



Peace and Justice Commission

CONSENT CALENDAR
January 29, 2008

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Peace and Justice Commission

Submitted by: Steve Freedkin, Chairperson

Subject: Firestone Natural Rubber Company Workers in Liberia

RECOMMENDATION

Join the International Labor Rights Forum, Friends of the Earth, NAACP, TransAfrica Forum, The RFK Memorial Center for Human Rights, and other United States and Liberian based organizations in demanding that the Bridgestone/Firestone Corporation:

- (1) Take responsibility for the situation in Liberia and follow the law;
- (2) Assign achievable quotas for the average worker to negate the use of child laborers;
- (3) Increase wages to raise the standard of living of plantation workers;
- (4) Supply modern tools to protect workers on the job from coming into contact with harmful chemicals;
- (5) Redress all environmental damages as a result of its Liberian operations;
- (6) Stop releasing chemicals into the environment and stop exposing workers to any compounds and chemicals that are internationally recognized as most toxic; and
- (7) Fully disclose all key project payments, contracts, and concession agreements for all Firestone projects in Liberia.

FISCAL IMPACTS OF RECOMMENDATION

None.

CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECT

Firestone Corporation has operated in Liberia since 1926 and has exploited workers and the environment throughout its history, currently paying its workers \$3.19 a day in base pay for a production quota that a Firestone official acknowledged in an interview with CNN in 2005 could take up to 21 hours of work per day to meet; thereby forcing the workers to employ family members, including young children, to assist them, which has led to a lawsuit against Firestone filed in 2005 by the International Labor Rights Fund.

Firestone rubber tappers in Liberia are dependent on the company for housing, schools and medical facilities, all of which are inadequate. They have little access to safety equipment and limited access to medical facilities, and their backbreaking work leads to numerous injuries and deformities the longer a tapper is employed; with a report by the United Nations Mission in Liberia in 2006 stating that "occupational safety and health standards are not observed at the Firestone plantation" (United Nations Mission in Liberia, "Human Rights in Liberia's Rubber Plantations: Tapping into the Future" Report of the Commission for Africa, May 2006), and Firestone being given the Public Eye Award by two activist organizations, the Berne Declaration and Friends of the Earth-Switzerland, for "irresponsible corporate behavior" and "conditions approaching slavery" at the World Social Forum in Switzerland.

BACKGROUND

At the meeting of January 7, 2008, the Peace and Justice Commission approved the following motion: **M/S/C** (*Bohn/sorgen*) that the Council of the City of Berkeley approve the following recommendation expressing solidarity with the Firestone Natural Rubber Company Workers in Liberia:

WHEREAS, Berkeley Municipal Code (BMC) Chapter 369.070, establishing the Peace and Justice Commission, states that the Commission shall (A) Advise the Berkeley City Council...on all matters relating to the City of Berkeley's role in issues of peace and social justice.includingsupport for human rights and self-determination throughout the world, (and) (C) Help develop proposals for the City Council...for actions in furtherance of the goals of peace and justice"; and

WHEREAS, Firestone Corporation has operated in Liberia since 1926 and has exploited workers and the environment throughout its history, currently paying its workers \$3.19 a day in base pay for a production quota that a Firestone official acknowledged in an interview with CNN in 2005 could take up to 21 hours of work per day to meet; thereby forcing the workers to employ family members, including young children, to assist them, which has led to a lawsuit against Firestone filed in 2005 by the International Labor Rights Fund (Class Action Complaint for Injunctive Relief and Damages) in the United States; and

WHEREAS, the Bridgestone/Firestone Corporation sells automobile tires in the city of Berkeley, deriving great profit due to the near slave-labor wages and exploitative conditions under which Liberian workers toil, and the City of Berkeley procures automobiles and trucks equipped with Bridgestone/Firestone tires, with proceeds flowing directly or indirectly to that corporation; and Berkeley residents, having a strong sense of social justice, do not wish their city to be a profit center for Bridgestone/Firestone; and

WHEREAS, Firestone rubber tappers in Liberia live inside a 240 square mile plantation and are dependent on the company for housing, schools and medical facilities, all of which are inadequate; they have little access to safety equipment, and limited access to medical facilities; their backbreaking work leads to numerous injuries and deformities

the longer a tapper is employed, with a report by the United Nations Mission in Liberia in 2006 stating that "occupational safety and health standards are not observed at the Firestone plantation" (United Nations Mission in Liberia, "Human Rights in Liberia's Rubber Plantations: Tapping into the Future" Report of the Commission for Africa, May, 2006), and Firestone being given the Public Eye Award by two activist organizations, the Berne Declaration and Friends of the Earth-Switzerland, for "irresponsible corporate behavior" and "conditions approaching slavery" at a ceremony at the World Social Forum in Switzerland; and

WHEREAS, the community outside the plantation has also charged Firestone with dumping chemical waste into the Farmington River, contaminating a waterway used for fishing, bathing and drinking water, and a French laboratory recently tested water samples and found high concentrations of ammonium, nitrate and other harmful chemicals; and

WHEREAS, fed up with the abusive conditions and the lack of union democracy, workers have staged two work stoppages demanding the formation of a union to represent them, elections which took place June 30, 2007; but there are already ominous signs indicating that management and its allies are trying to place as many obstacles as possible in the way of independent union leaders.

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Council of the City of Berkeley join the International Labor Rights Forum, Friends of the Earth, NAACP, TransAfrica Forum, The RFK Memorial Center for Human Rights, and other United States and Liberian based organizations in demanding that the Bridgestone/Firestone Corporation:

- (1) Take responsibility for this situation and follow the law;
- (2) Assign achievable quotas for the average worker to negate the use of child laborers;
- (3) Increase wages to raise the standard of living of plantation workers;
- (4) Supply modern tools to protect workers on the job from coming into contact with harmful chemicals;
- (5) Redress all environmental damages as a result of its Liberian operations;
- (6) Stop releasing chemicals into the environment, and stop exposing workers to any compounds and chemicals that are internationally recognized as most toxic; and
- (7) Fully disclose all key project payments, contracts, and concession agreements for all Firestone projects in Liberia.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that copies of this Resolution be sent to the International Labor Rights Fund, International Labor Rights Forum, United Steel Workers (who will

convey the information to the Liberian rubber workers), and Dan Adomitis, President, Firestone Natural Rubber Company.

Ayes: Unanimous; **Absent:** Brody, Cohen, Litman, Seaton, Sherman.

CITY MANAGER

The City Manager takes no position on the recommendations of the Commission.

CONTACT PERSON

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