Bananas

Audioscript

Over the last 150 years, the banana has become the world's favourite fruit and the international banana trade is a gigantic business. Most bananas are grown on large plantations in tropical countries. First, the jungle is cleared or wet lands drained[1]. Then irrigation systems are prepared and a transport infrastructure[2] – roads or railways – created. Banana plants are basically clones, grown from cuttings (or "bulbs") taken from adult plants, which makes them very vulnerable to disease. So, in addition to chemical fertilisers, massive quantities of chemicals are used to protect them from diseases and the insects that carry them.

There is no growing season for bananas, so new stems can be planted all the year round. Six months after planting, the first flowers appear followed, about four months later, by the fruit, which must be covered with plastic bags[3] to protect them from insect and bird pests, and from wind, while they are growing. The bananas are harvested[4] while they are still green and taken to the packing centre, where strict quality control[5] is applied to separate those for export from those for local consumption. The fruit for export are then transported in refrigerated ships to the main markets, in North America and Europe. On arrival, they are sent to ripening rooms[6], where ethylene gas is used to ripen them in controlled conditions of temperature and humidity. After a few days in the ripening room, they can be sent out to the shops.

Together, all these steps in the production of bananas require a massive investment, which is why it is difficult for small producers to compete with the huge international companies that dominate the trade.

For over 70 years, until its merger with another company in 1970, the world's biggest banana producer was a giant US corporation, the United Fruit Company, with vast plantations in several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, its own transport networks in those countries, and a fleet of over 100 refrigerated ships. It sold its bananas in North America and Europe, changing what had been an expensive fruit accessible only to the rich into the most popular and widely available fruit of the whole western world.

The United Fruit Company often controlled governments and dominated the economies in what came to be known, following the American writer O. Henry, as "banana republics" – small, weak countries with corrupt leaders. The Company paid bribes to local politicians and government officials to enable it to hold vast amounts of land, pay little or no tax, and ignore the local labour laws[7]. This was made public in a 1964 investigation by the Washington Post, which also uncovered links between the Company and a number of leading United States political figures.

One of the worst examples of the Company's abuse of its political power occurred during a strike by Company employees in Colombia in 1928, when the army was ordered to fire on the striking workers, killing over 1,000 of them. This massacre features in the famous Colombian novel One Hundred Years of Solitude, by Gabriel García Márquez[8].

In 1954, the Company persuaded the CIA to organise the overthrow of a new – and honest – president in Guatemala, who intended to nationalise some of the Company's land in that country. The full details of this operation only came out, years later, in a study by a team from Harvard University, which also revealed the participation of United States marines in Company operations[9].

As regards the condition of the Company's workers, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) found that wages were extremely low, workers were not paid overtime and often suffered from serious illnesses caused by the toxic chemicals they were forced to handle[10]. According to Human Rights Watch, attempts by workers to start trades unions were stopped by police brutality and even killings[11]. Finally, the Company's extensive use of child labour, particularly in Ecuador, was brought to light by the New York Times, which found many thousands of children under ten working on average a 12-hour day for pathetically small wages[12].

But it is not only in the banana trade that small Third World producers have difficulty competing with big multinationals. It was to help the small producer that the Fair Trade movement was started in the USA in the late 1940s, first to offer better prices for clothing[13] from small independent businesses in developing countries, and later handicrafts. This spread to Fair Trade coffee, and then to a variety of other exports from the Third World, and notably bananas.

Thanks to public support in the developed countries, products with the Fair Trade logo are sold at a slightly higher price than those from the multinationals, which many people are willing to pay for ethical reasons. It is thus that Fair Trade bananas are slightly higher priced than those from companies like Dole, Fyfe, Chiquita or Del Monte – the successors to the United Fruit Company – and the benefit goes to their small independent producers. In return, those producers must accept the Fair Trade rules on employment, ensuring that workers are adults[14] and that they receive a decent wage for their hard work. Of course, the multinationals are still the biggest players in the banana business, but Fair Trade is setting new standards for the proper treatment of farm workers in the developing world.