

Fyffes' Workers Continue the Fight for Justice on the Honduran Melon Fields

Thousands of miles away from U.S. supermarket shelves, Oglis Mejia (pictured below, middle standing) gets up at 4 a.m. to prepare the meals of the day for her children. She subsists on a diet of rice and beans, and occasionally chicken, which is all she can afford with her wages working at the melon plantation. Her workday starts at 6 a.m., and consists of planting, cutting and harvesting the melons for 8 to 12 hours a day, a strenuous job that requires her back to be hunched over to the ground to plant the seeds.

Oglis works for Suragroh, a melon plantation owned by Fyffes, one of the largest fruit companies in the world and the largest supplier of melons (sold under the  label) to the U.S. market. Fyffes' plantations are located in Choluteca, the southernmost state of Honduras, and employ around 4,500 workers, the vast majority of whom are women. For over ten years, workers have been claiming egregious human and labor rights violations on Fyffes' melon plantations.



Job Insecurity: Despite laboring on the same plantation for decades, most Fyffes workers are hired on short-term contracts each melon season. Local management uses these precarious working conditions to threaten, fire and deny contract renewals for workers who speak out against abuse.

Poverty Wages: While Fyffes claims to pay the daily minimum wage of 228 lempiras (USD \$9.73), workers report they often work more than eight hours a day and receive no overtime pay. A 2015 U.S. Department of Labor [report](#) found that Fyffes subsidiaries consistently failed to give or pay mandatory holidays, vacation or school vouchers.

Inhumane Working Conditions: Workers [describe](#) being ordered to enter fields which are sprayed with toxic chemicals, without appropriate protective equipment such as boots and gloves. They say the labels on the pesticide containers are ripped off before use. Last year, The Guardian [reported](#) that Suragroh workers use Gramoxone [also known as Paraquat], a chemical with well-documented health risks, including links to Parkinson's disease. The EU banned Gramoxone in 2007, but its use is not in any way restricted in Honduran law.

Gender-Based Discrimination: In October 2015, Marys Suyapa Gómez was fired for being pregnant after 15 years of working for Suragroh. Women workers say that maternity leave rights are unheard of and the company provides no support for childcare.

Denial of Healthcare and Social Security: Fyffes' plantations have failed to pay into the state-run health care and social security programs as required under Honduran law, leaving workers without vital benefits. Maria Gomez, 65, (pictured left, sitting right) says, "They never contributed to social insurance and now I will not be able to retire and finally rest after so many years (nearly 30) spent on the plantation. I have to continue working to survive."

Fighting Back with Union Power

In January 2016, Suragroh workers achieved a historic milestone. With the help of the Honduran Agricultural Workers Union, or STAS, they were the first melon plantation to organize workers in the entire sector. STAS' efforts to collectively bargain for better working conditions have been met with a violent anti-union campaign from Fyffes' local management.

Union members have been subject to blacklists, intimidation, threats, bribes and scores of illegal firings. The violence reached a peak in April of this year, when Moises Sanchez, secretary general of the union was robbed, beaten and held at gunpoint by unknown men. His brother Misael was seriously injured on his face with a machete when he tried to free Moises. The message was clear: stop organizing.

Fyffes has consistently refused to sit down and negotiate with STAS, instead pursuing a legal strategy which wrongfully argues that temporary and subcontracted workers have no right to organize under Honduran law. STAS has appealed against this interpretation of the law with the Ministry of Labor. If the appeal is approved, this would set a historic precedent, clearly establishing that all temporary and subcontracted workers in Honduras have the right to organize local union branches. STAS and its union federation, FESTAGRO, say the appeal has been sitting on the Labor Minister's desk for over a year, refusing to sign it due to pressure from the business community. Fyffes yields a lot of political and economic power in the region and workers report that

the local government reliably sides with the company.

The fight continues, despite [reports from FESTAGRO](#) that employers have bussed people in company vehicles to [protest against STAS](#) and have created a management- friendly union, which is awaiting registration at the Ministry of Labor. ILRF, along with our European allies have been leading the **Freedom and Fairness for Fyffes' Workers** campaign for the past year, calling upon supermarkets and consumers to hold Fyffes accountable for labor rights abuses on its Honduran melon plantations.

For the women pictured above, this union fight is no longer just about their own jobs, but for the well-being of future generations. Herminia Carranza, 61 (pictured above, sitting left), told a crowd of supporters in Washington D.C. that she fights so that her children and grandchildren can have dignity at work and a better life. For them, joining STAS has been a way to build collective power against a company where the quarterly bottom line takes precedence over the inherent rights of workers.

In solidarity with Fyffes' workers, the campaign is demanding that:

1. Fyffes' local management end discrimination and the anti-union campaign against STAS union members.
2. Formally recognize STAS and engage in collective bargaining as required by national and international laws.

Photo via Valérian Mazataud.

Sitting, Left to right: Herminia Carranza, 61, Maria Gomez, 65

Standing, Left to Right: Ana Jilda Lopez, 60, Oglis Mejia, 35, Petrona Diaz, 45

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Fyffes will only listen when consumers demand action.

1. [Send an email to Fyffes' parent company, Sumitomo telling them to recognize STAS!](#)
2. [Print this letter](#) and deliver it to the manager at your local grocery store. Tell them you are concerned about the human rights violations on Fyffes' supply chain and ask that they raise the issue with Fyffes' parent company, Sumitomo. Don't forget to take a picture of your action, tweet at us @ILRF and @USLEAP or email gabby@ilrf.org