



**WORLD BANANA FORUM  
Rome 7th and 8th December 2009**

**COORDINATING BODY OF LATIN AMERICAN BANANA  
and AGROINDUSTRIAL WORKERS' UNIONS - COLSIBA**

**A. Working conditions and trade union rights  
in the banana plantations of Latin America**

**Introduction**

The Coordinating Body of Latin American Banana and Agroindustrial Workers' Unions – COLSIBA held its 10<sup>th</sup> delegate conference on 6th-7th August in Sullana, Peru. The issues analysed and the resolutions agreed by the banana trade unions at that event are synthesised in this proposal to the World Banana Forum. This first set of proposals represents the view of the Latin American banana trade union movement on the issues of greatest concern to the men and women who work in the plantations: the socio-economic situation for banana workers and the problems concerning the freedom to organise in trade unions.

The expectation of COLSIBA's member organisations attending the Forum is not just to present the vision of the problems, but is also to be able to secure a commitment from the different stakeholders in world banana trade concerning the link in the chain that is most affected by the cyclical crises, i.e. the workers. We hope that we will not leave Rome empty-handed or with weak commitments that lead only to minimal improvements.

**1) On the socio-economic situation facing banana workers**

Despite the financial crisis affecting the majority of consumer countries supplied by Latin America, consumption levels have not fallen in the last ten years. What is happening however is a downward trend in prices that is due to the dominance of the retail companies. The "race to the bottom" has not been reversed; quite the contrary, the tendency is for it to accelerate unless we do something to stop it.

The situation of rising costs of production coupled with lower and lower banana prices has harsh repercussions on the living and working conditions of plantation workers.

This unfettered “race to the bottom” translates into a series of changes in production conditions which can be summarised as follows:

- low wages;
- greater intensity of work (more work for less remuneration) and the generalised adoption of wage systems linked to productivity, piece work, in a high-pressure environment that is very physically and mentally demanding;
- flexibilisation or disappearance of the concept of eight-hour working days as established in international labour standards, as well as of access to healthcare and other social benefits;
- deregulation of employment contracts and the emergence of labour sub-contracting, which leads to job insecurity;
- difficulties in enforcing national and international labour laws;
- an increase in levels of aggression and intolerance on the part of some employers, and criminalisation of trade union activity in the plantations.

These problems have become more and more widespread across Latin America, dressed up as the need to achieve “competitive production”. In practice however, they amount to another form of exploitation. In no country do the standard of living indices for workers show any real improvements. Only workers who have been able to exercise their right to collective bargaining have managed to achieve some improvements in their standard of living.

The concepts of a fixed wage and job security have virtually disappeared in the majority of banana plantations. Independent certification bodies (social and environmental responsibility initiatives) have either turned a blind eye or simply do not consider these as being important factors.

There are groups of workers who are particularly vulnerable, notably undocumented migrant workers, children, ethnic indigenous workers and women. The issue of vulnerable workers is one on which COLSIBA places special emphasis.

How can we pretend to be feeding the world, when those who produce food are the last to eat or clothe themselves properly or have a decent place to live?

It is perfectly fair that producers are demanding better prices for their fruit provided that this translates into real improvements in living conditions for workers. The accumulation of excessive wealth by just one sector of the industry (clearly we are referring to the retailers) is the key point that needs

to be recognised in the Forum, so that we can create a new basis for discussion on value in the production and trade chain.

We believe that discussions of this nature could have positive repercussions in the international food economy.

As COLSIBA we consider that the Forum should recognise that the plantation workers' sector is the most affected by the inequalities and inequities in the production and international trade of bananas. We believe that the Forum should call on all stakeholders to rethink the measures that have been applied to production and working practices over the last ten years and that have affected hired labour more than any other sector.

## **2) On trade union freedom**

Trade union freedom and the right of the worker to join a trade union organisation of his/her choice remains an aspiration for the great majority. In its meetings COLSIBA continues to verify the series of problems encountered in the plantations for workers who form or join a trade union, at times putting people's personal security in jeopardy. It is a constant and all-consuming struggle. The reality is that the problems described above can only be resolved if workers are able to freely organise in trade unions.

Although there are no tangible improvements to show for it, many banana companies in Latin America continue to support mechanisms that substitute for trade unions in order to demonstrate their good labour practices to consumers through private certification. These private or independent certifications, programmes of corporate social responsibility and some manifestations of "fair trade" have proved to be no more than palliatives, lacking any credible means of verification that the Latin American banana industry is acting with social and environmental responsibility.

In the light of this reality, COLSIBA proposes that the Forum makes a clear statement on the need to form – and the need to respect the right of workers to form their own – independent trade unions, as well as the need to formalise relations between capital and labour through collective bargaining – a "*balanced negotiation between two independent and autonomous parties*"<sup>1</sup> – as enshrined in the standards and conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

In common with all other banana industry stakeholders, the trade union movement wants to see improvements in the banana trade, but insists that these will not be possible without the involvement of workers and their trade unions.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from report by Dr Adrian Goldin to the ILO Committee of Experts, 2007.

## **B. Health, safety and environment issues in the plantations**

The men and women working in the Latin American banana industry have heard, time and again, expressions of goodwill by different industry stakeholders on issues related to the environment, health and the key issue of the use of agrochemical products in the plantations. However, there has been very little action on the ground to address the issues. Often the motivation for bringing attention to bear on these problems is to safeguard the health of the consumer or the public image of a company and not the health of banana workers.

All stakeholders can understand the importance of the issues, but it is workers who have the fewest options when it comes to change. In Central America alone it is estimated that the industry uses eight kilograms of agrochemical for every plantation worker. If we could for example reduce this average to two or three kilograms per worker, this would be a significant step forward. It would be insufficient though, because there is also a need for education, prevention, equipment and production processes that are adapted to the social and economic requirements of what the ILO calls decent work.

For COLSIBA, there is no reason why banana plantations should continue to be a slow Auschwitz, as in the well-known case of DBCP-Nemagon. We should therefore focus in on those aspects of agrochemical use where a real commitment from the banana industry can deliver results. Maybe, despite all the social and political injustices that prevail in the producer countries, you will continue to find enough workers for your plantations, but what you are not going to find soon is fertile land and water; we are already seeing the warning signs.

### **1) Reducing agrochemical use - the watch-word for the new era of the banana industry**

Our first proposal to the Forum on these issues is that the reduction of agrochemical use is taken on by the industry as a top priority, thereby giving a clear signal to the international chemical industry from those involved in banana production.

According to one report, the chemical industry invested over US\$ 18 billion in new generation products for the banana industry (ACORBAT Congress, 2008)<sup>2</sup> A new orientation needs to be given to this industry, which, as is evident, can afford to reorient its innovation efforts.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.freshplaza.es/news\\_detail.asp?id=13778](http://www.freshplaza.es/news_detail.asp?id=13778)The chemical industry is spending over \$18 billion in R&D on new generation chemicals for the next 8 years

Similarly, as part of this new orientation, signals could be given to other agricultural technology industries to initiate new research and propose products and services to improve banana production.

Such an orientation would require a general commitment by producer and consumer country governments to reach an agreement or develop an international framework for engagement in a step-by-step process of reduction in the use of agrochemicals.

Such steps should be incorporated as indicators into the phytosanitary standards set by the US government and the European Union, such that they become an international reference-point on phytosanitary issues, residue-free production and public health.

Private initiatives that do inspections and give certifications in the area of environment and health could push this work forward in the short term.

Phytosanitary standards in international trade are important, and it is urgent to improve monitoring of them, just as it is necessary and urgent to develop legal tools that enable the sanctioning of those countries or producers that do not comply with minimum standards.

## **2) Strengthening agrochemical reduction initiatives in banana production**

For decades studies have been done on reducing agrochemical use in banana production by groups of producing companies and scientific research institutions, but they have not met with the necessary backing. In particular, it may well be the case that the structure of the international banana market and reasons of commercial competitiveness have had an adverse impact on the continuity of such work as well as on the implementation of any innovations in practice.

Experiences of CIRAD (International Centre for Agricultural Research for Development) of implementing new practices in French Caribbean island plantations show that significant results can be achieved not only concerning agrochemical use, but also in terms of productivity and quality - issues which are of course areas of interest to producers. We call on this Forum to pay attention to such serious initiatives in this field.

Our second proposal therefore concerns the strengthening of agrochemical reduction initiatives. This could be achieved through an international agreement between banana industry stakeholders (including producer and consumer country governments) to establish an international network for data and information exchange on low-agrochemical-input or other alternative production systems. It is important that the Forum recognise that resources and institutions exist to do this work, but that what has been lacking is the political will and the preparedness to share information and resources to allow it to move forward.

The Forum should also recognise that organic production is a system that fulfils the conditions that we have been advocating. However, it requires the creation of an alternative to the conventional production system and could be seen as an objective in a time-frame agreed by the different parties.

It will be valuable and important to ensure that these initiatives involve the participation of workers through their trade union organisations.

### **3) Improving workers' occupational health**

As representatives of labour organisations, COLSIBA cannot leave out the need for action on the current occupational health situation in the plantations.

It may well be that many of the chemical products applied in the plantations do not represent any danger to consumers, but they are real poisons for workers, the neighbouring communities and the environment.

Reducing agrochemical use would be a very important step forward – as already made clear – but there is also much scope for improvements in field practices. It is not just a question of protective equipment and good labour practices, but also we need to address problems linked to the current high-intensity working regime.

With pride, many producer country governments, companies and producer associations announce that they achieve productivity increases year on year: how they have gone from 700 plants per hectare to 2000 per hectare in a few years; they also measure labour productivity in units per hectare.

In some countries we have reached an average of 0,7 workers per hectare. These achievements are not only based on technological improvements, but are also based on more and more intensive labour practices that are undermining the health of workers.

Piece-work systems and competition between workers (produce more and earn more) take into consideration neither occupational health standards nor workplace risks. Trade unions complain more and more frequently about the effects on workers' physical and mental condition. Fatigue and stress are problems that impact negatively on the family and social life of workers.

For us as Latin American trade union organisations, it would be important that the World Banana Forum adopt a resolution on the improvement of workers' occupational health, provided, on the one hand, that current working conditions are taken as the base-line, and, on the other hand, that free trade unions are taken as being the only real and democratic vehicle for improving working conditions.

In all producer countries, national legislation allows for the establishment of workplace-based Occupational Health & Safety Committees and for workers to be represented through their trade union. Nobody has ever demonstrated

that there is any more efficient mechanism than a trade union for monitoring occupational health and the environment.

The proposals made by COLSIBA above should be included as part of the overall agreement made by the World Banana Forum.

## **C. Women's employment in the plantations**

### **General background on women in the banana industry**

Women constitute more than half the population of Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala. However, despite being in the majority, there is a significant lack of gender equity when it comes to women's access to the labour market. This is due to the fact that women still have reproductive responsibilities, and remain invisible or are not valued in the current economy, despite the huge efforts that we women have been making to make our contribution visible in the national gross domestic product (GDP).

Furthermore, even though we are more than 50% of the population that is of an age to work, we only form 46% of the active workforce, whilst men form 54%. Women's economic activity continues to be concentrated in the informal economy, and in Latin America we do not diverge from the tendency for women to be involved mainly in social, community and personal service activities, a sector that is a declining proportion of GDP in many countries. All this leads to women having less control of economic resources and therefore to us being the poorest amongst the poor.

Specifically in the banana industry, recent reports from the Women's Secretariats of COLSIBA member organisations show a drop in the number of women employed in what were traditionally women's jobs of between 10 and 25%. This is due to discriminatory policies towards employing women on the part of companies that see us expensive and high risk for reasons of our gender, and because of maternity and childcare, amongst other issues. This means that there has been a fall in women's employment in areas where the banana industry is one of the most important sources of employment for the population.

Working life for women in the banana industry starts at an early age, usually between 16 and 20 years old. Women tend to have few or no qualifications, low levels of schooling, work 8 to 14 hour days, and have minimal occupational health protection, thereby presenting risks because of the constant exposure to chemicals, etc.

Other studies indicate that 65% of women banana workers are single heads of household, have between 3 and 5 children and are the only breadwinners in their families. On top of that, women have to put up with sexual

harassment at work and greater poverty, characterised by low levels of schooling, limited access to healthcare, housing and decent sanitary conditions. Finally, in countries like Colombia, women continue to be affected by the armed conflict in the banana producing regions.

### **1) Better access to employment and job security**

The reduction in the number of jobs for women in the industry in these countries is not just a consequence of the global economic crisis, as the multinational and national banana companies would have us believe, but is mainly caused by the expansion of indirect contracting or the use of sub-contractors. It is this that results in reduced job security, with different forms of precarious employment conditions, and in low wages and greater casualisation of labour supply.

All this has a negative impact on us women workers, since we are the first to lose our stable jobs and the accompanying benefits and instead are obliged to accept precarious employment, thereby plunging us into informal labour relationships and exposing us to the worst forms of exploitation and discrimination.

The reality in the majority of banana companies is that they are employing less and less women workers; those who used to contract more women are no longer doing so. It is therefore urgent to act to counter this policy.

Other barriers to employment still exist: in most countries of the region women have to show a medical certificate to prove we are not pregnant or else have had our tubes tied, despite the fact that in some countries like Colombia the law expressly prohibits employers from denying access to employment for such reasons.

Women workers in the banana industry also earn lower wages than men: according to Banana Link, in countries like Ecuador where trade union organisation is weak, men earn much more than women.

### **2) Women call for inclusion**

In spite of the fact that international legal mechanisms exist - such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women; established by the General Assembly of the United Nations (Resolution 2263, 7 November 1967) and others at the ILO such as ILO Convention 111 (1958), the Declaration (1967) and Convention (1979) on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women - there are, even today, real conditions of inequality that still persist and affect the access of women to welfare and social development.

The ILO promotes 'Decent Work' as a human right and the incorporation of gender equity as a vital cross-cutting issue. The aim is that women as well as



men should be able to access productive work in conditions of equity, freedom, security and human dignity, i.e. be guaranteed decent work.

We therefore call on the Forum to recognise the need to act at local, national and international levels to ensure that the banana companies, both national and multinational, governments, retailers and certifying bodies:

- include women in the workplace, in conditions of wage equality;
- generate employment opportunities without discrimination as to sex or age;
- treat women with dignity, rejecting mistreatment and aggression and, in particular, sexual assault and harassment
- respect the social function of maternity and breastfeeding;
- do not require women to prove they are not pregnant or have had their tubes tied in order to be given work;
- develop flexible programmes of technical training supported by companies and governments during women's working hours;
- respect the right to join or form a trade union and to collective bargaining;
- protect the health of workers with special emphasis on the specific health needs of women;
- establish policies giving access to education on women's rights issues.

For COLSIBA it is also urgent that a study is undertaken to clarify the impacts of the economic crisis on communities involved in the banana industry, particularly its impacts on women's lives.

We ask that these proposals for the equitable employment of women be taken up by the World Banana Forum and that all banana industry stakeholders integrate them into their policies, business practices and social monitoring activities.

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