

USLEAP Statement on Worker Rights, Fair Trade, and the Split between Fair Trade USA and Fairtrade International February 2012

Summary: Worker rights issues are central to the recent split between Fair Trade USA (FTUSA) and Fairtrade International (previously, Fairtrade Labelling Organizations), specifically Fair Trade certification of producers who employ workers. While USLEAP takes no side on the split, we welcome the debate and attention it has brought to the complicated and controversial issue of worker rights in Fair Trade and welcome FTUSA and Fairtrade International's renewed intent to ensure that worker rights are respected in hired labor production. Unfortunately, neither have yet to adequately address long-standing concerns that have been raised by trade unions and their supporters in the worker rights community since the first Fair Trade certification in plantation agriculture over a decade ago. We trust and expect that Fairtrade International and FTUSA will now move expeditiously to negotiate with the relevant unions a resolution to all key concerns raised by the labor movement, before any further expansion of the Fair Trade model to hired labor employers in the South.

Background

Over a decade ago, Fair Trade expanded beyond its original model that focused on small, disadvantaged producers to begin certifying large-scale employers with hired labor, including banana plantations with scores of workers. This expansion of Fair Trade certification raised both opportunities and concerns for unions and their supporters in the worker rights community. Banana worker unions in particular, represented by the Coordination of Latin American Banana Worker Unions (COLSIBA) and the International Union of Foodworkers, have since then been at the forefront of exploring opportunities for strategic collaboration and raising concerns with Fair Trade, a set of issues that have remained unresolved.

As a matter of general principle, we believe the split between Fair Trade USA and Fairtrade International is unfortunate as it is preferable for organizations who are committed to social justice to work collaboratively and in unity. However, we take no sides in this split per se. Rather, our concern is its impact on ensuring that Fair Trade organizations move forward to address long-standing issues that have been raised by the union movement so that Fair Trade's certification of hired labor production ensures respect for the core rights of workers and opens new opportunities for workers to organize, improve conditions, and gain power and voice in their workplaces since the best way to ensure and monitor fair treatment of workers is with a democratic trade union.

We recognize that Fair Trade USA has explained its decision to leave Fairtrade International as in part based on the desire to extend the Fair Trade model to workers on coffee plantations, noting that Fair Trade has for a decade been certifying plantations in other parts of the agricultural sector. We also recognize that some have called into question Fair Trade USA's commitment to worker rights, citing, for example, that the initial draft of its Hired Labor standards is weaker than the current standards maintained by FLO. Yet we also know that banana unions have for years considered Transfair USA its strongest ally within the Fairtrade

International system in trying to get serious movement in addressing their concerns with Fair Trade.

In truth, neither Fair Trade USA nor Fairtrade International have yet to adequately address labor's concerns with respect to hired labor production in the South. Both fall substantially short of creating a model of Fair Trade that is supported by the union organizations that represent workers in the South; both at this point fail to meet Fair Trade's own stated goal of worker empowerment. While we welcome the recent steps toward progress in addressing these issues that has been reported by labor unions engaged in direct discussions with Fairtrade International, both Fairtrade International and Fair Trade USA have moved far too slowly to resolve issues that have been raised for over a decade. Now is the time for both Fairtrade International and Fair Trade USA to negotiate with the relevant unions a resolution to all key concerns raised by the labor movement, before any further expansion of the Fair Trade model to hired labor employers in the South.

While we believe it is essential that Fair Trade-certified employers who use hired labor ensure respect for core worker rights and meet acceptable conditions of work, addressing and resolving worker rights concerns with Fair Trade is the purview of the labor movement, not worker rights NGOs. We will therefore continue to base our position and assessment of Fairtrade International and FTUSA's efforts to resolve worker concerns on those of the labor movement (noting that the labor movement is not monolithic and that different unions may negotiate different resolutions to reflect their specific strategic needs.)