



Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Sindicatos Bananeros

COLSIBA

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The Latin American Coordination of Banana Workers' Unions, COLSIBA, which represents 20 unions in eight countries, with more than 35,000 affiliates, has watched since 1993 with grave concern the developments surrounding the application of the European banana import regimen, the same regimen that has been used by the transnational banana companies as an excuse to cut back on wages and benefits for banana workers.

In addition to this worrisome situation, we are now experiencing a crisis of banana overproduction brought on by countries with low labor costs which has delivered a severe blow to all banana workers, especially those men and women who have obtained important social benefits through collective bargaining. It's also worth mentioning the constant natural disasters that affect our region, like Hurricane Mitch, which left more than 8,000 banana workers unemployed in three Central American countries.

With the proposed new import regimen "First Come, First Served," the strongest effect will be felt in those countries where banana workers have unions and collective bargaining agreements, and where their salaries are higher. In fact, there are already some initial results in the form of cancellation of contracts with national producers, and mass firings of banana workers, some of whom have been rehired, but with lower salaries.

We believe that those who see "First Come, First Served" as an alternative solution for the current crisis, without taking into account its negative consequences for all the banana producing countries, are denying small producers and banana workers an opportunity for survival. This new regimen is a victory for those exporters whose success depends on the merciless exploitation of banana workers and the systematic violation of their labor rights. And it will be a death blow for those banana workers who have managed, despite years of repression, to exercise their rights, especially their right to freely organize and to bargain collectively. It's no coincidence that in countries like Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Colombia, Panama and Costa Rica, where the banana sector has a high level of union organization and where men and women banana workers in general earn a dignified salary, some transnational banana companies are already cancelling contracts with national producers, in anticipation of "First Come, First Served," adducing high production costs, the result of high salaries and collective bargaining agreements, as an excuse.

It's necessary that those who defend "First Come, First Served" look at the human costs that it will bring: unemployment for thousands of unionized banana workers; lack of medical care and housing for them and their families and of education for their children; the loss of other benefits obtained through collective bargaining and long years of struggle; the destruction of communities which in some cases have depended on the banana industry for more than 50 years; and the severe weakening of the union

movement, whose maximum expression in several Central American countries finds itself precisely in the banana sector. This and the elimination of thousands of small producers will create a social crisis in the region.

The banana exporters who operate in countries where there are no unions in this sector, or where such unions are very weak, are the ones who are celebrating this new regime, the fruit of deliberations characterized by a total lack of social criteria. They are exporters who repress any attempt to organize unions, who pay miserable salaries, who don't bother to protect their workers from the effects of dangerous agrochemicals, and who use subcontracting as a means to avoid employer responsibility.

Ecuador's Ambassador in Brussels, Doctor Alfredo Pinoargote, who represents his country in the banana import negotiations with the EU, has declared that "there's no reason for [banana] prices to fall, as the competitors assert. What will fall are the exports from some less competitive countries with higher cost bananas;" in other words those countries where banana workers have obtained a high level of union organization which permits them to live with dignity. It's important to point out that in Ecuador, with few exceptions, the small- and medium-sized operators, both producers and exporters, reject this regime because they know that it will only favor the largest operators.

Not even the banana producers of the Caribbean, with whom COLSIBA has joined in solidarity for many years, have accepted "First Come, First Served," because it contradicts the EU's stated commitment to assure the viability of banana exports from the ACP countries.

The new regimen will foment a race to the bottom toward worsening social conditions, instead of providing incentives for those who respect labor rights and promote improved environmental conditions. Wouldn't it be better to design a regimen which took into account the social and environmental conditions under which bananas which are exported to the EU are produced? We don't believe that the EU's policy is to promote the weakening of the labor movement in the Third World and reward the transnational companies who most exploit their workers.

Therefore, COLSIBA exhorts the European Union to suspend the implementation of "First Come, First Served," and to review the social conditions under which bananas are produced, allowing room for a debate which includes the social and environmental conditions in banana production as a fundamental criteria in the design of a new regimen, one that seeks to reward social responsibility instead of promoting a type of competition which could return us to a dark past where the only winners would be exploitation and unfair competition.

Sincerely,



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