

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU OnLine...

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Spotlight interview with Edelina Garcia (Ecuador, FENACLE)

The shady side of the banana plantations...

Brussels, 4 May 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): The Second International Banana Conference, drawing attention to the threat to plantation workers around the world, has just come to a close in Brussels. Workers from different continents all gathered to sound the same alarm: the end of European Union import quotas in 2006 holds drastic social consequences for banana workers everywhere, not least in Ecuador, the world's largest banana exporter (1). Edelina Garcia, a trade union organiser for FENACLE, the National Federation of Free Peasants' and Indigenous Peoples' Associations grouping 250,000 workers in the banana sector, speaks about the non-existence of workers' rights in Ecuador and the even darker future looming close ahead. Having been sacked two years ago for having demanded a week's unpaid wages, she is now fighting for the recognition of workers' rights and to organise women in the banana sector.

What is the current situation of workers in Ecuador's banana plantations?

It is very precarious. We have to work 8 to 14 hours a day, often without seeing our children, for wages of between 15 and 25 dollars a week. What can we buy with such a wage? We cannot even feed our children. It is estimated that a household needs at least 280 dollars a month to live decently in Ecuador. What's more, we are exposed to the chemicals sprayed on the plantations while we are working there, products that haven't been in use in the "first world" for many years.

Ecuador has ratified a number of conventions on social rights, including those of the International Labour Organisation. Are there no inspections?

You know, the situation on the ground is very different. People only see what they want to see, and this is precisely the message we're trying to get across to European consumers, here in Brussels. They have to take some of the responsibility. Having access to cheap bananas in the supermarkets holds numerous implications: the killing of trade unionists, the exploitation of workers, who are violently repressed as soon as any protest movement emerges... Take my case, for example: I had worked for 14 years in the plantations of the Noboa corporation. I am an activist who supports the trade union movement. We had occupied three haciendas in an attempt to claim a week's pay that was already long overdue. Labour inspectors came and had us sign some papers. But in Ecuador, the labour authorities are just as corrupt as the rest, and a list of 154 workers found its way into the hands of the bosses. We were all dismissed, the men and women alike, regardless of our age and number of years service with the company. The repression is harsh; it's a reflection of the political situation in the country. Since I was fired, I have been working for FENACLE, raising women workers' awareness about their rights and the importance of forming a union, which I believe is the only viable alternative.

But the situation of trade unions is also very precarious in Ecuador...

All the more so since 2004 when a law was passed setting the minimum number of people required to form a union at 30. Since then the bosses only employ a smaller number of people, and 75% of the workers have no contract.

I am a trade unionist and can testify to the unprecedented repression we have to endure. The bosses sack us without any regard for due process. They literally throw us out. They threaten our families. They went to

find my sons, to have them pass on a message: "Your mother has to shut up." It's not easy to work as a trade unionist, trying to organise people and tell them about their rights and obligations, because they are afraid of losing their jobs in a country that, like so many others, is crippled with unemployment. How would they feed their children if they lost their jobs? If only they could think that by organising themselves within a union they could secure better wages... but the repression is so harsh in Ecuador...(2) FENACLE now groups flower and sugar workers as well as those from the banana sector. We want to raise awareness among these people, so that they unite. The peasant farmers are equally exploited. The government has started to import rice from other countries at more competitive prices, so they are not able to sell anything.

Yet Ecuador has signed several conventions, such as those of the ILO...

But the situation in practice is very different. Inspectors make visits from time to time to check the wages and working conditions in the plantations, but the workers know full well that if they talk they run a high risk of losing their jobs. Not only are they dismissed without compensation in such cases, but they are also placed on a blacklist of "trade unionists who are detrimental to the haciendas", discouraging any other employers from hiring them.

In what way is the situation likely to worsen with the introduction of the European Union's tariff only system?

The tariff currently envisaged, which the European Union believes would be capable of keeping the "existing balance" of quotas that do not accelerate the race to the bottom, would be between 230 and 250 euros per tonne. This tariff would be the death of us. The price per crate would fall even further to remain competitive, yet it is already far too low, varying between 1.2 and 1.7 US dollars, whilst a price of 7 dollars is needed to provide workers with a decent living. It's always the workers who pay when there's a drive to cut production costs. The countries that do not turn a blind eye to working conditions or where the unions are strong will see the flight of the major producers, who are already starting to move out of countries such as Panama, Colombia and Costa Rica in anticipation of 2006. It also signals the demise of the small producers of Central and Latin America, who will never have the means to export. Some countries have already seen the closure of numerous plantations, with companies pulling out to set up operations here for example. Ecuador is not the world's number one banana producer for nothing...

Interview by Maude Malengrez (InfoSud).

(1) During the WTO Ministerial Conference in Doha on 14 November 2001, the European Union, pushed most notably by Ecuador, made a commitment to lift the restrictive quotas placed on "dollar bananas" (from Central and Latin America) to protect the imports from less competitive ACP (Asia-Caribbean-Pacific) countries. But Europe intends to replace the quota restrictions with tariff only barriers. As of 1 January 2006, the EU will impose an import duty of 230 euros a tonne on dollar bananas (relative to the current duty of 75 euros under the quota system). ACP bananas will be exempt from this duty until the end of 2007.

At the end of March, six Latin American countries (including Ecuador, the world's top banana exporter, Costa Rica and Colombia...) requested that the WTO initiate arbitration proceedings against this measure, which they consider to be discriminatory, calling on the EU to make a downward revision of the tariff. Meanwhile, the small producers of the Caribbean, who cannot compete on this level, are asking for tariffs of at least 295 euros, arguing that, otherwise, January 2006 will sign their death warrant. The small producers of Latin America are just as sceptical: such a tariff will prevent them from exporting, unlike the

large companies such as Chiquita, Dole and Bong, which are already preparing for 2006, cutting costs by closing down their plantations in Latin American countries that guarantee minimum workers' rights and moving to Africa, or their "paradise" in the sector, Ecuador, the world's largest producer.

(2) For more information on trade union repression in Ecuador, also see the chapter on Ecuador in the Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights, published by the ICFTU, at:
<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991219434&Language=EN>

The ICFTU represents 145 million workers in 233 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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