
**Nominated for the Public Eye Global Award 2007
by the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF), USA, and Friends of the Earth USA**

Bridgestone Corporation

Headquarters:	Tokyo, Japan
Branch of trade:	Rubber products, mainly tires
Turnover / Profit:	US\$ 22.8 billion / US\$ 1.5 billion (2005)
CEO:	Shoshi Arakawa
Owned by:	Publicly-traded corporation
Employees:	123,700 (2005)

Summary

The Bridgestone Corporation has been nominated because its workers at a rubber plantation in Liberia have to endure slave-like conditions. They live in dilapidated mud huts and are forced to seek the aid of their children in the strenuous and dangerous task of extracting latex from rubber trees. Both adult and child labourers are exposed to toxic chemicals on a daily basis. Their well-being and livelihoods are further impacted by discharge from the company's rubber processing plant which has polluted the adjacent river, killing all life forms in it except one fish species. The merciless exploitation of Liberia's people and natural resources by Bridgestone is directly linked to the nation's impoverishment as the raw materials produced in Liberia are sent elsewhere for processing, thereby shutting out the possibility of added value.

Irresponsible corporate behaviour

In Liberia, the Firestone Natural Rubber Company¹, a subsidiary of the Bridgestone Corporation, operates one of the world's largest rubber plantations. Since the plantation opened in 1926, company housing, mainly single room mud huts with no electricity, running water, or toilet facilities, has never been refurbished and updated to modern safety standards. Firestone's plantation workers and their children toil under the same slave-like conditions they have endured for the past 80 years. Extracting latex, rubber's key ingredient, from rubber trees is a dangerous and strenuous endeavour. To meet the exorbitant daily quotas, children are called upon to assist their parents; this practice is encouraged by the plantation's overseers. The children's labour usually includes cutting trees with sharp tools, applying pesticides by hand, and hauling two buckets on a pole, each filled with more than 30 kg of latex. Every day, these child labourers have to work long hours and are thus denied the right to basic education. Access to the company run schools is further impeded as parents must present a costly birth certificate in order to register their children. On the huge (almost 500 km²) plantation, tappers and their families are isolated from the world, totally dependent on Firestone's inadequate provisions for everything from food to housing to health care.

¹ The Firestone Natural Rubber Company LLC is the only supplier of latex to Bridgestone Firestone North American Tire LLC, a major subsidiary of the Bridgestone Corporation.

Firestone Natural Rubber not only abuses human rights but also the environment. According to Friends of the Earth USA, local organizations have documented the continuous release of toxins into the environment. Toxic effluence from the factory has contaminated the adjacent Farmington River and other waterways, killing their once vibrant ecosystems and polluting communities that depend on river water for drinking, bathing, and fishing. Furthermore, plantation workers are exposed to toxic chemicals and compounds on a daily basis while tapping.

Consequences

Firestone Natural Rubber does not admit to its abusive practices on the Liberian plantation. In a 2005 interview, Daniel Adomitis, the president of the company, stated that each worker taps about 650 trees a day, spending a couple of minutes at each tree. Assuming a tapper spends two minutes at each tree, he or she has to work for more than 21 hours a day to meet the daily quota of 204 kg. According to the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF), plantation workers have to tap up to 1000 trees every day to meet the exorbitant quota. If workers don't fill their quotas, their wages are reduced by half. They have no choice but to seek the aid of their children. These child labourers are deprived of their childhood and of a basic education. A lack of schooling and the perpetuation of slave-like conditions tighten the workers' dependence on the company and the cycle of poverty. Waste dumping and pollution further deteriorate the workers well-being as well as their livelihood.

Current status and demands

On November 17, 2005, the International Labor Rights Fund filed a class action law suit against Firestone. The 35 plaintiffs either have been or are currently child labourers on the company's rubber plantation in Liberia. They describe their lives as "trapped in poverty and coercion". Conditions on the plantation have not changed since it opened in 1926; only the quota i.e. the number of trees that need to be tapped each day has been raised. The plaintiffs have brought their case to a US court since Liberia's legal system is still weak while recovering from years of civil war. The case is currently ongoing. In June 2006, Judge David Hamilton held a two-hour hearing on Firestone's motion to dismiss the case; the parties are now waiting for him to issue his opinion. Assuming the case is not dismissed, it will move to the discovery phase in which the ILRF will finally get to examine Firestone's documents and take depositions of its managers.

The ILRF, along with its Stop Firestone Coalition partners, demands that Firestone

- provides workers with basic rights, including a living wage and the freedom of association
- ends all child and forced labour and assigns achievable quotas
- adopts health and safety standards; stops exposing workers to toxic compounds and chemicals
- improves housing, schools, and health care centres to provide safe and comfortable facilities
- ensures public disclosure of revenue and all types of foreign investment contracts
- stops releasing chemicals into the environment and redresses all environmental damage
- publicly discloses the identity and quantity of all toxic compounds that it releases or transports.

Further information:

- www.laborrights.org
- www.stopfirestone.org