about 20% of the banana workers in Honduras are female) and they were



interested in exchanging experiences, as workers, union activists and women, with their newer counterparts in the maquila sector.

The women of the banana fields and the maquila factories concluded that they face many of the same problems at work: low wages, discrimination and an urgent need to organize their non-union colleagues in order for their unions to survive.

With STITCH's support, they decided to continue the exchange of skills and support – with a focus on training new women leaders and organizing more workers in both the banana sectors and the maquila sectors. In this spirit, a group of 16 women representing COSIBAH, STEYY, and a team Honduran maquila union organizers joined together on Saturday, June 29, for a workshop on housevisits and organizing. First, they discussed how to respond to the “tough questions” put to activists by workers they visit, in any industry. Common, but hard, questions from workers everywhere are “What if they fire me for joining the union?” or “How will I have time to be in a union when I have a full-time job and household to run on my own?” The group practiced answering these and other questions through discussion and role-plays.

Then, they set off to practice in the field, in mixed teams of banana and maquila workers to visit workers at the Yoo Yang factory in preparation for upcoming salary negotiations. Fanning out throughout La Lima and surrounding communities, the women activists met with dozens of workers and spoke with them

STITCH is a network of US women unionists, organizers, and activists that seeks to build connections between Central American and US women organizing for economic justice.

Contact us at:

TEL: 202-265-3790

FAX: 202-265-3575

www.stitchonline.org

stitchdc@earthlink.net

about the union and their concerns on the job. They succeeded in gathering information to help STEYY leadership address members' questions and generated a renewed commitment by STEYY members to fight for a fair contract.

Activists from both STEYY and COSIBAH, women leaders from both the banana fields and maquila factories, were energized by the chance to learn and apply new skills with each other, and are enthusiastic about continuing these training exchanges in the future. Maria Elena Munoz (shown above), President of the STEYY union stressed – “Having solidarity with our *companeras* from the banana unions is so important – we can build stronger movements together.”

An Organizer's Voice:



“...we need to unite; we all struggle for the same cause.”

Sonia Medina, Organizer with the ITGLWF project (the textile union trade secretariat, which works with STEYY – see left- and other maquila unions)

Sonia, a 33 year old mother of two, has spent the past 10 months making an hour-long, daily trip between her home and the town of La Lima, Honduras where thousands of workers, mostly young women, labor in textile factories. Sonia worked in one of these factories for several years herself until recently. Transpacific was one

of the few unionized factories and Sonia was elected as a leader while there. Now, as an organizer she's dedicated to helping other workers organize for better treatment and wages.

“...Many are single mothers and have to work these jobs, so this work is important, organizing... You can see many benefits won through struggle; if we unite more women we can win even more which will help our children and families.”

Surprising Solidarity: Honduran Maquila Unions Catch Bosses Off-Guard!

On July 29, 2002, two different Honduran maquila unions were able to close the distance and catch their employers by surprise. First, a group of workers that had been organizing in secret at the Corazon Apparel maquila factory shocked plant management by announcing their formation of a union, called SITRACOR. Later that same morning, leaders of STEYY, the year-old union at the Yoo Yang maquila, informed their factory's management that they intended to provide enthusiastic support to SITRACOR. The factories, located in different industrial parks in different towns outside of San Pedro Sula, are owned by the same Korean company.

Immediately after notifying management of the union's existence, the three most active leaders of SITRACOR were illegally fired. The Labor Ministry failed to respond to the union's petition for reinstatement of the leaders. But - the SITRACOR leaders found an enthusiastic ally in STEYY. “If Corazon and Yoo Yang are sister factories, SITRACOR and STEYY are sister unions,” said STEYY's general secretary, Maria Elena Muñoz. “We wanted to show the bosses what that means.”

“Why are you trying to give me a heart attack?” one exasperated manager asked. “We just want you to know we're serious,” replied the union's vice president.

The two unions drafted a joint letter to company owner David Chang in Korea requesting his intervention. At the same time, US solidarity organizations did the same. The years of organizing and public international campaigning for the STEYY union paid off and Chang's response was immediate. Before the unions even sent their letter, Chang ordered local management to reinstate the Corazon leaders. Meanwhile, workers showed their

overwhelming enthusiasm to organize – one third of the 350 workers at Corazon joined the union the same day the union leaders returned to the factory.

Yet, Corazon's local management continued a harassing anti-union campaign and began calling workers into the office demanding that they affiliate to a company-sponsored union. Not missing a beat, the STEYY and SITRACOR leaders revised their letter to David Chang, requesting that he travel from Korea to Honduras to discuss with them the company union and harassment of SITRACOR unionists.

Meanwhile, STEYY and SITRACOR's solidarity continued to beat back Yoo Yang and Corazon managers. The next day, managers of both plants were greeted at the Corazon factory by STEYY members holding posters and singing chants in support of their SITRACOR sisters and brothers. "Why are you trying to give me a heart attack?" one exasperated manager reportedly asked the unionists. "We just want you to know we're serious," replied Jesus Banegas, STEYY's vice president. They spend the rest of the afternoon helping SITRACOR sign up new members. A week later, on August 9, David Chang arrived in Honduras, met with SITRACOR and told them he would not recognize a management-formed union.

STITCH will support further exchanges of solidarity and skills between these two unions. In workshops planned for this fall, STITCH will help coordinate trainings with STEYY leaders on communication and leadership skills. Now, these leaders will also help coordinate trainings for their SITRACOR brothers and sisters on topics like contract negotiations and building power in the factory.

Currently, SITRACOR continues to build membership. They are identifying leaders throughout the factory and organizing area by area to ensure majority backing for the union. **According to leader Sobeida Montes, the support of their sisters at STEYY has been key in keeping the new union's energy strong. "In these struggles, we all have to fight for each other's well being. None of us can do it alone."**

Get involved! Here's how:

Take Action:

- **Support the new SITRACOR union in Honduras!** Send letters of encouragement and solidarity to SITRACOR via: Email: fittvc@globalnet.hn or Fax: 212-656-1302
- **Join the campaign to support women organizing in the banana industry!** See the US/LEAP website www.usleap.org, or contact the Campaign for Labor Rights at clr@afgj.org for more details.
- **Get involved in the Fall Speaking Tour of Banana workers from Central America and Ecuador!** Contact STITCH for more information.
- **Send us your ideas on how to build more links between women activists across borders!** Contact us at stitchdc@earthlink.net

Join the STITCH Women's Language School Delegation!

Women Behind the Labels: Organizing in Export Industries
October 12–20, 2002
Guatemala

This all-women's delegation combines excellent Spanish instruction with an in-depth look at the economic situation facing women workers in the Guatemalan maquila and banana sectors. The cost is \$800, which includes housing, all meals and language instruction. Participants must pay their own way to Guatemala City. Scholarships are available. Applications are due by Sept. 10, 2002.

For information or an application, contact us at:

202-265-3790 or stitchdc@earthlink.net