

SOLIDARITY CENTER

PROMOTING WORKER RIGHTS
WORLDWIDE



2020 ANNUAL REPORT

The Solidarity Center is the largest U.S.-based international worker rights organization helping workers attain safe and healthy workplaces, family-supporting wages, dignity on the job and greater equity at work and in their community. Allied with the AFL-CIO, the Solidarity Center assists workers across the globe as, together, they fight discrimination, exploitation and the systems that entrench poverty—to achieve shared prosperity in the global economy.

The Solidarity Center acts on the fundamental principle that working people can, by exercising their right to freedom of association and forming trade unions and democratic worker rights organizations, collectively improve their jobs and workplaces, call on their governments to uphold laws and protect human rights, and be a force for democracy, social justice and inclusive economic development.

Our Mission:

Empowering workers to raise their voices for dignity on the job, justice in their communities and greater equality in the global economy.

The Solidarity Center Education Fund is a registered charitable organization tax-exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Contributions are tax-deductible to the extent of applicable laws. A summary of activities for 2020 and financial highlights for the year ending November 30, 2020, are described in this report. For more information or to make a contribution, please contact Arina Lester, lead development officer, at alester@solidaritycenter.org.

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Design: Deepika Mehta

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ON THE COVER:

27-year-old Rabeya Begum—who attended a Solidarity Center Courtyard meeting in Jashore, Bangladesh, to learn how to migrate more safely to Saudi Arabia for domestic work—hopes to replace the income her six-member family lost to a COVID-19 shutdown of the sawmill where her husband worked. Photo: Juthika Dewry Gayatree & Sakib Pratayay



THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC laid bare endemic economic, social, health and justice inequalities, and devastated the livelihoods and well-being of hundreds of millions of people. The ensuing massive job losses, supply chain disruptions, wage theft, lockdowns, union busting, disregard for the health and safety of workers, and weakening of democracy will have long-term repercussions. At publication of this report, families are grieving the 1.6 million people who died from the disease.

The crisis has disproportionately affected low-wage workers, especially women and migrants, who predominate in the informal economy and other sectors most affected by health-related shutdowns, among them food production and service, tourism, front-line health care and the manufacturing of garments and textiles. Many informal-economy workers, who comprise half of the world's workforce and live hand-to-mouth in normal times, have been pushed deeper into poverty, which is a prerequisite for child labor and debt bondage. Compounding the situation for women workers, the pandemic threatens

to roll back gains made on gender equality and exacerbate the feminization of poverty, women's vulnerability to violence and their unequal participation and pay in the labor force.

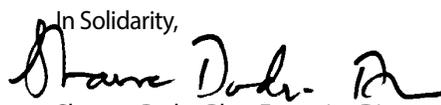
Despite the dire nature of our collective situation, there is hope. This year and against the odds, workers have redoubled their efforts to exercise their rights, pushing for health and safety measures ignored by their employers, and even winning back their jobs and, often, wages due them. They have stood up to factory owners attempting to bust unions under the pretext of pandemic layoffs. They have conducted health campaigns and distributed personal protective equipment to vulnerable workers. They have won critical legal battles. And they have adapted to new ways to communicate, organize and campaign. These advances are detailed in the following pages of this report.

Meanwhile, the Solidarity Center responded to the crisis affecting workers and partners with a sweeping reprogramming of our funding and

activities—the largest redistribution of funding in our history—adapting quickly to lend support and help unions overcome potential existential threats.

At the same time, we are coordinating within the global labor movement to build a worker-centered, democracy-anchored future of work, where: the vulnerable are not abandoned to weather economic shocks and exploitation on their own; workers can freely form unions and shape workplaces that are fair, democratic and humane; and the long exclusion of the most marginalized workers, including women, is history.

The effects of this pandemic year will ripple beyond 2020. The challenges to rebuild jobs, lives and economies are enormous. Yet this only reinforces our will to stand with our 900-plus partners to rebuild a world where democracy, dignity and justice on the job are the norm.

In Solidarity,

 Shawna Bader-Blau, Executive Director

Market workers and customers fight COVID-19 in Nairobi at hand-washing stations provided by Kenya's trade unions with Solidarity Center support. Photo: Tazama



THE PANDEMIC SET OFF a perfect storm of hardship for workers. While lockdowns and curfews kept people from their workplaces and paychecks, many workers were deemed essential—though often denied protective gear and safe working environments. At the same time, COVID-19 provided authoritarians and many corporations with the pretext to crack down on dissent and union demands, and quash worker efforts to organize for healthier worksites, receive their due wages, remain on the payroll and survive the health crisis.

Throughout the pandemic, the Solidarity Center continued to support workers and their unions as they sought to secure freedom of association and enforceable worker rights, while maintaining work to reach groups traditionally excluded from labor law, among them domestic, migrant and

informal-economy workers, of whom a disproportionate number are women. It also adapted to the crisis by devising innovative ways to support workers and their unions as they faced down the pandemic and its aftermath.

SINTRAHO (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadoras del Hogar, the national domestic workers union in **Honduras**) saw its membership increase by more than 100 members by March. The union, which formed in October 2019, is the first national union to specifically mention the rights of LGBT+ workers in its statutes. It also created an executive-level secretary of gender and diversity to recognize and value its members' diverse backgrounds.

In **Tunisia**, the UGTT (Tunisian general labor federation), Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), and the

government struck a landmark agreement to ensure the jobs and wages of some 1.5 million workers across the country's private sector during COVID-19-related closures. The pact covered workers in agricultural and maritime fishing; construction; metal, garment and shoe manufacturing; transportation; hotels and more.

And in March, a **Myanmar** garment factory, blaming the pandemic, withheld wages from and fired all union members—but kept non-union workers on the payroll. The union set up a protest camp outside the gates and reached out to European brands sourcing from there. By June, the union had succeeded in getting back pay and struck an agreement for the immediate reinstatement of some workers and the guaranteed recall of hundreds of fired union members once the health crisis eases.

Solidarity Center ally, the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGUF), joined the 2020 global campaign to protect garment and textile workers' rights. Photo: BIGUF



SYSTEMIC CULTURAL NORMS AND POWER STRUCTURES disadvantage one group of people to the benefit of another, with people and groups targeted by gender identity and norms, class, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, religion, disability or other group identities. Working people often belong to more than one of these groups. In partnership with a broad array of worker rights advocates around the world, the Solidarity Center provides programs to help workers understand their vulnerabilities and rights, organize unions to mitigate structural oppression, learn to bargain for improved conditions and wages, and build solidarity across economic sectors and countries.

The coronavirus pandemic increased the violence women face at work and at home. But a new treaty (Convention 190) approved by the International Labor

Organization (ILO) last year created the fundamental right to be free from violence and harassment at work by addressing the root causes of gender-based violence and harassment, which often also involve race, ethnicity and gender identity.

A global coalition of worker rights organizations, led by women union activists and including the Solidarity Center, pushed for the new convention and, despite the pandemic, carried on with a new campaign in 2020 for ratification in their countries. Solidarity Center partners from around the world—from **Bahrain to South Africa**, and from **Mexico to Morocco**—went online, spoke at webinars, recorded videos and raised their voice on social media to press their cause. In **Nigeria**, women leaders in the Nigerian Labor Congress highlighted how Convention 190 addresses the

pandemic-increased violence and harassment experienced by nurses, the majority of whom are women. In **Georgia** during curfew, the Georgia Trade Union Confederation (GTUC) successfully urged the government to require employers to provide workers free transport from work.

To promote the fair employment of women, workers with disabilities and those migrating from **Kyrgyzstan** to earn a living, as well as youth civic engagement, the Solidarity Center gathered dozens of young people in mid-September for the second annual School of Young Leaders to discuss protections under the country's labor code, with a special focus on disability rights. Local disability-rights activist and blogger Askar Turdugulov encouraged attendees to pursue their goals and challenge externally imposed limitations.

The Nigeria Labor Congress celebrates International Women's Day 2020 by calling on their government to ratify ILO Convention 190 on harassment and violence. Photo: Nkechi Odinukwe



AROUND THE WORLD IN 2020, workers and unions saw their usual struggles for fair wages, health and safety on the job, discrimination, corruption, anti-democratic legislation and unemployment compounded by the global pandemic. They stepped up to meet the new challenges, launching campaigns to educate working people on their rights, supporting those laid off or furloughed, providing legal assistance, fighting plant closures and wage theft, and mobilizing to provide protective equipment to front-line workers where the government or employers failed.

Assaults on worker rights are at the heart of attacks on democracy worldwide. Rampant rights abuses in supply chains, uncertainty about future jobs in a low-wage and post-pandemic world, the erosion of human rights and widening inequality are global challenges. The Solidarity Center supports allies, workers and

activists trying to create respect and have a say at their workplace, both on the ground and through grassroots internationalism—connecting workers and unions across borders and movements, such as the campaign to establish and ratify the ILO convention on workplace violence and harassment.

Civil society activists and the five major trade unions of **Ukraine** that represent 7 million members resisted proposed changes to the country’s labor law, which, in violation of international labor law, would allow employers to fire workers for any reason and drastically reduce overtime pay. Meanwhile, local Ukrainian unions used their reserve funds or raised money to purchase personal protective equipment for medical workers and delivered food baskets to the elderly.

The Central Organization of Trade Unions-**Kenya** (COTU-K) distributed

protective gear, such as masks, gloves, soap and hand sanitizer to workers before shops were closed at an outdoor market, and lobbied the Kenyan government for support for informal workers, who comprise some 80 percent of the workforce.

Members of the **Maldives** Health Professionals Union (MHPU), after working their formal shifts, volunteered at the National Emergency Operation Center, which addresses issues related to COVID-19. The Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of **Serbia** (CATUS) successfully stood up against efforts by the government to dock by 65 percent the pay of health care workers in Niš who were exposed to coronavirus and required to quarantine. And in **Tunisia**, 150 women garment workers self-quarantined in their factory to manufacture desperately needed protective masks, churning out 50,000 a day as the COVID-19 crisis broke out.

Thousands of workers in the Honduran garment sector negotiated collective bargaining pacts that boosted wages and provided new benefits. Photo: Stephen Wishart



THE TREND TOWARD DENIAL OF WORKER RIGHTS took a turn for the worse in 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic provided new opportunities for employers and governments to restrict freedom of association and the rights to bargain and earn a decent living, as well as to facilitate mass layoffs, wage theft and union busting. According to the International Trade Union Confederation, 123 countries violated the right to strike, 115 countries violated the right to bargain collectively, and 106 countries impeded the registration of unions. Meanwhile, workers in 51 countries faced violence—and workers were murdered, including at union protests, in nine countries.

The lives of hundreds of millions of people were made more precarious as the pandemic took hold. In early 2020, according to the ILO, some 266 million people—agriculture and domestic workers in particular—were denied a minimum wage due to restrictive laws

and non-compliance with legal statutes. Informal workers, who comprise the majority of the world’s workers and who usually have no access to social safety nets, saw their jobs evaporate. And disruptions in global supply chains exposed the abuses of globalization, including the imbalance of power between workers and multinational corporations, and the fragility of the social contract.

The Solidarity Center supports partners’ efforts to create laws that respect worker rights, rectify inequality, correct broad disenfranchisement and hold corporations and governments accountable.

The Solidarity Center’s International Lawyers Assisting Workers (ILAW) network co-wrote—with the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights and Worker Rights Consortium—the policy paper, “Farce Majeure: How Global Apparel Brands

Are Using the COVID-19 Pandemic to Stiff Suppliers and Abandon Workers.” The report highlighted inequities in the global supply chain and called for accountability mechanisms for workers to combat brands’ irresponsible behavior, such as refusing to pay for orders produced or shipped.

More than 2,000 garment workers in **Bangladesh** achieved a new collective bargaining agreement in June that included a 10 percent pay increase—double the amount required by law—and creation of a committee to prevent violence and harassment on the job.

Thousands of casino workers at NagaWorld hotel and casino complex in **Cambodia** won a wage increase in January that boosted pay between 18 percent and 30 percent, and secured the reinstatement of the union’s president, who was suspended from her job in September for defending union rights and the call for higher pay.



AN INCLUSIVE CIVIL SOCIETY is the antidote to rising authoritarianism, corporate impunity and the denial of human rights that erode democracy around the world. Workers who have a say at the workplace—including to demand a safer working environment—are able to guard their rights and have impact on how their government enacts economic and social policy. The Solidarity Center works to support unions at the national level, large social movements that address common struggles and campaigns for economic and social justice.

With other rights organizations, the Solidarity Center co-sponsored two discussions with Clément Voule, UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, focusing on two major reports he authored. The first found that worker rights and the freedom to form unions and freely assemble are key to achieving human rights because

without those rights, workers have little leverage to change conditions that entrench poverty, fuel inequality and limit democracy. The second, celebrating women in civil society and activism, found that women activists and their organizations are drivers of positive change worldwide.

The Cotton Campaign, of which the Solidarity Center is a member, documented **Uzbekistan's** progress toward ending—but not eradicating—state-sponsored forced labor in cotton production. The group found that reform of civil society freedoms has lagged far behind other reforms, inhibiting the freedom of citizens to form civic associations and unions empowered to fight forced labor in Uzbekistan.

Four garment-sector unions in **Haiti**, all Solidarity Center partners, issued a joint proposal calling on the government and employers to respect ILO protocols

on COVID-19, and to follow Haitian labor code regarding payment of wages during health shutdowns of workplaces. They also advocated for support to informal workers and more funding for the COVID-19 response.

And around the world, workers and their labor unions joined in solidarity with Black Lives Matter protesters in the **United States**, demonstrating support for peaceful marches and decrying racism, police brutality and inequality—in the United States and in their own countries. Across **Brazil**, for example, unions organized rallies and panel discussions, and sent letters in support of the U.S. protest movement. The CUT (Central Union of Workers in Brazil), which also participated in #BlackoutTuesday, cited centuries of oppression, inequality and social injustice. Partners from **Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Nigeria, Thailand, South Africa** and **Tunisia** also organized solidarity actions.

Around the world, including in Bangkok, Thailand, workers and their labor unions rallied in solidarity with Black Lives Matter protesters in the U.S., decrying racism, police brutality and inequality. Photo: Solidarity Center

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When the Job Hurts: Workplace Injuries and Disease Among South Africa's Domestic Workers (January 2020)

Bangladesh: The Intersection of Climate Change, Migration and a Changing Economy (May 2020)

The Benefits of Collective Bargaining for Women Workers in Morocco (July 2020)

Agricultural Workers and Morocco's Economy Benefit from Collective Bargaining Agreements (July 2020)

Made for this Moment: How ILO Convention 190 Addresses Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in the World of Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond (November 2020)

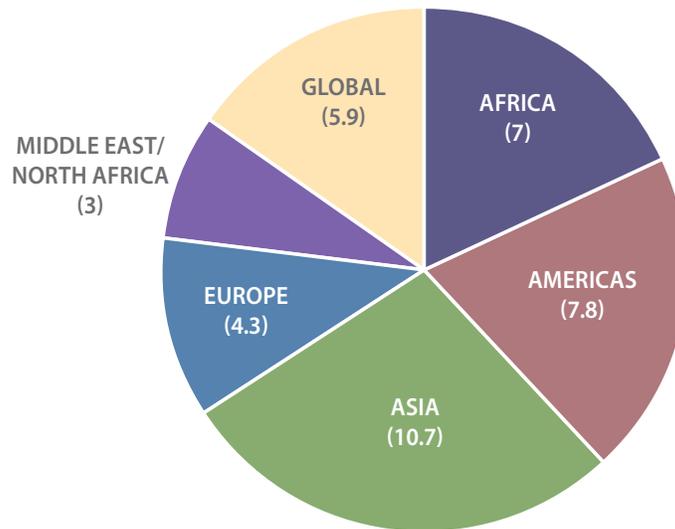
Solidarity Center

YEARS ENDED DECEMBER 31, 2019, AND 2018

SUPPORT AND REVENUE	2019	2018
Federal awards	\$36,382,487	\$31,870,749
In-kind contributions for federal awards	1,330,533	1,191,037
Other contributions (unions, foundations, institutional donors, individuals)	1,306,477	1,387,153
Other revenues	618,358	(22,582)
Total support and revenue	\$39,637,855	\$34,426,357

FY 2019 REGIONAL SPENDING

(\$ in millions)





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