

They visited five villages and saw dismal living conditions prevalent on the plantation. "We saw people living in squalor with no running water; hospitals and schools had been destroyed," said Redmond, now an International Vice President.

Impossible production quotas required workers to put their entire families to work and basic safety items were not available. Some workers were blind from getting latex in their eyes.

Each tapper was responsible for 750 rubber trees and had to accumulate 150 pounds of latex daily. Pay amounted to little more than \$3 a day and a monthly 100 pound bag of rice if quotas were met. Children who should have been in school were put to work.

After about three hours, Firestone's security police caught up with them. But by that time, plenty of information had been gathered with photos to back it up.

The next day in the Liberian capital of Monrovia, Firestone's human resources director confronted the delegation. He was furious because he had tried to control their Firestone experience.

What next?

The fact finding group returned to the U.S. and gave a complete report. They knew that there was a moral obligation to help the workers but since there

“ The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress. ”

Frederick Douglas, an American abolitionist

was no democratically elected government, it was too early to determine how to do it.

Then, in November 2005, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was elected president of Liberia. Many years ago, she had been an immigrant living in the U.S., who swept floors and waited tables before graduating from a university in Wisconsin and from Harvard. She worked at the World Bank and Citibank.

"Johnson-Sirleaf's election was a milestone," Redmond said. "We knew she was committed to improving the lives of her people."

Redmond sent her a letter. She wrote back and put him in touch with the Minister of Labor, Samuel Kofi Woods. With the support of the Liberian government, the USW and the Solidarity Center offered training sessions for members of FAWUL, a union represent-

ing plantation workers. But there was one condition. All activists, not just union officials, who wanted to attend would be permitted.

FAWUL agreed. It was a mistake that they would later regret.

Empowering the workers

In training led by USW staff member Mike Zielinski, workers learned about union democracy, methods of building solidarity and how to take strategic action when necessary. In early 2006, workers formed the "Aggrieved Workers Committee" demanding better treatment from Firestone and new union leadership. They led wildcat strikes and some improvements were made.

Workers struck again in April. This time, police attacked and beat the strikers. One worker died from his injuries.

Convinced that the attacks were

instigated by Firestone management, they appealed for outside help while continuing to demand new union elections. President Gerard sent a strong protest letter to Firestone management and arranged for a delegation to return to Liberia.

Following the strike, Liberia's Ministry of Labor ordered an election and invited representatives from the USW and the Solidarity Center to be monitors.

The historic event

A delegation including DeWitt Walton of the USW staff, Kim Smith, president of USW Local 9-508 in Summerville, S.C., Ben Edherue of the Solidarity Center and Zielinski were dispatched.

Upon their arrival, they had heard Firestone management was putting pressure on the workers to support the incumbent office holders.

"Not long after we got there, Firestone backed off," said Walton. "Workers told us that our presence made a significant difference. It was incredible to see how people with no experience in running democratic elections rose to the occasion."

Most rubber tappers and their families rise at 3:30 a.m. to begin a long workday. On Election Day, they returned in late afternoon to find fellow workers standing in long lines waiting to vote.

There were 55 polling places spread over the 240 square mile plantation. Election monitors were able to cover all but the most remote locations.

"The Liberian government played a critical role," Zielinski said. "They wanted participation and transparency."

Many workers are barely literate. Colorful ballots were used, listing not only the names of the 30 candidates but photos as well. More than 3,000 people voted. The eight candidates of the Aggrieved Workers Committee, who had received USW and Solidarity Center training, won by large margins. The incumbent officers were stunned.

The workers had viewed their old union leadership as a company union and with good reason. They were part of a caste system in which management lived at the top level and rubber tappers and their families lived in abject poverty. Union officers lived in upgraded housing and facilities that were not quite up to management level, but far above the workers.

As the new officers take charge, plantation workers are looking forward to contract negotiations next year. Led by Austin Natee, they have time to prepare.

Plantation wages are extremely low but are not the biggest issue. Third and fourth generation workers want Firestone to provide better housing, running water, toilet facilities, and schools for their children, medical care and a hospital.

They want production quotas that can be filled without entire families having to work to meet them. They want the price of rice set where they can feed their families.

"As Liberia advances so will the union," Redmond said. "This election was important because it establishes democratic principles for the union and the country. It's just one step but it's a big one. There's no going back. Firestone is one of the country's biggest employers. We've helped empower the workers. We've helped set a new standard."

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Fred Redmond, International Vice President

Photos courtesy DeWitt Walton

