

Union Busting

Plantation workers are often effectively denied the right to freely organise into trade unions. Dismissal for organising union activity or even just joining a union is common. Workers are often afraid to stand up for their rights in case they are fired. In most countries where bananas are produced for export, no state financial support is available for unemployed people. Union members in Costa Rica are systematically "black-listed" and unable to get work on any banana plantation. In countries like Colombia, where civil war is rampant, banana union members can also be at risk of their lives. In Ecuador, in May 2002, the owner of the biggest banana company in the country sent hundreds of armed men to stop a peaceful strike by 800 workers that had recently formed a trade union, injuring 19. There are still occasional cases of violent repression there today.

In Britain, all workers have the legal right to join trade unions so that they can freely learn about what their employment rights are and have protection if their employer fails to respect any of these rights. Trade unions also offer 'life long learning', the opportunity to gain skills throughout your life not just when at school or college. The governments of most banana producing countries have also ratified International Labour Organisation standards in their national laws giving workers a number of rights, including the freedom to join an independent trade union, but these laws are often not enforced or are ignored by the powerful banana companies.

The British government believes that trade unions have



a key role to play in reducing poverty in developing countries – which is where most banana producing areas are to be found.

Workers occupying the Ecuadorian Labour Ministry in protest at corruption. Photo: FENACLE

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and core labour standards

The international Labour Organisation (ILO) is a United Nations structure with 171 member states. Governments, employers and trade unions participate in its work. More than 140 countries meeting at the ILO in 1998 re-affirmed their commitment to core labour standards. Core labour standards are rights which all workers should enjoy by virtue of being human beings. The eight core ILO conventions include:

- Freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining;
- the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour;
- the effective abolition of child labour;
- the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment

Unfortunately, many of these rights are not respected

in many parts of the world, resulting in gross injustices against vulnerable people. Respect for core labour standards does not imply uniform labour conditions across developed and developing states which would be fiercely opposed by developing states seeking to operate in an increasingly competitive market. The standards are a minimal level below which no one should sink. They represent a belief that globalisation must work for the whole society, and that governments should not compete away the basic rights of their workers, to encourage companies to relocate and invest in their countries.



Race to the bottom



Photo: The Fairtrade Foundation

Race to the Bottom

There is a “race to the bottom” being pursued in the banana industry as companies relocate from country to country in search of ever cheaper bananas. But somebody has to pay a cost for food to be ‘cheap’ and in the case of bananas this cost is being paid by hundreds of thousands of workers, small farmers and their communities.

The impacts of this race to the bottom are devastating – migration, gender discrimination, cancer and even death caused by unprotected agrochemical use, environmental damage and a widespread failure to respect internationally agreed labour standards including, increasingly, the right to join an independent trade union.

Just five companies (Dole, Del Monte, Chiquita, Fyffes and Noboa) control 80% of the international banana trade. However, the race to the bottom in the industry is now being led by European supermarkets which have become the most powerful players along the international banana supply chain. For three years in the UK, Tesco and Asda engaged in a ‘banana price war’ matching each other’s price cuts within the hour to such a low level that it is now impossible for many plantation workers to earn a living – or even a legal minimum - wage. As supermarkets slash the price of bananas – their single biggest profit making item – they do not reduce their profit margins. Instead supermarkets lower the price they pay to suppliers who pass the cuts back along the supply chain to the workers. At the same time, many supermarkets deny responsibility for the social and environmental impacts of their behaviour in producer countries.

Long hours and low wages

Plantation workers work long hours – often 10-12 hour days – in unbearable heat. To reduce costs, companies often allow very poor working conditions which can threaten the health and lives of workers. Plantation workers in Latin America can earn as little as 1% of the final price of a banana. In Nicaragua, workers earn as little as 75p a day; in Ecuador, between £2.50 and £4 a day. A legal minimum wage exists in all producer countries but this is often not enough for workers to afford to live properly. Workers need to earn enough money to enable them to pay for their basic needs such as housing, food, education, transport and clothing, also known as a ‘living wage’. Wages are also often only for a working day of 8 hours, but overtime is compulsory and unpaid.

Women and children

Sexual harassment and discrimination against women are common on plantations. As companies seek to reduce costs, they employ fewer women, seeing them as ‘high cost, high risk’ because they have the right to maternity leave and often have childcare needs. It is estimated that now less than 10% of people working in the banana industry are women. Those that do get jobs often suffer discrimination. For example, in Costa Rica women have to prove they are not pregnant before being offered a job.

A recent report by a human rights group reported widespread child labour in Ecuador. Although it is against the law, there are under-age young people working on plantations instead of attending school; this is so that they can help increase the family income to a decent level.

Environment and health

Displacement of Indigenous people

The colonisation of large areas of land by banana companies has often driven out or threatened the survival of indigenous populations through the contamination of their rivers, pressure on their lands, as well as the negative effect on their cultural identity when their youth became workers on the plantations.

Migration

Labour is increasingly provided by migrant workers. In Belize, for example, many of the workers moved from Honduras and Guatemala as plantations there closed. In Costa Rican nearly half the work-force are poor Nicaraguan migrants, whilst in Ecuador more and more workers come over the border from Peru. Living in non-settled communities with little support from family or other social structures, such workers are isolated and vulnerable to exploitation.

Serious Health Hazards

Workers receive little education about their rights or basic health and safety. For example, pesticides are often applied by hand directly on the plants or from backpack sprayers carried by workers. Although most countries require use of protective clothing by law, the companies often do very little to implement this. Where protective clothing is provided, it is often inadequate and highly uncomfortable to wear in the oppressive tropical heat. Workers risk cancer, sterility or other serious diseases from pesticide poisoning. Workplace accidents are also common as workers employed in both the plantations and pack-houses undertake back-breaking and repetitive work in hot and humid conditions. There are unlikely to be medical staff on the plantation and doctors are often employed by the companies and therefore unwilling to identify exposure to chemicals or industrial injuries.



Photo: The Fairtrade Foundation

DBCP

For years, the banana companies Dole, Del Monte, and Chiquita, and the chemical companies Dow, Shell and Occidental have faced lawsuits from thousands of Latin American workers over the harmful effects of the highly toxic chemical nematicide Nemagon (DBCP) which include birth defects, damage to the liver and kidneys, and allegedly caused sterility in male workers. It continued to be used on banana plantations, in some cases up to 1990, after it was banned for use in the U.S. in 1977, and even though the companies were aware of the risks encountered by workers.

Although DBCP has now been banned, such a tragedy could recur. The chemicals used on the plantations include at least four that are classified by the World Health Organisation as extremely hazardous (the strongest classification) including paraquat, and three organophosphates not approved for use in the UK.



Life on the plantation



Photo: The Fairtrade Foundation

Poor living conditions

Workers often live in housing provided by the plantation owners but this can be of very poor quality, particularly the accommodation provided for single men. Plantations are often located far from nearby towns and offer few amenities for the workers and families that live on the plantations.

No Job Security

It is common practice on banana plantations to hire people on short-term contracts of 3-6 months. Workers on short term contracts do not have many legal rights, and these contracts can be used as a threat against those trying to organise unions. Short-term labour is easier to hire and fire.

Just imagine working on a banana plantation.....

There are vast fields of banana trees in straight rows, stretching as far as the eye can see. A dirt road separates the fields, with a packing station at the far end of the road and a railway line bordering the plantation on one side. Lorries carrying the familiar logo of Chiquita or Del Monte bananas trundle along the dusty roads. It's hot, the midday sun is directly overhead, but you and your fellow workers have been in the fields for six hours already. You will have a strictly timed one hour lunch break later but will then have to go back to work until six or seven in the evening.

In the packing station, women workers stand for 10-12 hours a day, their hands constantly in water that is full of the chemicals used to clean the bananas and preserve them for their long journey. They try to ignore the pain in their arms, legs and backs which comes from bending over the vats of water all day long.

Back out on the plantation, a light rain starts to fall. Or so you think, until you feel the sting and see your skin raised in a red rash – chemicals again! The aerial sprayer passes over the plantations regularly, often with no advance notice to the workers underneath. What's more, the chemicals seep into the earth, contaminating the groundwater, which supplies the local people with the water they drink and wash in. What can you do to make the banana trade fair for workers and farmers?