

Subject: SITRAJERZEESH

Date: November 2nd, 2011

Interviewer: Milli Lake

Coded by: Katie Bass

Duration: 1:43

NOTE: This is not a transcript. This document comprises interview notes from the interview conducted with members of SITRAJERZEESH in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, on November 2nd, 2012. We hope to provide a direct transcript in Spanish and English as soon as resources become available.

Start by telling us a little about SITRAJERZEESH and how the union was formed?

It was a lot of work to found the union, started in 2010. We started because there were a lot of changes happening at the time. We started primarily to get benefits for the workers at the time. We realized that the only way to stop the labor violations was to be organized in a union. However, the reaction of the company was to fire people, or to persecute them. They also threatened to kill the workers. But the workers kept fighting for their rights and fighting to form a union. It is also part of our legal right to form a union. So, the purpose of this union was to keep our benefits, because the company was taking them away.

How many employees of Russell were involved in forming the union?

There was an investigation by the WRC that helped prove that the factory was firing people because they wanted to form a union.

How did you prove that those people were fired for trying to form a union?

The information is available online at the WRC website, they published what they found. There is information for the SITRAJERZEESH case.

What was the process for the union to help the WRC in this report?

At that time we were wondering what happened to factory codes, and we looked into how many factories Russell was running at the time and how many were unionized. Everybody was scared because the owners of the factory were threatening to close.

What reason did the factory give for closing?

Reorganization. They were also threatening rights, such as the right of single mothers to work. We were scared at that time. All of the members that formed the union were very scared because we didn't know what was going to happen. The first step was to make an alliance with CGT. So, CGT contacted people from WRC to help. When we announced what happened in the factory, WRC came to Honduras and were able to prove what was happening in the factories. They told us that the factory was going to close in January in October. They said everyone was fired at that time.

Did you collect death threats and other threats as evidence to report to WRC or to Russell as evidence?

At that time they were in contact with FLA, but they did not respond. WRC did respond. All the intimidations were in very unofficial ways. They would occur in bathrooms or be written on small scraps of paper. We took pictures of the message when the WRC came. Through those threats we were able to ask for rights. One worker was followed to the supermarket and threatened. We were facing hostility straight from the factory owners. It was about a year from the time we set up the union until we were able to be recognized by the company. In 2008, the union began bargaining for our first collective contract. In October of the same year, the factory threatened to close. At that time we heard a lot of rumors from high officials in the company that the factory was going to close because we were trying to form a union. The factory didn't respect the law about the right to form unions. The message was that it was impossible for the workers to belong to a worker.

How did you convince Russell to take your right to unionize in that factory seriously?

In the beginning they maintained their position that the factory would have to close. We understand now that they had that position because it was how things worked. We are the only union in company history. Through the students' unions in the United States and through the FLA, AFL-CIO, and through other international organizations we were able to organize and find support for our union. We had to wait until the day after the factory closed to get the results from the investigation by the WRC. We began to have conferences with students as well as Universities within the United States to show them what the conditions were like in the factory. We visited schools to tell our story.

What school did you visit, and what was the reaction?

Maryland University, Georgetown, Cornell, New York State, Rutgers, Columbia, USAS conference, Omaha, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana University, Minnesota.

What was the response at the Universities and at the Fruit of the Loom office?

We had good response at all the Universities. Our testimony was important to them. We were told that some schools were demanding their school cut the contract with Russell. We used the platform of this international tour as a means to establish a complaint against the problems we have in Honduras. We asked for our jobs back and asked for the factory to be opened again. When we went to the office of the Fruit of the Loom, we brought a letter from the workers. The letter was to the President of the company. We wanted to give them a letter to explain how we feel. But they didn't want to meet with us and asked us to leave. Then we went to Warren Buffet's house to give him the letter personally. He wasn't at the house, so we left the letter with security personnel. We didn't receive any reaction. The only thing we received was a visit from a person high in operations. He offered us training to get a different job. We told him if the purpose of his visit was not to get a resolution to the problem, then we are not interested in meeting. What we were asking for was for the factory to be reopened. He said that the closure of

the factory was irreversible. We knew then that the corporation was not changing their position. So, since we did not receive a response we did a second tour. With the second tour we covered the whole country. After the second tour, over 100 contracts between universities and Russell were cut. We recognized the economic impact of our efforts was significant. We also found out through our collection of evidence that the factory, at the same time that it was closing, was making pacts with other factories. Evidence was really important in this case. We also recognized all the international pressure on Russell. There were efforts from students at Canadian Universities as well as in the US. They were asking for another tour this time in Europe.

How do you think you were able to get so much international support for your efforts given that violations of workers must occur all the time?

The difference with this case is that we are actually workers and when we tour around telling our story it is from the first person. The Cooperation between the CGT and organizations within the United States made the difference in this case.

Who organized the tour?

USAS, and the AFL-CIO international solidarity center.

What do you recommend to other workers in your situation, or what did you learn that was valuable about getting Fruit of the Loom to pay attention to workers violations.

A job is necessary in this country, and the only way for us as workers to survive is to be part of a union. The most important thing that we did was to contact all of the organizations outside of this country, because in this county they were allowing the abuses to happen. The first step is to break the fear that workers have about fighting for unions. We know that students all consume from different brands, and we think that this case was a step toward rights for workers. It is not just that we are asking for Fruit of the Loom to respect the law in the country, but also to respect the Code of Conduct. In the case of Russell we think they made a step in this case, but other brands, Hanes and such, are still fighting people over unions. For workers, it is important for consumers to make sure that the brands that they are purchasing respect the rights of workers.

Is there a difference between factories that are subcontracted, and factories like yours which are owned directly by Russell? Or, do you think it would have been more difficult to get Russell to change their practices if it was a subcontracted factory?

Yes, it probably would have been harder to work through a subcontracted factory. This campaign was most effective because we were working directly with Russell.

How successful do you think your efforts have been now that the campaign is mostly over, and how satisfied have you been with the results?

We sent a clear message to the brands, and we are hoping that they will respect unions, and not run from unions. Through this international alliance, we have made some progress.

What progress has Russell made in opening their new factory?

We signed a collective contract in March specifically for this new factory. The labor environment between this factory and the other seven factories that they have in this country are way different. We are supporting other workers in the other factories to start unions. Everyone that works in our factory can join our union. There are obstacles from the companies in creating unions however. The problem is the position of the higher executives, they do not want to form a union because they are scared.

Could you talk about the conditions in non-unionized factories as opposed to the conditions in your factory?

We have a scholarship program for our workers. And pay is generally better for the same position in our factory. Also, lunch is free and uniforms are paid for in the unionized factory. In the other factories they have the same benefit. The unionized factory also has a medical system which the non-unionized factory does not. We can also bring our children in to be treated by the medical system. There is a social security system to help take care of our children too. That is why we have a cooperative. We also have some benefits if a family member dies. In some companies, they give you about \$50 if a family member dies, in some companies they don't give you a cent. In our factory you get about \$230.

Were all of the workers that lost their jobs when the first factory closed, were they all offered new jobs when the new factory opened?

We hired new workers to work in the factory, but many came from the old factory. There are about 250 workers that are waiting for a job. The corporation has a commitment to hire from those 250 who were fired and are still waiting for a job. We feel that Russell is not necessarily honoring this commitment. It is taking a long time to open the new factory. We are still waiting for the jobs to come back. We don't know when we are going to get our jobs back, and it is very difficult to live without a job for months. We are worried by the slow response by Russell.

What are your expectations for the future of labor rights in Honduras?

There are a lot of expectations for a better life by the workers. The government is more interested in how it can help working conditions for workers.

Earlier you referred to the case being in the inter-American court for human rights. I was just wondering whether you thought that that was a good way to resolve questions of human rights?

We faced prosecutions here, and even though the police offered protection we were still in danger. This is why we went to the inter-American court. The process was not very complicated, other unions could do it.