

Mike Zielinski from the United Steelworkers Strategic Campaigns Department talks with students from the Labor Solidarity and Global Campaigns course at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations

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Mike, can you tell us a little about the Steelworkers involvement at the Bridgestone Firestone plantation in Liberia?

I'll start with the gains that have been made since that first union contract was negotiated in 2008. Key to that contract was reducing the tree tapping quotas on the plantation. It had been set at 1,200 and in that first contract the union was successful in negotiating it to 800. That was really key in addressing child labor. The quota was impossible to meet as it existed and if you didn't meet your quota you would have your pay docked and more importantly you would have your rice rations withheld. They were really starving people out with the quota, so the tappers had no choice but to employ their whole families.

In subsequent contracts they really went to work on housing and living standards. The housing was absolutely abysmal. Whole families lived in one room shacks with no running and water and no electricity. The union has successfully campaigned over the years to get new housing constructed. They have dramatically expanded the living space for families and some housing—not all housing—now has electricity. So that was a significant victory for the union.

Another key demand was around education. It is really a company town. The plantation is huge, everybody lives on the plantation; it really is their entire world. Firestone does have schools there but in previous years before the union had really become active and strong the schools were in a state of disrepair and neglect. So one of the key demands was building more schools closer to where the families lived and providing buses for transportation. Before students had to walk several miles to get to school.

Most critically, they were able to gain access to the high school which workers' families had never had before. Managers' families had been able to go to high school, but workers' families were excluded. That was Firestone's way of perpetuating the system of enslavement for the rubber tappers. There was no opportunity to leave the plantation, so you were destined to follow in your fathers' footsteps as a rubber tapper with no access to other resources and education. So it was a significant breakthrough when the union was able, for the first time, to gain access to the high school for rank and file union members.

Transportation of the latex was another significant breakthrough that came with some of the later contracts. I'm sure you've seen the pictures of the rubber tappers with the stick across their backs where they are carrying two 70 lb buckets of latex. I, myself, can barely pick up one bucket with my two hands without spilling it and they have two across their backs. They were really being treated like beasts of burden.

Workers demanded a better system of transportation where the tapper poured the latex into a metal container which is then picked up by a tractor and taken to the weigh station, where in the past workers had to walk up to a couple of miles with the 150 lbs across their back. This was an area where contacts with the Malaysian rubber workers union were very helpful. FAWUL reached

out to us because when they raised the issue at negotiations, Firestone told them that this was the way it was everywhere in the world, that this was the system that everybody uses.

FAWUL, of course, did not really believe that so they asked us if we could do some investigation, so we reached out to the rubber workers unions in Malaysia through some of the global union federation. We sent them pictures of rubber workers with the sticks across their back and they were shocked. They could not believe that in Liberia they were using such an archaic system. In Malaysia they had not done that in many, many years. They sent us pictures of their systems where they would take metal jugs and load them into a truck or in some places, they had motorbikes where would attach the jugs to the motorbikes, but human beings were not being used as beasts of burden.

We were able to share those pictures with folks at Firestone so the next time they went to the bargaining table and Firestone said that was the way it is done everywhere they were able to throw those pictures on the table and say that you are liars. This is not the way it is done everywhere. We are in contact with our union brothers and sisters in Malaysia and here is proof. So they were able to leverage that information and push back on Firestone to get a new system.

Can you talk about some other union organizing gains in Liberia?

One significant gain was in the palm oil sector. It's a significant commodity in west Africa and in Asia as well. Palm oil plantations had been extremely active in recent years in Liberia. The Firestone workers have taken their experience of organizing and collective bargaining and brought that to workers at some of these palm oil plantations. So now the union that Firestone plantations are part of also represents unions at the major palm oil plantations, so the gains that have been made at Firestone have been extended to other workers in the agricultural sector.

The other significant contribution that Firestone workers had made in Liberia was that they helped to inspire other unions. The United Workers of Liberia went on to organize workers at Arcelor Mittal's iron ore mine in Liberia. As the United Steelworkers we also represent Arcelor Mittal workers in the United States and Canada, so we have been able to work together to pressure that employer. There have been several significant gains that were really inspired by the gains at Firestone. Now that union has gone onto to organize several other gold mines and other mining operations in Liberia.

Finally, the workers at Firestone played a significant role in passing some major labor law reforms in Liberia called the Decent Work Act, which for the first time established a minimum wage for workers in the country—including agricultural workers and domestic workers—something we still have not achieved in the United States. It was significant legislation that has raised standards for all working people in Liberia, but it didn't come about easily. It took several years of mobilizing and campaigning and camping out in front of the capitol and putting pressure on the legislature to get that passed and the Firestone workers really contributed in making that happen.

Can you tell us a little bit about your role in this campaign?

I want to honest, often times these global solidarity campaigns start off as transactional relationships. We have an ask; we want to pressure an employer on a global front to win a contract or settle a labor dispute. And our initial interest in Firestone was connected to that. We

realized that there were bound to be very exploitative conditions there and we were interested in finding out more about that as part of a global campaign to win a contract at Firestone. So our initial involvement was very self-interested.

We sent over a fact finding team to Liberia to find out more about what was going on there. What we discovered was that there was really no union in place. It was what you called a "yellow union." They had a contract in place, but no worker had ever seen the contract that they were working under. And when you looked at the contract under wages—one of the most fundamental issues a trade union negotiates over—all it said was "wages will be determined solely at the discretion of the company."

Soon after that we did, in fact settle our contracts at Firestone, but we had established some relationships and we felt that this was not the kind of thing we could turn away from. We wanted to pursue it if we could but we needed a union to work through. As a result of some political changes that were happening in Liberia—when Ellen Johnson Sirleaf—became the first woman elected head of state in Africa—something else we still have not achieved in the United States—opened up some political space.

Based on some of the contacts that Liberian workers had established with the Steelworkers based on the earlier trips the political space that had opening up in the country, they felt emboldened to launch the wildcat strikes that eventually led to the union election.

What did the training programs look like? Were there models of US unionism that the Liberians adopted? What did they do differently?

Liberia's political system is modeled after the United States so a lot of the legal institutions when it comes to labor law and how union elections are organized are somewhat similar to what we have in the United States. But of course, there were major cultural differences and in all of these situations you absolutely need to approach it with a perspective where we are here to learn from each other and share our experiences and similarities and differences. You really just need to sit down and start having some conversations about what are the material conditions facing you right now and what do you think are the strategies and approaches that will work in building union power given the challenges that you face.

The challenges were tremendous. Coming out of the war the unemployment rate in the country was 80%. Everybody's got two, three, four, five hustles that they're doing and the infrastructure of the country was destroyed during the war. There was no functioning electric grid. When it gets dark in Liberia, it's dark. Limited access to technology. So you really had to start at the ground level with having the conversations with people.

And that was really a strength of the Aggrieved Workers Committee. They started with 20 people in a plantation of 4,000 people living there. How did they organize those wildcat strike? They weren't posting it on Facebook. They were talking to people; they were traveling across the plantation.

The workers live in camps that are spread out over a wide swath of territory, so they identified organizers in each camp and each division. It was all word of mouth. By having those direct

conversations with workers they were able to spread the gospel of the union and pull off a remarkable display of organization that brought the plantation to a standstill all at once.

So the program that they put together was built on the foundation that they had created to have contact with their members. Because during the war years the schools were really not operating and there was very limited access to education for an entire decade there is a lot of illiteracy on the plantation. So it doesn't make sense to hand out newsletters and flyers, so it's important to talk to people.

Something that became key down the road was the union started a radio station. It initially had a very weak signal and only covered Harbell, the capital of the plantation. With the support of the USW we were able to obtain a radio transmitter and ship it from Europe and set it up at the union offices. They have used that radio station extensively to reach every level of the plantation, not only with political information and union information but they have entertainment programs as well.

One of the things they have done with the radio is, because there are seventeen or eighteen different ethnic groups in Liberia. English is the official language and just about everybody speaks English, but they are often more comfortable speaking in their ethnic languages. So the union has organized programming in some of the most commonly spoken languages. One thing they have used the radio station for over the years is to have a show where they explain the collective bargaining agreement and they go through it clause by clause, so everybody gets the same level of understanding.

The key is really communications. That's what the Building Power program of the Steelworkers is built on. We have to be transparent; we have to be open—especially when it comes to bargaining which is what most of the members care about the most. So that was the foundation of a lot of the program. How do we set up a network through show stewards, word of mouth? They often use study circles in Liberia where they go around with a trainer to zero in on a particular issue.

The other thing that they did was organize an extensive survey of what their members want in their contract. Here in the United States we usually do that through a written survey. But with the literacy issue a written survey wasn't going to be that meaningful or effective. So they did a series of camp meetings, where they had a list of issues that they wanted to run through, but it was open to everyone for whatever they wanted to bring up. And the union committee did an extensive job of documenting what members wanted to see in the contract and that guided the program and priorities every step of the way. Those surveys were really critical in building support for the union and members feeling this was their union.

How have workers in the US been involved in the work in Liberia?

We definitely have transformed the relationship between workers in the US and Liberia where we are in it together. Obviously, there are more possibilities for us to support folks in Liberia than there are opportunities for them to support our campaigns at this point.

But you never know where things are going to go. Here's one example: Vale, the multinational mining company based in Brazil operates several nickel mines in Canada that the Steelworkers represent. We had a major strike at Vale in Canada. At the time, Vale was looking to start a major

iron ore mine in Guinea and they were going to build a railroad to transport the ore through Liberia to get to the ports.

Without going into all of the details, we alerted our allies in Liberia about Vale's misconduct around the world and the labor dispute in Canada. They immediately sprang into action where they organized a whole legislative campaign with press conferences and meetings with politicians and were able to put a stop to Vale operating this mine in Guinea and using Liberia as a transportation point. This was an example of the Liberians really stepping up and providing a major assist to the work that we were doing in Canada.

The relationship with rank and file Steelworker members has not been as strong as I think it could be. We certainly have done work on it and as soon as we found about the Aggrieved Workers strike and the company withholding rice rations, we sprung to action and several locals at Firestone plants in the United States held gate collections to raise money. And when Firestone tried to stop them, we had to file Unfair Labor Practices against the company because of that.

We have brought a number of Liberian delegations to our conventions that happen every three years. At those conventions we have been able to set up meetings between USW Firestone and Arcelor Mittal members and their counterparts in Liberia. We have also been able to take our Liberian brothers and sisters to Bridgestone Firestone plants to meet with local union leaders and interact with members.

Quite a few Steelworkers have gone over to Liberia over the years to help with health and safety programs, organizing programs. We have a program called Women of Steel that has done a lot of work with women in Liberia. Those programs have involved some of our rank and file members, but I'll be honest with you that I don't think we have done enough with that. I think there is more that we can do to involve more of our rank and file members, particularly at Firestone. We have done a degree of work around this so the extreme xenophobia that you saw in the 90's aimed at the Japanese; we have really not experienced that with Liberia.

How have the global union federations and other more established unions in Africa been involved in this work?

Really the first step in Liberia was to establish democratic trade unions. Until then there was no role for the global union federations because there was no partner there. So in the early years the concentration for the Steelworkers was working with our partners to establish themselves as a force with a solid membership and some capacity. That later allowed them to affiliate with the ICEM and then IndustriALL. Both the Firestone workers and the Arcelor Mittal workers, through their respective unions, have been relatively active in IndustriALL.

That has enabled the Firestone workers to participate in a couple of global rubber worker network meetings. When the Liberians first came to the meetings, the Japanese unionists at Bridgestone were reluctant to meet with them. They were seen as off the grid and perhaps too confrontational towards management. And quite honestly, they didn't fully believe some of the reports and stories about how deplorable some of the conditions were in Liberia. They just didn't think that their employer could be a part of that. So it took a little bit of doing and maneuvering to get them in the same room, but it was an eye-opener to the Japanese unions and that was the first step of connecting the Firestone workers to a bigger global network beyond just the United Steelworkers.

In more recent years there has been work done to make the Liberian workers full participants in the rubber workers network that is organized by IndustriALL. And there have been a number of contacts that have been made with other unions outside of Liberia through the global union federations. So while the other unions were not initially involved in the early efforts, they have been hugely supportive throughout the years.

In terms of the other African unions, NUM, the National Union of Mineworkers in South Africa has played a role in supporting the workers at the Arcelor Mittal mine in Liberia. And the Liberians have made their own connections and contacts with unions in Africa—as it should be. So it's not mediated through the imperialists in the US. It is all direct contact that is being made between the Liberian unions and their counterparts throughout Africa, particularly in West Africa.

When the Aggrieved Workers Committee went on a wildcat strike, the country was coming through a civil war and unemployment was at 85%. How in the world can you have a strike with 85% unemployment? And after a civil war with a dozen different ethnicities, wasn't the workforce divided?

To underscore the courage that it took for these workers to organize and take the action that they did—not only were they coming out of a civil war, not only was there massive unemployment—but at that time it was illegal to strike. You could be fired by the company and jailed for going on strike.

I think they realized that the political circumstances had changed. Some space had opened up that was not there before. They were very strategic in recognizing that and seizing the opportunity. Also, the International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF) had been investigating child labor on the plantation and they were taking legal action against Firestone and shining a spotlight on the issue of child labor which was clearly a vulnerability. And that issue was starting to attract more global attention which was helpful in launching some the early activity.

The connections that they had made with the Steelworkers were also important. They felt that they had a powerful union backing them in the United States. And they don't associate Firestone with Japan, they associate Firestone with the United States, that's where the plantation started.

On the one hand you have the unemployment, but on the other hand, the only thing that was keeping the Liberian economy going at that time was the rubber plantation. So for the government to have any revenue or taxes or royalties, whatever revenue they had was coming out of the plantation. Shutting down the plantation exerted significant economic leverage on the Liberian government to intervene.

President Sirleaf had appointed Kofi Woods, a human rights lawyer, as minister of lawyer. He played a very significant role in going up to the plantation, working with workers. One night he snuck into the factory—no one had ever been in the factory before—to see the conditions first hand and he stayed there overnight in the factory with the aggrieved workers. Some of what gave them power was understanding the changed circumstances and taking advantage of seizing that movement and that opportunity, working with global partners like the ILRF and the USW, pressuring the government, and realizing that they had some economic power if they could bring things to a standstill.

Workers were also so fed up. What did they have to lose? They were living in abysmal conditions, so they were able to organize at that moment. They also made a real effort to make sure that members of their bargaining committee represented the different occupations, ethnic groups and languages.

What's going on in Liberia right now?

These are very challenging times at the Firestone plantation. The union is really under siege. There have been some leadership changes within the structure of the union. Whereas FAWUL was the central force for a lot of this activity, FAWUL is now part of a national union that has really struggled with some of the on the ground representational work. The company has fired two of the top union leaders at the plantation and that has had a serious impact on fear and intimidation across the plantation. It's also really hampered the union's bargaining position at the bargaining table.

Firestone in Liberia has been an incredible story of worker empowerment and true gains that have been made through organizing through bold action. But no progress is straightforward. It's a series of zigs and zags. A step forward and a half a step back and there are definitely some major challenges at Firestone right now. The local union leadership has lost a little bit of touch with the membership and they need to get back to their roots and launch an internal organizing campaign and have a better program of communication between the leadership and membership across the plantation.

That's all compounded by the fact that commodity prices are low, and Firestone has is in the process of laying off hundreds of workers. The work never stops, it's never the end. Corporations are always on the attack and we always need to be fighting back. It starts with our members. That's where our power comes from and that's where we need to be focusing our organizing and our communication.

Thanks for taking the time to talk with us. Many of the students here are going to work in the labor movement. What advice do you have for young people entering the labor movement?

There is nothing more rewarding than the work that we're doing. I often say that I have the greatest job in the United States, without exception. There is nothing more powerful than being able to work with strong unions and activists and leaders and folks on the shop floor level to be able to empower people to be able to go toe to toe with multinational corporations.

Some of the work that I do is on the global front because so many of our employers are international, but more of my work is focused on contract campaigns doing what we can to build power on the shop floor level. I'm sure there are a number of interests and skills there in the room. Some of it is focused on organizing which is vital and needs to be done. Some other folks might be interested in strategic research which is also vital because for all of these campaigns to succeed they need to be grounded in solid information and leverage research to identify the vulnerabilities of the employer.

And a lot of that information comes from our members, not just the research that we do behind a computer. A lot of this information comes from our rank and file members on the shop floor. Bringing together the information from experts and external sources and rank and file workers.

It's incredibly gratifying to have seen first-hand how, when a union is well organized and puts together a campaign based on good communication with the members and a good understanding of the leverage that we have that taps into the knowledge and information and resources that are available to us we really can move mountains. Firestone is really a case in point in that. There is nothing more gratifying you can do than continuing on with the labor movement and bringing the expertise that you have through the education that you have had the privilege to receive to be able to bring these campaigns to bear and get a measure of justice in the political economy for working class people.