
Liberia: Painful rubber – the hard day's life of Firestone tappers

In 1926, Firestone Tire & Rubber Company signed a 99-year contract with the government to lease one million acres [approximately 405,000 hectares] of land for the establishment of a rubber plantation. The total concession area of Firestone represents 4% of Liberia's territory and nearly 10% of its arable land.

Firestone currently occupies some 240 square miles [approx. 62,000 ha] of the concession with about 7,000 employees, most of whom are rubber tappers. There are also approximately another 4,000 laborers who work for the company with no legal status hence with no benefits from the company, such as health and education for their families. Also, an additional some 4,000 people work on the plantation for the tappers and therefore have no legal status with the company.

Tappers work approximately 12 hours a day without safety equipment (gloves, goggles, rain boots, rain coats and other safety gears) unless they are bought by the tappers themselves. They have to carry all the latex they produce on their bare shoulders on a stick with two buckets weighing 70 lbs [31.7 kg] each.

This primitive means of transporting latex has not changed since 1926. With 140 lbs [63.4 kgs] yoked across their shoulders, laborers walk to weigh stations that may be up to three miles [4.8 kms] away from the grove of rubber trees. Firestone provides no alternative means of transportation. Rubber tappers doing this backbreaking work risk injury and the development of deformities the longer they are employed.

A tapper wakes at 4 o'clock every morning to get prepared for tapping up to perhaps 750 trees daily on a normal tapping day. However, only half of the daily rate of \$3.38 is paid if a tapper fails to complete the full daily quota. Faced with these onerous quotas, tappers have little choice but to allow family members to assist them in completing their quota or hire a sub-contractor.

The tappers work every day of the year including national holidays, with the exception of Christmas day, producing high volumes of latex. An average tapper's monthly production can be valued at US/\$2,296.80 on the ground in Liberia and US/\$3,915.00 at world market prices while the tapper is paid US/\$125. Out of the monthly wage of US/\$125, he may have to pay one or two sub-contractors who helped him tap.

"These people are treating us like slaves because we have nobody to talk for us and we have nowhere to find a new job. You produce more than 5 tons of latex for the company a month and they don't even pay you the price of one ton", said bitterly a tapper.

Besides latex production, tappers are required to apply chemicals (both fungicide and stimulants) on the trees for protection and to increase production. In addition they are required to under-brush the trees they tap. This workload means that many of the tappers have to hire sub-contractors to get all the work done. In the instance where the tapper's family is large and can not afford the deduction of their rice supply or salary for a sub-contractor, the wife is obliged to abandon her children to assist

her husband in completing his quota.

Huge disparities exist between laborers and other staff of Firestone. For example, a superintendent who monitors the tappers makes more than US\$700 a month, according to his educational level, resides in a well-furnished bungalow, and enjoys other benefits including excess monthly production bonuses.

In contrast, tappers and other laborers live in dilapidated houses. Most of these houses, that were built in the 1930s when Firestone started operations, are one room, lack electricity, pipe-borne water, indoor latrines, indoor kitchens, living rooms and ceilings. Roofed haphazardly with asbestos, many of these structures now leak profusely.

“When it is raining we have to put all of our eating bowls around in the rooms or else the whole place will be filled with water”, denounced a labourer.

Clean water is a luxury on the plantation. In more than 20 camps visited unofficially by a SAMFU's investigation team between November 2006 to date, an average of two hand pumps were seen in the camps with the average population of approximately 500 persons. These hand pumps sit on wells that are dug by hand and therefore do not have water during much of the dry season. This situation leaves tappers and other unskilled employees and their families with no option but to drink from shallow wells and creeks. Meanwhile, staff members have access to pipe borne water and specially treated drinking water located inside the processing plant.

The company tried to control worker's organization through the Firestone Agriculture Workers Union of Liberia (FAWUL), until extensive pressure from plantation workers and Liberia's two major labor federations led to FAWUL's suspension by the government. Elections were called to usher in an independent and democratic union.

At the end of April 2007, workers engaged in a strike to protest Firestone management's efforts to delay the elections. During the strike on April 27, 2007, police reportedly brutalized peaceful striking workers with batons and sticks, chased harmless workers throughout the city of Harbel – where the Firestone rubber processing plant is located-, broke into houses and beat many innocent people which resulted in dozens of injuries. Two dozen workers were injured so badly that they were forced to miss work while they underwent treatment. Subsequently, one of the injured workers died as a result of wounds suffered during the attack. In addition, tear gas was fired into Harbel's densely populated communities without regard for children, women and the elderly. It appears that many innocent workers were not only unnecessarily arrested, but unreasonably detained.

“If you have seen the people who produce the latex for the rubber products you use; the place they live, the kind of work they do, the food they eat and the amount of money they take home in salaries ... you will be conscious of who produces the rubber you use on a daily basis”.

Excerpted and adapted from: *“The Heavy Load. A Demand for Fundamental Changes at the Bridgestone/Firestone Rubber Plantation in Liberia”*, published by Save My Future Foundation, June 2008, http://www.samfu.org/do%20files/The%20Heavy%20Load_2008.pdf

