

## **War on Want response to comments on *Growing Pains* provided by Asocolflores representing the Colombia Flower Industry**

In March 2007 War on Want published a report, *Growing Pains*, highlighting the poor working conditions of workers supplying UK supermarkets with cut flowers. In response Asocolflores, the industry group representing Colombian flower exporters, wrote a detailed set of comments on the report that they circulated to representatives of the UK Government and the major UK supermarkets. The response of Asocolflores unfortunately was guilty of the very accusations it levelled against War on Want.

Contrary to assertions made by Asocolflores, our comments on Colombian flower workers were not based solely on the interviews with 30 flower workers. They also included consultation with our partner organisations in Colombia and comparison of our findings with previous studies and surveys, including results of an earlier survey of flower workers in November 2005.

The report is meant to reflect the problems of flower workers worldwide, not just in Colombia, and we do make reference to other flower exporters including Kenya, Ethiopia, Ecuador and China. The focus on Kenya and Colombia in the report is because they are both major suppliers to the UK and they are also countries where we have partner organisations that work with flower workers.

The response from Asocolflores complains that we are damaging the flower industry and that this could lead to a veto of Colombian flowers being imported to the UK. The implication is that we are effectively calling for people to boycott flowers from the Colombia, which is of course plainly untrue. We state specifically in the report that a boycott of flowers from Colombia and Kenya is not the answer and this was repeated by our spokespeople in every media interview following the release of the report. War on Want works with partners on the ground in both Colombia and Kenya that support flower workers, and we are fully aware these jobs provide vital sources of income for many families.

Asocolflores criticise our demand for regulation to enable employees of suppliers to UK companies to be able to seek redress if they suffer as a result of actions by that supplier, saying it could backfire. However, they fail to provide any evidence as to why this may happen. This point is particularly pertinent as the report demonstrates there are major flaws with the existing voluntary flower standards and codes of conduct that are failing to protect workers, particularly in terms of freedom of association and decent pay and conditions

There are some key areas of concern in the comments made by Asocolflores:

Dr Michael Parella is quoted throughout as an independent scientist who supports Asocolflores claims regarding the health effects and toxicity of chemicals used in the Colombian flower industry. What is not disclosed is that Dr Parella has received funding from Asocolflores for research on pest management through the non-profit American Flower Endowment Fund, which of course compromises his independence.

Asocolflores make very serious allegations against Cactus, who undertook research as part of this report, including accusations that they promised flower workers a cash reward for completing surveys. These accusations are completely false and without any

evidence to support them. War on Want fully supports Cactus and respects their commitment and professionalism in working with flower workers in defence of their rights for more than 10 years.

There are various allegations made in the Asocolflores comments that simply do not appear in the report or are meaningless. For example, to say that ‘...working conditions on our farms is far better than sweatshops...’ is irrelevant and is a crass attempt to downplay the poor working conditions of flower workers.

The most damning aspect of the response to the report is however the failure to address key areas of concern including the following:

- (1) **Freedom of association** – there is a total failure to address the intimidation of those flower workers who join or attempt to start independent trade unions. To refer to the fact ‘...not a single trade unionist in the flower industry has been assassinated...’ is an appalling benchmark to judge intimidation of trade unions. As the report highlights, there are many other techniques used to intimidate workers from joining unions, including using bribes and threatening them with farm closures. The figures given for union membership are not credible and are largely inflated by including employer-supported unions or ‘yellow unions’.
- (2) **Health impacts** – the response on health impacts is very weak and ignores the most commonly pervasive health problem of repetitive strain injuries, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, shoulder rotational injuries and lower back pain. There is also a clear attempt to downplay the serious health impacts from pesticides, and we could have easily quoted many other studies including from the Pesticides Literature Review and Environmental Health Perspectives journal to support our findings.
- (3) **Job security** – flower workers surveyed identified job security as one of their greatest concerns, particularly for women who fear being laid off if they become pregnant. The use of subcontracted labour or workers on temporary contracts rather than on permanent contracts is also widespread and has created a lot of anxiety among workers.
- (4) **Overtime** – while it is true to say that it is not compulsory for workers to do overtime, our research shows that in numerous cases they are obliged to and are not given any choice. If they refuse then they fear managers may target them. The impact of excessive hours causes severe stress for workers, especially during peak times, and can seriously aggravate the risk of injuries in the workplace.
- (5) **Auditing and flower standards** – the existence of major flaws in the monitoring and auditing of flower standards is simply not addressed. For example, the manipulation of social audits by farms managers to ensure they get accredited, including the coaching of workers, is ignored. In terms of addressing flaws in the audit process the response is simply irrational. For example, in response to the use of random audits to catch out farms that may be breaching the flower standards, it is compared to ‘breaking and entering’.

War on Want stands by the substance of this report about the working conditions in the cut flower industry in developing countries such as Colombia and Kenya, and also by the recommendations included therein.