

## **Dole closes Colombian flower plantation and strikes a serious blow to independent organizing**

International Labor Rights Fund

On October 12, 2006 Dole announced that it is closing the Corzo farm at Splendor Flowers, one of the numerous flower plantations that it owns in Colombia to produce cut flowers for export to the United States. Splendor-Corzo will be closed in 6-9 months once the company has completed the necessary legal processes. Porcelain Flowers and farms in Ecuador will also be closed.

Dole owns and operates approximately 23 flower farms in Colombia and controls 20% of the flower export from that country. Workers at Splendor Flowers formed an independent union, Sintrasplendor, in November 2004, with the support of Untraflores, an independent sector-wide flower workers union. After the inception of the union, workers reported that Dole conducted a vigorous anti-union campaign that included bringing in a company-backed union, firing union leaders, challenging the union's legal registration with the Colombian government, and refusing to reinstate fired union leaders despite court orders to do so.

Dole has used a variety of ploys to deny Sintrasplendor its right to a collective bargaining agreement, such as challenging the union's legal registration with the Minister of Social Protection, signing a different collective bargaining agreement with the company-backed union, and refusing to support a fair process to determine union representation at the company.

Corzo is the larger of the two farms at Splendor Flowers. Dole justifies the closure of Splendor-Corzo by saying that it has "historically produced products with limited/seasonal demand and have high costs". However, in 2001 Splendor Flowers was #2 on a list of the most successful flower companies in Colombia, with 19 million dollars in sales. Dole has not provided evidence that Splendor is a losing enterprise. It appears that the plantation closure is a response to the growing support for Sintrasplendor.

Untraflores calls this Dole's "greatest abuse to date in the already-long chain of abuses" of the union's rights. The union will lose hundreds of members and be seriously debilitated, not only at this plantation, but in the sector as a whole. Splendor management has already started to call workers and offer them compensation to get them to resign.

Asocolflores, the Association of Colombian Flower Exporters, has argued that the US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, which President Bush has already announced his intention to sign, will strengthen the flower industry in Colombia and benefit both companies and workers in the US and Colombia. Clearly, the new Free Trade Agreement does not in practice provide any protections or guarantees for workers' job stability or fundamental right to organize.