

## On the Road

Of the four, Domitila Hernández, secretary of women for the Dole banana workers' union in the Aguán Valley, Honduras, came the farthest the morning of November 6, 2002. It took her four hours on a bus that left at dawn just to get to La Lima, the old United Fruit company town near San Pedro Sula in the north. Domitila was also the quietest of the four. In her early fifties, roundly built with small laughing eyes, she occupied herself on the trip weaving a pink and white plastic cover for a kleenex box. Gloria García—a bit more serious, maybe ten years younger, with tiny black braids pulled up into a knot and wearing, as usual, the snazziest outfit—got to La Lima in half an hour from her house in El Progreso. As secretary of organization for the biggest, oldest banana union in Honduras, the *Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Tela Railroad Company* (the Union of Workers of the Tela Railroad Company; SITRATERCO), she was the highest-ranking woman in the Honduran banana unions.

Iris Munguía, the political and personal force at the center of the whole story, was waiting in La Lima with the truck. In her mid forties, self-possessed, and an expert at the art of tight jeans, she had her own black braids tied back with a scarf she'd gotten in Europe from the global campaign against the World Bank. Since 1995 Iris had served as secretary of women for both the *Coordinadora de Sindicatos Bananeros y Agroindustriales de Honduras* (Coalition of Honduran Banana and Agroindustrial Unions; COSIBAH) and the *Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Sindicatos Bananeros* (Coalition of Latin American Banana Unions; COLSIBA). As it began to

rain she wrapped the women's luggage, their packets of notebooks, pencils, and felt pens, and the video projector into big black plastic garbage bags and heaved them into the back of the little two-seated Nissan pickup truck.<sup>1</sup>

Once on the highway the three *mujeres bananeras*—banana women, as they call themselves—wove through San Pedro Sula and out of town. Passing Choloma, where the maquiladoras hulk like concentration camps—row upon row of concrete warehouses with garment and electronics factories hidden behind barbed wire—they pulled over at a bus shelter to pick up COSIBAH staffer Zoila Lagos, at fifty the jolliest, artsiest, and most politically experienced of the four. She brought the soundtrack, a cassette compiled to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Nicaraguan Revolution. After an hour or so the women turned left at Puerto Cortés, at the coast, and headed southwest toward Guatemala, bouncing along the potholed gravel road, with Zoila and Iris belting out the songs all the way. The waters of the Caribbean lapped the coast about five hundred feet away on the right; steep green mountains loomed up to the left, as the now-afternoon light shot sideways through the palm trees. Half the bridges were out but Iris just plunged the truck right through the fords without missing a beat.

The Honduran side of the border turned out to be just a few shacks, a silent man with a stamp, and two black-market money changers. The Guatemalan side was much more serious: a bar across the road, creepier officials, and farther down the highway, a second inspection, this one by rifle-carrying, adolescent Mayan boys in camouflage fatigues. It was well after dark by the time they got to Morales and found the union hall. Selfa Sandoval, secretary of press, organization, and propaganda for the Del Monte banana workers' union in Guatemala, came rushing out to greet them, and they all ambled down to a cafe for dinner, dripping with sweat in the heat. Selfa—laughing, round, and fortyish, too, in a trim black-and-white two-piece suit she'd sewn herself—flooded the visitors with a rapid-fire report of union and personal gossip, as the male union officers dropped by to say hi.<sup>2</sup>

This wasn't just any union hall they'd arrived at, or just any group of union leaders. Three years earlier, in October 1999, two hundred armed paramilitaries acting in the interests of the Del

Monte Corporation had kidnapped four of the union's male leaders and twenty more of its members, held them captive in the hall, beaten them, threatened to kill them, and forced them to go on the radio to renounce their union activities. Only when each man had signed an affidavit denouncing the union did the paramilitaries allow them to leave. They fled into hiding in Guatemala City and remained underground for over two years. After a successful international campaign denouncing Del Monte, five of those men eventually went into exile in the United States; two remain in Morales as union officers. Selfa Sandoval, the only woman officer, wasn't kidnapped. But she was the one who insisted on reopening the union hall four days later, and she got her share of death threats during the next few months.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the four Honduran women's journey wasn't an armed conflict, however, but something equally revolutionary: a quiet drama of transformation in the hearts and minds of women—and men—banana workers throughout Latin America. Domitila Hernández, Gloria García, Iris Munguía, and Zoila Lagos had come to town for a two-day workshop on domestic violence with twenty-three young rank-and-file women banana workers. In a seemingly quotidian journey, they were inspiring a new understanding of the gender politics of Latin American labor.

The next morning at 8:30, in the steaming hot union hall—so hot and so humid that some of the young women carried little yellow towels over one shoulder for wiping the sweat off—Selfa introduced the visitors. “We have here *compañeras de lucha* (comrades in struggle),” she began. “Here are some women you can aspire to be.” Gloria García followed: “International politics are trying to divide us. We need to educate ourselves so we can confront the corporations.” Zoila and Domitila, too, welcomed the participants, followed by Iris Munguía. Iris stressed the issues that women banana workers all over Latin America have in common—the hours of work, the burden of the double day. The idea, she underscored, is that we're all working together. It's not just a question of women, she said, but of gender. Men need to understand our labors, and we need to get involved in our unions. “We need to defend our organizations, and we can only do that if we know what's going on inside them.” As she wrapped up her open-

ing remarks, Iris affirmed that ultimately it's about the world we want for our kids. She called on each of the young women present to become teachers, too, and carry the workshop's ideas back to their packinghouses.

Glistening in their best outfits, the young women then stood up one by one and spoke of their hopes for the workshop. "I want to learn, and then show others." "I want to learn how to defend myself from whoever tries to oppress me, whether it's my husband, my union, or my boss." Last, but not least, "I want the women from Honduras to come back five times"—although they'd just arrived.

Zoila opened the main body of the workshop with a presentation on different definitions of domestic violence, then had the women break up into small groups to discuss a set of quotations—some from the Bible, some from famous men—about women's proper place in society. Over the next two days, the women watched a video from Mexico on domestic violence, reported back on several group projects, played games, and cautiously entered into guarded discussions of domestic violence, prefaced with classic phrases like "I myself haven't had any problems, but I have a friend who..."<sup>4</sup>

That trip to Morales captures the core elements of the women's projects that have quietly flourished in the banana labor movement of Latin America since the mid 1980s. Like that road trip, the larger story of banana women's activism starts in La Lima, Honduras, in 1985 with one union, SITRATERCO, and then expands during the late 1990s to women activists from banana unions throughout Honduras. It crosses borders in the late 1990s and early 2000s, not just to Guatemala but to five other banana-exporting countries of Central and South America as well: Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Panamá. It's a story about how older, more experienced women banana workers are reaching out to young women with a message of empowerment, always with an eye to the future. Last but by no means least, it's a story of gender politics in which men are always involved. And, as the Del Monte kidnappings underscore, it's unfolding in a context of dangerous struggles with the transnational banana corporations for which they all work. Iris's scarf from Europe hints, moreover, at the powerful role of global

allies standing behind the banana women and their unions—just as the video from Mexico suggests women’s resource networks within Latin America.

From one perspective the banana women’s projects provide a straightforward example of transnational feminism, with complex roots in late twentieth-century Latin America. Their politics emerged, in part, out of women’s struggles in the revolutionary movements of Central America in the 1970s and 80s—hence those songs from the Nicaraguan Revolution.<sup>5</sup> Many of the banana women’s intellectual concepts, however, such as the distinction between sex and gender, or the idea of an *encuentro*, echo more middle-class Latin American feminisms of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>6</sup> By the 1990s and 2000s the banana women’s ideas, techniques, and organizing strategies also overlapped with other poor women’s social movements in Latin America such as the *Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida* (Women for Dignity and Life; DIGNAS) in El Salvador.<sup>7</sup>

The banana women are distinctive from all these, though, in building women’s projects within the structural form of the mixed-gender labor movement. Their transnational networks have evolved within the institutional framework of majority-male unions, at three overlapping levels: first, in individual unions; second, through national-level federations—especially COSIBAH, the Honduran banana workers’ federation; and third, at the regional level, through COLSIBA, the federation of Latin American banana unions. Their local unions provide long-term institutional stability dating back to the 1950s, contracts with the banana corporations protecting union activities, and literal structures in which to organize—buildings, desks, phone lines, and, if the women can get access, computers. Their broader coalitions, in turn, provide bases for banana women to obtain and control independent funding, which they have used to launch an array of projects empowering women.<sup>8</sup>

These gains have come through twenty years of painstaking struggle and comradeship with individual men in the banana unions. Today, as a result, “women’s work” is considered legitimate and a central part of banana unions’ activities in many countries. All along, the banana women have argued that empowering wom-

en—at every level of their organizations, from the rank and file through the very top leadership—makes for stronger unions as a whole, for a more united and powerful front in the face of the corporations. They always envision their struggle as one involving men and women together, moving forward with their full powers unleashed.

Since 1985 banana workers have thus forged a powerful politics of class *and* gender, in which women's issues and union issues are inseparable and mutually reinforcing. The young banana worker at the workshop in Morales captured it exactly when she said she wanted to defend herself against anyone who wanted to push her down, whether it was her husband, her union, or her employer.

This is also a story of international labor solidarity. In the United States, two models of international solidarity dominate our imaginations: either the ugly history of intervention by the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) in Latin American labor during the Cold War; or more inspiring recent activism in support of maquiladora workers.<sup>9</sup> Even in the latter, though, Latin American women workers are often portrayed only as powerless, unorganized victims in need of rescue from the North.<sup>10</sup> The banana women show us a different tale, of powerful, savvy organizers with strong unions that fight global corporations every day and often win. They welcome aid from Europe and the United States, such as that Nissan pickup truck paid for by Catholic charities in Ireland.<sup>11</sup> But they're driving it, and singing their own, Latin American songs.

The banana women of Latin America offer a new model that explicitly integrates gender equity as part and parcel of any effective labor internationalism. They refuse to separate the global struggle against transnational corporations from the struggle at home for women's equality and respect. Employees of some of the biggest corporate monsters in the world with household names like Dole and Chiquita, they are also well aware that other monsters, deploying domestic violence, can inhabit their own households. They inspire us to envision a new labor internationalism that places women's issues at the center of global class politics.

Before launching into the banana world, I want to make clear my own relationship to this story. I first met the banana women

when I was invited in December 2000 to help COLSIBA develop a banana union label for the US market. Since then I have worked with COLSIBA in a variety of solidarity work, mostly through the US Labor Education in the Americas Project (US/LEAP), a Chicago-based nonprofit. When I began researching the banana women I was already known to the leaders of the banana unions as an ally; I was introduced, and introduced myself, as both a researcher and someone working on behalf of the banana workers. Over the course of four years, as I interviewed three dozen male and female banana unionists and their allies, observed workshops in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, participated in three international conferences of women banana workers, and attended four COLSIBA meetings, I was gradually embraced as part of the international network of women I was studying.

Along the way the banana women very pointedly directed and shaped my research process, teaching me both how to learn about them and what to learn. I was specifically instructed, for example, to write here that I didn't just look at documents and figures, but stayed with women banana workers in their homes, ate with them, and visited their packing plants and union offices. I, too, was along on that road trip, another round, fortyish woman belting out songs she'd learned from the Nicaraguan Revolution. Unlike the Honduran women in that truck, though, I hadn't spent twenty years packing bananas, standing up ten or twelve hours a day, six days a week. I brought all the privileges of a white, middle-class academic from the United States. But the *mujeres bananeras* of Latin America gave me another privilege: that of telling their story.



Packinghouse workers, Buenos Amigos Plantation, El Progreso, Yoro, Honduras, September 2004