Honduras and Nicaragua: Two Similar Countries with Very Significant Differences

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The hills of Tegucigalpa, Honduras crowded with housing, & little green space.
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Executive Summary

The Alliance for Global Justice organized a bi-national delegation of 11 people from Feb. 17-26, 2017 to compare and contrast the two neighboring Central American countries of Honduras and Nicaragua in three areas: rural development, citizen security, and women’s empowerment. The delegation began in Tegucigalpa, Honduras and included meetings there, in La Esperanza, and in the southeastern region of Choluteca. We were hosted in Honduras by the Honduras Solidarity Network. The delegation then crossed overland into Nicaragua where we had meetings in the municipality of Somoto before traveling to El Crucero and ending in the capital city of Managua. The purpose of the delegation was to build solidarity with Honduras’ embattled social movements and in support of the gains that social movements in Nicaragua have made under Sandinista governance.

Although neoliberal economic policies were not an explicit focus of this delegation, it is not possible to understand much of what the delegation witnessed without a basic understanding of neoliberalism. Both countries have been profoundly affected by neoliberalism’s policies of control through debt, free trade, low business regulation, commodification of nature and the environment, and weak protection for labor rights. In the 1980s, neoliberal prescriptions cost Honduran agricultural cooperatives the protection of their lands which opened up the process that continues today of the violent re-concentration of land ownership in the hands of the elites. In Nicaragua, the gains of the Sandinista Revolution were attacked, and in many cases reversed, by the neoliberal governments put in place by the US from 1990-2006 when Nicaraguan voters decided that the threats by the US of a new war was less of a danger to them than the economic starvation they were suffering, and they voted the Sandinistas, led by Daniel Ortega back into office. Ortega’s achievements of macroeconomic stability while refusing to accept neoliberalism’s high poverty rates, debt, and extractive development prescriptions, has increased the Sandinista majority with voters in each subsequent election since 2006.

Some of the delegation’s conclusions were:

The delegation was struck by the fact that U.S. funding for the Honduran security apparatus supports a corrupt militarized police force and military that exacerbates the country’s violence and contributes to its high levels of crime. In Nicaragua, on the other hand, police and military were seldom seen and appeared to have a good relationship with the people.

The delegation was deeply moved by our meetings with the indigenous group COPINH, founded by assassinated environmentalist Berta Caceres. Their courageous defense of the land in the face of such violent repression, and their broad vision for a just and sustainable society has created a multifaceted movement that is anti-imperialist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-capitalist extraction. In Nicaragua our meetings with the United Cooperatives of Somoto and the Rural Workers Association were equally profound, but it was encouraging to see what they have been able to accomplish through support of the State rather than the repression faced by Honduran popular movements.

The delegation was struck by the relationship between the post-coup erosion of democratic rights and this extractive model of “development,” in Honduras, in which local elites and transnational corporations rely on a repressive government to eliminate popular resistance against extractive projects, compared to Nicaragua where there is a notable lack of State violence and indeed a multitude of government programs supporting poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

The delegation was outraged by the assassination of Berta Caceres, the likely complicity of the DESA Corporation, and the refusal of the government to conduct an open investigation. The delegation was deeply moved by the way Caceres continues to inspire and motivate COPINH and other movements for popular sovereignty. Driving through La Esperanza, the delegation noticed frequent graffiti announcing “Berta vive” [Berta lives]. The delegation was impressed by the self-empowerment of women in Honduras where they lead many social movements and put their lives on the line every day for their activism. The delegation was further impressed
with the social and economic empowerment of women in Nicaragua as a matter of both past battles won and government policy to institutionalize those gains. A joint study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the United Nations Gender Equality and Women Empowerment Agency (UN Women) recently stated that Nicaragua is in first place worldwide with respect to women’s participation in public offices, tied with France and Bulgaria with 52.9% of positions in government institutions held by women.

The delegation was once again struck by the fact that Honduras’ rural development policies are based on economic exploitation by transnational and local elites which treat peasants as impediments to access or expendable cheap labor with no human or labor rights. Police, military, and paramilitaries which are called “private security,” operate with total impunity on behalf of the international and national oligarchies. Rural development in Nicaragua, in contrast, since 2007 has been focused on restoring the economic rights of peasants that were under attack during the neoliberal years of 1990-2006. The many government programs such as Zero Hunger, Zero Usury, Plan Roof, free education and healthcare, subsidized food, “edible yards,” loans for micro and small businesses, school lunches, subsidized home ownership, and many other programs, most focused on women heads of households, have achieved the UN Millennium Goals of cutting poverty in half, and have jump started the peasant agriculture sector which was moribund under the neoliberal governments.

The delegation was impressed by the vitality of the cooperative sector in Nicaragua, including a framework of laws encouraging and defending the rights of cooperatives. In contrast, Honduran cooperatives struggle without any more legal protection than any individual property owner against the rapacious greed of Honduras’ oligarchy in the context of the lack of any semblance of the Rule of Law.

Former Honduran National Police Chief of Internal Affairs, Maria Borjas, who was ousted for bringing corruption charges against high-ranking officers, explained that corruption is endemic in the Honduran Police because you can’t rise without paying graft to those above you in the chain of command. This has led to structural links between the police and drug cartels. In Nicaragua, on the other hand, the National Police was formed from “los muchachos”, the young Sandinista guerrilla fighters who overthrew the US-backed Somoza dictatorship and vowed never to be an instrument of repression against Nicaraguan citizens. Their success in keeping the drug cartels from gaining a foothold in the country, in contrast to Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, is evidence of the low level of corruption in Nicaragua.

The delegation was struck by the need, for very different reasons, for international solidarity with the people and social movements of both Honduras and Nicaragua. In Honduras it is to shine the light of international attention on the repression funded with US-taxpayer money, in an effort to keep the State and oligarchy from creating more martyrs such as Berta Caceres. In Nicaragua the need for solidarity is to educate our communities about the gains won by the people through their rejection, with the support of the Sandinista government, of neoliberal orthodoxy. It is important that we help defend those gains against constant efforts by the institutions of international capital, supported by the US government, to destroy positive examples and alternatives to neoliberalism.
Introduction

The Alliance for Global Justice organized a bi-national delegation of 11 people from Feb. 17-26, 2017 to compare and contrast the two neighboring Central American countries in three areas: rural development, citizen security, and women’s empowerment. The delegates were active and retired academics and activists living in diverse US states and one living in Nicaragua. The delegation included nine US and two German citizens. The delegation began in Tegucigalpa, Honduras and included meetings there, in La Esperanza, and in the southeastern region of Choluteca. We were hosted in Honduras by the Honduras Solidarity Network. The delegation then crossed overland into Nicaragua where we had meetings in the municipality of Somoto before traveling to El Crucero and ending in the capital city of Managua. The purpose of the delegation was to build solidarity with Honduras’ embattled social movements and in support of the gains that social movements in Nicaragua have made under Sandinista governance.
Honduras is a country with both a Pacific and Caribbean coast, that has been dominated by US interests since winning independence from Spain, along with the rest of Central America, in 1821. Standard and United Fruit Companies (known today as Dole and Chiquita) vied with the US State Department for governing control. The US writer O. Henry coined the term “banana republic” to describe his experiences in Honduras.

In the 1980s the US-funded and coordinated Contra War against the Sandinista government of neighboring Nicaragua was conducted primarily from Honduras. Honduras remained unknown to most US solidarity activists until the June 28, 2009 military coup that removed elected President Manuel Zelaya resulting in firm support of the coup government by the Obama administration under the guidance of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The coup brought disparate Honduran social movements together in a nonviolent struggle to return to democracy resulting in a violent response by succeeding coup spawned governments and the coercive forces of the State in the interest of the small Honduran oligarchy and US global interests. Hundreds of peasant activists, teachers and union leaders, journalists, LGBTQ activists, and others have been murdered with impunity since the 2009 coup, including internationally known indigenous leader and environmentalist Berta Caceres on March 2, 2016. The delegation visited the community of La Esperanza where COPINH, the organization she founded, was preparing actions to commemorate the first anniversary of her murder.
February 18

Meeting with Maria Luisa Borjas, the former internal affairs head of the National Police in Tegucigalpa. Maria Luisa Borjas is now an elected member of the Tegucigalpa municipal city council and from the LIBRE Party. She has been an outspoken critic of the militarization of the country and the corruption inside the police force.

After meeting with our delegation, Maria Luisa Borjas was interviewed by national news about her views on corruption, police militarization, targeting of youth accused of gang membership, among other topics.

Borjas told the delegation about her 25 years of service on the national police force. In 2002, she was removed from her position as head of internal affairs after she investigated top police officials. She was “fired for doing my work” as she described it.

Borjas explained that the endemic corruption in post-coup politics and policing contributed to widespread impunity in Honduras. Even honest officers are often required to provide kickbacks to politicians and higher ranking officers in exchange for their postings, so they must engage in graft and extortion in order to raise this money. She recounted the numerous new security units that have been created that blur the line between the military and the police including the “Cobras” which are military police and supposedly “vetted” by the US embassy. Borjas told the story of a young university student, detained by the military police and accused of killing a former public prosecutor. In the face of overwhelming evidence of the young man’s innocence, she argued, he is still being detained because these newly created policing units are attempting to demonstrate their effectiveness at solving high-profile crimes during an election year. The vast majority of crimes in Honduras go unsolved, however, and often uninvestigated, and Borjas argues that this is because government and the police officials are deeply enmeshed in and corrupted by criminal networks. “Prosecutors and judges sell themselves,” she explained, and as a result, she estimated that as many as half of the people incarcerated in the country are innocent, or have never had the chance to even go before a judge. There is currently a commission in place to purge the police force of corrupted police, but she argued that it is being used to undermine and eventually eliminate the civil police and replace it with a military force.
For speaking out against police and government corruption, Borjas has endured two assassination attempts and her son was arrested. Her husband faced an assassination attempt as well, which public prosecutors never investigated in spite of being provided with a video of the car used in the assassination attempt (the car was later found parked in the national police parking lot). The delegation was struck by the fact that U.S. funding for the Honduran security apparatus supports a corrupt, militarized police force that exacerbates the country’s violence and contributes to its high levels of crime.

Selvin Mejía, a member of the COPINH General Coordination, described the work of COPINH to defend the rights of the Lenca people in Honduras, and to tie that struggle to global organizing to defend the environment, assert the autonomy of indigenous peoples, and promote women’s and LGBT equality. COPINH was formed in 1993 to defend indigenous land against logging, and they then expanded to protect rivers, including stopping the construction of hydroelectric dams that would flood indigenous lands. They work to promote an autonomous and sustainable vision of development, instead of an extractive economy in which outside people and corporations profit off of the land while simultaneously destroying it. To COPINH, this effort to protect land and water is not only political, but spiritual. Not only have they successfully reclaimed ancestral lands that had been taken from them but in doing so they have created a multifaceted movement aimed at defending indigenous culture and territory, protecting popular access to public land and resources (aka, the commons), including the media, and insisting that people have the right to control their own bodies, particularly women. Since 2000, COPINH has been explicitly anti-patriarchal.

Selvin Mejia poses in front of the community radio at COPINH headquarters.

Mejía explained that COPINH worked to support indigenous peoples in constructing autonomous communities with their own governments (that the national government does not recognize), and the creation of indigenous guards to defend territories and mobilize allies in the event of emergencies. They view their defense of the land as a service to all of humanity, for all people need air and water to sustain life. They are currently struggling against approximately 50 mining and energy projects proposed in Lenca territory in western Honduras. In spite of the organization’s resistance, the extractive economy persists. Mejía noted that the company, DESA, working to build the Agua Zarca dam in Rio Blanco, Intibuca still has not abandoned the project, as it still has financing and the support of the Honduran military, particularly the US-trained, funded, and vetted TIGRE elite police force.

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COPINH’s work has been met with violent repression; they have lost six members in the struggle to stop the construction of the Agua Zarca dam alone. Since its founding and particularly since the murder of the General Coordinator Berta Cáceres, COPINH leaders have survived assassination attempts, been subject to continuous threats and intimidation, defamation campaigns, and are violently repressed when protesting in defense of their territories. The delegation was deeply moved both by COPINH’s courageous defense of the land in the face of such violent repression, and by their broad vision for a just and sustainable society, a multifaceted movement that is anti-imperialist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-capitalist extraction.

February 19

Meeting with two members of COPINH’s Support Team, Berta (Bertita) Zuniga Cáceres (Berta Cáceres’ middle daughter) and Camilo Bermudez at the COPINH office in La Esperanza, with a focus on COPINH’s vision of development, women’s empowerment, and the state of the security situation in the country.

These COPINH organizers spoke to the delegation about the organization’s 24-year history of struggle to defend Lenca territory and organize against “multiple systems of domination.” COPINH works on land titling both to reclaim ancestral lands and to provide protection against “extractive projects.” Through both direct actions on the land and demonstrations in Tegucigalpa, COPINH fights against large land owners who have illegally possessed the land, and against the mining and hydroelectric projects that render the land unlivable and extract its resources.

Organizing the community in these forms of protest is also a form of claiming and celebrating their indigenous identities, as well as a spiritual practice. The COPINH organizers emphasized that this work is an essential reminder to the world that indigeneity is not simply an aspect of the past; rather indigenous people still exist. COPINH coordinates with other indigenous and Afro-indigenous groups, such as OFRANEH, the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras. Before the 2009 coup that removed Manuel Zelaya from power, COPINH had been working with other organizations to write a new constitution, essentially to push for a refounding of the country on more egalitarian terms. The COPINH organizers explained that the coup was largely an effort to silence the voices calling for a new constitution, and that the post-coup government has deepened the extractive economy of the country by passing an array of laws to make dispossession and extractive “development” easier. The post-coup government also resulted in a very rapid militarization of the country, dramatically
increasing the military’s role in society and creating a critically dangerous situation for activists who are targeted by the government and private corporations.

The COPINH organizers explained that the post-coup government, under the National Party, currently has granted concessions for approximately 50 mining and energy projects in Lenca territory without the communities’ consent. Indigenous protest has been met not only with violent repression from private security and armed agents of the State, but also with racist dismissal. Indigenous communities are portrayed as ignorant people who don’t want development, but the truth is that they have a different vision for development. Rather than development run by local elites, transnational businesses, and international lending institutions, aimed at extracting wealth, indigenous protesters are calling for an autonomous vision of sustainable development that benefits the people. Particularly, when asked about climate change, COPINH organizers stressed that it was a political issue, not something that could be solved through individual lifestyle changes, but something that requires mass resistance to an extractive capitalist economy. In this sense, indigenous activists, by fighting to defend their territory, are serving a larger global purpose of protecting the earth and all of us who live upon it. The delegation was struck by the relationship between the post-coup erosion of democratic rights and this extractive model of “development,” in which local elites and transnational corporations rely on a repressive government to eliminate popular resistance against extractive projects. The delegation recognized the work that COPINH is doing as not only aimed at justice for the Lenca people, but at promoting a view of sustainable, non-extractive development essential for global survival.

Finally, the COPINH organizers spoke about the murder of Berta Cáceres, targeted for her outspoken support of indigenous autonomy and protection of the environment. A 2015 recipient of the Goldman Environmental Prize, Cáceres was a co-founder of COPINH and a key strategist in the organization, so her death was a major loss. The COPINH organizers, including her daughter, stressed that this was a political crime, and thus they have an integrated vision of justice -- not just prosecution of the actual murderers, but a recognition of the role of the military intelligence and corporate actors in assassinating Cáceres in order to try to stop the resistance. They asked people in the United States to support the Berta Cáceres Human Rights Act, proposed in 2016 and reintroduced in 2017 as HR 1299, which would cut off U.S. police and military aid to Honduras until there is an investigation into human rights abuses by Honduran law enforcement.

February 19

Presentation on the circumstances surrounding the murder of Berta Cáceres and visit the place of her murder and grave in La Esperanza.

The delegation was outraged by the assassination of Berta Cáceres, the likely complicity of the DESA Corporation, and the refusal of the government to conduct an open investigation. The delegation was deeply moved by the way Cáceres continues to inspire and motivate COPINH and other movements for popular sovereignty. Driving through La Esperanza, the delegation noticed frequent graffiti announcing “Berta vive” [Berta lives].
February 19

Discussion with U.S. military captain at Palmerola airbase in Comayagua about the U.S. military presence in Honduras.

We stopped at the Palmerola Air Base in Comayagua, approximately 1.5 hours north of the capital city, Tegucigalpa. A member of the delegation who is a military veteran asked for a meeting and the entire delegation was invited into a guard structure at the entrance and received a briefing from Capitan Hues. This is the first AfGJ delegation where we received such a cordial reception.

The U.S. captain emphasized that the U.S. military is present in Honduras as guests of the Honduran government, supporting the Honduran government in security actions, not because the Honduran government is not capable of acting on their own, but because both governments ostensibly have the same goal of stopping the drug trade through the country. And yet, in spite of the massive economic and military aid that the United States gives to Honduras, the captain was clear that no meaningful reduction in the drug trade through Honduras could occur until the “faucet of demand” in the United States was turned off. However successful the joint efforts of the Honduran and United States military and police forces might be at intercepting drug traffickers, he was certain that many others were trafficking with impunity. The delegation’s conversations with other individuals and organization in Honduras, particularly with Maria Luisa Borjas, suggest that the Honduran government’s complicity in the drug trade contributes to this impunity.

The delegation was struck by the captain’s failure to distinguish between supporting the Honduran government and supporting the Honduran people. He was attempting to emphasize the United States’ respect for Honduran sovereignty by asserting that the U.S. military was an invited guest and not an interventionist force, but the 2009 coup renders that distinction essentially meaningless. If the Honduran government does not represent the people (and indeed violently represses them), then supporting the Honduran government does not constitute respect for Honduran popular sovereignty. Rather, the United States is playing a familiar role of lending military and financial support to a repressive authoritarian regime that is amenable to U.S. economic and foreign policy objectives.
February 20

Meeting with Women’s Human Rights Defenders in Tegucigalpa, Yessica Trinidad, Roxana Corrales, Miriam Suazo, and Katerin Cruz spoke about the specific risks and challenges faced by female organizers in Honduras.

The primary work of the organization is to accompany women human rights defenders who are in danger because of the work that they do. They accompanied Berta Cáceres, members of OFRNEH, and other less well known activists. They noted that social activists in Honduras, particularly since the 2009 coup, are targeted for violent attacks. This is true of both men and women, but women often face additional risks because 1. they are more likely to be targeted for sexual assault, 2. their children are often also targeted, and 3. they are often unable to leave the country when targeted because they are the sole or main source of support for their families. The organization noted that it is important to have the resources to remove male activists from danger when they are targeted with violence, but that it is equally important to have the resources to take women activists out of danger, and that often also must involve bringing their children with them.

The organizers create and maintain a database of threats and attacks against women human rights defenders. They work to create a network of women’s organizations including the Center for Women’s Studies (CEMH by its Spanish acronym) and the Women’s Forum for Life. Organizers spoke about the impact of stress and trauma on women activists’ health and their work promoting self-care; they noted it is difficult to find funding to support women’s health and self-care initiatives.

The organizers noted that, although women activists have served in important leadership roles in an array of social movements throughout Honduras, there are gendered obstacles to their leadership. While male activists gain prestige by their leadership, women activists are often criticized as bad women or bad mothers for being involved in the movement. In addition, some women experience sexual harassment or assault from men within the movement and are afraid to report it because they don’t want to divide their communities or the movement. Women who condemn their attackers are often accused of being infiltrators or collaborating with the military. So the organizers work to support women human rights defenders against threats, attacks, and disparagement from both outside and within the movement, in order to promote women’s leadership and empowerment. They cite COPINH as a positive example of an explicitly anti-patriarchal organization that has promoted women’s leadership and formally censured men who have been violent to their partners.

Not only does the post-coup government repression target women activists, but the state of impunity engendered by the corrupt, militarized police force contributes to broader violence against women, including domestic violence. In addition, women are sometimes targeted by organized crime for things done by their male partners. Organizers condemn increased government security measures as a ruse, and accuse the government of being the “foremost aggressors and violators of our rights.” When social activists are killed, the government, police, and media criminalize them, portraying the victim as tied to drugs or gangs in an effort to depoliticize these targeted killings. They noted that, last year, a woman was killed in the country every 13 hours. Poverty, too, is a form of gendered violence, as families suffer from hunger, and women are forced by circumstance to accept exploitative, abusive jobs, such as in domestic service, agriculture, or the maquilas (textile assembly plants) – jobs which often involve grueling hours and conditions, and from which they are promptly fired if they become pregnant or attempt to organize. The organizers noted that this form of violence relates to the political economy enforced by the post-coup oligarchy, as “Honduras is not poor; it is impoverished.”

Delegation members remarked on the courage and leadership of women human rights defenders, and the risks and repercussions they endure in their efforts to advance popular sovereignty.
February 20

Meeting with representatives of FESTAGRO (Federation of Agroindustrial Unions). Nelson Nuñez and Ahrax Mayorga discussed their campaign supporting melon workers in Choluteca, Honduras.

FESTAGRO organizers detailed the failure of melon companies, like the multinational corporation, Fyffe, to comply with national and international labor regulations, the repression faced by workers who choose to organize, and the failure of the government to protect workers and enforce regulations. They argued that companies systematically violate workers’ rights because the authorities have been unwilling to enforce the law. They noted that approximately 80 percent of workers in the melon industry are women. None of the workers have social benefits or pensions, even though many have worked in the industry for up to thirty years.

Organizers argued that, because 85 percent of Fyffe products are marketed in the United States (often as part of Sol Marketing group), international solidarity is key to supporting the melon workers. People in the United States and Europe have the power to influence the company as consumers, by insisting that Fyffe respect workers’ rights, particularly the right to unionize. They directed people to participate in the campaign through makefruitfair.org and www.iufcampaigns.org.

FESTAGRO representatives explained to the delegation that consumer solidarity is so important, because the global “race to the bottom” of neoliberalism has created a situation where strikes are met with company decisions or threats to move production to another country (one where workers’ rights to organize would be even less protected). In Honduras, the post-coup government consistently sides with companies, accusing labor and other activists of being “terrorists” and promoting laws to criminalize protest.

The delegation was once again struck by the relationship between economic exploitation and the post-coup repressive government. Transnational companies specifically want to bring their businesses to Honduras because of the level of impunity that exists, in which companies do not need to comply with labor regulations and any labor organizing can be repressed without legal ramifications.
The delegation met with a few dozen women melon workers who had been fired for organizing at the home of Doña Maria. The FESTAGRO organizer Ahrax Mayorga noted that the women were not being allowed to go back to work, and they currently had 92 legal challenges pending against the melon company, Fyffes regarding labor violations.

A number of women volunteered to tell the delegation their experiences. The first woman noted that she had been a melon worker for 27 years, and that it involved a lot of hard days, heavy work, and no compassion. They worked seven days a week, initially for 30 lempiras a day. During the peak harvest times, they worked extra hours but for no extra money. She recently complained about their treatment, and “that was her last pay.” She was placed at a further worksite and then she was no longer rehired. She described restrictions on when she

February 21

Meeting with Sarahi Carranza Reyes, president of a housing cooperative just outside the city of Choluteca. COVICHOLUMAR (Housing Cooperative of Marcovia Choluteca) was formed in 2010 and approximately 70% of its members are women.

The coop president described the grassroots organizing that was necessary to obtain the land to build the housing cooperative. In order to obtain access to financing from the government, coop members demonstrated and blocked the streets, demanding government support. They ultimately obtained financing for 500+ housing plots [170 of which will or have been built in the first phase] although she notes that government and private banks gain substantial profit from mandated interest on the financing. But without the coop, she would never have been able to own her own home. She had been renting, dreaming of one day owning her own home, but whenever she applied for credit, she was rejected.

We were able to tour the cooperative’s water treatment plant and community garden. XXX spoke about the difficulties of the project’s location, specifically that it is surrounded by sugar cane and melon plantations and a recently installed solar panel project which have all contributed to significant deforestation in the area.

Sarai Carranza Reyes gives the delegation a tour of the COVICHOLUMAR cooperative’s organic vegetable gardens.

February 21

Meeting with organized melon workers in Choluteca, who explained to us the conditions of their work and the ramifications of their organizing efforts. The meeting was organized by the agroindustrial union FESTAGRO, which the delegation had spoken with the day before.
could drink water, and that “the boss would insult us if we weren’t working fast enough, say he’d run us out because we didn’t want to work.” The women described getting up at 3am to get to work at 5:30am. They had to walk to work, and the company never provided a truck to transport the women from their village to the fields. The woman recounted that if women became pregnant, they’d be run out or fired.

The FESTAGRO organizer noted that this is the third attempt melon workers in Choluteca have made to form a union. The first time, the union leaders went into a room with the head of security (a retired military man), and then they were brought to Tegucigalpa and mysteriously all resigned. In this third unionization attempt, they fired all the workers who organized. But their organizing and the publicity has started to see some small results, including a small wage increase and no longer a seven day workweek.

Another worker recounted how hard it is to work seven days a week. Up until last year, they were only paid 204 lempiras a day. [Currently the exchange rate is 23.5 lempiras to the dollar.] She worked 19 years for the company and has nothing to show for it. “We get sick and they don’t protect the workers; they protect the melons.” She explained that women were told they could not have cell phones in the fields because it affected the melons. Another worker noted the negative health effects of being exposed to chemicals in the fields. One worker explained that they used to tolerate the miserable pay, hours, and conditions, “We put up with it because there was no other work.” Another argued that the Honduran authorities don’t support the workers, and that the government makes sure people don’t see what is happening to workers. “They’re millionaires and look at us,” she said.

When asked what they are struggling for, the workers responded: that they pay us what we deserve, that we have a negotiated union contract, that we have freedom through our union. The delegation was outraged by the exploitation of these workers by the melon companies and the failure or refusal of the government to enforce labor regulations. It seemed clear that organizing in the union was the only option for these women to improve their working and living conditions, and those of their children. The women noted that there was no public secondary school in the area for their children to attend.