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 2015 through June 2016, the Solidarity Center helped empower more than 220,000 working people, the majority of them women, in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa.

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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Design: Deepika Mehta
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ON THE COVER: Cristo Humberto Vergel collects African palm fruit on a plantation in Minas, Colombia, that produces and exports palm oil. Union members on the plantation are represented by Solidarity Center ally Sintrainagro-Minas. Recently the union was able to organize subcontracted workers into its bargaining unit, significantly improving their wages, benefits and job conditions. Photo: Solidarity Center/Carlos Villalon (2016)
THE ECONOMIC SYSTEM that has produced powerful corporations with vast global supply chains has proven to be a boon for a few at the top, but not necessarily for the millions of working women and men upon whose shoulders the system rests. Many of the garment, textile, retail, fishery, electronics, construction, tourism, transport, agriculture and other workers who are integral, at all levels, to the global economy face eroding rights on the job, poverty wages, unsustainable work arrangements and a weakening of their voice. Workers everywhere should earn family-supporting wages, expect safe and healthy working environments, and benefit from social protections, like paid sick leave. However, the practice of sourcing goods and services from countries where wages are low, laws are lax and companies are not held accountable tends to deny workers their rights and dignity. Non-binding agreements and corporate self-regulation have proven woefully ineffective at addressing deplorable working conditions and persistent violations of worker rights along opaque supply chains. Corporate codes of conduct are rarely binding, monitored or enforced. Voluntary auditing programs have allowed multinationals to outsource responsibility and accountability for rampant abuses of fundamental human and worker rights at suppliers and intermediaries overseas.

Over the past year, the Solidarity Center has supported workers building alternatives to exploitive structures, systems and institutions of the global economy. They defended and promoted worker rights by learning, organizing, challenging the status quo and holding their government and multinational corporations to account.

In the last year, our 207 professional staff worked in more than 60 countries with 300-plus labor unions, pro-worker nongovernmental organizations, legal aid groups, human rights defenders, women’s associations, advocacy coalitions and others. We advocated with ministries of labor and labor inspectorates to enforce laws, prioritize job safety, and respect workers’ rights to organize. And across the globe, we supported working people—miners and market vendors, garment and domestic workers and seafood processors, farmers and auto-parts manufacturers—as they challenged a top-down economy that prioritizes global corporations and investors over working people, fighting for a system that equally values and protects their lives and livelihoods.
UNCHECKED GLOBALIZATION, where workers are commodities and the legal systems that should protect them do not, is sparking a worker rights crisis. The global network producing services and supplies has exacerbated inequality and whittled away at decent jobs. The supply-chain model, which prioritizes profit over people, may specifically deny workers the most effective tools to improve their workplaces: organizing unions and bargaining collectively.

Global brands demand low prices, pushing suppliers to squeeze wages, neglect workplace health and safety and cut other corners. The global supply chain model also incentivizes informal and other non-standard forms of employment, such as temporary, on-call and contract jobs that epitomize low-wage, insecure work.

Together with the Solidarity Center, workers, their unions and associations are forming unions and building a united voice to promote worker rights along global supply chains. With training, hands-on skills development and organizational support, we empower workers to take collective action. Through their unions, working people can voice concerns regarding unsafe workplaces or violations of human rights without fear of employer retaliation.

The Solidarity Center focuses on four major areas where global supply chains and injustice collide:

1. **Precarious and informal work**, which includes sub-contracted, temporary and part-time workers who are among the “hidden” workforce global supply chains depend upon.

2. **Access to justice**, which is essential to rectifying the supply-chain imbalance that distances worker from employer.

3. **Gender inequality**, perpetuated by discrimination and lack of decent work in global supply chains where women constitute a large share of the workforce.

4. **Labor migration and human trafficking**, including forced and bonded labor, which is found across corporate supply chains.

To empower workers in these areas:

We assist precarious and informal economy workers, such as call-center and domestic workers, in forming unions and networks to get a voice on the job. We analyze draft labor laws to ensure they represent all workers’ interests and back worker-centered legal measures that improve access to justice.

We assist union leaders in achieving gender equality in their organizations and train working women in legal, financial and personal safety measures to empower them for leading roles.

We support migrant workers in their home and destination countries so their working conditions are safe and their wages fair, while championing broader issues, like labor recruitment reform, that can remedy abuses in the supply chain.

The following pages provide a snapshot of our programs, July 2015 to June 2016.
CHALLENGING EXPLOITIVE WORKPLACE PRACTICES is most effective when workers can join together to improve their wages and working conditions without fear of losing their jobs or being penalized. Unions offer working people, especially those from marginalized groups, the best vehicle to learn about their rights and expose the hidden side of global supply chains.

Some of the most exploited workers in supply chains toil in export processing zones and agriculture, which often are exempt from labor laws and restrict workers’ rights to form unions and bargain collectively. Long working hours, forced overtime and wage theft are common.

Over the past year, the Solidarity Center assisted unions in reaching workers along global supply chains, to let them know about their rights at work and empower them with the tools to collectively improve their workplaces. In Bangladesh, for example, the world’s second-largest garment exporter and major contributor to global supply chains, workers in the ready-made garment industry formed 37 unions, representing more than 11,000 workers.

In Honduras, another key export zone economy, more than 10,000 apparel workers, mostly women, formed unions or bargained first contracts with Solidarity Center support. Some 9,000 apparel workers in Choloma, San Pedro Sula and Villanueva organized unions at three Gildan factories with the Central General de Trabajadores Honduras General Workers Central, (CGT) and its apparel federation FESITRAMAVI. And at a Fruit of the Loom factory in Villanueva, apparel workers who cut and sew T-shirts and sweatshirts, and their CGT-affiliated union SITRAMAVI, negotiated a first collective bargaining agreement covering 1,200 workers.

Years of Solidarity Center work with Honduran apparel sector unions, the government and employers also resulted in the creation of a pilot day care center for workers’ children in Choloma and the first phase of construction on 3,000 subsidized homes for apparel workers.

Workers extracting raw materials often are among the many “invisible” links in supply chains. In the Republic of Georgia, some 750 miners who went on strike in Tkibuli seeking wage increases promised in 2011, returned to work in 16 days with a new contract that included a 10 percent pay raise. With the assistance of the Metal Workers, Miners and Chemical Industry Workers’ Trade Union and the Georgian Trade Unions Confederation, both Solidarity Center partners, the workers will be paid for half of the days spent on the strike and strike leaders will face no retaliation. Their employer, the Georgian Industrial Group, also has agreed to address salary imbalances.
AN ESTIMATED 1.5 BILLION PEOPLE, or approximately 60 percent of the world’s workers, eke out a living in the informal economy. In some developing countries, informal jobs comprise 90 percent or more of available work, and most workers take these unstable jobs out of necessity, not by choice. Street vendors, home-based workers, domestic workers and day laborers join subcontracted, temporary and part-time workers who subsist on the fringes of the formal economy. These jobs typically pay low wages, perpetuate worker and human rights violations, provide few social benefits and offer little access to union representation. For most informal-economy workers, survival trumps active engagement in society’s daily undertakings.

Across all regions, Solidarity Center and our union partners reached out to workers who have traditionally been disenfranchised. Our efforts facilitated the founding of new unions representing migrant, domestic, agricultural and informal workers; extended legal support and services to marginalized groups and rank-and-file workers seeking justice; and advocated for laws that expand rights and criminalize discrimination.

The supply chain model incentivizes work arrangements that offer no formal employment contract. But 5,000 port workers working on contract without job security in Colombia, supported by the Solidarity Center through their long campaign, challenged the low-road status quo and reached a breakthrough agreement to begin formalizing their employment.

In Morocco, some 13,700 workers won collective bargaining rights at 11 call centers across the country. This major victory culminates a three-year effort by the Union Marocaine du Travail (Moroccan Labor Union, UMT) and Solidarity Center to help call center workers form a union. The UMT also won the right to represent all the country’s call center workers at the national level with employers and the government—a “tripartite social dialogue” process that addresses benefits and minimum wages, among other issues. In these national negotiations, the union will bargain on behalf of Morocco’s approximately 100,000 call center workers.

Women, migrant workers and the young are disproportionately represented in the informal economy, and often are the most exploited. Their situation is exacerbated because they may be barred from joining unions, which could offer support through collective bargaining on wages and working conditions, or because unions have not been able to reach them due to the isolated and changeable nature of their job. Domestic workers are especially voiceless. With support from the Solidarity Center, workers in Mexico voted to form the country’s first domestic workers’ union, SINACTTRAHO. The union’s formation culminated a 15-year struggle for rights on the job by the Center for Support and Training of Domestic Workers (CACEH), which has only begun to educate Mexico’s domestic workers about their rights.
LACK OF LEGAL PROTECTIONS

for workers and accountability for corporations with complicated supply chains can perpetuate exploitive workplaces, dangerous working conditions, denial of democratic rights and entrenched discrimination.

Over the past year, the Solidarity Center has helped open avenues of justice for working people by assisting partners who were drafting worker-friendly legislation; pursuing enforcement of existing laws that protect working people; and taking measures to ensure uncompensated workers receive redress. The involvement of often-marginalized people whose voices are rarely heard, especially women and informal-economy workers, empowers them to take part in all aspects of civil society.

In a major victory, Iraq signed new labor legislation in October that incorporates the input of workers and is the first law in Iraq to address sexual harassment in the workplace. The Solidarity Center supported Iraqi trade unions as they drafted and advocated for a more fair labor code. The new law covers all workers not protected by the civil-service law, addresses discrimination on the job and aims for gender equality, specifically regarding wages, hiring and working conditions. Women union members actively participated throughout the process.

Domestic workers and other informal-economy workers in Liberia now are covered by a law that sets minimum wages and provides first-ever protection against non-discrimination. The Decent Work Bill, effective March 1, 2016, establishes a daily minimum wage for skilled and unskilled workers, the first increase in the country’s minimum wage in more than two decades. The Solidarity Center assisted the Liberian Labor Congress with legal analysis on draft versions and provided advocacy support. Until the bill’s passage, only formal-economy workers could form unions and bargain collectively.

In Thailand, the Supreme Administrative Court ruled that all employees, including migrant workers, are covered by the Workmen’s Compensation Fund. The decision followed three years of public advocacy by Solidarity Center-trained partner organizations including the State Enterprise Workers Relations Confederation, the Human Rights and Development Foundation and the Migrant Worker Rights Network.

A first-of-its-kind worker rights center in Ukraine provided legal consultations to more than 850 union and non-union members on wage theft, illegal firings and other workplace issues. The Labor Initiative, a project of Ukrainian trade unions and the Solidarity Center, averages between eight and nine legal consultations and referrals per day.
WOMEN COMPRISDE A LARGE SHARE of the workforce in global supply chains and are disproportionately represented in low-wage jobs at the lower tiers of industries such as garments and electronics. Globally, more women than men work in agriculture, and women workers tend to be the majority in special economic zones, where rights are often curtailed and wages limited to attract major brands. Too often, they face discrimination, sexual harassment and other forms of workplace violence. They may be unaware of or unable to access social protection measures or justice under the law, and their career opportunities are limited.

The Solidarity Center supported women workers as they strove for leadership roles in their unions and a more active voice in their communities, through workshops, hands-on trainings and involvement in campaigns for rights on the job.

In Pakistan—where some 35 percent of 214 female journalists surveyed said they had experienced workplace-related intimidation, threats or abuse—dozens of journalists and media professionals learned how to prevent and address gender-based violence, at the Solidarity Center-sponsored Gender Equity and Physical Safety trainings. The series of workshops, launched late last year with the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), the All Pakistan Newspaper Employees Confederation (APNEC) and other media professionals, delves into gender equality issues on the job in an effort to outline strategies for redressing inequality.

Women mine workers in Mexico who took part in the Mineras de Acero (Women Miners of Steel) leadership and gender equality training are now building a network of women leaders throughout their national union, the National Union of Mine, Metal, Steel and Allied Workers of the Mexican Republic (known as Los Mineros). The program was jointly developed by the Solidarity Center, United Steelworkers (USW), Comité Fronterizo de Obrer@s (Border Committee of Workers, CFO) and Los Mineros, and is actively raising the visibility of the work and activism of women members. During the most recent collective bargaining training, union members looked at family-friendly contract language and strategies for promoting gender equality and ensuring that women’s key issues get on the list of bargaining priorities—and stay there.

In the Bangladesh garment industry, the Solidarity Center integrated women’s empowerment in its activities and involved a majority of women in workshops on labor law and worker rights, strategic planning, financial management and collective bargaining. More than 60 percent of garment unions in Bangladesh are now led by women.
Migrant workers labor throughout global supply chains and often experience harassment, discrimination and abuse with no recourse to legal protection. They are targets of predatory labor traffickers, who lend money at usurious rates, make false promises about jobs and working conditions, and sometimes coerce workers through violence. Migrant workers in the supply chain pipeline are often trapped in forced labor, a system of “modern slavery” that generates $150 billion in annual profits globally.

Mainstreaming migrant workers’ rights is key to promoting the rights of all workers. The Solidarity Center in August brought together some 240 migrant worker activists from around the world to strategize and form networks to address migrant worker exploitation at the “Labor Migration: Who Benefits?” a Solidarity Center global conference on worker rights and shared prosperity in Indonesia. Concrete results were immediate: Participants developed draft position points for the 2015 Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), which the Council of Global Unions GFMD Briefing Paper later incorporated.

In Jordan, the Solidarity Center assisted domestic workers in forming a first-of-its-kind Domestic Workers Network that now includes about 350 migrant workers from Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. The project began early in 2014, when the Solidarity Center approached leaders in migrant worker communities to discuss ways to protect vulnerable workers and combat trafficking.

The Solidarity Center, Labor Research Center and mining, garment, transport and construction unions in Kyrgyzstan launched a campaign to inform Kyrgyz workers about their rights when they migrate to Russia for jobs. Since November, more than 1,043 workers have been reached. At the same time, the Solidarity Center worked with the garment workers union as it helped women move from precarious work and found ways for families of migrant workers to improve household earnings. The union supported 76 workers as they formed six local unions, and it held master classes on artisan scarf weaving so that migrants’ families had alternative sources of income.

In South Africa, after some 250 Zimbabwean migrant vegetable farm workers, who toiled seven days a week for half the legal minimum wage, asked their employer for a 59-cent-per-day pay increase, they were physically attacked and some of their homes set on fire. Unable to seek other jobs because the farm owner had confiscated their work papers, the workers fled to a refugee camp, where they arrived near starvation. Along with the Food and Allied Workers Union and the Migrant Workers’ Union of South Africa, the Solidarity Center enabled the workers to be represented in court, offered material aid, generated public attention for their plight and raised awareness of migrant workers’ often brutal working conditions across South Africa. Workers who went to court were reinstated to their jobs in May 2016.
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Solidarity Center

YEARS ENDED DECEMBER 31, 2014 AND 2015

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FY 2015 REGIONAL SPENDING ($ in millions)

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- **AFRICA** (4.3)
- **AMERICAS** (7.6)
- **ASIA** (9.4)
- **EUROPE** (3.3)
- **MIDDLE EAST/ NORTH AFRICA** (3.3)
- **OTHER PROGRAMS** (1.2)
In 2015–16, the Solidarity Center published the following reports:

**Putting Union Gender Equality Policy into Practice in South Africa: The Role of Transformational Leadership** (2015)

**Transforming Women’s Work: Policies for an Inclusive Economic Agenda**
(2016, with the AFL-CIO and Rutgers University)

**Working Without Pay: Wage Theft in Zimbabwe** (2016)

**Workers in Post-Civil War Jaffna: A Snapshot of Working Conditions, Opportunities and Inequalities in Northern Sri Lanka** (2016)