

International Labor Rights Forum



# Fairness in Flowers

## Campaign Toolkit



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**Flowers.** We give them to our loved ones as acts of appreciation, compassion, and kindness. A flower has the power to brighten a person's day and fill a person with joy. We run to the grocery store last minute to pick up a perfect bouquet for our mother, our friend, or our spouse. We receive a lovely assortment, and don't stop to think "How did I get roses in the middle of winter?" The last thing we would ever ask ourselves is, "Who grew these beautiful flowers?"

Unlike other products that Americans consume, flowers generally don't have an obvious tag or label that lets us know where the flowers were grown or by what company. It is even more difficult for us to know if the flowers we are buying were harvested sustainably, with acceptable labor conditions, or organically.

The truth is most of the flowers that Americans buy are imported from Colombia or Ecuador, where fundamental labor rights of flower workers are consistently violated by growing companies. Flower production can also be found in the Netherlands, Israel, Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Mexico, Central America, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and more recently in Japan, China and India. This is an industry that is competing in a race to the bottom in terms of labor conditions. Workers are routinely forced to work overtime without additional pay, are exposed to toxic chemicals without proper training and equipment, and are deprived the right to collectively bargain for decent wages and safer conditions. Women, who make up the majority of flower workers, face sexual harassment and violence at astonishing rates. In some countries, children are found working in flower cultivation. The practices of many farms, such as the disposal of toxic wastes into nearby rivers and lakes, place the workers and surrounding communities in serious danger.

## The International Labor Rights Forum and the Fairness in Flowers Campaign

The International Labor Rights Forum began its "Fairness in Flowers" campaign in 2003, forging collaborative relationships with unions and NGOs in Colombia and Ecuador, and bringing the concerns mentioned above into the public eye in the US. They have conducted research on the ground, pressured companies such as Dole to respect the rights of their employees, and testified before Congress, the UN, and the State Department. ILRF has organized speaking tours across the U.S., enabling American consumers to hear the firsthand experiences of South American flower workers. ILRF has also formed alliances with other organizations to help flower workers assert their labor rights. ILRF continues to be committed to bringing justice to the flower workers.

This information has been prepared by the International Labor Rights Forum to continue to educate on the alarming issues that flower workers face and to provide the tools for change.



Look for the pink rose throughout this reference for fun and interesting ways to learn and share about the flower industry.

# frequently used terms

**Workers' Rights:** Workers' rights or labor rights are established through International Labor Organization (ILO) Conventions and national laws. The most fundamental ones include the right to organize, the right to collective bargaining, the right to claim unfair dismissal, and the right to non-discrimination. There may be other rights, like the right to maternity leave, that are conditional on the employee having sufficient length of service to exercise them.

**Floriculture:** Floriculture is commonly defined as the cultivation and management of ornamental and especially flowering plants. It is frequently used interchangeably with "flower industry."

**Flower Industry:** The web of commercial entities involved in the growing, the distributing, the transporting and the buying and selling of flowers. Each link in the fresh cut flower supply chain including the growers, the transporters, wholesalers, and retailers make up the floral industry.

**Supply Chain:** This term refers to the system of organizations, people, activities, information and resources involved in moving a product, in this case cut flowers, from supplier to customer. Supply chain activities transform raw materials and components into a finished product that is delivered to the end customer.

**Trade Union:** A trade union or labor union is an organization that represents workers. The trade union leaders negotiate with the employer on behalf of union members; these negotiations result in a collective labor contract. Trade unions can negotiate wages, work rules, complaint procedures, rules governing hiring, firing and promotion of workers, benefits, workplace safety rules and other policies. firing and promotion of workers, benefits, workplace safety and policies.

**Collective Bargaining:** This refers to the negotiation over wages and working conditions between trade unions and employers (when trade unions are permitted to operate openly).

**Child Labor:** Child labor is commonly defined as work done by children under the age of 18 (in some countries it is under the age of 16 or 17), which is considered to be damaging to their physical, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual growth and denies them their rights to develop fully, to play or to go to school.

**Sexual Violence:** This is any act in which the person in power uses physical force, coercion, or psychological intimidation to force another person to participate in a sexual act against their will, or to participate in sexual interactions that lead to their victimization.



A female worker at Elite Flowers.



🌸 U.S. consumers spend over \$18 billion annually on fresh cut flowers.<sup>i</sup>

🌸 The United States imports almost 80% of its flowers.<sup>ii</sup>

🌸 Colombia is the largest exporter to the U.S. followed by Ecuador, both of which export over 70% of their flowers to the United States.<sup>iii</sup>

🌸 Over 60% of the flowers imported by the U.S. come from Colombia.<sup>iv</sup>

🌸 There are 75,000 flower workers in Ecuador and over 100,000 in Colombia, working to grow, harvest, and package flowers. Additional people indirectly depend on the flower industry for their employment, including those who transport flowers or produce the inputs.<sup>v</sup>

🌸 About 60% of Colombian and Ecuadorian flower workers are women.<sup>vi</sup>

🌸 Sexual harassment of female workers proceeds unchecked as 55% of Ecuadorian flower workers have been the victims of some form of sexual harassment. The aggressors are almost never punished by the company or the courts.

🌸 Due to heavy use of pesticides and fungicides, nearly two-thirds of Colombian flower workers suffer from one or more floriculture-related health problems including headaches, nausea, impaired vision, conjunctivitis, rashes, asthma, congenital malformations and respiratory and neurological problems.<sup>vii</sup>

🌸 Most flower workers are paid poverty level wages. In Colombia, workers earn an average of \$7 a day, a fraction of what US consumers pay for one bouquet of flowers.

🌸 Women are often forced to take pregnancy tests as a condition of hire, and if found to be pregnant, are not hired. Women who are found to be pregnant after starting to work at a flower farm are often fired.<sup>viii</sup>

🌸 According to a 2000 study by The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated that 20% of the 60,000 Ecuadorian flower workers were children or young adults.<sup>ix</sup>

🌸 Many workers are employed through “labor cooperatives” or subcontractors. These workers are paid less and are denied most basic rights including the right to join a



## A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FLOWER WORKER

“...I had been working at this plantation for four years when my hands started to fall asleep. I would work from 6 a.m. until 5 or 6 p.m., using clippers all day long. The pain went all the way up to my shoulder. They gave me an exam to see if the carpal tunnel syndrome was due to a thyroid problem, arthritis, or glycemia, and since those tests came back fine, they knew it was because of the work.

I have had surgery on my right hand three times. I feel like I am going to lose this finger. It is really hard to bend it or move it. I get to work at 6 a.m., and by 8:30 a.m. my hands hurt so much I can't stand it. I only work taking the smaller buds off the stems; this is an easier job than cutting but I am still sick. They didn't give me enough time to recover from the surgery before sending me back to work. After the last surgery, they gave me 1 month and 20 days of rest. But the specialists say that it takes at least 6 months for the nerves to recover. On the outside, the skin looks healed, but inside the nerves have a hard time healing. I haven't recovered, and every day my hand hurts more...”

-Rosa Delgado, Colombian Flower Worker\*



Flower workers at a plantation in Cayambe, Ecuador.

# a day in the life

In low season, workers at the plantation regularly work about 50 hours per week. The high season workweek is often 70-80 hours. The number of hours worked daily depends on the worker's department, but typically during the low season, flower workers work from 6:15 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, and 6:15 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Saturdays. They are allowed 30 minutes for lunch and at least one 15-minute break.

During a regular week, a male flower worker wakes up at around 5:00 am to get on the bus. He arrives at the plantation, puts on his work clothes, and must be in position when the bell rings at 6:15 a.m. He most likely is assigned to work in the greenhouse, composting, fumigation, or building new greenhouses. .

*“...In the high season they double our workload. We get to work but we don't know when we get to leave...”*  
-Luís Espinosa

On a typical day, a woman flower worker wakes up as early as 3:00 a.m. in order to finish her housework, feed the children and prepare them for school. She could either go to work in the classification and packing room,, in which flowers are sorted by quality, stem length, and color, or she may do weeding and harvesting in the greenhouses.

As if the lengthy hours of work were not enough, while at work flower workers are at risk for life-threatening illnesses or accidents. Workers are frequently exposed to dangerous chemicals, women are victims of various forms of sexual harassment, heavy workloads result in repetitive stress injuries, and women report ruptured varicose veins from standing for long hours and kidney problems from restricted bathroom use.

During the high season, workers report working 14 or 15-hour days. They begin work at 6:15 a.m. and often stay until 10:00 or 11:00 p.m. At the end of the day, the workers return home in buses, and then start all over again the next day.

*“...One day the supervisor called a meeting to propose that we work on Sundays instead of Saturdays. I told my coworkers not to sign that document, because that would change the way Sundays were counted in our severance pay and bonuses. So the supervisor told me: ‘by order of the company-and I am the company-you will just wash the bathrooms and changing rooms and then go stand in front of the office there without speaking to anyone.’ My coworkers cried to see me like that, and I entered into a deep depression. One day the owner of the company came and saw me standing there, and he didn't say anything. I was there for 5 days.*

*Then I filed a human rights complaint with the Personería Municipal. The complaint was sent to Asocolflores and the Ministry of Social Protection. I told the manager that I had filed a complaint against the company, and he offered me money to stop the case. I told him that I hadn't done it for money, but to recover my dignity\*...”*



Use the “Lesson Plan” in the “Resources to Further the Cause” section as a guide to educate students grades 1 through 5 on the working conditions and the use of pesticides in the cut flower industry. Learning about this important issue can increase their vocabulary with words such as “toxicity,” as well as expose them to and make them think critically about this global issue.

\* The names of the flower workers have been changed to protect their identities.

## PEAK SEASONS: VALENTINE'S DAY AND MOTHER'S DAY IN THE GREENHOUSE

Before you hand that bouquet to your loved one, consider the flower workers.

- ♥ During holidays such as Valentines Day, Mother's Day and Christmas the flower industry sees a peak in sales. An estimated 214 million roses were produced for Valentine's Day in 2007.<sup>xi</sup>
- ♥ According to the Society of American Florists, customers purchase more fresh flowers for Valentine's Day than any other holiday.<sup>xii</sup>
- ♥ One third of all flowers exported from Ecuador are exported for Valentines Day.<sup>xiii</sup>
- ♥ The high season workweek is often 70-80 hours.<sup>xiv</sup>
- ♥ Workdays can be up to 20 hours long.
- ♥ Production quotas range from 250-300 stems per hour for harvesters and 1,250 to 1,500 per hour for those who work in the classification and packing department.<sup>xv</sup>
- ♥ February 14 is not just Valentine's Day any more. Now, it is the International Day of Flower Workers. It is a day dedicated to raising awareness about the dire circumstances of flower workers throughout the world. While sweethearts are giving their tokens of affection, workers in flower producing countries and organizations throughout the world celebrate the occasion by organizing municipal festivals, holding education sessions in schools and daycares where children of workers study, and by providing forums and awareness-raising activities to promote better living conditions for flower workers.<sup>xvi</sup>



Show support for flower workers this Valentine's Day! Get together with a group in your community and make valentines in the shape of a flower or heart with a flower worker fact inside. You can make them for your friends, your local florist or grocery store, or Dole Foods Inc.



Write articles for your local or school newspaper during these holidays. They are perfect opportunities to get peers, members of the community and friends interested.





A sign warning of the dangers of the fumigation chemicals at Elite Flowers plantation.

## Toxic Flowers: Flower Workers' Health in Jeopardy

One of the greatest dangers flower workers face is the exposure to harmful pesticides, fungicides and other chemicals used in the cut flower production process. Countries importing flowers require flowers to be completely rid of insects and disease. These requirements are called phytosanitary regulations, and they are fulfilled at a high cost to the worker.

The flower growing process begins with workers using steam and chemical fumigation to disinfect the soil. Later, artificially produced fertilizers are pumped into the soil to provide nutrients for the plants to grow. Once the plants are growing, fumigations are done frequently to ensure that they are not blighted with pests or fungi. Eyewitness accounts reveal that greenhouses are not always completely cleared before the fumigation process begins. In Colombia the flower industry uses more than 200 kilos of pesticide per hectare of land which is double that of the Netherlands, still the world's leading flower exporter. A study of 8,000 Colombian flower workers found that they were exposed to 127 different pesticides. Twenty percent of these pesticides are either banned or unregistered for use in the U.S. because they are extremely toxic and carcinogenic. Unfortunately companies rarely provide training on how to decrease health risks when handling and applying pesticides, and many flower workers are not given sufficient protective clothing or masks.<sup>xviii</sup>

### Floriculture Chemicals

Floriculture uses many chemicals and many have devastating health consequences. Dursban and Lorsban, formulations of chlorpyrifos manufactured by Dow

Agrosciences, are chemicals that caused over 200 people to be sent to the hospital in a 2003 flower growing facility accident. Chlorpyrifos is a strong neurotoxicant and a suspected endocrine disruptor.

Organophosphates, of which approximately 40 are widely used as pesticides, are associated with adverse cumulative effects, meaning that one exposure (and particularly an acute exposure, or poisoning) may increase the likelihood of negative health effects, including long term neurological damage. These are known to be used on Colombian flower plantations.<sup>xix</sup>

### Side effects of floriculture chemicals

The use, misuse and overuse of dangerous chemicals causes flower workers to experience horrifying illness. Doctors in Colombian floriculture regions report up to five cases of acute poisoning daily.<sup>xx</sup> According to a 2002 study, nearly two-thirds of Colombian flower workers suffer from one or more floriculture-related health problems including headaches, nausea, impaired vision, conjunctivitis, rashes, asthma, congenital malformations and respiratory and neurological problems.<sup>xxi</sup> Reproductive problems are another result, as a study in Colombia reported female floriculture workers with reduced ability to become pregnant, and sperm concentrations 40% lower in males working more than ten years in floriculture. Still births and miscarriages are common among pregnant female workers. Floriculture workers also experience an elevated risk of Parkinson's disease, which is believed to be caused by chemicals used in the industry.<sup>xxii</sup>



Challenge yourself, your peers or your students with the Fairness in Flowers Word Find in the "Resources to further the Cause" section.

# woman flower workers

## Victims of Violence

**A**bout 60 percent of Colombian flower workers and Ecuadorian flower workers are women. Women flower workers are victims of various forms of sexual violence with alarming frequency. A case study in the Northern Andes region of Ecuador conducted by ILRF and local NGO partners in Ecuador showed that over 55 percent of women flower workers had experienced some form of sexual violence. The study also showed a staggering 19 percent of women flower workers had been forced to have sex with a coworker or superior and 10% had been sexually attacked. The most common victims of sexual violence are adolescents of 14-15 years of age. The offenders are usually superiors or older coworkers.

### What is sexual violence?

This is any act in which the person in power uses physical force, coercion, or psychological intimidation to force another person to participate in a sexual act against their will, or to participate in sexual interactions that lead to their victimization.

### Why does sexual violence occur on flower plantations?

Sexual violence in floriculture continues for several reasons. One reason is that sexual violence is made possible by working conditions such as solitary work in cultivation areas, long working hours that extend late into the night or into the early morning and strong pressure to fulfill production goals. Women prefer not to discuss experiences of sexual violence for fear of losing their jobs, for fear of disrupting their family and marital relations, or simply because they

don't think anyone will believe them. A case study in Ecuador showed that women "do not inform their superiors because they are more likely to believe the technician or a supervisor than the worker." Companies and authorities do not take measures to punish offenders of these crimes. The Ecuador case study showed that of the few reported cases, only 14 percent of the offenders were actually charged.

The daily challenges that women flower workers face in the workplace and at home do not allow them to prioritize the problem of sexual violence. In Ecuador's main flower-growing region, a very poor area, women must prioritize job stability in order to be able to ensure their survival and the survival of their families. In the interest of keeping their jobs, they try to ignore recurrent problems such as forced sexual contact, obscene gestures, and even sexual assault.

As a form of aggression against women, sexual violence is not a new phenomenon. Both men and women have come to view this behavior as normal in places such as Ecuador. This cultural attitude of some societies is another reason why the problem has not been adequately addressed.



Do you know of any women's rights groups in your community? Ask members if they are aware of the issue and what are some ways they can help the women flower workers.



Get together with friends and talk about the dangers women flower workers face. Ask if they have heard of similar situations in other industries or places, and why they believe sexual violence continues in those places.

## FLOWERS vs. ENVIRONMENT: WHY THESE PLANTS ARE NOT SO GREEN

### A deep-rooted problem

It's hard to imagine that growing flowers could be detrimental to the environment, but the fresh cut flower industry requires tremendous amounts of natural resources, and the constant use of chemicals that produces toxic wastes that contaminate the surrounding land and water. In the plains surrounding Bogota, where Colombian flower production is concentrated, pesticides have contaminated the water table and the subsoil. Scientific investigation there has discovered pesticide contamination over 1000 feet beneath the earth's surface.<sup>xxiv</sup> Contamination of the land and water that surrounds the flower farms creates risks for wildlife and residents nearby. In Ecuador, for example, floriculture pollution is causing the extinction of some flora and fauna.

### Flowers need water (and lots of it) to grow

The flower industry requires an abundance of natural resources such as labor, soil, water and sunlight. While some flower industry needs are sustainable, such as sunlight, the flower industry requires unsustainable amounts of water. Water depletion is a grave consequence of the flower industry. This is due to a global phenomenon that is referred to as the virtual water trade.<sup>xxv</sup> A flower is 90% water. So when a flower is exported, water is being exported as well, effectively draining local water supplies. One flower growing company actually had to cut back production due to over-exploitation of resources; their flowers had consumed all of the water in the subsoil.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Reductions in the water table are a serious threat to nearby residents and wildlife. Flower farms surrounding Lake Naivasha in Kenya have caused the lake to recede ten feet below its healthy level. Prior to the increase in the number of flower farms, the lake was known for its pristine waters, over 300 bird species, papyrus plants and water lilies. Since the industry has grown around the lake, the plant life has disappeared, eaten by crayfish or trampled by animals as they seek the receding water. The decrease in the water level has caused the hippopotamus population to decline by 20%.<sup>xxvii</sup>

### Flowers need sunlight, soil, water...and oil?

Floriculture is water and soil intensive (in Colombia alone, the flower industry covers an area of over 16,000 acres), but another natural resource is essential for the flower industry: oil. Fuel is needed to power planes that transport flowers from places such as Colombia and Ecuador to Miami, Florida. Every round trip flight between Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, and Miami emits 1.48 tons of carbon dioxide.<sup>xxviii</sup> In Miami, the flowers are temporarily stored in refrigerated warehouses, which require huge amounts of energy to keep cool. From Miami, the flowers are transported by truck or refrigerated truck, which pump even more greenhouse gases into the air.

### Contaminated carnations

The flower industry generates solid wastes such as rejected flowers, plant stalks, and pesticide and fungicide containers that require safe disposal. Until recently,



# the environment cont'

many Colombian farmers fed their cattle rejected carnation stalks. These stalks, having been sprayed with numerous chemicals, contaminated the cow's milk. Farmers then sold the contaminated milk in neighboring towns and in Bogotá, where unknowing people ingested it. Although the practice is illegal now, it still continues in some areas.<sup>xxix</sup> According to the Victorian International Development Education Association, a study showed that Ecuadorians use scraps from abandoned greenhouses for firewood, creating toxic fumes inside their homes. The study also showed that they used stalks and rejected flowers for compost.

## Modifying, or gilding the lily?

Genetically modified flowers raise even more questions about the effects of floriculture on human health and the environmental. In 2000, the first genetically modified flower, a blue rose, was approved by the Colombian flower industry. It contains genes derived from petunias to provide its artificial color.<sup>xxx</sup> Flower genes are now being altered genetically to make the flowers pest and disease-resistant, to increase the output of blooms and to make flowers last longer, but there is growing concern about the long-term effects of GMOs.



A worker spraying chemicals at a farm in Ecuador.

## Together, Workers Assert Their Rights

**T**he fundamental human rights to organize and bargain collectively are consistently denied on flower plantations in South America. These rights are essential for all workers to have a voice, and to come to agreements with their employers on fair wages, hours, and working conditions. Although both Colombia and Ecuador promised to protect these worker rights by signing the Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining Convention,<sup>xxx</sup> companies still fire and blacklist workers (illegally) for trying to negotiate better wages and working conditions.

Third-party contracting practices also severely limit freedom of association. The subcontracted workers are shuffled between different companies every few months so that their employers can avoid having to affiliate them with social security; a constantly changing workforce also inhibits serious attempts at organizing. Of the hundreds of flower companies located in Ecuador, only two have unions. Dole Fresh Flowers, a subsidiary of the US based multinational, spent years fighting workers trying to form an independent union. The flower industry's opposition to worker organizing was aided by the Colombian and Ecuadorian governments which frequently act in collusion to deny workers their basic rights. In Colombia, independent flower unions were unable to win collective bargain agreements after two decades of organizing efforts. In 2008, workers on two of Dole plantations made finally signed agreements.

### **Dole Fresh Flowers Squashes Workers' Attempts to Bargain**

Dole Fresh Flowers, a subsidiary of Dole Food Company, is the largest fresh flower exporter and plantation owner in Colombia. The company made their message very clear to workers: organizing and collective bargaining will not be tolerated. Dole refused to recognize independent unions for many years. Only after receiving a tremendous amount of international pressure, including an injunction by US Representative George Miller, did Dole recognize its independent unions and negotiate with workers. Dole created company-backed unions in attempts to undermine independent ones, and even closed a farm in 2006 due to the inconvenient organization of workers. Dole has recently announced that it has sold its flower operations to another company. Workers proud of their recent victory want to ensure that the new company recognize preserve their collective bargaining agreements and independent unions. The Sintrasplendor case below describes the workers' struggle to assert their right to freedom of association and their right to collective bargaining.

### **The Sintrasplendor Story**

In November 2004, workers at Dole's largest flower plantation in Colombia, Splendor, formed a union, and immediately faced an aggressive anti-union campaign from Dole. In December 2004, a company-supported union, Sinaltraflor, was formed to undermine Sintrasplendor. In 2005, Sintrasplendor was granted legal recognition by the Colombian government, making it the first independent flower worker union to do so in Colombia and in 2008, workers signed their first collective bargaining agreement.

*“Our motivation for starting the union was humiliation by the management and forced overtime.”* –male flower worker

In April 2005, Dole challenged the legal status of Sintrasplendor, and the government reversed the union’s legal registration, citing spurious technical reasons for their invalidity. The result was international outcry and support for the union. A month later the Colombian government reversed itself again and reinstated their legal registration.

The attack against the union culminated in the closing of the farm in December 2006. Dole cited profitability problems as its reasons for shutting down the farm—an unlikely story since 90 percent of Dole’s farms in the area remained in operation. When the closure was announced in October 2006, international and national union groups and NGOs united in solidarity with the

union to ask for documentation that the closure was a response to economic issues as opposed to a blatant anti-union measure, but the company refused to provide any.<sup>xxxii</sup> Sintrasplendor was granted an arbitration tribunal by the Colombian government in February 2008, with the help of U.S. Congressional support and Untraflores, an independent flower organization.

## A Similar Story at Fragancia

A similar story is being told at Dole’s Flores de Fragancia Farm, but there is still an opportunity for the workers to prevail. Untrafragancia, the local independent union has been fighting for several years to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement, but Sintraflor, the Dole-friendly union, is Dole’s excuse to not acknowledge Untrafragancia. The union is hoping that the Colombian Ministry of Social Protection will grant an arbitration tribunal that could possibly include ILO observers to ensure a fair outcome.<sup>xxxiii</sup>



Workers protest Dole’s attacks on the worker-organized union.



Tell Dole you know what they’re up to and urge Dole to stop abusing workers’ rights. You can help the workers at the Fragancia farm by getting together with your community, your class or school club to write Dole a letter. You can use the sample letter in the “Resources to Further the Cause” section. If you are a florist, let Dole know you want to purchase flowers from a company that respects workers.



Plan an action! Dole Fresh Flowers is headquartered in Miami, and Dole Food Company is based in Westlake Village, California. Organize rallies in front of these offices to pressure Dole.

## UNTANGLING THE SUPPLY CHAIN: FOLLOWING THE FLOWERS FROM FARM TO HOME

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, fresh cut flowers were a luxury enjoyed by the wealthy few, due to their perishable nature and very little transport technology. Flowers were wrapped in old newspaper or in cardboard boxes that the growers cut and pasted together themselves. They were then loaded onto a buggy and taken, by horse, to a train station. There was no refrigeration, so they had to think carefully about the weather and which flowers were suited for the varying temperatures of their journey. This meant that flowers could only be transported to the nearest cities.

Due to strengthened trade relations between countries in the late 20th century and major innovations in technology that have taken place beginning in WWII, the fresh cut flower industry has evolved from local production and buggy transport to a complex, globalized, industry that is energy, technology and labor intensive. The complicated paths of flowers make it difficult to pinpoint labor rights violators.

Once a flower leaves a grower it does not necessarily follow a neat path from grower to exporter to importer to wholesaler to retailer. Those channels exist, but other options exist as well. For example, certain dot-com flower businesses are removing many of the middlemen, by shipping directly from growers to consumers. However, the majority of flowers consumed in the U.S. follow the traditional trail that is referred to as the “cold chain,” because flowers need to be kept cool to stay fresh. Keeping flowers cool is not an easy task when they are shipped between the tropical climates of Ecuador and Colombia to Miami, Florida.



Have students draw or color in a map of where the flowers come from, explaining where they are grown and how they arrive at each location.

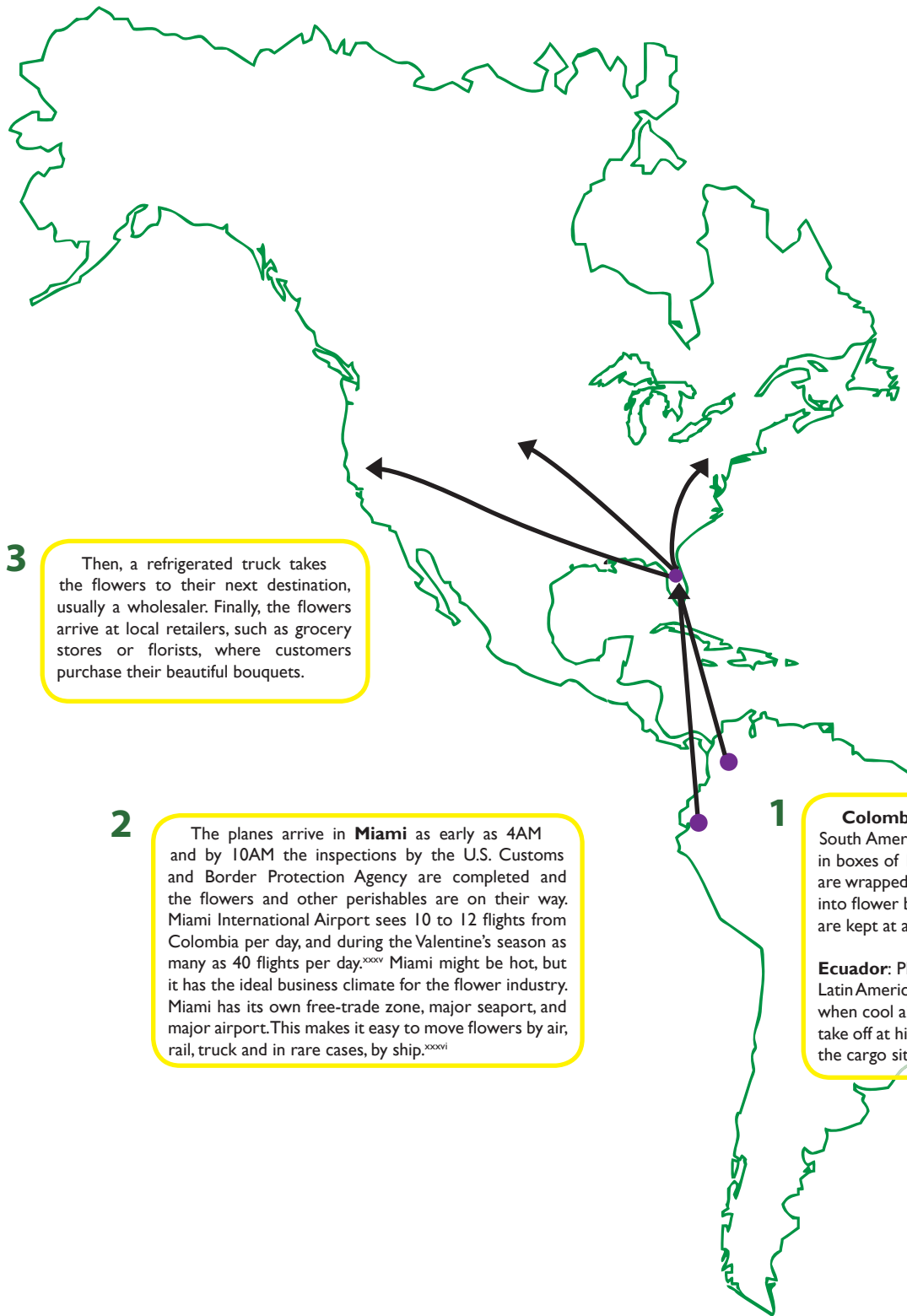


Join the cause on Facebook. “Become a Grassroots Flower Industry Investigator” to help untangle the complex web that links the plantations to the retailers, so we can all make more educated consumer decisions.



The next time you buy a bouquet at your local supermarket or florist shop, ask them if they know where their flowers come from. Tell the retailer you would like more information about conditions at their supplying plantations, and that you hope they will start sourcing from plantations with certifications like Veriflora or Fair Trade. See “Look for the Labels: A Guide to Buying Sustainable Flowers” for ways to purchase flowers with a clear conscience.







**1890s** Flowers are a luxury enjoyed by few. Flowers are transported by rail to nearby cities such as Manhattan. A rose sells for about \$1—about the same price as today. There is no refrigeration, so growers think carefully about what the weather will like be along the route.<sup>xviii</sup>

**1945** WWII opens new opportunities for flower industry with air transport.<sup>xvix</sup>

**1969** Agronomists discover in the 1960s that they can grow beautiful roses in the Andes and then fly them within a few hours into the United States, the industry begins moving to South America from places where roses had been cultivated domestically.<sup>xli</sup>

The first flower growing multinational company Floramerica is founded. North Americans begin the first flower harvest in Colombia, today the second largest exporting country of flowers.<sup>xlii</sup>

**1990s** In the early 1990s, as European consumers become increasingly concerned about conditions in the cut flower industry, Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN) and Bread for the World begin a European campaign to certify flower producers.<sup>xliii</sup>

**1920s** A few refrigerated train cars come into use for the transport of flowers.

**1960s** Flower production for export begins in Holland in the 1960s and quickly expands throughout the world to countries such as Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru, and Bolivia in Latin America, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania in Africa, and China and India in Asia.<sup>xv</sup>

**1980s** During the early 1980s, some headway is made at organizing flower workers into unions. However, plantation owners respond with violent repression and the movement is essentially broken. To this day, the only unions tolerated by the industry are company unions that serve owners' interests, while doing nothing to protect workers' rights.

**1991** The Andean Trade Preferences Act is signed into law, allowing Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru to export products duty-free to the United States, with the expectation that this favored trade status will encourage the growth of products other than coca, the plant used to make cocaine.

**1998** Dole Food Company buys Floramerica and quickly expands operations. Today Dole produces flowers on approximately 1,100 acres.<sup>xliii</sup>

- 2000** At an international meeting in Colombia, over forty workers, human rights and environmental organizations sign a statement protesting the introduction of genetic alterations in the flower and food industries. The first genetically modified flower is approved for the Colombian flower industry.
- 2003** The International Labor Rights Forum launches their "Fairness in Flowers" campaign. In the coming years ILRF will travel to Colombia to meet with cut-flower union leaders and contact and pressure Dole to acknowledge the workers' labor rights. ILRF will travel to Ecuador to research, and gather worker testimonies and photographs. They will continue to strengthen solidarity with partners in South America and the U.S. to bring justice to flower workers. <sup>xiv</sup>
- 2006** Dole closes Splendor Farm in their last blow against the independent union Sintrasplendor. The closure sparks international condemnation of Dole.
- 2008** Andean Trade Preferences Act is extended on February 29, 2008 by Congress with unanimous support in the Senate and a voice vote in the House of Representatives. Sintrasplendor and Untrafragancia workers sign their first collective bargaining agreements. <sup>xv</sup>

**2002** In the fall of 2002, the International Labor Rights Forum begins research on conditions in the cut flower industry.

**2005** ILRF, in partnership with IEDECA and INNFA, produces a report on sexual harassment and sexual violence in the Ecuadorian flower industry. ILRF collaborates with Fair Flowers Fair Plants and Veriflora to strengthen their certification standards.

**2007** USLEAP and ILRF prepare a Valentine's Day report.

## CONSUMER POWER: Buying “Fair” and “Sustainable” Flowers

Numerous certification and labeling initiatives have emerged to meet consumer demand for fairly produced flowers. These programs have the potential to change conditions on the ground and signify a step in the right direction, but many labels/certifications need reforms to be able to adequately enforce improve and enforce standards.

Consumers play a crucial role in improving the lives of flower workers as they demand fairly produced flowers but buying a “fair” product is not the only solution. Use the “take action” resources on the next page to tell flower retailers and producers that you care about workers.

A flower with a “fair” or “sustainable” label may claim excellent standards, but consumers must look closely at the details of each standard and the processes designed to enforce those standards when deciding which flowers to buy. Both Fair Trade and Veriflora are the stronger of existing labels. Florverde should be avoided. Continue reading or click here for more analysis. Read ILRF’s roadmap to fair products to learn what certification programs must include to improve the lives of workers.

### Fair Trade

[www.transfairusa.org/content/flowers/index.php](http://www.transfairusa.org/content/flowers/index.php)



The Fair Trade standard is strong on freedom of association and other core labor rights. It is strong on maternity leave and pesticide protection.

Fair Trade is the only initiative that puts a 12% premium on products to support development and community projects.

The program’s support for worker-cooperatives has been effective in sectors that have had history of small producers such as coffee and chocolate.

The flower sector (and other products that are becoming fair trade certified) does not have a history of small producers and worker-owned cooperatives, making it more difficult to determine how workers control the development premium. Consumers should understand the difference between independent, democratically operated worker-owned cooperatives and “labor cooperatives” that operate as subcontractors. These institutions are often controlled by large companies and have been used to replace unions in the workplace.

Look for Fair Trade flowers at Giant, Whole Foods or online at 1-800 Flowers.

### VeriFlora

[www.veriflora.com](http://www.veriflora.com)

ILRF has worked with the Veriflora sustainable flower initiative to ensure that its’ labor standards are strong and comprehensive. The standards’ strengths include its ban on pregnancy and HIV testing as a condition of employment and specific adherence to ILO (International Labor Organization) standards on freedom of association, collective bargaining, contract labor and discrimination. Veriflora provides a path for workers to earn a higher than average wage.



Veriflora is also the only labeling flower label that certifies flower farms in the US, particularly in California. Veriflora has a strong environmental component, as well. Scientific Certification

Systems contracts with Veriflora to independently audit farms and develop Veriflora’s standard.

Look for Veriflora flowers online at <http://www.organicbouquet.com> or ask for them at your local supermarket.



## The Truth behind the Florverde Label

The Florverde, or “green” flower label, claiming environmentally and social responsible standards may be most common in your local supermarket or floral shop. The label is an initiative of the Colombian Flower Growers’ Association, ASOCOLFLORES, an organization that represents companies producing flowers. Given the program’s lack of independence, the bottom line interests of flower companies are inherently prioritized over the interests of workers and unions.



Instead of using resources to support flower workers, the Colombian Flower Growers Association has spent millions of dollars promoting the “Florverde” label to consumers and The “Colombia: Land of Flowers” public relations campaign. The PR campaign is not motivated by an interest to protect workers, but by an interest to sell flowers to US consumers, promote the US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement and promote the failed US-funded drug eradication program, Plan Colombia. The program has lied about improvements in the flower industry. For example, it claims that 14% of workers are unionized, when most of these workers are in undemocratic, company unions. ASOCOLFLORES also fudges its statistics to exclude subcontracted workers who are denied basic labor rights.

After years of trying to engage in a dialogue with ASOCOLFLORES over the labor standards in its Florverde certification program, dozens of organizations in Colombia and internationally have expressed concern for the programs’ lack of interest in improving the labor rights component. Read the sign on letter here.

### Florverde DOES NOT:

- Give workers the right to form the organization of their choice. (instead promoting only "information and participation mechanisms" for workers, which do not include unions). Independent, democratic unions are the best enforcers of worker rights because they are operated by the workers themselves.
- Prohibit company engagement in anti-union activities
- Guarantee the right to collective bargaining.
- Specifically prohibit discrimination against union members
- Ban HIV or pregnancy tests during recruitment (these tests are often used in a discriminatory way - women who are pregnant, for example, will not be hired).
- Ensure that overtime work is voluntary and paid at a higher rate than normal hours.
- Guarantee women workers' right to maternity leave.
- Explicitly ban forced labor (Around Valentine's Day, workers are often forced to work up to 80 hours a week, often without higher pay for overtime.)

The Florverde program claims to promote “voluntary social programs” amongst other vague initiatives. These do not address the major labor abuses facing flower workers every day. The majority of workers laboring on flower plantations develop some occupational health issue over the course of their work life. Programs can help to solve these problems but a living wage, reasonable production quotas that protect workers’ health, guaranteed protective gear and democratic unions to enforce these standards are the real key to "worker friendly" farms. Read ILRF’s roadmap to fair product certification here.

## Be a conscious consumer!

The next time you buy a bouquet at your local supermarket or florist shop, ask them if they know where their flowers come from. Tell the retailer you would like more information about conditions at their supplying plantations, and that you hope they will start sourcing from plantations with certifications like Veriflora or Fair Trade. See “Look for the Labels: A Guide to Buying Sustainable Flowers” for ways to purchase flowers with a clear conscience.

## Tell your flower retailer that you care!

Your local supermarkets, florists and 1-800-Flowers type services have a great deal of power in the flower supply chain. They often set the prices of the flowers and determine the what flowers consumers demand, Show that you demand fairly produced, sustainable flowers by writing a letter! Find out where the store supplies it flowers and send the wholesaler a copy of the letter.

## Tell Dole to preserve its contracts!

After years of fighting its workers’ independent union, Dole Fresh Flowers has secretly announced that it will sell all of its Colombia plantations. Tell Dole to let its workers know to be transparent about its’ plantation sales. In your letter, suggest that Dole create an agreement with the new company to respect workers’ collective bargaining agreement and preserve the union. Tell Dole that its workers and their union want to know what’s going on!

Write to:

Ms. Sue Hagen, Vice President  
Dole Food Company, Inc.  
One Dole Drive, Westlake Village, CA 91362  
Fax: 818-874-4593  
E-mail: [dole\\_consumer\\_center@na.dole.com](mailto:dole_consumer_center@na.dole.com)

## Plant a Garden!

Learn what goes into producing your food and flowers by planting your own garden.

## Raise awareness about the issues!

Let **ILRF, JWJ or US/LEAP** know your school or organization is interested in organizing an event to with a flower worker. These organization frequently bring workers to the US for speaking tours.

**Organize events** such as brown-bag lunches on campus or in the office where you can distribute information and raise awareness.

## Join the cause on Facebook. “Become a Grassroots Flower Industry Investigator”

to help untangle the complex web that links the plantations to the retailers, so we can all make more educated consumer decisions.

**Use holidays such as Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day as an opportunity to raise awareness.** Search ILRF’s website for “Valentine’s Day Lesson Plans” to find a number of ideas.

## Contact your Members of Congress!

Encourage them to promote the inclusion of anti-discrimination clauses and enforceable labor rights mechanisms in free trade agreements, to provide better protections for women workers on flower plantations and in other sectors. Tell them to oppose the Colombia Free Trade Agreements until the Colombian government makes significant progress in protecting union leaders. Contact information for your Representative can be found at:

<http://www.house.gov/writerep/>

## RESOURCES TO FURTHER THE CAUSE

Now that you know why the workers need your help, here are some extra activities and materials for you to get your friends, family, peers and co-workers involved in the Fairness in Flowers Campaign.

Sample Letter to retailer...	p. 21
Student Action Sheet...	p. 22
Lesson Plan for Grades 1-5...	p. 24
Fairness in Flowers Word Find...	p. 27

# sample letter to Dole

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Store Manager,

During this [HOLIDAY] season, I would like to share with you my concerns as a consumer about purchasing fresh cut flowers. In conjunction with the International Labor Rights Forum's "Fairness in Flowers" campaign, I wanted to deliver this letter to you in hopes that you would take the time to read it and pass it along to the person who is in charge of ordering cut flowers for your store.

The majority of flowers sold in the US on [HOLIDAY] are imported from countries such as Colombia and Ecuador, where the cut flower industry consistently violates workers rights and environmental standards. Because of the high demand around [HOLIDAY], many workers are forced to work up to 20 hour days to meet production quotas, with no overtime pay and in unsafe conditions. Harmful pesticides are often used on the flowers, which has led to health problems for many workers. In most cases workers earn less than poverty-level wages, and are often fired for trying to improve working conditions through unions. Furthermore, agro-industrial flower cultivation and pesticide use drains and pollutes the local water supplies of communities around the world.

As a consumer that shops at your store, I urge you to consider where the flowers you sell come from. Flower workers want jobs where they can support their families with decent wages and job security. As a business that sells flowers, you have the opportunity to support cut flower suppliers that grow flowers in a sustainable way and respect workers rights, health, and safety. I encourage you to consider purchasing flowers where workers' rights and environmental rights are respected from companies that sell VeriFlora and Fair Trade Certified flowers.

For more information on workers' rights in the cut flower industry, go to International Labor Rights Forum's website at [www.laborrights.org/creating-a-sweatfree-world/fairness-in-flowers-0](http://www.laborrights.org/creating-a-sweatfree-world/fairness-in-flowers-0). I look forward to hearing from you about ways in which your business will help protect flower workers around the world this [HOLIDAY] and in the future.

Sincerely,

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

cc: THE STORE'S WHOLESALER/DISTRIBUTOR

## Dole Fresh Flowers:

### Worker Rights in the Cut Flower Industry

Colombia and Ecuador produce most of the roses and carnations sold in the US. Common workers' rights violations in the cut flower industry include:

- Dangerous workplaces: Workers are exposed to toxic chemicals on a daily basis, often without sufficient protective equipment or training. As a result, workers suffer illnesses such as skin rashes, respiratory and eye problems, and miscarriages.
- Discrimination: Almost 60% of Colombian flower workers and over half of Ecuadorian flower workers are women. New workers are often submitted to illegal pregnancy tests, and employers frequently fire pregnant workers. Sexual harassment is a serious problem.
- Violations of the right to organize: Workers are prevented from organizing independent unions through tactics such as illegal firings, intimidation, threats to close plantations where workers are organizing, black-listing unionists, and the use of company-backed unions.

## The Dole campaign

In Colombia, the country's largest flower owner and exporter, U.S.-based Dole spent years fighting workers who were trying to form an independent union. Dole owns about 20 flower farms in Colombia, and has consistently used strategies to undermine its' workers. Dole has secretly announced plans that it will sell all of its flower operations in Colombia. Workers who recently signed collective bargaining agreements are worried about their future and Dole has told them nothing! Untraflores, Dole workers' independent union, thinks that any new owner can undermine the union by using a loophole in the law to fire unionized workers. US consumers can help by pressuring Dole to ensure that the union is preserved during the operations' sales.

## What students can do...

### I. Research to identify pressure points

#### *At colleges and universities:*

- If flowers are sold on campus, talk to the florist to find out where the flowers are from. Try to find out the names of the Miami importers/distributors, and the name and country of the producing farms.
- Talk to Food Services to find out if the school has contracts with Dole for non-floral products, like bananas. If it is a public university, you can also send the school a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request asking for copies of bids and contracts that include key words like Dole, flowers, Dole Food Co., etc. Each public school has a person responsible for responding to such requests.
- While a company like Aramark or Sodexo may have the contract for food services, that company may buy fruits from Dole.



# student action sheet

## At K-12 schools and school districts:

- Find out if the school has contracts with Dole for flowers, orange juice, bananas, etc.
- In February 2007, Dole placed vending machines (carrying fresh fruits and Fruit Bowls) in 15 schools in Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, and Texas. Dole plans to expand this pilot program soon.

A longer-term campaign strategy, including decisions about secondary targets like public institutions and Wal-Mart and other retailers, can be developed once this information about flower supply chains and Dole connections is available for your school. **Note:** *The strategy of the campaign at this point does not include a boycott or efforts to actually sever contracts with Dole (and the flower workers are very clear that they don't want people to stop purchasing Dole flowers).*

## 2. Encourage florists to provide better alternatives

Pressure florists to contact their suppliers to express support for improved working conditions at producing farms and the need for flower growers to respect the basic rights of their workers.

## 3. Build a coalition that includes student voices and others

Identify specific issues at Dole flower farms that will be of concern to different constituencies, including women, Colombian students, etc.

## 4. Plan actions when workers need extra support

Dole Fresh Flowers is headquartered in Miami, and Dole Food Company is based in Westlake Village, California. Organize rallies in front of these offices to pressure Dole. Organize students to participate in urgent action letter-writing campaigns.

## 5. Raise awareness about the issues

- Organizations like ILRF, JWJ, and US/LEAP often bring flower workers to the US for speaking tours. Let these groups know you are interested in organizing an event at your school!
- Write articles for your school newspaper, especially around key holidays like Valentine's Day and Mother's Day, when flower sales increase.



A worker in the field at a Colombian plantation.



The **International Labor Rights Forum** appreciates your participation in the campaign to curb the cut flower industry's abuse of workers' health and rights. Below is a generative lesson plan for you to follow or to help you develop your own ideas to present this issue to your students. Also included is a list of websites that contain more information for you to use if you choose to add more data to fill more time or change the level. Thanks for spreading **Fairness in Flowers!**

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Part of Lesson Plan designed by Jeffrey Imwold, 7th Grade Teacher

Total time: 45 min

Lesson Topic: Cut Flower Industry

Grade: 6-12th

## Goals and Objectives

**Purpose:** Students will be introduced to the labor conditions and use of pesticides in the cut flower industry

**Performance Objectives:** Students will use a short video to understand what goes into the production of flowers. Students will learn about where the flower industries' problems are more common. Students will think about why the situation is poor and about what they can do to change the situation.

---

### Vocabulary:

(Science teachers could use the topics of pesticide and toxicity to tie the subject into their class; Social Studies, History, Government or Citizenship teachers could focus on the human and workers' rights aspects and maybe add child labor)

**Pesticide** - Substances intended to keep away, kill, or control any species designated a "pest" including weeds, insects, rodents, fungi (molds, rusts, and mildew), bacteria, or other organisms.

**Human Rights** - The basic rights and freedoms, to which all humans are entitled, often held to include the right to life and liberty, freedom of thought and expression, and equality before the law.

**Workers Rights** - These are established through ILO Conventions and national laws, and the most fundamental ones include the right to organize, the right to collective bargaining, the right to claim unfair dismissal, and the right to non-discrimination. There may be other rights, like the right to maternity leave, that are conditional on the employee having sufficient length of service to exercise them.

### Warm Up Questions:

Ask students the following questions:

1. Where do you think your flowers come from? (Ans: Colombia or Ecuador)
2. Why do we get our flowers from so far away? (Potential answers: Other countries have a better climate for flowers, companies have lower environmental and labor standards so they don't spend as much money to treat their workers and the environmental well.)
3. What is a pesticide? (Answer: a type of chemical to keep away bugs)

## Video:

Go to this You Tube Link for or search for “Poisoned Flowers” on You Tube.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2hTTkr2KuQ&feature=related>

This mini-documentary about the flower industry will give students a background on flower workers issues.

Students will answer the following questions while you watch the video:

1. What surrounds most flower farms?
  - a. Why would they choose to surround the farm with this?
2. What happens to all of the water around the farm?
  - a. How might this affect the environment?
3. How much pesticide is sprayed on the flowers?
  - a. What kind of protection do the workers on the farms get for the pesticides?
  - b. Explain the effects that this has on the workers. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- c. Why can't Carlos get the insurance money for his sickness? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Closing Questions:

1. Why is it important to think about the workers who produce your flowers and other products?

(Guide students towards the concepts of human rights and worker rights)

2. What can we do as consumers, people who buy flowers, to help flower workers?

Give students extra credit to write a letter to their supermarket or florist (see sample).

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Research and text: Clarissa Pintado and Nora Ferm

Layout and graphics: Hanh Nguyen



A flower worker visits a Wal-Mart in the United States, where flowers from Ecuador and Colombia are sold.



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