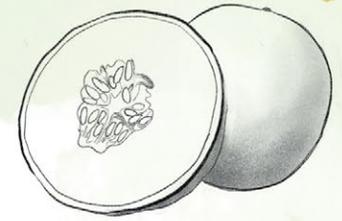


# Unfair Fruit:

## The Multinational Corporations Driving Migration



WRITTEN BY **GABRIELA ROSAZZA**

**M**edia reports on migrant caravans from Honduras show images of families separated at the border and kids in cages, heightening an already polarizing debate on immigration. Yet, time and again, the media fails to question the root causes of poverty and violence from which Central Americans are fleeing.

According to the World Bank, 66% of Hondurans live in poverty, and one in five live in extreme poverty. Pundits talk about poverty as if it were an accident or an abstract concept — it is not. It is born of a global economy that is designed to create poverty wages and inhumane working conditions. Multinational fruit companies, like Dole, Chiquita, and Del Monte take advantage of this throughout Central America, under the guise of “job creation” and “sustainable development.” But instead of providing dignified work, their global supply chains are fundamentally based on underpaid and disposable workers. The people who grow our food are treated like silent machines that service the world’s food system.

### **WHEN WORKERS UNITE: CONFRONTING FYFFES’ LABOR ABUSES**

Thousands of miles away from U.S. supermarket shelves, in southern Honduras, melon workers are confronting this race to the bottom by standing up to a global fruit giant that has long used their labor but never respected their rights.

Fyffes is the billion-dollar fruit company that Americans have never heard of. They are the top supplier of bananas to Europe and of winter-season melons to the United States. For over a decade, Honduran workers have reported rampant wage theft and exposure to toxic agrochemicals on Fyffes’ melon farms.

In Honduras, Fyffes employs up to 8,000 seasonal melon workers, mostly women. By 2016, these workers had had enough and organized a union with El Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Agroindustria y Similares (STAS). In response, local bosses fired dozens of union leaders and launched a violent union-busting campaign, physically, verbally, and psychologically

harassing the union members. The violence peaked in April 2017 when Moises Sanchez, STAS’ Secretary-General, was kidnapped, beaten and threatened with death by unknown assailants. Sanchez survived the attack, but the crime remains unpunished.

According to the AFL-CIO, at least 31 trade unionists have been killed in Honduras since 2009. Local employers use violence against workers and suppress their rights to keep costs low and remain competitive in the global economy. Multinational companies often threaten to leave when governments enforce environmental, indigenous, and labor rights. Under free trade agreements, companies have even filed multimillion-dollar suits against Latin American governments that have enacted laws protecting communities, claiming that these restrictions reduce their profits. As a consequence, governments often ignore even blatant labor rights abuses such as those on Fyffes’ melon plantations.

When their workers organized, Fyffes did what most companies do: Instead of recognizing workers’ universal rights, they spent tens of thousands of dollars hiring expensive consultants and lawyers, created management-controlled “unions” and distracted from the issues with diluted “women’s rights” programming.

### **WORKERS ARE THE BEST DEFENDERS OF THEIR OWN RIGHTS**

The difference between STAS’ organizing efforts and Fyffes’ Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives is that the former is worker-led and can hold bosses accountable through a legally binding union contract. Meanwhile, the latter is a corporate-led, voluntary public relations scheme with no real teeth. Fyffes has used CSR initiatives to allow local management to continue their abuses and to cover up union busting. Fair Trade USA (FTUSA) certified Fyffes’ farms in Honduras despite ongoing labor conflict, and only de-certified them after thousands of people sent emails directly to FTUSA’s CEO demanding the removal of the fair trade label.

At the International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF), we have seen firsthand how

unenforceable codes of conduct and third-party audits have tragically failed workers for the past 30 years, from the deadly factory fires of Bangladesh and Pakistan to toxic pesticide exposure in the sugarcane fields of Nicaragua. Workers in global supply chains do not need more labels and certifications. They need their right to organize to be respected. They need to be able to denounce workplace abuses without the fear of reprisal. Workers are the best defenders of their own rights. They don’t need top-down solutions from corporations that are merely an extension of colonialism and white supremacy.

“Charity is not the same as justice. The farmworkers want Fyffes to follow the law, not to create programs in order to distract from the company’s obligation to remediate labor rights violations,” said Ahrax Mayorga, an organizer with STAS-FESTAGRO. “We’re not against gender programming, but we’re against it when it’s used to cover up labor abuses and circumvent the law.”

Fyffes’ charade is coming to an end. The company was recently expelled from the Ethical Trading Initiative. However, this has not been enough to stop their union busting. An international campaign is now calling on U.S. supermarkets to hold Fyffes accountable.

The fight on Honduran melon farms is a microcosm of a larger struggle against a system that keeps people in poverty while extracting massive profit for corporations. Violence against trade unionists and other human rights defenders in Central America directly contributes to a lack of decent work in the region, one of the many factors that fuels poverty and pushes people to migrate. While every human has a right to seek asylum, they also have a right to stay in their communities, feel safe at work, and earn a living wage.

Understanding — and addressing — the root causes of migration requires Americans to take a hard look at the legacy of U.S. foreign policy, and how multinational corporations help create the conditions people are running from.

Learn more at: [laborrights.org/fyffes](http://laborrights.org/fyffes)