

Boycott Flor de Caña

Sugar Workers Turn up the Heat

In April 2009 the Flor de Caña Boycott Group in Nicaragua launched a boycott against the famous Nicaraguan rum. The boycott is in solidarity with former sugar cane workers who are members of the Nicaraguan Association of Those Affected by Chronic Renal Insufficiency (ANAIRC), sickened by exposure to toxic chemicals, bad water and long days in the sun. The group has been targeting its campaign to the Pellas Group and to international rum distributors.

More than 480 people – the number keeps constantly increasing — have joined in a Facebook group [www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=76399022845] to express their support for this cause. The idea is to keep up the pressure, to force these companies to change their labor logic and agree to negotiate a reparations package for the former sugar cane workers, and for the widows of ANAIRC, whose husbands died from IRC. For the last two months, the members of ANAIRC have been camping out in the center of Managua demanding a dialogue with the Pellas Group which has ignored their demand for negotiations.



A mother watches the last of her four sugar-working sons die from Chronic Renal Insufficiency.

To read an interview with Carmen Rios, president of ANAIRC, go here: <http://www.nicanet.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/156-sugar-workers.pdf>

Through the Alternative Mesoamerican Communications website at <http://rcam.ws/leer.php/8809162>, the Flor de Caña Boycott Group announced a new campaign of letters that seeks to strengthen the protest.

The campaign web site explains: “In Nicaragua, a holding company by the name Pellas Group has a sugar cane plantation and mill called the Ingenio San Antonio. This plantation produces the raw material for making Flor de Caña rum. The labor conditions and the use of pesticides on the plantation have sentenced to death more than 3,000 former workers, besides contaminating the water, lands and the air of the western part of the country.”

“This holding company,” – says the text, “is Nicaragua’s most powerful, and it is very difficult to get it to change its corporate practices, above all because it fashions itself a responsible and pro-environment business, buying public opinion through corporate social responsibility programs. For this reason, we request people’s solidarity through protest and dissemination of the message.”

The members of the group believe that at this point it is important to get those companies that are importing and distributing Flor de Caña around the world involved in the campaign. For that reason they have prepared letters translated into different languages, so that each person who wants to show his or her indignation about what is happening and let his or her protest be known, can write to Compañía Licorera de Nicaragua SA, and to the importers and distributors of Flor de Caña rum in their respective countries.

On May 29, under pressure from the international campaign, Nicaragua Sugar Estates president Carlos Pellas promised to collaborate in the building of a hospital to treat kidney ailments such as the CRI which

affects thousands of former sugar workers. He also promised to guarantee the jobs of the company's current workers in light of the boycott and said the company would participate in a commission along with government officials to investigate the causes of the kidney failures so prevalent in the western part of Nicaragua where the majority of the nation's sugar plantations are located.

ANAIRC members continue to live in their Managua tent encampment waiting for the Pellas Group to respond to their repeated demands for dialogue.



*Boycott campaign poster says,
“Only with Flor de Caña Rum, your
recreation is the most deadly. Three
thousand deaths from renal
insufficiency in Chichigalpa are due
to the pesticides used by the Pellas
Group at the Ingenio San Antonio.
For our brothers and sisters in the
western part of Nicaragua, let's not
drink Flor de Caña!”*

For sample letters to the Compañía Licorera and to the distributor for the United States, visit the Nicaragua Network web site at www.nicanet.org.

The letters list a series of claims having to do with labor, human rights and the environment. Among them:

- 1) Contamination of land and water of the western part of Nicaragua (Chichigalpa), where the Ingenio San Antonio is located. This is due to the excessive use of toxic agricultural products in the region.
- 2) Air contamination, due to the irresponsible burning of the sugar cane fields as a common planting/harvesting practice in the western part of Nicaragua (Chichigalpa), where the Ingenio San Antonio is located.
- 3) Contamination of workers at the Ingenio San Antonio through fumigation with toxic agricultural products. This, along with other questionable labor practices (such as an excessive number of hours working under the sun) has contributed to workers developing Chronic Renal Insufficiency (IRC), a disease which has already killed more than 3,000 people in that zone of Nicaragua.
- 4) The proscription of independent labor unions, allowing only those that are “company unions” sponsored by the businesses of the Pellas Group (Compañía Licorera de Nicaragua and Nicaragua Sugar Estates Ltd, proprietor of the Ingenio San Antonio).

The letter to the Compañía Licorera urges the company to review and change environmentally hazardous practices regarding the use of chemicals and the burning of sugar cane fields (among others), to welcome independent studies of water, land and air quality at the Ingenio San Antonio and its vicinity and, lastly, to sit down and dialogue with the former workers organized through ANAIRC.