

Firestone Under Fire

Green Advocates



The Stop Firestone campaign accuses Firestone of practices that lead to child labor at its Liberian rubber plantation.

According to the environmental and human-rights groups behind the “Stop Firestone” campaign, child labor and poverty-level wages are common at the Liberian rubber plantation supplying the raw material for Firestone tires. The groups charge that workers earn only \$3.19 daily, and they only receive that if they tap a daily quota of 650 trees—a task impossible to complete in a day unless they bring their children to help them.

The International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF) has filed a class-action lawsuit in the name of workers at the Harbel, Liberia, plantation, accusing Firestone parent company Bridgestone of “forced labor, the modern equivalent of slavery.” They are filing their case in the US, ILRF explains, because “Liberia, still recovering from years of tumultuous civil war, does not even have a legal system stable enough to punish those committing human rights violations on its own land.”


The suit is filed under the Alien Tort Claims Act, a 1789 law that allows non-citizens to sue defendants in US courts for violations of international law, such as slavery and forced labor.

In a November 2005 report by CNN’s “Inside Africa” about the Harbel plantation, Firestone president Dan Adomitis defended plantation working conditions and stressed that the company prohibits child labor. In an interview with host Femi Oke, Adomitis said it took workers “a couple of minutes” to tap each of the 650 required trees—adding up to more than 21 hours of work, Oke noted. (The lawsuit contends that the actual quota is as high as 1,100 trees per day rather than 650.)

The “Stop Firestone” campaign is also drawing attention to the environmental damage it says Firestone is causing through its use and disposal of toxic chemicals—and to the paltry benefits the Liberian government receives. A 99-year concession established in 1926 leased the land to Firestone for just six cents per acre annually, and a 2005 agreement negotiated with Liberia’s transitional government raised that amount to 50 cents per acre.

The groups working on the campaign include ILRF, the Institute for Policy Studies, Friends of the Earth, NAACP, Transafrica, and the Liberian-based Green Advocates, and they demand that Firestone:

- Take responsibility for this situation and follow the law.
- Improve the assignment of achievable quotas for the average worker to negate the use of child laborers.
- Increase wages to raise the standard of living of plantation workers.
- Supply modern tools to protect workers on the job from coming into contact with harmful chemicals.
- Redress all environmental damages as a result of its Liberian operations.
- Stop releasing chemicals into the environment and stop exposing workers to any compounds and chemicals that are internationally recognized as most toxic.
- Fully disclose all key project payments, contracts, and concession agreements for all Firestone projects in Liberia.

Individuals can e-mail Adomitis from the Stop Firestone campaign Web site and ask that his company meet these demands. 

CONTACT: Stop Firestone, www.stopfirestone.org.

FACTORY FIRE KILLS WORKERS

Dozens—perhaps even hundreds—of workers, most of them women, died when flames engulfed a KTS Textiles garment factory in the port city of Chittagong, Bangladesh, in February. The factory’s main gate was locked when the fire started, and many workers jumped from windows of the four-story building to escape.

Estimates of the number of workers in the factory when the fire started range from 500 to 1,000, and death toll figures range from 54 to several hundred. The Bangladesh newspaper *New Nation* reported that 450 seriously injured workers were admitted to a local hospital, where many of them were declared to be in critical condition. The fire appeared to have started from welding work that was occurring in the factory.

A report from the nonprofit National Labor Committee (NLC) states that KTS sewing operators were paid just 10-14 cents per hour and forced to work seven days a week for 10½-14 hours each day; that workers reported being slapped, denied maternity leave, docked a day’s wages for late arrival, able to access only unsafe drinking water, and denied freedom of association and the right to organize; and that seven girls ranging from 12 to 14 years old were among those initially reported dead or missing.

Workers are demanding compensation for victims and their families, payment for workers while the factory remains closed, investigation and prosecution of the factory manager who illegally locked the main exit, and recognition of workers’ rights to organize, according to the NLC. NLC and other labor-rights groups are asking consumers to contact the US-based companies (including Ambiance USA Inc, Uni Hosiery Co. Inc., and Vida Enterprise Corporation) that source from KTS and urge them to see that the workers’ demands are met.

CONTACT: National Labor Committee, 212/242-3002, www.nlcn.org.

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