

Building culture of respect in Firestone

Solidarity with Liberian rubber workers

Firestone's rubber workers in Liberia have long laboured under harsh and primitive conditions. **John Hosinski** writes movingly of these workers' struggle to convert their union into a genuine force for change and how together with support from US labour they have achieved some important changes in their work conditions.

In July 2007, over 4 700 workers at the Firestone Natural Rubber plantation in Harbel, Liberia, voted overwhelmingly for a change in leadership of their union, the Firestone Agricultural Workers Union of Liberia or Fawul. That change, and a protracted fight to gain respect, has improved life for workers at one of the largest rubber farms in the world.

For years, the union was seen as a Firestone's management union, acceding to corporate decision-makers who ran the 52 000-hectare farm like the company towns of old. Firestone controlled terms of employment as well housing, education, health care and all commerce and services. Workers' complaints over low pay, long hours, crumbling housing, poor health and education went largely unheard.

The 2007 union elections ushered in a new era of labour relations on the rubber farm. Since then, Fawul has restructured and successfully concluded two collective bargaining agreements in 2008 and 2010 resulting in improvements to wages, leave, health and safety, family housing, educational facilities and other services.

On a recent visit to Fawul offices, Edwin Cisco, general secretary of Fawul noted, 'Just a few years ago, you (foreigners) could not have just driven on to this plantation to meet with us with no questions asked. It used to be different, but things have changed.'

What's changing is the culture of the place. The Liberian workers now know that they can stand up for their rights. The company now realises that if it wants to continue operating a large rubber-producing plantation, it must be run more democratically.

Furthermore, the distance that separated exhausted Liberian workers from consumers across the world has been closed by Liberian and international partners who actively monitor progress on Freedom of Association and company efforts to rectify abuses. What's emerging is a culture of respect for workers' rights that had not existed in over eight decades.

While credit for this change is entirely owed to the Firestone workers and the democratic union they created, the role of international union solidarity has been vital and remains important to Fawul. A strategic effort at

helping workers address problems at the plantation through Freedom of Association while raising international awareness has been provided at critical times by a coalition of international partners, primarily the US-based Solidarity Center, and the United Steelworkers (USW).

WEALTH OF THE FOREST

Firestone's role in Liberia dates to 1923. The company in exchange for a 99-year concession on more than 400 000 hectares, at roughly 15 cents (US) per hectare annually, offered the debt-ridden Liberian government a multimillion-dollar loan to pay off its European creditors.

The rubber plantation opened in 1926, eventually becoming the largest rubber farm in the world and Firestone's main source of rubber shipped to its US factories. Rubber became one of Liberia's main exports, and Firestone's Liberian rubber was vital to American recovery after the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the economic boom of the post-war decades.

In the process, Firestone became an iconic brand in the US auto industry. Although the company merged with Japan's

Bridgestone in 1988, its US-based Firestone Natural Rubber Co subsidiary still operates the Liberian plantation.

For years worker grievances were building, though largely unknown outside of Liberia. These included low wages, disregard for health and safety problems, dilapidated and unhealthy housing, crumbling infrastructure, and astronomical production quotas for rubber tappers, who collect the raw latex used to make natural rubber.

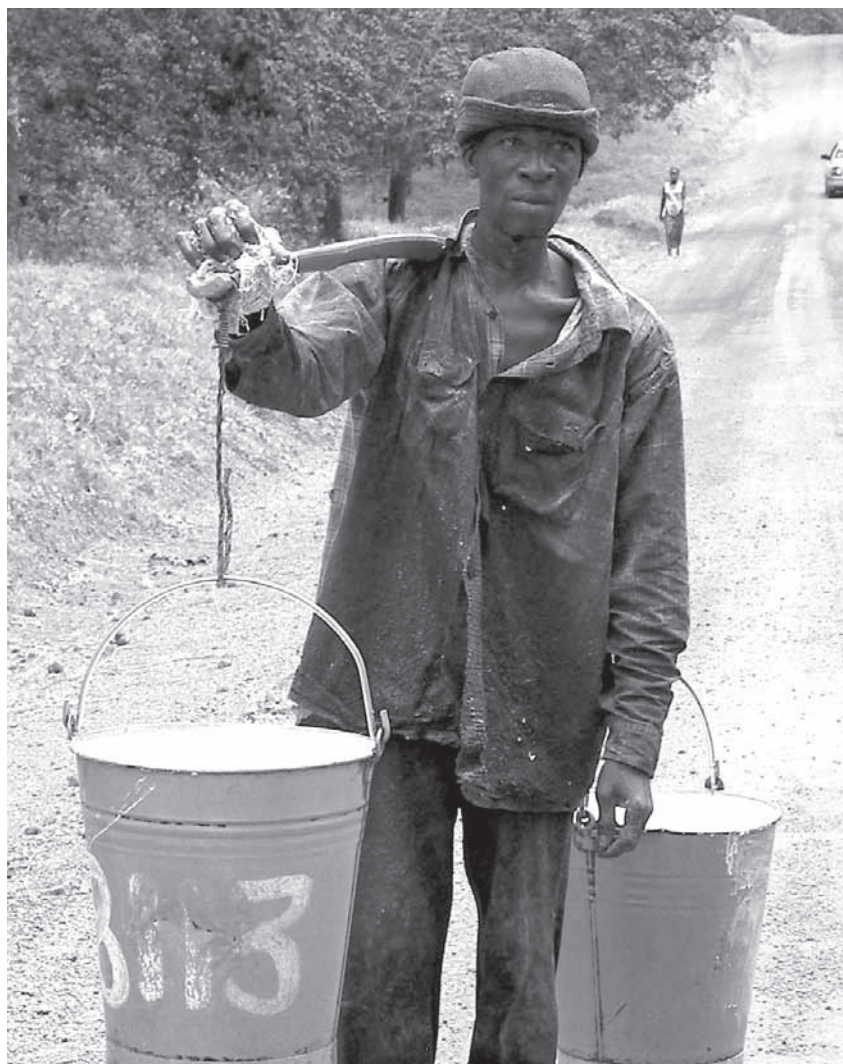
While business analysts were aware when civil wars interrupted Firestone's rubber supply, the international labour community was just beginning to learn of the working conditions and rights issues on the farm.

21-HOUR WORKDAY?

In a notorious interview with the *New York Times* in 1990, a Bridgestone/Firestone official described the company's Liberian operations thus: 'The best way to think of it is as an old Southern [slave] plantation.' A decade later, human rights researchers began spreading the word about workers' issues.

A number of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the Save My Future Foundation and Green Advocates publicised information on working conditions and environmental concerns. In 2005, the International Labour Rights Fund, a US-based NGO, filed a lawsuit against Firestone under the US Alien Tort Claims Act alleging forced labor and child labour in its Liberia operations.

In a much-noted November 2005 interview with CNN, Firestone Natural Rubber president Dan Adomitis said, 'I think the work is fairly balanced... each tapper will tap about 650 trees a day, where they spend perhaps a couple of



A worker carrying liquid latex weighing over 70 kilos to the collection centre over two kilometres away.

minutes at each tree.' CNN later flashed a graphic showing that 650 trees multiplied by 2 minutes per tree equaled a 21-hour workday.

No one, however, was looking at Firestone workers' problems as a freedom of association issue. In 2005, the USW, a union federation which represents workers at rubber-processing operations in North America, began looking into linking with rubber workers worldwide.

Meanwhile the Solidarity Center, an affiliated organisation of the US labour centre the AFL-CIO, was working with Liberia's labour federations to help them promote worker participation in national elections.

The two organisations quickly learned of the simmering grievances at Firestone. The USW reached out to Firestone workers in 2005 (including a heated argument with company officials at a Monrovia hotel) while the Solidarity Center worked to facilitate an outreach and training programme.

The core problem was that, in 2005, Firestone's workers were represented by a company controlled union. A high level of worker distrust had been building for years, pushing one set of workers to form a separate 'Aggrieved Workers Committee'.

The Solidarity Center and USW's initial capacity-building

efforts focused on basic union building – on member-to-member communication, the role of shop stewards and grievance handling. Importantly, this work included all worker leaders, both from the union and the aggrieved workers. It was clear to the international trainers that events on the ground were moving quickly towards a confrontation.

STRIKE CHANGED ALL

During a recent shop stewards' training with Fawul, the Solidarity Center's West Africa program director Jason Campbell started a warm-up session with a general question on leadership: 'Can someone name a leader?'

A steward spoke up, 'Austin Natee,' the president of Fawul.

With this the room erupted in agreement as participants began discussing Natee.

'Why him?' asked Campbell. 'Is it just because he's the leader of the union?'

'No,' replied the steward, a rubber tapper, 'Because he led the strike.'

The strike, he noted, 'changed everything.'

The 18-day wildcat strike in February 2006 was extraordinary for the company town culture of the plantation. Management was unprepared, as were union officials. Over 6 000 people took part in complaints about salary and benefit reductions, and calls for improvements to work and living facilities, an end to reprisals against worker activists, and new union elections.

Natee, a worker in Firestone's on-site rubber factory, took a leading role. A one-time shop steward and also a leader of the aggrieved workers' group, Natee's willingness to lead, to 'stick his own neck out,' in the words of one worker, reverberated through the ranks of the long-ignored workforce.

Management did not relent on the demands, and there were more strikes and some confrontations.

Natee and other leaders were briefly arrested. A number of workers were beaten with one reported death. But eventually, Firestone reluctantly opened the door for union elections and set the stage for a change of leadership and collective bargaining.

INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

While outreach slowed as the conflict over the union continued, international union partners offered support for union elections and sent union leaders from the US and Nigeria as observers.

Importantly, the Labour Ministry of Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf stepped in to mediate and observe. The labour minister, Kofi Woods, a former human rights activist, noted the government's support for Freedom of Association and elections. (The Sirleaf government had also just pressed Firestone to renegotiate the annual rent on the remainder of its 99-year agreement to \$1.25 per hectare.)

Elections were held in July 2007 with Natee and Edwin Cisco heading a winning slate of candidates. Though a long legal battle ensued among competing candidates, a Liberian Supreme Court decision verified the results, prompting Firestone to recognise the new Fawul leaders.

With negotiations set for 2008, international partners helped meet Fawul's training needs. USW trainers worked with new leaders on negotiations, bargaining committees and the role of stewards in supporting negotiations.

Also important was research documenting contract language from unionised rubber plantations around the world, as well as information on living and environmental standards within the industry.

Fawul undertook a comprehensive survey of the entire Firestone workforce. According to USW's Mike Zielinski, 'The survey they put together really helped them establish communications with the

membership and was instrumental in preparing for bargaining.'

Armed with a wealth of information, Fawul negotiated an August 2008 collective agreement where it won a 24% wage increase, a 20% reduction in tree-tapping quotas, and solidified agreements to speed improvements to housing, education and medical facilities on the plantation. While Fawul did the heavy lifting, Natee gave a nod to international help. 'Our triumph is shared with our brothers and sisters in the labor movement who provided vital solidarity and support every step of the way,' he said.

The AFL-CIO presented Fawul with its international human rights award in 2008, and USW members conducted activities at all levels of the federation, from inviting Fawul leaders to its international convention, taking them to US tyre factories and collecting donations for the union at a USW local in LaVergne, Tennessee.

Fawul then requested help with complex implementation issues and also much-needed training on workplace health and safety. As 2010 negotiations approached, the Solidarity Center helped to bring a negotiator from South Africa's National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) to work with Fawul on its strategy and to develop future south-south relationships.

HEART OF THE MATTER

Most workers at Firestone collect raw liquid latex sap from trees. This labour-intensive tapping of trees is at the base of the natural rubber supply chain. Rubber tappers make diagonal cuts in the trees and set up equipment to collect the sap. Cuts must be made properly and equipment meticulously cleaned to prevent bacterial contamination. Then the liquid latex has to be collected, cup-by-cup, and taken to a collection point.

There are two problems with rubber tapping that drive union activism at Firestone. The first



Using a tractor is part of a new system of automotive latex transport being tested on the Firestone plantation.

is the high number of trees in a worker's daily production quota. According to Liberia's agricultural laws, rubber tappers must work under a quota and piece-rate system. The production quotas that tappers struggle to meet are behind complaints about exhaustive workdays and allegations about children working illegally to help tappers meet their quotas.

Fawul has successfully negotiated a reduction in the quotas, a ban on child labour, increases in the piece rates for liquid latex, and compensation for unpaid work and cleaning equipment. However, changing rubber tapping from a quota system to a more just hourly wage system requires legal revisions to Liberia's agricultural statutes. Fawul has requested assistance from international partners to achieve this goal and discussions are underway.

The second problem with rubber tapping is the process whereby tappers carry the liquid latex weighing around 70 kilos *by foot* to collection stations, some over two kilometres away. Fawul has attacked this backbreaking and time-consuming work and the extreme

physical toll it takes on workers' health.

According to a Fawul leader, 'At the end of 25 years of service, the workers have continuous occupational injuries in the field. They have scars on their shoulders, hernias. They are being continuously, repeatedly hospitalized.'

Fawul made a breakthrough on transportation in their 2010 collective agreement. Using photos provided by the Solidarity Center of latex being transported by vehicles on rubber farms in Asia, Fawul leaders made the case that the system was outdated, cruel and economically inefficient. Firestone is now testing a system whereby buckets are picked up and transported by vehicles to weigh stations.

MOVING FORWARD

Since the June 2010 agreement, Fawul has undergone a financial audit and is preparing for another open union election in 2011.

The rapid changes at Firestone's Liberia plantation are a direct result of the collective activism

of workers, particularly the long-aggrieved rubber tappers. The support of international partners has played a notable role in providing overall solidarity, and drawing together training materials, research, and information from a range of sources, but particularly from unions and workers in the global rubber industry.

The partnership will continue as Liberia rebuilds and consolidates its democratic institutions. Continued international solidarity will help Fawul build towards bigger organising and domestic policy goals but also to connect their work with other Liberian workers. Of particular interest will be the deepening of emerging linkages between Fawul and other Liberian unions with partner unions in Africa and the Global South. ^{LB}

John Hosinski works in the Solidarity Center Africa Department in the US. Fawul was recently given an award by the US Department of Labor for its work preventing child labour on the plantation.