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Says US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement will not protect rights of women workers

Beatriz Fuentes, a 29-year-old mother of two with nine years of work experience in Colombian rose plantations, is in the US for Valentine's Day to share with consumers her first hand account of the issues facing women workers.

Valentine's Day is the most important retail day for cut flowers in the United States, and most of these flowers are produced in Colombia and Ecuador.

Most Colombian flower workers are women, and they frequently face gender discrimination, pregnancy tests as a prerequisite for hiring, and sexual harassment in the plantations. Insufficient protection against toxic pesticides reportedly leads to headaches, nausea, impaired vision, conjunctivitis, rashes, asthma, miscarriages, congenital malformations and respiratory and neurological problems.

Ms. Fuentes is the president of the Sintrasplendor union at Splendor Flowers, a company owned by the multinational Dole. Virtually all of the flowers produced at Splendor Flowers are retailed in the US market, including at Wal-Mart stores. Workers at Splendor say they were motivated to form a union in 2004 because of the worsening working conditions. The company assigned more and more flowerbeds to each worker, making the workload intolerable. Lately the company had been firing sick workers and old workers. Splendor Flowers used various forms of persecution against the Sintrasplendor union, including threats that union affiliates will be fired, and assigning extra work on days when the union had planned assemblies and other activities. Dole has also denied Sintrasplendor its right to a collective bargaining agreement. In October 2006, Dole announced that it was closing Splendor Flowers; Dole has not provided evidence that Splendor is a losing enterprise, and it appears that the plantation closure is a response to the growing support for Sintrasplendor.

The proposed US-Andean Free Trade Agreement does not offer any enforceable mechanisms for guaranteeing compliance with labor rights in Colombia. As the Colombian cut flower sector grows under these trade benefits, the workers will only see their conditions become more precarious. This new trade agreement does not give women workers any protection against discrimination, excessive or unpaid overtime, or violations of the right to freedom of association.

Ms. Fuentes will be participating in a number of events in Washington, DC, to coincide with Valentine's Day, including a Hill briefing sponsored by Rep. Jan Schakowsky, a Hearing with the US Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation on "Overseas Sweatshop Abuses, Their Impact on U.S. Workers, and the Need for Anti-Sweatshop Legislation", and events with students and NGOs.

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