

LABOR-ECUADOR: U.S. GROUPS CONDEMN ABUSES ON BANANA PLANTATIONS

06/20/02

By David Bacon

Inter Press Service

Bonita, the word for beautiful in Spanish, is the trademark found on bananas at markets here and across the country. But Bonita is not the word used by workers to describe their experience growing, harvesting, and packing the nearly perfect fruit.

The Bonita label belongs to Alfredo Noboa, the largest banana exporter in Ecuador. Noboa also is running for election to succeed Gustavo Noboa (no direct relation) as president of Ecuador. His plantations are the site of what workers and observers alike describe as gross and violent abuses against human rights and national law. U.S. unions are protesting the treatment of workers who went on strike to protest conditions at Noboa.

In April, some 1,400 Noboa company workers organized a union on seven plantations in Hacienda Los Alamos. They asked for what was already, in many cases, legally required from their employer.

Ecuadorian law says workers must be enrolled in the national health care system, but on banana plantations, virtually no one is. They wanted higher wages -- their average wage is less than the legal minimum. And they wanted legal recognition for their union, a right guaranteed by Ecuadorian law. Hardly any of the 150,000 banana workers in Ecuador, the largest banana workforce in Latin America, have a union.

Company reaction was swift, according to workers and observers. Some 124 workers were fired almost immediately. Others on temporary contract were told there was no more work. Efforts to negotiate with Bonita got nowhere, and after three more union activists were fired, the workers walked out on strike on May 6.

Nine days later, 400 hooded men armed with rifles arrived at one of the plantations in a Noboa company truck. They invaded the strikers' homes and took the possessions of many workers, said Jan Nimmo, a Scottish observer for BananaLink, an international organization supporting banana workers.

"They banged on the doors with rifle butts and dragged workers from their beds kicking them and hitting them," Nimmo said, relating what strikers had told her. The workers were "told that they were being taken to be killed and dumped in the river."

When strikers tried to resist, some were shot. The leg of 26-year-old Mauro Romero was amputated as a result of his wounds. On the second evening, the armed men shot into the crowd of strikers, wounding more. A large police contingent arrived the following day, but strikers who were living in company housing on the plantations were expelled and strikebreakers were brought in to restart production.

Los Alamos Hacienda workers also said they have been told, on threat of being fired, to join their employer's political party, the PRIAN.

Xavier Monge, a spokesperson for the Exportadora Bananera Noboa company, told reporters the company has resumed harvesting bananas on the plantations, and that the strike is over.

The Federacion Nacional de Campesinos Libres del Ecuador (FENACLE), to which the strikers' union belongs, says the strike movement is spreading, not ending.

In the United States, the Costco retail chain, having been persuaded by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, has sent a letter to Noboa expressing concern.

After a representative of the American Center for International Labor Solidarity, Liz O'Connor, relayed news from the strikers following a visit to the plantations, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and Jim Spinosa, head of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, also have written to Noboa. Sweeney's is the premier U.S. labor federation.

Members of Congress Jan Schakowsky and George Miller have sent their assistants to investigate the situation on the Hacienda Los Alamos plantations and to meet Noboa officials.

Support also has come from the International Union of Foodworkers and the International Transport Federation. The final word, labor activists say, might come from U.S. consumers -- if they begin to treat Bonita with the same disdain they reserved for table grapes two decades ago, for much the same reason.

One out of every four bananas harvested in Ecuador is sold in a U.S. supermarket or to a school or other institution, making the country by far the largest source for U.S. consumers. Noboa is the biggest producer, followed by a consortium called La Favorita, and then the U.S. companies Chiquita (United Brands), Dole Farming Company, and Del Monte.

Together, these companies control the world market in bananas. In the last decade, they have shifted much of their production to Ecuador, which is now the world's largest exporter. The next four are Colombia, Panama, Guatemala and Costa Rica.

Ecuador's non-union status is the big attraction. More than 90 percent of the banana workers in Colombia and Panama belong to unions, and 40 percent in Guatemala. Only Costa Rica's six percent approaches Ecuador's one percent -- or 1,650 banana workers -- who are organized.

Success in the current strike would do more than double Ecuador's banana union membership. It would also deprive its employers of the low-wage advantage they currently enjoy. Unions

would also threaten the advantages they derive from their contracting system, which is not as prevalent in other countries.

According to a recent report on child labor on Ecuadorian banana plantations by Human Rights Watch, the average daily wage of a banana worker is \$ 5.44. This is 41 cents below the legal minimum. The Ministry of Labor says it takes \$ 288 a month to support a family, or about \$ 11.07 per day for a six-day week. The combined income of two working adults barely covers basic needs.

Although the law also forbids employing minors in dangerous jobs, work on banana plantations exposes them to pesticides so hazardous that the Environmental Protection Agency bans them in the United States.