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## Burnt rubber: Firestone cuts back in Liberia

🕒 November 30, 2016 👤 cholo 📁 Liberia 💬 0



**A worker cuts the bark of a rubber tree on a plantation of US company Firestone in Harbel, Liberia, on October 17, 2016**  
© Zoom Dosso (AFP)

US rubber giant Firestone, no stranger to controversy during its 90 years in Liberia, is again stoking anger, this time for firing hundreds of workers who now fear for their livelihoods.

Firestone has carried out two waves of sackings over the last few months, aiming at a seven percent cut in the workforce because of what it describes as “ongoing significant and unsustainable losses” due to depressed rubber prices.

Workers at its plantation around an hour from the Liberian capital, aware of strong competition from Asia and the little respite in sight for the rubber market, fear they have few means of fighting back.

A worker cuts the bark of a rubber tree on a plantation of US company Firestone in Harbel, Liberia, on October 17, 2016

“The day we were told, the same day, 189 people had already been laid off,” said Harris Kerkula, president of the Firestone Agricultural Workers Union of Liberia (FAWUL), who told AFP the firm had broken a collective bargaining agreement.

After intervention by the labour ministry, a few dozen jobs was saved, but officials asked the union to accept the redundancies “because the company is going through some difficulties”, Kerkula added.

As Liberia’s biggest private sector employer, with around 8,000 staff, Firestone’s plantations in Harbel have grown into an entire community over the decades, providing a generous package of services the state cannot match.

As a result, redundancy means workers lose their free housing, money for school fees, medical care and subsidised meals in one fell swoop, with just six weeks’ severance pay for many.

“I will be going to Lofa County where I was born because if I stay here my family will die from hunger,” former employee Nyumah Tamba told AFP.

“I have been working for nine years and I am leaving with nothing,” he said, watching his three children play nearby.

- Troubled history -

Critics say Firestone has always exploited Liberians. Allegations of child labour and “slave-like” working conditions have dogged the company for years, despite more recent improvements.

In 2014, US media outlets ProPublica and PBS Frontline accused Firestone of paying off the regime of former dictator Charles Taylor during the early years of the 1989-2003 civil war to allow its operations to continue.

Children were forced to work alongside their parents to meet impossibly high production targets, others alleged.

The firm denied funding Taylor's atrocities and asserted that it simply paid taxes as required by any government. Child labour was not permitted, Firestone added.

But despite many twists and turns through some of Liberia's darkest years, these redundancies are the first since the 1980s, the company claims.

In an email to AFP, the firm defended its decision on the grounds of low natural rubber prices and high overhead costs associated with the company's concession agreement, along with Liberia's "uncertain business climate".

Furthermore, as a direct result of the 14-year civil war, when new rubber trees were not planted, production was low, Firestone said.

- Government cash cow -

The monotonous work of rubber tapping may not seem immediately attractive to workers, but the Firestone package is rare in a society with catastrophic education standards and an absence of training programmes.

More than 16,000 students are enrolled in 17 Firestone-funded schools, while the Firestone Medical Centre, a 300-bed hospital cares for 5,700 patients a month.

Since 2004, Firestone says it has paid \$1 billion (940 million euros) in tax revenue to the government — indispensable in a nation that counts the presence of just a handful of multi-nationals.

Labour Minister Neto Zarzar Lighe was careful not to criticise the firm in an interview with AFP. "A total of 500 employees were to be redundant and we were able to reduce that to 428 employees. That is significant," he said.

He defended the firm against accusations they had reneged on a pension agreement with employees, saying that as the scheme was private and non-contributory, different rules applied.

It was not always like this: Firestone and its employees enjoyed the boom years when Detroit's automobile firms were the powerhouse of the American economy.

But today life is much changed for the workers who have been let go.

Some have turned to plantations abandoned by Firestone, tapping the same trees as contractors and climbing perilously high up the exhausted trunks with the hope of finding some remaining latex.

"(Firestone) give us \$180 (169 euros) for a ton of rubber. To get the one ton you have to work for at least two months because we climb the tree before getting to the liquid," said Zayzay Flomo, 30. "It's pure slavery".

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SOURCE: Daily Mail Online/Associated Press

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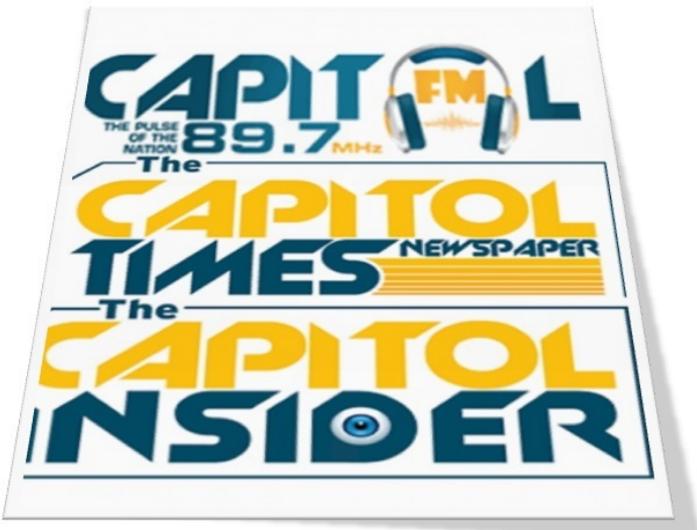
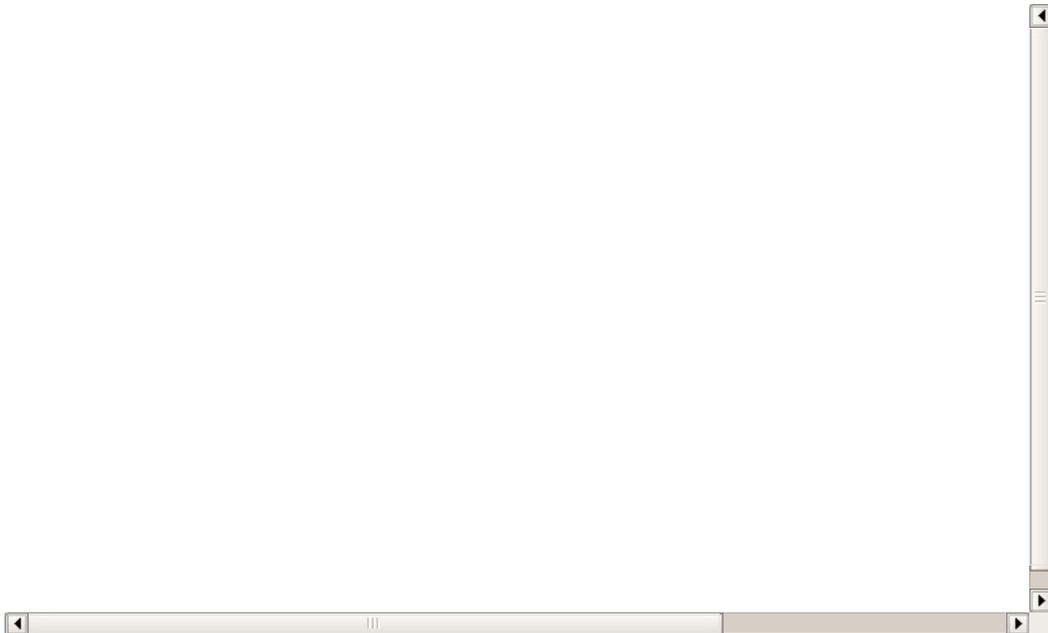
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Contact the Managing Editor:

**Mobile Lines:** (Liberia) +231886461010 / +231555-461010 / +231777461010 (USA)  
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