

# SOLIDARITY CENTER

PROMOTING WORKER RIGHTS  
WORLDWIDE



**2014 ANNUAL REPORT**

**The Solidarity Center is a non-profit organization that works with unions, nongovernmental organizations and community groups worldwide to advance worker rights and achieve equitable economic development in countries where globalization has made the lives of vulnerable people even more precarious. It supports programs and projects—among them, trainings, education campaigns, legal aid, research, transparency initiatives—that help workers understand and exercise their rights, improve their working and living conditions and build independent unions. From July 2014 through June 2015, the Solidarity Center reached more than 330,000 working people, the majority of them women, in Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, Eastern Europe and Central Asia.**

**The Solidarity Center’s mission is to help build a global labor movement by strengthening the economic and political power of workers around the world through effective, independent and democratic unions.**

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ON THE COVER: Palm workers and their families—including Vilda López and her daughter, Celestina—live on and near massive plantations located in the Peruvian rain forest in San Martín province. Two unions, both Solidarity Center allies, represent workers in the processing factory and on the plantation where worker delegates coordinate with women, migrant and young workers to improve dangerous working conditions, access to healthcare, wages and job stability through collective bargaining and labor inspections.  
Photo: Oscar Durand (2014)

**ALL PEOPLE WHO WORK** should receive the rewards of their work—decent paychecks and benefits, safe jobs, respect and fair treatment. Yet in an increasingly unequal global economy, the deck is stacked against most workers. Their low-wage or unpredictable jobs mire them in poverty, limit their full potential, curtail their participation in democratic processes and imperil their family's well-being.

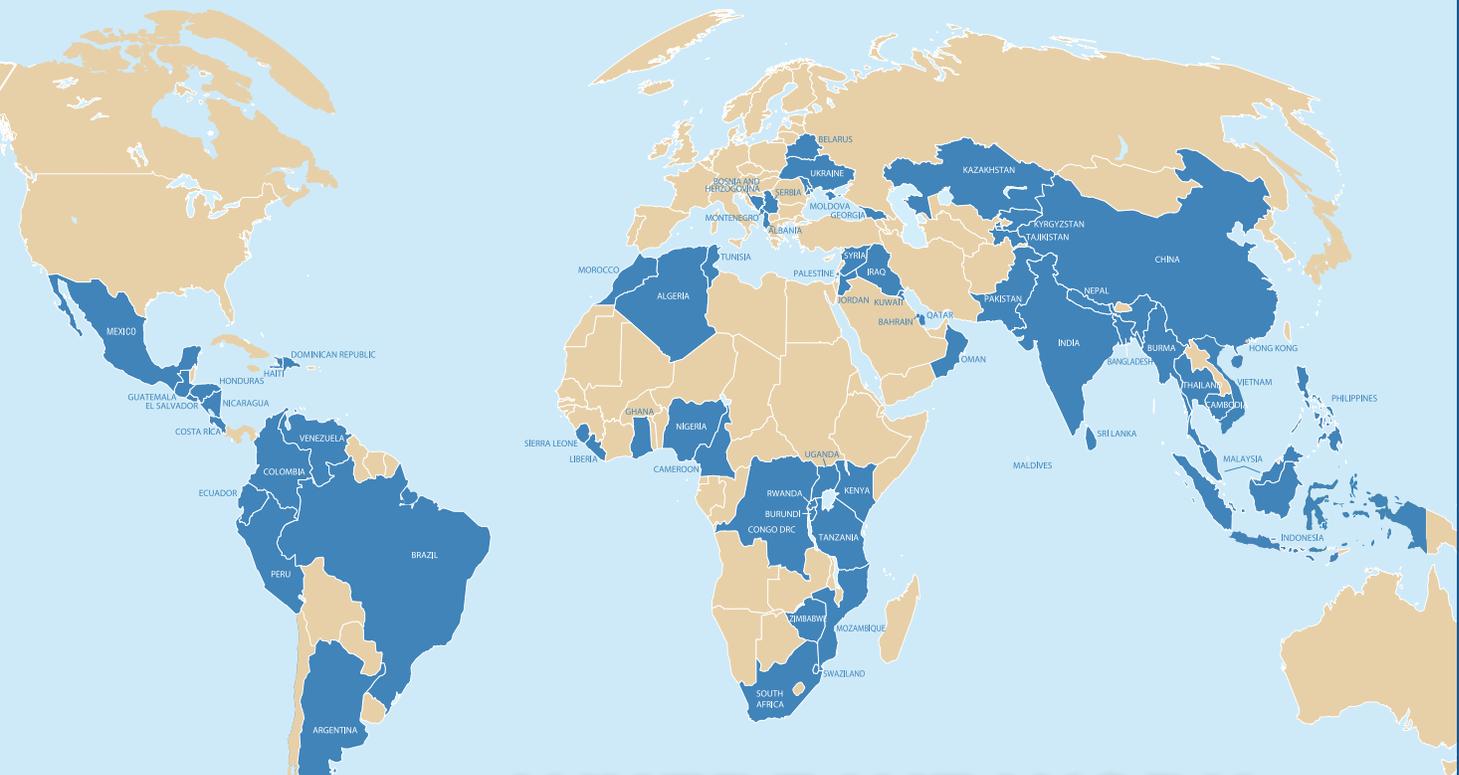
Inequality is more than the wealth gap between rich and poor. In its increasingly extreme levels, inequality is a barrier to human advancement and dignity. For workers, it manifests around the world in wage theft, exploitive and dangerous

workplaces, denied democratic rights, entrenched discrimination, forced labor and compromised legal systems. It pushes women and men to seek unsafe employment far from their homes and communities, where their rights and access to legal remedies may be few. And inequality ensures that the children of the working poor follow in their parents' footsteps, often well before childhood has ended.

Economic and social inequality are greatest around the world where worker rights are most denied. Over the past year, the Solidarity Center has supported workers as they challenged injustice and inequality, worked collectively to improve

their workplaces, called for accountability from their governments, defended their rights and the rights of the vulnerable among them, and stood as a force for shared prosperity and inclusive economic development. Our 221 professional staff worked in more than 65 countries with more than 400 labor unions, pro-worker nongovernmental organizations, legal aid groups, human rights defenders, women's associations, advocacy coalitions and others to support workers—in garment factories, home service, seafood processing, mining, agriculture, informal marketplaces, manufacturing, the public sector and beyond—as they faced and surmounted the challenges of an unequal world.

## In 2014–2015, the Solidarity Center worked with allies on more than 150 programs around the world.



# WHERE WE WORK



**CREeping INEQUALITY** and social exclusion are byproducts of a globalization model that treats people like commodities. While economic growth is often touted as an antidote to poverty, it rarely results in shared prosperity. Instead, real gains for average people—particularly for historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities—come when they share common cause, advocating for better laws and bargaining for wages that reflect their true economic contributions.

The Solidarity Center allies with trade unions to support workers through **organizing, bargaining, advocating and building collective voice**. Around the world, we provide technical expertise for workers as they push back against the erosion of wages and social protections, and work together to improve livelihoods for all. We support efforts by determined women and men, often at the bottom of the economic ladder, who, often at their peril, seek to mitigate abuse on the job, including violence against women, denial of wages, forced labor, discrimination, child labor and workplace

safety threats such as exposure to dangerous substances, locked factory stairwells and anti-worker assaults. These empowered workers are the true agents of change and the best-positioned to reduce inequality in their countries.

The Solidarity Center focuses on combatting four of the major global trends that perpetuate inequality and block people's ability to create a participatory middle class in their country:

**Precarious and informal work**, where workers have no single employer, no contract, no fair wage, deteriorating standard of living and no benefits;

**Anti-worker laws and practices**, which deny working people their rights, enshrine discrimination and protect business interests over the safety, security and dignity of workers;

**Gender inequality**, which relegates women to secondary status, with fewer rights and greater vulnerability to abuse, destitution and violence; and

**Labor migration and trafficking**, which may result in exploitation, forced labor or human trafficking.

To combat these trends, our programs include assistance to unions trying to educate workers, organize and bargain with employers and advocate for worker rights. We train union leaders and activists in human rights standards and local labor laws, providing workers with the tools to challenge violations. We help workers recover stolen wages or gain medical assistance when they are injured on the job. We teach health and safety, including fire prevention, for thousands of garment workers. We help migrant workers connect with protective networks and know their rights. We train women leaders so they can challenge systems that deny them voice. And we help workers communicate with their elected officials and advocate for policies that benefit working women and men.

The following pages provide a snapshot of our programs, July 2014 to June 2015.

Members of the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) clear brush on a farm near Krugersdorp, South Africa. The Solidarity Center works with FAWU on membership building, collective bargaining and migrant worker rights.  
Photo: Solidarity Center/Jemal Countess



**UNIONS GIVE WORKERS A VOICE ON THE JOB** and in their communities and promote greater economic equality in societies.

Without labor rights, working people have little or no recourse when their rights are violated. They cannot complain when employers force overtime without compensation or coerce them into structurally unsound factories. They may have to choose between working without safety equipment and not working at all, or may be trapped in debt bondage because they paid exorbitant fees to get a job. For working people, particularly the most vulnerable in society—e.g., women, migrant laborers and workers whose only means of income lie in the informal economy—collective bargaining represents the best shot for improving wages and workplace conditions.

Over the past year, the Solidarity Center helped unions educate tens of thousands of workers, traverse legal hurdles to

building worker organizations, sharpen negotiating skills and win agreements that protect the rights and dignity of working people. In our programs funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, for example, workers formed 88 new unions, and more than 60,000 workers joined unions.

In January, nearly 1,000 Moroccan orchard, vineyard and olive-grove workers won a landmark collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with a major agro-industry employer, Les Domaines Brahim Zniber. The *Confédération Démocratique du Travail* (Democratic Labor Confederation, CDT) campaigned for more than five years, with Solidarity Center support, to arrive at the accord, which provides for benefits including bonuses, safety equipment and workers' compensation. The agreement could have positive implications for all workers in the agriculture sector, where 40 percent of workers are women. By taking this pioneering step, Les Domaines Brahim Zniber says it demonstrates to

other corporations that achieving world-quality products requires world-quality workers, and investing in workers is the most important investment corporations can make.

Also in Morocco, the *Union Marocaine du Travail* (Moroccan Labor Union, UMT) won bargaining rights for 13,700 call-center workers. The Solidarity Center and UNI Global Union allied with the UMT, supplied training and other technical support. In Mozambique, we brought together organizers from Brazil's *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* (CUT) with the Mozambican national association of informal market vendors—*Associação dos Operadores e Trabalhadores do Sector Informal* (ASSOTSI)—to train and inspire organizers. Within months after the training, ASSOTSI organizers had launched a membership campaign, fanned out to all 10 of the country's provinces and the capital city, and signed up more than 9,700 new union members, ensuring their right to decent work.

Giorgi Adamashvili, a bus mechanic in Tbilisi, works outdoors—including during harsh Georgian winters. He and the transportation workers' union are addressing poor working conditions. Photo: Lela Mepharishvili

Maria Masango sells second-hand clothing at her vending stand, Maria's Flea Market, to support herself, her two sons, her brother and a domestic worker, in the Dzivarasekwa section of Harare, Zimbabwe. Photo: Solidarity Center/Jemal Countess



## WOMEN AND MEN WITH INFORMAL EMPLOYMENT

—among them, day laborers, domestic workers, sugarcane cutters and other agricultural workers, market vendors, call center workers—now comprise the majority of the workforce in many countries and create up to half of their nation's gross national product. Yet despite their numbers, they count among the lowest paid and least protected in their societies. Most are not covered by labor laws. And they have little power to advocate for living wages, fair treatment and safety on the job.

The lack of legal protection for workers informally employed provides the conditions for extremely low wages, exploitive workplaces and precarious lives, with the ability to earn a decent living and provide for one's family out of reach. Unions are staving off the erosion of wages and good jobs by organizing informal-economy workers and pushing for new laws that protect, rather than harm, vulnerable workers.

In June, **Liberia**, still reeling from the social and economic aftermath of the Ebola crisis and after a years-long campaign by trade unions, passed the Decent Work Bill, establishing a minimum wage and providing maternity leave for unskilled workers.

The law, when fully implemented, will significantly boost incomes for the country's precarious workers, among them domestic workers, who found their meager incomes cut off during the epidemic due to layoffs or stigma, or because they had to leave work to care for sick family members. The new per-day minimum wage of \$3.50 is more than five times the \$15 per month salary earned by the lowest-paid domestic workers in Liberia. The law reflects input from Liberian unions, who framed their response to the bill based on analysis of it by the Solidarity Center, which outlined alternative, pro-worker language.

In **Colombia**, agriculture union and Solidarity Center ally SINTRAINAGRO reached an agreement with a major sugar plantation to formalize 600 subcontracted cane-cutting jobs following a difficult, five-year campaign to reduce informal jobs. The union won direct, permanent contracts for workers at the Risaralda mill in the Cauca Valley following a strike in March that resulted in violent attacks on workers, resulting in dozens of injured strikers, some critically. Prior to this agreement, cane cutters—even after many years of work—were employed on limited fixed-term contracts, depressing wages.

And in November 2014, after more than two years of fighting a host of rights abuses, workers at a major palm oil plantation in Colombia successfully formalized their jobs, ending fraudulent subcontracting and reinstating workers illegally suspended for organizing, among other gains.



**WORKER RIGHTS ARE FRAMED BY A NETWORK OF LAWS**—constitutional rights, such as freedom of association and expression, national labor legislation and regulations, international labor standards and contract law. The legal framework determines the content of rights and how people can exercise them. While in theory, the law is a great equalizer, it is often exclusionary both on its face and in its application, and serves to perpetuate and legitimate inequality.

Around the world, Solidarity Center rule-of-law programs help workers and their unions navigate the legal system and challenge laws and regulations that discriminate or harm workers. Our legal-aid and advocacy programs help resolve abuses such as wage theft, support workers injured on the job and provide legal rights training for migrant and other workers. We file test cases to challenge laws that do not meet constitutional standards. And we connect workers and their unions

with their country's labor and human rights lawyers in support of initiatives to benefit all workers.

For example, the Kiev-based Labor Initiative in **Ukraine**, established in 2013, averaged eight legal consultations and referrals per day in 2014–15. A project of Ukrainian trade unions and the Solidarity Center, the Labor Initiative provides a venue for union and non-union workers to seek redress for work-related disabilities, illegal firings, wage theft or other abuses. A network of labor attorneys both supports efforts to right individual wrongs as well as takes on broad issues that negatively affect workers, including corruption.

The **Georgian** Trade Union Confederation, which has a full-time lawyer supported by the Solidarity Center, began a critical review of existing labor legislation in order to draft new amendments to the Labor Code and other labor laws that cover workers. These efforts focused

on: loopholes in the Labor Code that allow short-term contracts to be used by employers to obstruct employees from forming unions, restrictions on the right to strike, discrimination against workers based on gender, unfair grounds for termination and unsafe and unhealthy working conditions. This long-term work is aimed at implementing reforms to and effectively enforcing Georgian labor laws.

The Solidarity Center provided legal advice and representation support to **Cambodian** workers and unions from all major economic sectors, including garments, hotels and tourism, and construction, seeking justice via the Arbitration Council and courts. We focused on defending leaders of garment unions against criminal and civil cases resulting from a strike over the minimum wage, and assisted partners in preparing for an unprecedented class action arbitration case on the abuse of temporary employment contracts in the garment sector.

Kohinoor, a survivor of the Bangladesh Rana Plaza garment factory collapse of June 2013, says she does not have the strength or courage to work in a factory again. Today the single mother is a domestic worker for three households, trying to make ends meet.  
Photo: Solidarity Center/Balmi Chisim



**WOMEN MAKE SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS** to the wealth of their countries and the well-being of their family, yet they continue to face discrimination, exploitation and violence. They disproportionately work in precarious, low-income and informal-economy jobs, which offer little security and few, if any, benefits. Women also are the majority in occupations where workers are more likely to be exposed to violence, such as domestic work and health care, the garment and textile industries, and agriculture.

The Solidarity Center empowers women workers to confront and challenge global systems that entrench discrimination in the workplace. Through our programs, women are joining and leading unions, advocating for themselves and their families, and standing up for the rights of all workers worldwide. We provide training and foster the leadership skills needed to give women a voice in their unions, in their workplaces and in the global economy.

In **Bangladesh's** female-dominated garment sector, women workers have taken on greater leadership roles in their workplaces and unions, with Solidarity Center support. We conducted 24 education sessions on women's leadership development and network building for nearly 350 women workers from 180 ready-made garment and export-processing zone factories. In addition, some 340 workers participated in a dozen gender-equality trainings conducted in association with the Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies.

In the period covered by this report, 152 Bangladesh garment unions applied for official registration. Many of them were organized by dynamic young women who found new power and confidence by networking with their peers and with knowledge gained through Solidarity Center trainings.

In Latin America in 2015, we expanded on the success of the Gender and Women's Empowerment for Action

(*Género y el Empoderamiento de las Mujeres, GEMA*) in **Mexico** to begin a new network in **Peru**. We conducted two exchanges for women mineworkers, in conjunction with our ally *Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s* (Border Committee for Workers, CFO), bringing Mexican activists to Peru to exchange ideas and vice versa, to build a network among women mineworkers and focus on issues unique to their minority status in the industry.

The Solidarity Center is expanding programs around the world to help prevent gender-based violence at work. Our efforts include expert research on its incidence and scope, and on legal remedies and frameworks to address the issue. Other efforts include local and international advocacy; coalition building with feminist and other social movements; and educational workshops with workers, both women and men, to raise awareness and develop mechanisms to fight gender-based violence at work.

Khadeja Othman is a kindergarten teacher in Ramallah and a member of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions kindergarten teachers' union, formed in 2011 to help early-child educators improve their wages. Photo: Alaa Salih



**OF THE ESTIMATED 247 MILLION MIGRANTS** in the world, the vast majority migrate for work. Migrant workers are domestic workers, construction and agricultural workers, factory and service workers, teachers and professionals. They travel great distances to seek decent work, something lacking in their home communities, and for the same reasons most people find jobs: to support their families and build a better life. Often they find abusive working conditions, broken contracts, unpaid wages and even violence.

The Solidarity Center joins with migrant workers, trade unions, governments and civil society coalitions around the globe to create community- and workplace-based safe migration and counter-trafficking strategies that emphasize prevention, protection, access to justice and building worker voice. We support training for workers about to migrate and help connect them to support systems when they arrive; promote union-run legal aid, counseling and information

centers, and advocate for greater regulation of labor recruitment processes and the elimination of recruitment fees; and work with partners and in coalitions to advocate for legislation to stop human trafficking and forced labor.

A new migrant crisis erupted in Southeast Asia in 2014–15, bringing to the fore longstanding issues of debt bondage, trafficking and mistreatment of workers striving to earn a decent living in the region. The **Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC)** and the **General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT)**, both Solidarity Center allies, documented hundreds of cases of employer abuse of migrant workers in Malaysia, some of which met the definition of forced labor. Many of these workers—from **India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, China** and elsewhere—said their employer had not paid them, or had given them wages far below what they had been promised before leaving their home countries. A number were not compensated for work-related injuries.

More alarming, a significant number of the migrant workers said they had been physically abused by their employer, forced to live in unsanitary conditions or even virtually held hostage by their employer, who in nearly all cases, confiscated their passports, rendering them unable to flee deplorable conditions and vulnerable to human trafficking. The MTUC and GEFONT worked to resolve cases, recovering back pay or facilitating workers' return home.

In **Moldova**, the Solidarity Center, along with the International Union of Food Workers, supported the Information Center for Migrant Workers and its website. The center offers resource materials and counseling to workers planning to migrate for work, and investigates reports of abuse by migrant worker recruitment agencies, several of which have been exposed for trafficking in their operations. By September 2014, the center had provided legal help to more than 800 migrant workers and their families.

In Burma, Win Nay Aung Thant, who migrated to Yangon for work in the garment industry, says opportunities for women in the sector are limited. "We can't learn new skills. Our earnings are (only) enough for our survival and our family's survival." Photo: Solidarity Center/Jeanne Hallacy

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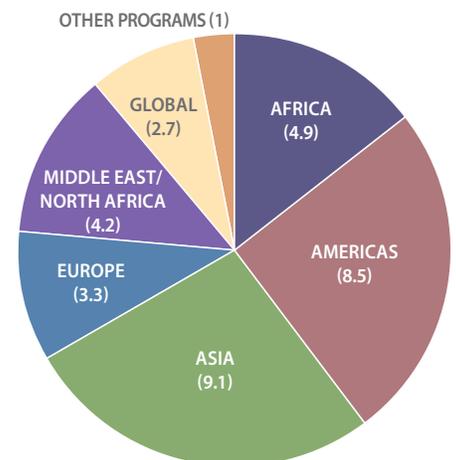
**Solidarity Center**

**YEARS ENDED DECEMBER 31, 2014 AND 2013**

SUPPORT AND REVENUE	2014	2013
Federal awards	\$31,471,181	\$32,140,740
In-kind contributions for federal awards	\$1,110,885	\$1,233,113
Other contributions (AFL-CIO, foundations and affiliates)	\$572,932	\$678,140
Other revenues	\$79,494	\$268,825
<b>Total support and revenue</b>	<b>\$33,234,492</b>	<b>\$34,320,818</b>

**FY 2014 REGIONAL SPENDING**

(\$ in millions)



In 2014–15, the Solidarity Center and its partners produced four new studies under a multiyear research project focused on vulnerable workers and the informal economy, migration, gender and rule of law. The reports were funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development.

**Labor Migration and Inclusive Growth: Toward Creating Employment in Origin Communities** (2015)

**Roles for Workers and Unions in Regulating Labor Recruitment in Mexico** (2015)

**International Labor Migration: Re-Regulating the Private Power of Labor Brokers** (2015)

**Irreconcilable Differences? Pursuing the Capabilities Approach within the Global Governance of Migration** (2014)

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## Other Publications

**Building a Strategy for Workers' Rights and Inclusive Growth—A New Vision for the African Growth and Opportunity Act** (AFL-CIO and Solidarity Center)



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