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ASEPROLA (Asociación Servicios de Promoción Laboral)

SITRAP (Sindicato de Trabajadores de Plantaciones Agrícolas)

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Growth in the Global Pineapple Industry Impacts Workers, Not Just the Environment

Last week, The Miami Herald published an article entitled, “Costa Rica's Pineapple Boom Raises Environmental Questions,” which blames the Costa Rican government for failing to regulate the pineapple industry for the purposes of protecting public health of residents and preserving biodiversity. Attention needs be paid to both environmental *and labor* industry practices in the *global* industry, since similar problems have been occurring in other pineapple producing nations. The pineapple industry presents us with yet another example of how the global food system not only impacts consumers in the US, but the workers and residents of producing nations who feel the weight of unaccountable, growing agricultural export sectors.

In addition to the environmental concerns that have been raised, the exponential growth of pineapple exportation has revealed the hardships that pineapple field workers face on the job. The pesticides and fertilizers that have reportedly contaminated Costa Rican water supplies have directly impacted the health of the plantation workers. Plantation workers for the PINDECO Company, a subsidiary of Del Monte, in the southern Pacific region of Costa Rica report increased allergies, migraines, nausea, general weakness, chronic gastritis, and influenza as a result of weakened immune systems, according to a report by Guillermo Acuña of ASEPROLA, a Costa Rican based labor research and advocacy group. In the Philippines, there has been a movement in some regions to ban the highly toxic chemical, Endosulfan, while in Costa Rica, protest has erupted over the chemical, Bromacil which has reportedly entered the water supply.

As the industry grows more competitive, a race to the bottom has occurred amongst pineapple industry giants and the strong drive to reduce labor costs has set low wage standards in pineapple production. Take the example of Anna (in order to protect this worker, she is under the alias of Anna) who is 53 years old and has been working in the Dole Philippines

pineapple fields for almost 30 years. In the past few years' she has been paid an average of \$5 a week for a 6 day workweek, according to the Ecumenical Institute for Labor Education and Research (EILER) in the Philippines.

Younger workers, who are less worn down from years of working, may earn more because they are paid largely based on production levels and hours worked. Workers who are paid piecemeal in the packing plants end up working longer and harder so that they earn enough to get by. Long workdays in the hot sun in addition to unpaid, mandatory overtime, and the pressure to fulfill their daily quotas takes a toll on workers' health, safety, and family life. Workers in Costa Rica typically work for 10-12 hours a day, six days a week. When there is a need to fulfill a certain task, they may work seven days a week. Workers increasingly face job instability and an increase in temporary, contract labor. Both in the Philippines and Costa Rica, a large majority of the full-time, regular workers have been replaced by temporary workers that are hired for a few months out of the year. The subcontracting of workers by middlemen, or agencies called "labor cooperatives" in the Philippines, has become common practice as large companies like Dole and Del Monte try to cut costs. The practice allows these companies to avoid paying mandated social benefits that full time employees in Costa Rica are entitled to. Omar Salazar, the Executive Director of ASEPROLA, says that "pineapple companies would rather not hire workers at all than hire workers that are entitled to rights and social benefits." In other words, workers have no option but to accept jobs that don't provide standard rights or protections, if that is all that is available.

The internationally recognized labor right to freely join a union without being threatened, harassed, or blacklisted has been blatantly violated in most pineapple producing nations. Plantation workers' unions such as SITRAP of Costa Rica, have been weakened in their attempt to improve workers' wages and working conditions because companies have fired, threatened, and blacklisted union leaders. Didier Leiton, the Secretary of the Plantation Workers' Union in Costa Rica, said, "Every time a group of workers on the pineapple plantations decides to organize a union, the company begins a campaign to prevent the development of the union." The local union representing pineapple workers in Dole Philippines (Dolefil), AMADO-KADENA-NAFLU-KMU, continuously face harassments from the management and union officials were charged with numerous false criminal charges.

Companies have increased their hiring of subcontracted and temporary labor as a tactic to prevent unionization efforts. They also use tactics such as massive layoffs and selective rehiring of workers to weed out union sympathizers and break up the union. Recently, a massive layoff occurred at the Piña Frut plantation in Costa Rica, targeted at union leaders. Piña Frut largely supplies to the US based multinational, Dole.

Although lack of government enforcement of labor and environmental laws are largely to blame for the blatant labor rights violations that occur, multinational companies that dominate the pineapple supply chain, namely Dole and Del Monte, should take responsibility for poor working conditions and labor standards. Big Box retailers and supermarkets such as Wal-Mart play a large stake in setting such industry labor and environmental standards by setting industry prices through tremendous buying power. In other words, more needs to be done from the consumer end to pressure companies and their supply chains to protect labor rights and improve standards.

For more detailed information on the pineapple industry in Costa Rica and the Philippines, look out for a report that will be released in September by the International Labor Rights Forum and the cosignatories of this release. For more information, contact Trina Tocco or Eva Seidelman at (202) 347-4100.