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Honduras: Banana Workers On Strike; Thousands Of Workers In Other Industries Threaten Solidarity Actions

by Deborah Tyroler

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On June 29, some 60,000 members of the Honduran Federation of Free Unions (FESITRANH) threatened to strike if Chiquita Brands International Inc. did not answer employees' wage hike demands. Chiquita's 10,000 union employees, who are members of the federation, struck for a 60% wage hike June 28. Chiquita employees receive an average \$15.32 a day, and have not received a raise for six years. Meanwhile, inflation has increased 50% per annum. Company spokespersons said the raise would cost \$4.6 million a year and had not made a counterproposal on Thursday, after four days of negotiations. On Friday, refinery workers shut down the country's only oil refinery in Puerto Cortez in solidarity with the Chiquita employees. According to Manuel Crespo, head of Texaco Caribbean Inc., "If there isn't a rapid resolution to the strike, Honduras will be out of fuel in three days." Chiquita, formerly United Brands, and before that, United Fruit, has exercised a near monopoly in the banana business in Honduras since 1912. It currently controls 60% of Honduran banana exports, and owns the country's only railroad. US-based Castle and Cooke, a subsidiary of Standard Fruit, controls the other 40%. Also on Friday, Castle and Cooke employees announced they would strike beginning July 2 if "Chiquita Brands does not accede to workers' demands," said union president Mauro Gonzalez. The Texaco and Castle and Cooke unions are members of FESITRANH. Other labor organizations, including the 600,000-member Workers Confederation, have said they will strike if Chiquita refuses to negotiate. Notimex reported that the army took control of the national port authority and the Texaco refinery in Puerto de Cortes to prevent occupation of facilities by workers. Next, 9,000 members of textile workers' unions (SITRATERCO) announced progressive work stoppages until Chiquita reaches an agreement with striking employees. (Basic data from Notimex, 06/29/90; AP, 06/29/90, 06/30/90)

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