

## INTRODUCTION

### On the Road



Iris Munguía (COSIBAH), Gloria García (SITRATERCO), Zola Lagos (COSIBAH), and Domitila Hernández (SITRAESISA), near Omoa, Cortés, Honduras, returning from COSIBAH workshops in Guatemala, November 2002 (left to right).

Of the four, Domitila Hernández, secretary of women for the Dole banana workers' union in the Aguán Valley, Honduras, came the farthest the morning of November 6, 2002. It took her four hours on a bus that left at dawn just to get to La Lima, the old United Fruit company town near San Pedro Sula in the north. Domitila was also the quietest of the four. In her early fifties, roundly built with small laughing eyes, she occupied herself on the trip wearing a pink and white plastic cover for a kleenex box. Gloria García—a bit more serious, maybe ten years younger, with tiny black braids pulled up into a knot and wearing, as usual, the snazziest outfit—got to La Lima in half an hour from her house in El Progreso. As secretary of organization for the biggest, oldest banana union in Honduras, the *Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Tela Railroad Company* (the Union of Workers of the Tela Railroad Company; SITRATERCO), she was the highest-ranking woman in the Honduran banana unions.

Iris Munguía, the political and personal force at the center of the whole story, was waiting in La Lima with the truck. In her mid forties, self-possessed, and an expert at the art of tight jeans, she had her own black braids tied back with a scarf shed gotten in Europe from the global campaign against the World Bank. Since 1995 Iris had served as secretary of women for both the *Coordinadora de Sindicatos Bananeros y Agroindustriales de Honduras* (Coalition of Honduran Banana and Agroindustrial Unions; COSIBAH) and the *Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Sindicatos Bananeros* (Coalition of Latin American Banana Unions; COLSIBA). As it began to

rain she wrapped the women's luggage, their packets of notebooks, pencils, and felt pens, and the video projector into big black plastic garbage bags and heaved them into the back of the little two-seated Nissan pickup truck.<sup>1</sup>

Once on the highway the three *mujeres bananeras*—banana women, as they call themselves—wove through San Pedro Sula and out of town. Passing Choloma, where the maquiladoras hulk like concentration camps—row upon row of concrete warehouses with garment and electronics factories hidden behind barbed wire—they pulled over at a bus shelter to pick up COSIBAH staffer Zoila Lagos, at fifty the jolliest, artsiest, and most politically experienced of the four. She brought the soundtrack, a cassette compiled to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Nicaraguan Revolution. After an hour or so the women turned left at Puerto Cortés, at the coast, and headed southwest toward Guatemala, bouncing along the potholed gravel road, with Zoila and Iris belting out the songs all the way. The waters of the Caribbean lapped the coast about five hundred feet away on the right; steep green mountains loomed up to the left, as the now-afternoon light shot sideways through the palm trees. Half the bridges were out but Iris just plunged the truck right through the fords without missing a beat.

The Honduran side of the border turned out to be just a few shacks, a silent man with a stamp, and two black-market money changers. The Guatemalan side was much more serious: a bar across the road, creepier officials, and farther down the highway, a second inspection, this one by rifle-carrying, adolescent Mayan boys in camouflage fatigues. It was well after dark by the time they got to Morales and found the union hall. Sella Sandoval, secretary of press, organization, and propaganda for the Del Monte banana workers' union in Guatemala, came rushing out to greet them, and they all ambled down to a café for dinner, dripping with sweat in the heat. Sella—laughing, round, and fortyish, too, in a trim black-and-white two-piece suit she'd sewn herself—flooded the visitors with a rapid-fire report of union and personal gossip, as the male union officers dropped by to say hi.<sup>2</sup>

This wasn't just any union hall they'd arrived at, or just any group of union leaders. Three years earlier, in October 1999, two hundred armed paramilitaries acting in the interests of the Del

Monte Corporation had kidnapped four of the union's male leaders and twenty more of its members, held them captive in the hall, beaten them, threatened to kill them, and forced them to go on the radio to renounce their union activities. Only when each man had signed an affidavit denouncing the union did the paramilitaries allow them to leave. They fled into hiding in Guatemala City and remained underground for over two years. After a successful international campaign denouncing Del Monte, five of those men eventually went into exile in the United States; two remain in Morales as union officers. Sella Sandoval, the only woman officer, wasn't kidnapped. But she was the one who insisted on reopening the union hall four days later, and she got her share of death threats during the next few months.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the four Honduran women's journey wasn't an armed conflict, however, but something equally revolutionary: a quiet drama of transformation in the hearts and minds of women—and men—banana workers throughout Latin America. Domitila Hernández, Gloria García, Iris Munguía, and Zoila Lagos had come to town for a two-day workshop on domestic violence with twenty-three young rank-and-file women banana workers. In a seemingly quotidian journey, they were inspiring a new understanding of the gender politics of Latin American labor.

The next morning at 8:30, in the steaming hot union hall—so hot and so humid that some of the young women carried little yellow towels over one shoulder for wiping the sweat off—Sella introduced the visitors. "We have here *compañeras de lucha* (comrades in struggle)," she began. "Here are some women you can aspire to be." Gloria García followed: "International politics are trying to divide us. We need to educate ourselves so we can confront the corporations." Zoila and Domitila, too, welcomed the participants, followed by Iris Munguía. Iris stressed the issues that women banana workers all over Latin America have in common—the hours of work, the burden of the double day. The idea, she underscored, is that we're all working together. It's not just a question of women, she said, but of gender. Men need to understand our labors, and we need to get involved in our unions. "We need to defend our organizations, and we can only do that if we know what's going on inside them." As she wrapped up her open-

ing remarks, Iris affirmed that ultimately it's about the world we want for our kids. She called on each of the young women present to become teachers, too, and carry the workshop's ideas back to their packinghouses.

Glistening in their best outfits, the young women then stood up one by one and spoke of their hopes for the workshop. "I want to learn, and then show others." "I want to learn how to defend myself from whoever tries to oppress me, whether it's my husband, my union, or my boss." Last, but not least, "I want the women from Honduras to come back five times"—although they'd just arrived.

Zolia opened the main body of the workshop with a presentation on different definitions of domestic violence, then had the women break up into small groups to discuss a set of quotations—some from the Bible, some from famous men—about women's proper place in society. Over the next two days, the women watched a video from Mexico on domestic violence, reported back on several group projects, played games, and cautiously entered into guarded discussions of domestic violence, prefaced with classic phrases like "I myself haven't had any problems, but I have a friend who..."<sup>4</sup>

That trip to Morales captures the core elements of the women's projects that have quietly flourished in the banana labor movement of Latin America since the mid 1980s. Like that road trip, the larger story of banana women's activism starts in La Lima, Honduras, in 1985 with one union, SITRATERCO, and then expands during the late 1990s to women activists from banana unions throughout Honduras. It crosses borders in the late 1990s and early 2000s, not just to Guatemala but to five other banana-exporting countries of Central and South America as well: Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Panamá. It's a story about how older, more experienced women banana workers are reaching out to young women with a message of empowerment, always with an eye to the future. Last but by no means least, it's a story of gender politics in which men are always involved. And, as the Del Monte kidnappings underscore, it's unfolding in a context of dangerous struggles with the transnational banana corporations for which they all work. Iris's scarf from Europe hints, moreover, at the powerful role of global

allies standing behind the banana women and their unions—just as the video from Mexico suggests women's resource networks within Latin America.

From one perspective the banana women's projects provide a straightforward example of transnational feminism, with complex roots in late twentieth-century Latin America. Their politics emerged, in part, out of women's struggles in the revolutionary movements of Central America in the 1970s and 80s—hence those songs from the Nicaraguan Revolution.<sup>5</sup> Many of the banana women's intellectual concepts, however, such as the distinction between sex and gender, or the idea of an *encuentro*, echo more middle-class Latin American feminisms of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>6</sup> By the 1990s and 2000s the banana women's ideas, techniques, and organizing strategies also overlapped with other poor women's social movements in Latin America such as the *Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida* (Women for Dignity and Life; DIGNAS) in El Salvador.

The banana women are distinctive from all these, though, in building women's projects within the structural form of the mixed-gender labor movement. Their transnational networks have evolved within the institutional framework of majority-male unions, at three overlapping levels: first, in individual unions; second, through national-level federations—especially COSBAH, the Honduran banana workers' federation; and third, at the regional level, through COLSIBA, the federation of Latin American banana unions. Their local unions provide long-term institutional stability dating back to the 1950s, contracts with the banana corporations protecting union activities, and literal structures in which to organize—buildings, desks, phone lines, and, if the women can get access, computers. Their broader coalitions, in turn, provide bases for banana women to obtain and control independent funding, which they have used to launch an array of projects empowering women.<sup>8</sup>

These gains have come through twenty years of painstaking struggle and comradeship with individual men in the banana unions. Today, as a result, "women's work" is considered legitimate and a central part of banana unions' activities in many countries. All along, the banana women have argued that empowering wom-

en—at every level of their organizations, from the rank and file through the very top leadership—makes for stronger unions as a whole, for a more united and powerful front in the face of the corporations. They always envision their struggle as one involving men and women together, moving forward with their full powers unleashed.

Since 1985 banana workers have thus forged a powerful politics of class *and* gender, in which women's issues and union issues are inseparable and mutually reinforcing. The young banana worker at the workshop in Morales captured it exactly when she said she wanted to defend herself against anyone who wanted to push her down, whether it was her husband, her union, or her employer.

This is also a story of international labor solidarity. In the United States, two models of international solidarity dominate our imaginations: either the ugly history of intervention by the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) in Latin American labor during the Cold War; or more inspiring recent activism in support of maquiladora workers.<sup>9</sup> Even in the latter, though, Latin American women workers are often portrayed only as powerless, unorganized victims in need of rescue from the North.<sup>10</sup> The banana women show us a different tale, of powerful, savvy organizers with strong unions that fight global corporations every day and often win. They welcome aid from Europe and the United States, such as that Nissan pickup truck paid for by Catholic charities in Ireland.<sup>11</sup> But they're diving it, and singing their own, Latin American songs.

The banana women of Latin America offer a new model that explicitly integrates gender equity as part and parcel of any effective labor internationalism. They refuse to separate the global struggle against transnational corporations from the struggle at home for women's equality and respect. Employees of some of the biggest corporate monsters in the world with household names like Dole and Chiquita, they are also well aware that other monsters, deploying domestic violence, can inhabit their own households. They inspire us to envision a new labor internationalism that places women's issues at the center of global class politics.

Before launching into the banana world, I want to make clear my own relationship to this story. I first met the banana women

when I was invited in December 2000 to help COLSIBA develop a banana union label for the US market. Since then I have worked with COLSIBA in a variety of solidarity work, mostly through the US Labor Education in the Americas Project (US/LEAP), a Chicago-based nonprofit. When I began researching the banana women I was already known to the leaders of the banana unions as an ally; I was introduced, and introduced myself, as both a researcher and someone working on behalf of the banana workers. Over the course of four years, as I interviewed three dozen male and female banana unionists and their allies, observed workshops in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, participated in three international conferences of women banana workers, and attended four COLSIBA meetings, I was gradually embraced as part of the international network of women I was studying.

Along the way the banana women very pointedly directed and shaped my research process, teaching me both how to learn about them and what to learn. I was specifically instructed, for example, to write here that I didn't just look at documents and figures, but stayed with women banana workers in their homes, ate with them, and visited their packing plants and union offices. I, too, was along on that road trip, another round, forty-ish woman belting out songs she'd learned from the Nicaraguan Revolution. Unlike the Honduran women in that truck, though, I hadn't spent twenty years packing bananas, standing up ten or twelve hours a day, six days a week. I brought all the privileges of a white, middle-class academic from the United States. But the *mujeres bananeras* of Latin America gave me another privilege: that of telling their story.

## Global Allies

Throughout this story, outsiders—Germans, Danes, Costa Ricans, Americans—have appeared, providing money to the banana women, popping up to explain the Central American Free Trade Agreement, or helping analyze the complex intersection of class and gender in Latin America. Who exactly are all these allies? And where does the money come from?

Beyond the powerful networks established among banana workers themselves lies a dense thicket of outside allies ranging from middle-class Central American Leftists to the Danish labor movement to the Irish Catholic Church. Tracing the banana women's allies reveals the far-flung networks of global solidarity on which the banana unions draw, and of which most outsiders are unaware. It also helps unravel the complex interrelationships between union activism, international solidarity, and working-class women's empowerment in Latin America.

In Honduras, to begin, the banana women's most important allies have been women's groups within the national labor federations, within other social movements, or on the Left, such as the *Coordinadora Centroamericana de Trabajadoras* (Coalition of Central American Workers; COCENTRA), a network of Central American labor unions founded in 1988, which has provided crucial support through its *Comité Femenil*. COSIBAH women also work closely with the *Centro de Derechos de Mujeres* (Center for Women's Rights; CDM) in San Pedro Sula, founded in 1992. The center initially focused on combating domestic violence in the mid 90s, and then in 1998 shifted to supporting maquiladora



Teacher and students at COSIBAH sewing class, La Lima, Cortés, Honduras, August 2003.

workers. Support and influence from other social movements and unions has flowed as much through individual activists as through formal organizational ties. Norma Rodríguez, for example, who has coordinated women's projects since the 1980s in the *Unión de Trabajadores del Campo*, a Honduran campesino organization, has met regularly with the Honduran banana women over the years. The same generation as the SITRATERCO pioneer women, Norma has imparted an experienced analysis of gender dynamics while also, like Zoila Lagos, serving as a bridge to a more explicit Left analysis of banana women's situation. Especially during the 1980s, a few individual women banana workers also developed leadership skills through contact with political organizations such as the *Movimiento de Mujeres Visitación Padilla*, a women's group that organized against US military bases in Honduras during the Contra War and provided support to trade union women.

Middle-class and college-educated allies throughout Central America have also provided essential technical and analytical skills to the banana women. The men and women in Costa Rica who work with ASEPROIA (*Asociación Servicios de Promoción Laboral*), founded in 1985, travel regularly throughout Central and South America to assist COLSIBA and COSIBAH. Ana Victoria Naranjo Porras, for example, provided technical support for the COLSIBA women's self-study and edited their autobiographies; Ariane Grau and Alvaro Rojas also helped on the book; Luisa Paz Jiménez facilitated the women's 2003 workshop on negotiation and collective bargaining. Other middle-class allies volunteer as individuals with technical topics and facilitation, such as Ajax and Alex Irfas in Honduras. In some cases these allies have specifically aided women's projects only; but just as often they enthusiastically serve the women as part of a broader commitment to supporting the banana unions in general.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, in contrast to this wealth of contacts with local middle-class allies committed to labor solidarity, the banana women do not have a history of direct contact with the middle-class women's movement in Latin America. They did not, for example, participate in any of the groundbreaking feminist *encuentros* that began in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1981 and expanded through subsequent conferences in Peru, Mexico, Argentina, the

Dominican Republic, and elsewhere in Latin America during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, uniting and inspiring women's organizations, grassroots activists, and feminist academics throughout Latin America. Asked whether she had had any relationship with the *encuentros*, Iris Munguía replied that she knew about them through e-mails and the Web, but that the banana women had never had any direct contact with them. Their organizational spheres apparently never overlapped.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, though, there has clearly been a great deal of cross-fertilization between middle-class feminism and the banana women. Iris, Zoila, and other leaders voraciously borrow concepts, phrases, and technical approaches wherever they can find them, and their sources include a variety of materials and ideas produced by middle-class feminists. The poster for their 2002 "VII *Encuentro Latinoamericano De Mujeres Bananeras*" on the FTAA and PPP, for example, not only utilized the new term *encuentro* to describe a women's conference, but featured quotes from Alda Facio, a Costa Rican academic feminist, which Iris found on the Web: "*Las mujeres hemos sido globalizadas en la invisibilización, en la explotación, en el cuerpo, en la violencia, en el silencio, en la familia*" (We women have been globalized in being made invisible, in being exploited, in our bodies, in violence, in silence, and in the family) and "*Necesitamos más mujeres en el poder, pero también necesitamos que esas mujeres no sean cualquier mujer, sino personas dispuestas a luchar contra la globalización*" (We need more women in power, but we also need those women to be not just any women, but people committed to the fight against globalization).<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the banana women have come so far, so fast in part because they haven't had to reinvent the wheel. They have been able to draw on flourishing women's activism and feminist consciousness in Latin America that was in place before they even started in 1985 and that has continued to develop apace since then. Take, for example, the pamphlet *Conocamos de Género*, written by Zoila Lagos and Iris Munguía, that COSIBAH and COLSIBA have been distributing since 2003 throughout the banana unions—the one Nelson Nuñez handed out to the visiting maquiladora workers. The pamphlet includes concepts such as the distinction between sex (biologically constructed) and gender (socially constructed),

expressed in phrases such as "We're born with our sex, but gender is learned," that were developed in academic contexts in the 1970s and 80s and have since flowed freely across national and class lines.<sup>5</sup>

Since the late 1990s the banana unions have also received enormous aid from allies in the United States and, especially, Europe. In Europe, a network of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) known as Euroban has developed to explicitly support banana workers. Its affiliates include Germany's Banafair and Great Britain's Banana Link, which publishes the *Banana Trade News Bulletin*, a semiannual summary of labor and industry news. Euroban has been especially concerned with the situation of small producers within former European colonies and with promoting fair trade bananas; Banana Link, in particular, has proven a crucial bridge between Latin American banana unions and progressive Europeans and was the driving force behind a 1998 global conference on bananas.<sup>6</sup>

In the United States, the US Labor Education in the Americas Project (US/LEAP) has played a parallel role in publicizing the issues facing Latin American banana workers, but with a much more explicit focus on the banana labor movement. Along with European allies, it mobilized outrage over the 2002 attacks at Los Alamos in Ecuador and provided solidarity for the STTRABI Del Monte workers kidnapped in Guatemala in 2001, for example. US/LEAP is especially adept at pressuring the US government and US-based transnationals to guarantee labor rights for banana workers. It has also worked hard to try to stop the assassination of trade unionists in Colombia.<sup>7</sup>

Where is the AFL-CIO in all this? In 1997 President John Sweeney's administration finally kicked out the Cold Warriors lurking in its International Affairs Department, abandoned the AFL-CIO's anticommunist project in Latin America, abolished the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), and created an all-new body, the American Center for International Labor Solidarity, based in Washington, DC, that, for the most part, channels true solidarity to the labor movement in Latin America.<sup>8</sup> The AFL-CIO still has not publicly apologized for its decades of imperialist intervention in Latin American labor, and a debate cur-

rently rages regarding the federation's role in the 2002 attempted coup against Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez.<sup>9</sup> But in the past ten years it has consistently supported the banana unions of Latin America with solidarity and organizing support. When the Del Monte leaders fled Guatemala in 2001, for example, the AFL-CIO, in collaboration with the International Union of Food Workers (IUF), arranged short-term jobs for them as organizers with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) and other federation affiliates.<sup>10</sup>

The AFL-CIO, US/LEAP, European trade union allies, and COLSIBA all work closely, in turn, with the IUF based in Switzerland with a Latin America office in Uruguay. The IUF, with COLSIBA, negotiated the all-important 2001 Chiquita Agreement.<sup>11</sup>

#### WHO PAYS THE BILLS?

All this aid falls under the category of solidarity. But Northern allies also directly fund the banana unions. The *Specialarbejderforbundet i Danmark* (General Workers' Union in Denmark; SID), a major coalition of Danish labor unions, has been especially generous in the 2000s in supporting COSIBAH and COLSIBA with funds obtained from the Danish government. SID paid for one of COSIBAH's two pickup trucks, for example, and has paid for extensive projects regarding occupational safety and health, as well as COSIBAH salaries.<sup>12</sup> In Honduras, the Irish Catholic development agency Trócaire pays for COSIBAH's radio programs and bought the other pickup.<sup>13</sup> Banana Link, in England, has also funded banana union projects.

These funds flow into COSIBAH and COLSIBA at a general level to the clear benefit of the banana women. They keep both federations in existence, support the all-important struggle with the banana corporations, and sustain the overall organizing, networking, and educational work of the two coalitions. They also subsidize women's projects indirectly, as when rank-and-file workers learn about workshops and conferences over the radio or when Iris regularly drives COSIBAH's truck to Guatemala, Nicaragua, and all over Honduras.

But, as we've seen, the women also get their own independent funding. SID, the Danish labor federation, in 2001 paid for the COLSIBA women's *Diagnóstico* and in 2003 provided \$3,000 to edit and publish their collection of autobiographies.<sup>14</sup> Other grants flow through COSIBAH or COLSIBA at the general level, but are tagged for women's work. In 2002 the AFL-CIO paid for two years of Zoila Lagos's salary to support women's projects in COSIBAH and COLSIBA as part of a package also funding Nelson Nuñez in his work as an organizer, largely in Honduras but also among banana workers in Ecuador. Nelson, in turn, as we've seen, has been crucial in organizing women workers.<sup>15</sup>

In recent years the most generous funds for women's independent projects have come from European NGOs. *Pan Para el Mundo* (Bread for the World), a consortium of German churches, consumer organizations, and support groups for Latin American workers, has paid Iris Mlunguía's salary since August 2002. In 2003 it funded COSIBAH's sewing, cooking, and other classes for older banana women; in 2004 it paid for the women's all-important computers. Trócaire, similarly, gave FETRABACH's women in Nicaragua \$14,000 for their projects in 1999; more recently, it funded the microenterprise project of which the women's pig collective in Honduras is a part.<sup>16</sup>

Of course there are enormous power politics behind all this money, both between funders and fundees, and within the banana unions themselves.<sup>17</sup> In every case outside money shapes the internal gender politics of the banana labor movement, as the women increasingly gain access to independent funding and the organizational autonomy that comes with it. As we've seen, sharp conflicts emerged in earlier years over women's lack of control of money—remember, for example, how in 1984 and 1985 SITRATERCO women were enraged when male leaders failed to share ILO funds earmarked specifically for women's work. We've also seen how, within COLSIBA, at times not all funds assigned to women's work have always ended up in the women's hands—demonstrating the importance of the women's own fiscal control. Since the late 1990s, women's autonomous control of outside funds has made all their flourishing projects possible while legitimating the women's agenda within the banana labor movement as a whole.

Yet they wouldn't have the outside funding in the first place if they didn't also have the institutional rubric of their long-standing, mixed-gender unions, the support of male allies, and their coalitions' own outside support, in turn.

Dynamics of gender and outside funding play themselves out, lastly, in the politics of international travel. The whole transnational network the women have developed depends upon outside money to pay for bus and plane tickets as well as hotel and meeting rooms. International travel has had an enormous impact on both individual banana women and on their collective project as a whole. 'Amanda,' a Guatemalan woman, describes in her autobiography the enormous impact of one single trip:

I traveled to Costa Rica to participate in a union education event. I lived for two weeks with union comrades that had professional training, and they got me to understand the urgent need to keep studying, not for myself alone, but for all those worker comrades that had chosen me to represent their interests. When I got back to Guatemala I had already made a decision that I wouldn't have changed for anything in the world.<sup>18</sup>

'Amanda' went back to school, as she had promised herself in Costa Rica, and in two years she had a high school diploma and, soon after, a nursing degree.<sup>19</sup> Adela Torres, the sole woman officer in the Colombian banana unions, has been to Costa Rica and Honduras five times. On each trip she has become more central to the banana women's network; on each trip she has grown rapidly in her knowledge of the wider world—especially important for Colombians, since, for safety reasons, outsiders are reluctant to travel to their country.<sup>20</sup>

More than twenty *mujeres bananeras*—from all the countries—have traveled outside of Latin America to the United States or, more often, Europe. Berra Gómez, for example, secretary of women for FETRABACH in Nicaragua, is a tireless, and in many ways exhausted, militant banana activist who has to struggle hard just to keep her family alive. But she benefits from regular travel throughout Central America and once flew to Ireland for free, and she knows eventually she might be invited again to Europe or perhaps to the US.<sup>21</sup> Gloria García, secretary of organization

for SITRATERCO, has been not only on six trips within Latin America, but to Washington, DC, Rome, and Finland.<sup>22</sup> 'Carmen,' another SITRATERCO veteran, writes: "Thanks to my union organization I have had the opportunity to know other countries, other cultures, other people, and I have always gotten the most out of it. I've never been handed anything on a silver platter."<sup>23</sup>

Iris Munguía herself has been to Europe several times, in some cases to meet with funders, in others for training workshops, in still others to attend conferences in solidarity with women workers from other sectors. In the banana women's most international moment of all, in July 2000, she attended the first and only global meeting of banana women workers and their allies. Female small producers as well as plantation laborers from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and the Philippines all attended—plus their European allies from the labor movement, consumer groups, and other NGOs. Ironically, the meeting took place not in any banana-producing country, but in Hanover, Germany. That conference captures how crucial Europe is in the banana women's story: in order to simply meet each other, women banana workers traveled not to each others' countries, but to Europe, on European money.<sup>24</sup>

The male leaders within COISIBA's affiliates are well aware of all this travel and know they can't, largely, control it. They, too, are traveling. They, too, have benefited from the broader horizons, technical advice, and inspiration that travel can offer. Some of the men have traveled not only repeatedly to Denmark, England, France, and on occasion to Washington, DC, but also to the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, or the AFL-CIO's US training centers. As the highest-ranking officers of the banana unions in their respective countries, they, too, have independence and access to outside funding. They, too, deal with the complex politics of accepting money from outsiders while trying to maintain autonomy over how that money is spent. What's crucial for our story here is that Northern allies, and the money they choose to spend, have proven a crucial lever in equalizing gender dynamics within the banana unions.

#### CONCLUSION

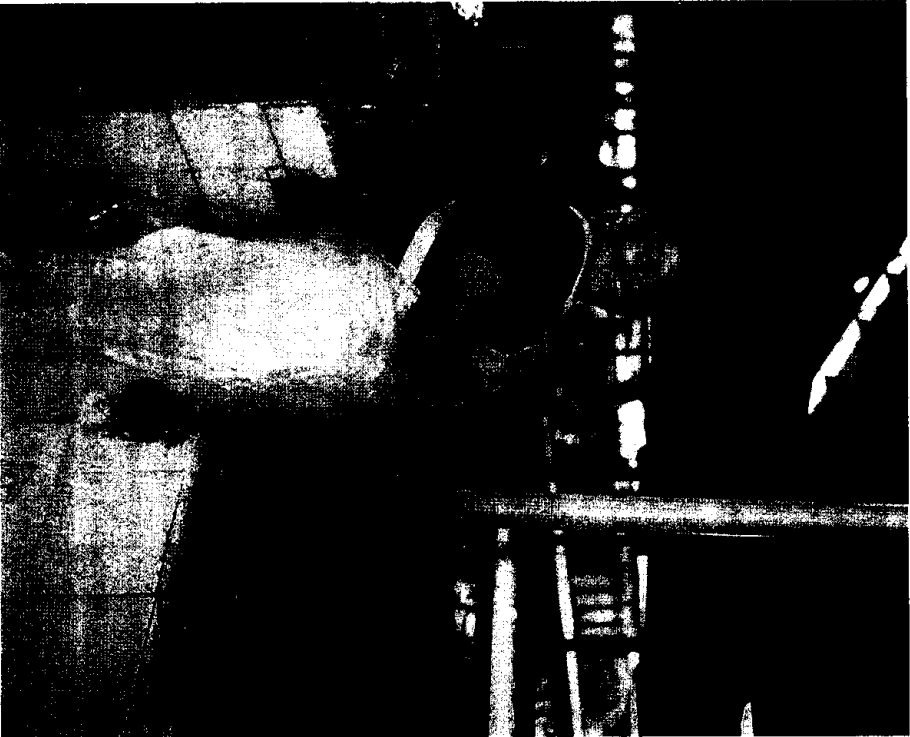
Overall, the impact of the banana women's allies has been much greater than the sum of its parts. Any aid, whether facilitation, training, a meager salary, a car, or a trip to Nicaragua or Germany, multiplies by ten within Latin America. For women with no other chance to travel—except perhaps, to visit a grown child in Dallas or Los Angeles—visits to other countries explode their horizons. For women with little more than a sixth-grade education, aid from allies, of many sorts, gives them access to the intellectual resources of those with more advanced educations. For women struggling with sexist leaders of their unions, foreign travel gives them a sense of very different—or often quite similar—gender politics abroad. Perhaps most important, in every case, the women understand the resources they receive to be part of a larger project of empowering other women like themselves at home, and of serving their unions. Think of how 'Amanda' dedicated herself to her education upon her return from her first trip to Costa Rica; or Iris's own first trip to Costa Rica in 1990, from which she came home to teach ten other women in SITRATERCO how to themselves teach ten additional women what she'd learned. Sisterhood, for the *mujeres bananeras* is global, but it's also collective.

## CONCLUSION

### A New Kind of Labor Movement

The women banana workers of Latin America have traveled a long way. Not just from company houses on their plantations in rural Nicaragua or Panamá to meetings in Guayaquil or London across barriers of region and nation, but across enormous barriers of education, generation, and, most important, expectations about their place in the world as women. What began in 1985 in Honduras as a tough fight and a deep collective and personal transformation among women in STRATERCO expanded in the late 1990s and early 2000s into the flourishing mixed-gender projects of COSIBAH in Honduras, and then the powerful pan-Latin American networks of women in COLSIBA, supported by allies across the world. What began as a local story has become global. That little road trip to Guatemala with which we began now falls into place, I hope, as one remarkable piece of an even more remarkable journey into, and revolution within, the gender politics of the Latin American labor movement.

Bananas are as global an industry as you can get. It's no coincidence that this story emerged in one of the first economic spheres to go fully transnational, way back in the 1890s when United Fruit's tentacular enterprises linked Ecuador with Costa Rica with Boston. In 1993, a century later, new transnational mutations of the banana corporations have similarly compelled the banana unions of Central and South America to think big in new, creative ways, and to construct the national- and regional-level federations in which the women's projects have flourished. Ironically, the very consolidation and crisis of the banana export industry helped open



Packinghouse worker, Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí, Heredia, Costa Rica, March 2002.

the space for women banana workers' successful activism both in Honduras and throughout Latin America.

Indeed, the transnational nature of the banana industry helps explain, in part, the uniqueness of the banana women's achievements. In many other sectors, Latin American union women and their allies have developed work on a small scale similar to that of the banana workers. Teachers, nurses, maquiladora workers, and other women workers have access to leadership development training, for example.<sup>1</sup> But in none of these sectors have they developed transnational ties among women. Why not? The answer is structural: these other women work for national-level employers, local- or national-level governments, or for fragmented, ephemeral subcontractors difficult to trace to their owners in the North. In the banana export sector, by contrast, unionized women almost all work for the same big three global corporations: Dole, Del Monte, and Chiquita. When COLSIBA in 1993 consolidated banana unions from all three transnational corporations, across seven countries, it created the institutional space for regional women's work. Global banana sisterhood, in other words, has been a subset of labor internationalism.

But it was the banana women themselves who battled their way in to claim and transform that space, and the core elements of their agenda reflect the sophistication with which they have inserted gender politics into COLSIBA and COSIBAH. First, there's the personal: their attention to self-esteem, household dynamics, and their own individual development as leaders. Second, the structural: the sexual division of labor in the home and the broader economy, the politics of sex and gender, and the all-important question of women's packinghouse labor, including not just wages and benefits but job security, housing, reproductive rights, and other issues of occupational health and safety. Third, they have taken on the gender politics of their unions, demanding gender equity in leadership and the validation of women's concerns as central to union politics. Fourth, they have developed into powerful militants in the struggle with the corporations themselves, with a sophisticated understanding of corporate strategy and a deep commitment to advancing all banana workers' rights. Finally, they've turned their eyes to the

biggest prize—and the biggest threat facing working-class Latin American men and women: the global economy and its neoliberal devastation of their communities. The banana women's evolution over time, moreover, recapitulates the women's own development—from individual awakening and empowerment to collective, institutionalized power: from family politics to top-level union politics to the politics of State and global corporate strategy; and from an understanding of the local to a mastery of the national, regional, and the global.

In many ways the banana women's story is an example of the transnational feminisms that emerged in Latin America and worldwide in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>2</sup> But three problems emerge in identifying the banana women's projects as "transnational feminism." First, as readers may have noticed, the women themselves never use the word "feminism," that is, its Spanish equivalent *feminismo*. Rather, they speak of "women's work," "gender equity," or "gender dynamics." Similarly, the banana women also do not use the word "transnational" (*transnacional*) preferring "regional" (the same word in both English and Spanish) to speak of linkages within Latin America. While their new identity as *mujeres bananeras* indeed transcends national boundaries, as do their enterprises, the women also know that their struggles unfold within the context of specific national labor movements, national cultures, and national political dynamics that vary widely.<sup>3</sup> Finally, speaking of their projects as "transnational feminism" alone can suggest the excision of class issues that are so central to the banana women's work. As should be abundantly clear, the banana women never separate their gender politics from their union struggles, and neither should we.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever the terms used to describe their projects, there's no question that women banana workers, along with their male allies, are forging an entirely new definition of what a labor movement looks like. In absolutely unprecedented ways, work on behalf of women's equality and dignity is today understood to be part and parcel of banana unionism in a large swath of Latin America. Ariane Grau Crespo, from ASEPROLA, in her introduction to the collection of banana women's autobiographies, sums up beautifully the goals of the women's work:

In our opinion, a new way of building unions implies not just the quantitative incorporation of women in all activities, but also learning from them, from their perspective, from their forms of struggle—and taking women's interests, as they have presented them, to be the interests of the organization.<sup>5</sup>

That's it: women's interests are understood by both men and women as the interests of the *entire* organization.

Better yet, listen to how Sefla Sandoval\* from Guatemala describes herself at the conclusion of her autobiography:

I am a unionist of the heart, completely dedicated to a cause that because it's so deeply about social justice, compels me to a greater and greater level of commitment.... But above all I am a woman from head to foot; and as a woman I feel a responsibility to continue raising the banner of dignity, of respect, of pride.

Her identity as a woman, in other words, is inseparable from her identity as a militant union activist, and being a banana woman has made it possible for her to define a labor movement that embraces and nourishes both, and that fights for social justice on the barricades of both gender and class.

Grasping the women banana workers' projects leads us, lastly, to a new understanding of international labor solidarity. COLSIBA itself, with its coordination of union activities across seven far-flung nations, is a new kind of enterprise, a new form of democratic self-management from below by workers themselves—in contrast to the ugly history of Cold War AFL-CIO intervention and the bureaucratic, top-down lethargy of long-standing official international federations like the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) or the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICTFU).<sup>7</sup> COLSIBA's women's projects, integrated more deeply into the coalition's larger whole with every passing year, challenge us to envision international labor solidarity with women's issues at the top of the agenda—in order to build a more powerful *workers' movement* across the globe. Rather than imagining solidarity as a gender-neutral enterprise that in practice seemingly inadvertently empowers men only, we need to think about what international

solidarity can look like for women and men both, and learn from the banana workers' model.<sup>8</sup>

The story of women and men banana workers doesn't, of course, end here; it's still in process. The corporations are still out there maneuvering to obliterate the unions; paramilitaries and other armed groups are still out there plotting assassinations and kidnappings; neoliberal governments are still scheming how to impose new trade regimes to crush workers' livelihoods throughout Latin America. But banana unionists are themselves more savvy about global trade politics with every passing year, and their unions are constructing deeper and deeper levels of solidarity at the national, regional, and international levels every day. And together, the banana women and men are still marching forward on the path to gender equality.

We can conclude by handing the story back to the banana women themselves, in their own words. For, if nothing else, the banana women's projects have given them their own voices with which to express their vision of women's dignity and empowerment, and the ability to imagine, meet, and speak directly to allies across the world. Listen, first, to 'Antonia,' a rank-and-file banana woman, in her autobiography:

I hope that you remember me when it's 12 at night and you think of me even though I don't know you. I hope to know you some day; and I hope that I am granted this wish to know you. This is my greatest wish, to know someone to whom I've confessed what happened in my life.<sup>9</sup>

The last word goes to Iris Munguía, in her introduction to the autobiographies, when she speaks on behalf of all the authors—and, I hope, on behalf of this volume as well:

We hope that when you read this book it helps you reflect, and that it turns into an incentive for exchange and communication, and for the search for alternative alliances to improve women's lives—not just women in the banana sector, but all women.<sup>10</sup>

\* Though she uses a pseudonym in her autobiography, Sefla Sandoval asked that her real name be used here.