

8-8-1990

Honduras: Chiquita Brand International Employees' Strike Ends After Military Occupation Of Facilities

Deborah Tyroler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

Tyroler, Deborah. "Honduras: Chiquita Brand International Employees' Strike Ends After Military Occupation Of Facilities." (1990).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/4257>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Honduras: Chiquita Brand International Employees' Strike Ends After Military Occupation Of Facilities

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Wednesday, August 8, 1990

In late June, employees of the Cincinnati-based Chiquita Brands International launched a strike to demand pay increases. (See CAU 06/29/90, 07/04/90, 08/01/90.) Strikers included banana plantation workers, administrative personnel, and employees of the Tela Railway Co. Chiquita owns Tela, the only railway system in Honduras. [The company in Honduras is known as United Brands, a Chiquita subsidiary.] Aug. 2: On Thursday evening, Rene Ayestas, president of the railway workers' union (SITRATERCO), told reporters that President Rafael Callejas had offered no new proposals on wage hikes in his role as mediator. Earlier in the day, SITRATERCO executive committee chief Nicolas Rivera said the president had threatened to suspend the union's legal status if leaders rejected the government's proposal to end the strike. Aug. 3: In a telephone interview with Notimex, Ayestas said 800 soldiers supported by two tanks had surrounded the SITRATERCO headquarters in La Lima, Cortes department. United Brands headquarters are also located in La Lima. Ayestas said the union is now willing to settle for a 35% wage hike, as opposed to its original demand for 40%. SITRATERCO leaders met in La Lima to discuss the president's proposals to end the strike. Late Friday, union members voted to give Callejas another 72 hours. At the end of the period, said spokespersons, the union plans to call on other unions under the Plataforma de Lucha to launch a general strike. Callejas proposed that the company raise its wage hike offer from 12% to 17% for temporary workers, and from 24% to 25% for permanent employees. The company was reportedly prepared to accept the president's proposal. The union rejected the proposed wage hikes, describing the same as inadequate. According to AFP, the union requested a 48% increase for temporary laborers, and 52% for permanent employees. The company was ready to accept the proposal, however, the union, which has asked that wages for temporary workers be increased by 48% and by 52% for permanent workers, rejected the offer as inadequate. Ayestas said that Callejas launched veiled threats that he would fix the rate of salary increases via an executive order and if it is not accepted that he would suspend constitutional guarantees applied to labor unions. Former president Jose Azcona Hoyo told reporters that under the constitution, Callejas could issue an executive order, since continuity of the strike endangers not only the economy, but also national security. (Company spokespersons assert that the strike has caused losses in excess of \$30 million. In addition, the government has been unable to collect export taxes on 14 million 18-kg. crates of bananas which would have been shipped to the US since June 27. Honduran banana production per year totals some 80 million crates, making it the world's third largest.) Aug. 4: United Brands rejected the union's 35% pay increase counterproposal submitted to President Callejas on Friday evening. The president said that the union counter-proposal appeared to offered in the spirit of obstructing a solution to the conflict. He called on the strikers to return to work, and accept the pay increases suggested by the government. On Saturday, President Callejas ordered the army to evict about 4,000 strikers from the Chiquita (United Brand) banana packing plant, offices, and workshops, which they had occupied for 41 days. The other 6,000 strikers had remained behind closed gates in about 80 camps where they reside surrounding the installations. Union spokesperson Alejandro Maldonado said that two workers were wounded by gunfire, and two others suffered

beatings from the soldiers. Counterinsurgency and regular army troops were dispatched to patrol the streets of Tegucigalpa on Saturday and Sunday evenings. According to AP, the 600 troops sent to evict strikers also occupied the city of La Lima. The government announced that Chiquita Brands could hire new employees and resume production. Karl F. Koch, general manager of Chiquita Brand International in Honduras, told AP that the company "absolutely rejects the new salary demand of 30% for the workers." The nation's radio and television stations were ordered to suspend their own programming, broadcasting only government transmissions. At 6 p.m., television and radio broadcasters reported that President Callejas had issued an executive decree effectively ordering strikers to return to work. Government spokespersons said strikers who fail to return to the workplace by Aug. 6 would be fired. Aug. 5: Heavily armed soldiers supported by tanks patrolled the streets of Tegucigalpa, and the cities of Pedro Sula, Progreso and La Lima. In La Lima, three people were injured and two were reported missing. SITRATERCO secretary Javier Mendoza said that although the military had not totally paralyzed La Lima, strike leaders' mobility was restricted. According to Mendoza, employees' base salary is approximately US\$120 per month. The Honduran media reported that inadequate solidarity shown by other trade unions in response to SITRATERCO's call for a general strike, and the increased military presence in La Lima had "persuaded" the union to accept the pay hikes proposed by President Callejas. Union leader Ayestas said that while the executive order does not explicitly declare the strike illegal, union rights were suspended since it specifies that the company has the right to contract new personnel. He also criticized the Plataforma de Lucha for failing to lend his union adequate support. Aug. 6: Reports appearing in the Honduran press indicate that banana plantations will remain under military surveillance for an indeterminate period of time. [Basic data from AFP, 08/03/90; AP, 08/04/90; Notimex, 08/03-05/90; El Tiempo (Honduras), 08/03/90, 08/04/90, 08/06/90, 08/07/90 in 08/09/90 report by Hondunet-Central America Solidarity Association (Boston)]

-- End --