

# Shaking trees of solidarity

*Fair trade nourishes Georgia pecan farmers*

**P**ecan trees are planted in long, even rows, spaced far apart so trucks can drive alongside to shake them and loosen the nuts.

What falls from the leafy trees is hope and security encased in a hard, weathered shell. The hands reaching for the Georgia pecans belong to African-American farmers. A co-op of African-American women shell the nuts before selling them on the Fair Trade market.

The 125-acre farm near Albany in southwestern Georgia is rented on a yearly basis by Diane Johnson. She has to keep the grass down, weeds away, and trees pruned and sprayed, similar to tending fruit trees in the Northeast.

"She can't afford to irrigate so she relies on Mother Nature," said Kathleen Donahue, NYSUT vice president, who joined Secretary-Treasurer Lee Cutler and others on a domestic Fair Trade trip to Georgia.

"Their plight is similar to many small-scale farmers around the world, plus they have a profound history of racial discrimination," said Anne Kelly, trip coordinator.

She was joined by Nancy Close, East Islip Teachers Association president; Walter Robertson of Dunkirk TA; Nadia Resnikoff of Middle County TA, and Brian O'Shaughnessy, executive director of the New York State Labor-Religion Coalition.

African-American farmers numbered 1 million in 1920; now there are fewer than 18,000, Kelly said.

Workers struggle to keep their farms, support their families and purchase homes, "all the things I think any worker would want," Kelly said.

## Concerns eased

Fair Trade helps ease concerns about unpredictable markets.

"(Diane) relies on a portion of her crop going to the co-op, where the price is set for a guaranteed income," Donahue said. The rest goes to auction.

Here's how it works: Equal



BRIAN O'SHAUGHNESSY

**NYSUT Vice President Kathleen Donahue, right, and teacher Nancy Close, center, get a lesson in pecan processing and fair trade for farmers in rural Georgia.**

## SOCIAL JUSTICE

Exchange, a company for living wages and fair prices, buys the pecans from the co-op. The partnership is an outgrowth of a collaboration between the Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, which also provides farmers business classes.

The pecans are processed in a cleaning facility that separates debris and cracks the shell. Then, at the Southern Alternatives Agriculture Cooperative, the women nimbly peel away the shells and separate pecan pieces.

The first year 6,000 pounds of the golden nuts were shelled and packed. The next year, it was 25,000 pounds.

As community-based workers, their day is far from done when the last pecan hits the packing bags. The women head to the Smithville Neighborhood Freedom Center in a nearby rural, poverty-prone area to offer after-school tutoring and support for 40 to 60 kids.

## Did you know?



- Georgia is the top pecan-producing state in the country.
- A symmetrical tree with a stout trunk and many hearty branches, the pecan tree grows to be 70 to 100 feet tall, and spreads out 40 to 75 feet.

"They don't stop with what's making money for them," said Donahue. "They put it into community participation."

NYSUT has done a lot of work with international Fair Trade, said Cutler, who oversees social justice issues for the union. "This was domestic, and anything we can do to raise members' awareness would be important."

Delegates to NYSUT's annual conventions in 2006 and 2008 directed NYSUT to build support for fair trade through education and awareness, encourage purchasing of fair trade products and promote Fair Trade solidarity.

— Liza Frenette