



**Farm
Labor
Organizing
Committee, AFL-CIO**

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PRESS RELEASE

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**MEMBERS OF BRITISH PARLIAMENT PLEDGE TO SUPPORT CAMPAIGN TO END
HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN US TOBACCO FIELDS**

December 13, 2013

LONDON--Members of the British Parliament received an unusual briefing yesterday, when FLOC President Baldemar Velasquez met with Members at the Westminster to report on the serious human rights abuses occurring in tobacco fields throughout the South. The meeting was a collaborative effort of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), Unite the Union, and The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF).

Velasquez shared his personal story as a former migrant farmworker, and reported on the state of tobacco farmworkers throughout North Carolina and the South, citing human rights violations commonly reported by tobacco farmworkers including pesticide and nicotine poisoning among other health problems, workplace injuries, sub-minimum wages and wage theft, and inadequate housing.

FLOC has been asking Reynolds American, Inc. (RAI) the largest tobacco company in North Carolina, to sign an agreement guaranteeing the right to freedom of association to tobacco farmworkers on all of the company's contract farms. Reynolds claims that the Company has taken steps to ensure that exploitative conditions do not exist on their contract farms, but Velasquez says "We know that worker representation is the only way that workers will have the power to speak out against these abuses and have a mechanism to resolve complaints without facing retaliation."

Velasquez made the case to Members of Parliament yesterday that other major tobacco companies, such as British American Tobacco (BAT), which owns 42% of Reynolds American, have a crucial role to play in pushing Reynolds to eliminate abuses on their contract farms. "BAT also profits from the tobacco that Reynolds sells, and therefore has a responsibility to see that fair wages, safe and healthy working conditions, and the right to organize and collectively bargain are protected in Reynolds' supply chain."

In December, 2012, Velasquez presented Reynolds with plan to eliminate human trafficking from their supply chain, improve the squalid housing that many workers live in, and alleviate the



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state of fear that keeps workers from speaking out against abusive living and working conditions. Reynolds has yet to respond to the proposal.

Shocked by Velasquez's testimony, two labor party members of Parliament, Hon. Ian Lavery and Hon. James Sheridan pledged to support FLOC's campaign. "We have got to do everything we possibly can, meetings like this are very important ... It's imperative to keep up the good work," Mr. Lavery commented.

Sheridan committed to introducing an "Early Day Motion" to Parliament to raise awareness of the issue and gather support among other Members. He also committed to circulate a sign-on letter to other Members which will be sent to BAT, calling on the company to take immediate action to ensure that Reynolds sign an agreement with FLOC and guarantee basic human rights throughout their supply chain, and citing the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights as the foundation of company's responsibility in the matter.

Following the meeting, Velasquez was joined by Rhys McCarthy, UNITE National Officer, Ron Oswald, IUF General Secretary, Aaron Chappell representing the AFL-CIO, and Owen Tudor, TUC, Head, European Union and International Relations Department, to deliver a letter to BAT Chairman Richard Burrows at BAT headquarters expressing "grave concern" about the conditions in NC tobacco fields, and calling on BAT "to use its position to intervene with Reynolds American Inc. to ensure an agreement is reached based on the Farm Labor Organizing Committee's proposal."

Simon Milton, Corporate and Regulatory Officer at BAT, received letter on behalf of Burrows and agreed to visit the tobacco fields in NC to see conditions firsthand, pending the company's approval.

"I feel very encouraged by today's meetings," commented Velasquez. "I am glad to see Members of Parliament taking steps to raise awareness among other Members and contacting BAT about their responsibility to protect human rights in the global tobacco supply chain. It will surely send a signal to BAT and Reynolds that this issue isn't going to go away until workers see improvements in the tobacco fields and have respect and representation in the workplace."

For more information about FLOC and the campaign to end human rights abuses in Southern tobacco fields, contact info@floc.com or visit www.floc.com.

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