

## LRR FOCUS: U.S./GLEP

### SUPPORTING WORKER RIGHTS AT HOME AND ABROAD

A group of U.S. trade unionists visited with striking workers at a thread plant in Guatemala in 1987, and came away committed to building solidarity between workers in the two countries, as well as promoting U.S. awareness of the repression faced by Guatemalan trade unionists. These activists formed the U.S./Guatemala Labor Education Project (U.S./GLEP) to pursue both these goals.

As one of the visiting unionists explained, "Textile and clothing workers in the U.S. have been hurt badly by capital flight and the resulting export of jobs. The worse conditions are abroad, the more likely U.S. companies are to move production overseas. The more we help foreign workers to defend their rights and raise their living standards, the more chance we have of preserving jobs in the U.S."



*Guatemalan workers demonstrate for worker rights.*

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U.S./GLEP has a two-fold mission:

- to provide ways for people in the U.S. to effectively support Guatemalan workers struggling to protect their basic rights
- to deepen U.S. citizens' understanding of the economic dislocations caused by economic globalization and strengthen their ability to respond to the changing world economy

To accomplish these objectives, U.S./GLEP uses U.S. trade policy to promote corporate responsibility and builds relationships between workers in Guatemala and the U.S.

The organization aggressively encourages U.S. corporations to adopt "codes of conduct" that guarantee basic rights such as a living wage and freedom of association for their workers overseas. It also pressures companies that have codes of conduct to enforce and monitor them. According to Stephen Coats, director of U.S./GLEP, "U.S. companies can and should take responsibility for the conditions under which the products they sell are manufactured or grown."

Recently, U.S./GLEP coordinated a campaign to persuade Starbucks Coffee Company, the largest gourmet coffee company in the country, to adopt a code of conduct. U.S./GLEP built grassroots pressure around the country by contacting trade union activists, solidarity organizations, and faith-based peace and justice groups, and encouraged them to form local coalitions to organize leaflettings at Starbucks stores. In February, 1995, with the help of socially responsible investment companies and concerned shareholders, U.S./GLEP persuaded Starbucks to adopt the first code of conduct in the agricultural sector.

In addition to its work around the issues of codes of conduct, U.S./GLEP brings workers from the U.S. and Guatemala together to promote better understanding and joint strategies for solidarity. Since 1987, several delegations of U.S. trade unionists have visited factories in Guatemala. And Guatemalan workers have come to the U.S. on a number of occasions to visit U.S. plants, brief members of congress on working conditions and give testimony before the U.S. Trade Representative. U.S./GLEP recently coordinated the formation of a network of North American women interested in supporting women's organizing in Guatemala's maquiladora sector. The organization has also begun to expand its work into Honduras. ■

— Erich Hahn

*U.S./GLEP is listed in the Resources section at the back of this issue.*

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