

# The Truth on your Table: Facts about Women Workers in the Banana Industry

Produced by STITCH –  
Supporting Women Workers in the US and Central America



## Banana Basics :

Bananas are produced in countries throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa. The largest exporter of bananas is Ecuador; 2<sup>nd</sup> is Costa Rica; 3<sup>rd</sup> is Colombia, 4<sup>th</sup> is the Philippines, 5<sup>th</sup> is Panama, and 6<sup>th</sup> is Guatemala, and 7<sup>th</sup> is the Caribbean.<sup>5</sup> Honduras exports less in comparison to these other countries, although bananas make up a significant percentage of its exports.<sup>2</sup> For Nicaragua, the fall of coffee prices may increase the importance of bananas in its economy.

- The US is the single largest importing country, with a market share of 32%. Next is the European Union, with a 27% market share.<sup>3</sup>
- Banana exports have traditionally been dominated by “The Big Three:” Chiquita, Dole, and Del Monte\*. These three companies control 2/3 of the world market.<sup>1</sup> However, the Ecuador-based Noboa company is rapidly gaining ground. Noboa pays workers misery-level wages and violently crushes union efforts; the company cheats independent producers by regularly paying less than the legally-mandated minimum per box. Through such tactics, Noboa has been able to keep its production prices down and sell its bananas cheap, thus attracting Northern buyers.<sup>2</sup>
- Bananas are the single most profitable item in US supermarkets.<sup>2</sup> For every dollar spent by consumers on bananas, 90¢ stays in the North—34¢ of that with retailers (supermarkets and chain stores). Only 5¢ goes to producers<sup>1</sup>—to be divided up among managers, workers, production, and maintenance costs.
- The Latin American banana export industry is currently in crisis due to factors including:
  - Saturation of markets. Many producers predicted that the fall of the Soviet Union would open up a vast new market. Producers rushed to expand their plantations and increase production. When the hoped-for market failed to materialize, the sector found itself in an overproduction crisis, which in turn provoked pricing wars between countries to provide the best and cheapest bananas.<sup>3</sup> Around the same time, the European Union changed its import regime, to the detriment of Latin American producers. Only countries that lowered production costs—i.e., slashed wages and benefits for workers—remained viable.
  - Consolidation of global markets. While some small, local producers have been able to take advantage of the growing European Fair Trade market and the organic market, most are forced to sell their fruit to the transnationals - Chiquita, Dole, Del Monte, Noboa, and Fyffe’s. If they don’t compete amongst each other for these companies’ business, they have no way for their product to reach the Northern market. The transnationals, in turn, must answer to a even higher power: supermarket chains. Increasingly consolidated, supermarket chains can now dictate wholesale prices, product quality, and even in-store product promotion (which the banana companies must then pay for).

The cost of the crisis in the banana sector is born by workers, who see jobs disappear, wages drop, and unions destroyed.



Photo - Bananalink/Nick Shaw

### Bananeras:

#### Women Workers in the Banana Sector

- Nearly half a million women live and work in the banana zones throughout Latin America. Many of these women work in the packing plants of banana plantations for at least part of the year.<sup>1</sup>
- Women's work on the banana plantations is concentrated in the packing plant, where bananas are prepared for shipping to foreign markets. Women are principally involved in the *desmane*, or cutting of fruit into small bunches. Women also wash and select fruit, separating bananas destined for the US market—which must be large and unblemished—from those of lesser quality destined for the local market. Women also prepare the fruit for packaging, applying preservative substances and stickers, and pack the fruit in boxes for shipping.<sup>2</sup>
- Work in the packing houses is fast-paced, physical labor. As producers strive to keep up with market pressures, women workers see themselves obligated to meet higher and higher production goals, which frequently leads to repetitive motion injuries. Other risks identified by women banana workers include psychological strain due to high production goals and excessive control by management, sexual harassment, constant dampness as a result of working all day alongside huge vats of water, and social risks tied to low and unstable salaries.<sup>2</sup>
- Women workers are often doubly affected by chemicals sprayed on banana plants. First, they come into direct contact with these chemicals when they handle fruit in the packing plant. This can cause skin allergies and respiratory ailments, which are worse still if workers are not provided gloves. Second, women living on or near plantations come into contact with these chemicals again at home in domestic tasks involving pesticide-contaminated water.<sup>2</sup>
- There is only work in the packing plant when there is fruit. In the periods when there is no fruit, many women workers find themselves unemployed. Even during the harvest, many women do not have stable work hours. When there is a lot of fruit, they may be forced to work many long days in a row; when there is less fruit, they may work only a three- or four-day week.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, they are kept “on call,” which makes it very difficult to have a part-time job to supplement their income.<sup>2</sup>
- In many areas, banana work is the only work available to women, leading to migration to urban areas or across borders (for example, from Nicaragua to Costa Rica).<sup>1</sup> The high degree of job instability among rural women in banana-growing areas also frequently leads to migration to large urban centers, where these women join the large pool of feminine labor working in the maquila (textile export) sector.
- Most women banana workers are between 20 and 40 years old. However, this is changing as companies have lately begun to contract women as young as 17 and no longer want to hire women over age 35.<sup>1</sup>
- Many women banana workers are single mothers. The average family in the banana zones has five members.<sup>1</sup>
- Though incomes vary widely throughout Latin America, the average woman banana worker earns from \$100-\$150 a month.<sup>1</sup>
- The majority of women banana workers have not been able to finish primary school. An estimated 35% cannot read or write.<sup>1</sup>

## Banana Unions: Struggling against the “Race to the Bottom”



Since the late 1950s, banana workers in Central America have generally worked on plantations owned by Dole, Chiquita and Del Monte. Many, though not all, of these plantations were unionized. Through years of organizing and hard-fought labor struggles, by the 1990s banana workers enjoyed some of the highest wages and best job security among agricultural workers in the region. Then the “Race to the Bottom” began.

### An Overview of Average Daily Wages<sup>5</sup>

Country	Union	Non-Union
Ecuador	virtually no unions	\$2-5
Nicaragua	\$3-4	\$2
Guatemala	\$7	\$4
Honduras	\$7	\$4
Panama	\$8	\$6-7
Colombia	\$8	\$6-7
Costa Rica	\$9	\$6

\*While women’s daily wage is generally the same as men’s on union plantations, women’s actual earnings tend to be from 40-70% less since they can only work when there is fruit ready to be packed.



- Environmental disasters have hit banana unions hard. Honduran banana unions, which had 11,500 members before Hurricane Mitch, saw their numbers drop to 8,000 as a result of layoffs. In Guatemala, the largest banana union lost around 700 of its approximately 4,250 members. Thus weakened, the union was forced to renegotiate its contract under extremely difficult circumstances.
- The “Race to the Bottom” in the banana sector is fueled by multinationals’ use of independent, anti-union, and non-union producers. Thus, more and more Del Monte banana production is being shifted away from plantations that are direct subsidiaries. Dole is using a combination of joint ventures and independent producers, and only Chiquita retains a large percentage of its own production.
- In making these changes, banana companies are responding to those further up on the globalization food chain: stockholders and supermarket chains. Both want to see production costs cut in order to boost their own profits.
- The banana industry now resembles the textile industry, in its use of subcontracting and temporary labor in order to avoid the social and legal responsibilities of employing workers directly. This means that when local producers wage fierce anti-union campaigns, the multinational often claims to have no responsibility or power regarding workers’ rights. The exception here is Chiquita. In the *Regional Worker Rights Agreement* signed by Chiquita, the IUF and COLSIBA in 2001, Chiquita acknowledges responsibility for working conditions on its suppliers’ plantations.
- In Ecuador, banana unions were virtually destroyed in the 1970s, and repression of union efforts there continues. Ecuadorian banana wages are significantly lower than those in other regions, leading to cheaper prices on the international market. The price of a box of bananas is \$2.70 in Ecuador, compared to between \$4.50 and \$5 in Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia. Moreover, exporters like Noboa are often pay even less than official minimum prices. This means Ecuadorian bananas are cheaper and more profitable for multinationals and supermarket chains in comparison to bananas from other Latin American countries.

## The result of the Race to the Bottom? Union plantations lose business and Central American workers and their families lose power and access to decent working conditions.

- Meanwhile, workers in Ecuador face dismal conditions, such as
  - the denial of the right to organize
  - classified as day laborers, most workers do not get basic benefits such as health care or accident coverage
  - miserable wages
  - exposure to agrochemicals and aerial spraying with little or no regulation
  - frequent sexual harassment in the packing plants where women work
- Banana unions throughout Latin America have joined together to confront these issues. COLSIBA, or the Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Sindicatos Bananeros (Latin American Coordination of Banana Unions) formed in 1993 to strengthen solidarity among banana unions and enable them to negotiate jointly with multinationals. Many of the Central and Latin American unions are also affiliated to the IUF – the International Union of Food Workers.
- In the April 2001 Worker Rights Agreement negotiated by COLSIBA and the IUF, the company pledged to respect workers’ right to organize on any plantation owned by or producing for Chiquita. The agreement was hailed as a landmark step towards improving workers’ lives and working conditions. While still new, the agreement has been used to support new union organizing efforts in Honduras and other countries.

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You can help! Join STITCH!

**Join the campaign to support women organizing in the banana industry!**

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Or see our website: [www.stitchonline.org](http://www.stitchonline.org)

**Get involved in the Fall Speaking Tour of Banana workers from Central America and Ecuador!**

Contact STITCH for more information, or tour co-sponsors US/LEAP

([www.usleap.org](http://www.usleap.org)) and the Campaign for Labor Rights at [clr@afgj.org](mailto:clr@afgj.org) for more details.

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<sup>1</sup> “Mujeres trabajadoras bananeras: desafíos y esperanzas,” COLSIBA, April 2002.

<sup>2</sup> “Health Risks for Women Banana Workers.” Ana Victoria Naranjo, ASEPROLA, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> “Crisis in the Banana Sector,” Bob Perillo, US/LEAP

<sup>3</sup> “Projections for Supply and Demand of Bananas to 2005,” Committee on Commodity Problems, Intergovernmental Group on Bananas and Tropical Fruits, May 1999.

<sup>4</sup> interview with Bob Perillo, US/LEAP, September 2002

<sup>5</sup> El Comercio, Ecuador October 20, 2000

<sup>5</sup> Supplied by German Zepeda, COSIBAH General Secretary