

## FLOWERS: LABOR RIGHTS VIOLATIONS, PESTICIDE POISONING, AND POVERTY WAGES



The Colombian flower industry is a key example of the export-based global economy that U.S. policies are promoting and U.S.-based multinational corporations (MNC) are exploiting. With these policies, MNC's are able to take advantage of weak labor laws in search of profits. These profits come at the cost of the health and welfare of workers and the environment. Flower plantations are often considered sweatshops due to the poor working conditions and extremely low wages. Workers in the Colombian flower industry are organizing to improve wages and working conditions and to stop the U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement which would promote further exploitative labor policies without any guarantees for workers or the environment. **Join Witness for Peace in demanding just trade policies and respect for worker rights in Colombia!**

- ⇒ U.S. consumers spend over \$18 billion annually on flowers.
- ⇒ 60% of all flowers sold in the U.S. come from Colombia.
- ⇒ Colombia is the second largest flower exporter in the world.
- ⇒ The majority of Colombian flower workers receive around \$8 a day, which is not enough to cover the cost of a family's most basic requirements.

Nearly 2/3 of Colombian flower workers experience **health problems** associated with their work in the cut flower industry, especially related to the frequent use of chemicals. Common symptoms of pesticide poisoning include:

- Headaches
- Nausea
- Impaired vision
- Asthma
- Premature births
- Miscarriages
- Eye problems
- Dizziness
- Respiratory problems
- Skin rashes /discoloration
- Congenial malformations
- Neurological problems

### OTHER HEALTH IMPACTS

Workers have extremely heavy workloads of up to 16 hours a day, often repeating the same task all day. This frequently results in repetitive stress injuries such as carpal tunnel. Many female flower workers also report ruptured varicose veins and kidney problems resulting from standing for hours on end and limited bathroom use.

### LACK OF PERMANENT EMPLOYMENT

30% of Colombian flower workers are hired by "cooperatives". These workers receive only temporary work contracts limited to only one to three months. Their benefits, such as access to health care, are defined and frequently denied through the cooperative, without the workers' rights that they would traditionally be granted from a long term contract. Additionally, they are denied the right to collective bargaining, organizing, and striking.

**Workers are prevented from organizing independent unions through tactics such as:**

- Illegal firings
- Verbal abuse
- Threats of dismissal
- Threats to close plantation
- Black-listing union members
- Lower salaries and bonuses than non-unionized workers
- Death threats

### PESTICIDE POISONING

According to the International Labor Rights Fund, Colombian flower workers are exposed to 127 different pesticides, three of which the World Health Organization has labeled as extremely toxic. A further 20% of these pesticides are known carcinogens or toxins and their use is either prohibited or restricted in the U.S. and Europe.

### US PLAYERS

U.S. company **DOLE** Fresh Flowers controls nearly 30% of all Colombian flower production. Top US retailers of cut flowers include **FTD, Costco, Safeway, Albertson's, and Wal-Mart.**



## COLOMBIA: WHERE U.S. POLICY KILLS

### A TYPICAL DAY FOR A COLOMBIAN FLOWER WORKER



***DORA WORKS AT DOLE'S FRAGRANCIA PLANTATION NEAR BOGOTÁ. HERE SHE SPEAKS A LITTLE ABOUT WHAT LIFE IS LIKE FOR A FLOWER WORKER IN COLOMBIA.***

"If I could say one thing to John Amaya, the president of Dole Fresh Flowers, I'd tell him he needs to think about the problems that face flower workers, because the workers are the driving force behind this company. We are humans and we want to be treated that way. We want the company to sit down with us to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement. We need a collective bargaining agreement in order to achieve a more just work load and direct labor contracts with the company."

Dora has worked in the flower industry for sixteen years pulling weeds. "For me a normal day is to wake up at 4:30am, prepare breakfast for everyone, and then catch the bus in time to start work at 6:30am. We get a break for lunch at 11:30am and leave around 3:30pm. Then I go home, take care of the family and clean the house". Female workers make up over 60% of the flower industry and for them, balancing work and home is always a challenge. This is especially so for the many single mothers who work in the industry. For unionized workers, extra challenges are added to the already difficult conditions. According to Dora, "We have problems with the managers. They discriminate against those of us who are members of the independent union. They've taken away our meals on Saturdays and have made us do more work for less pay, just for having joined the independent union. The company has gotten rid of workers and then expects less people to do the same amount of work."

#### **LABOR RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN COLOMBIA:**

- ***In Colombia being a trade unionist is very dangerous. More trade unionists are murdered each year in Colombia than in all other countries combined.***
- ***Since 1991, over 2,200 Colombian trade unionists have been murdered. Although this has not affected the flower workers in the same manner as it has organizers in other sectors, flower union organizers have still been victims of death threats.***
- ***98% of the murderers of Colombian unionists have not been investigated.***

### **JOIN WITNESS FOR PEACE IN SUPPORTING COLOMBIAN FLOWER WORKERS!**

**These organizers need the support of the U.S. grassroots community to promote safe and just working conditions as well as the right to unionize.**

- ◆ **Call Your Local Flower Distributor!** Let them know the importance of supporting labor rights and verifying local working conditions before buying flowers. The consumers voice DOES matter!
- ◆ **Call Your Congressperson and Senator!** Tell them to vote "NO" on the U.S.-Colombia Free trade Agreement (FTA) and other FTA's with Latin American countries. Speak out against further U.S. military aid and training to the Colombian government.



- ◆ **Educate Your Community!** Organize discussion groups on labor rights, free trade, violence in Colombia, and the impacts of free trade and militarization in your community. Submit op-eds and letters to the editor to your local newspaper that address Colombian flower worker conditions and the FTA.
- ◆ **Participate in a Witness for Peace Delegation to Colombia!** Travel schedules are on our website.
- ◆ **Join Witness for Peace and learn more about U.S. policy in Colombia!** Find your local WfP regional organizer on the WfP website.