



The slow death of Ecuadorian Banana workers

Magali Marega and Jo Verweken

‘In reality, the work in the field implies a slow death, because it kills you inside’ says Luis, a 59 year old banana worker. ‘Paradoxically, it’s the only way of surviving but it kills you anyway.’¹

This testimony comes from one of 30 in-depth interviews in Vitali’s (2015) study of work conditions and workers’ health in the banana-producing sector in Los Rios province of Ecuador.

Luis is one of 200 000 people working on banana plantations in Ecuador, the world’s leading banana exporter. The global banana supply chain is under a lot of pressure from food retailers, forcing down producers’ prices. Workers and the environment suffer the consequences. Rights violations create serious health risks for the banana workers.

One of the main health risks is daily exposure to pesticides. Aerial fumigation is done at any hour of the day. María describes: ‘They fumigate during lunchtime, also where we are eating. They force us to sign a paper stating that we agree with aerial fumigation and that we receive the necessary protection. If we don’t sign, we get into trouble.’ Juan confirms: ‘You should see what these chemicals do to your eyes and skin! Some of us get red, burning eyes. Others get sores and spots on their skin. But when we tell those in charge, they don’t care. They only care about us achieving production goals, nothing else.’ Luis adds: ‘In 2013 I was working in the packing area when I started to feel nauseous and to vomit blood. After one month in the hospital they told me I had early-stage liver cirrhosis, because of a constant contamination process. The doctors did not want to put it on paper though. They feared for their jobs. And now, I’m a chronic cirrhosis patient.’

A recent study in Ecuador (Hutter, 2016) compared the health of workers exposed to pesticides with the health of workers on organic plantations where no chemicals were used. The study confirms that workers in conventional banana production suffer significantly more health problems, including eye and skin irritations, fatigue and insomnia. They are six to eight times more at risk of gastrointestinal symptoms such as nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. The study also showed that, in the long run, workers exposed to pesticides are more likely to develop cancer.

Francisco comments that the work is really harsh and demands huge physical effort. He has to transport bananas from the field to the packing area, using a cable system: ‘It

takes an inhumane effort to carry the banana bunches. One bunch weighs up to 180 pounds. We have to pull up to twenty bunches at a time, and we do twenty transports a day.’

It is estimated that around half the workers have working days longer than fourteen hours. They also earn less than the minimum wage - too little to guarantee a decent living. Carlos explains: ‘It’s also a problem of nutrition; we workers don’t eat well. With the salary we earn, we cannot meet our basic needs. This affects our health.’

Most workers in the sector are paid only if they meet targets such as a certain quantity of boxes delivered, or progress on the field. Workers struggle to achieve these goals, and sometimes bring their children and other family to help them.

Workplace accidents

Working for so many hours is tiring, but also increases the risk of accidents. Employers seldom provide protective equipment and clothing. When they do, workers often have to pay for it themselves. María says: ‘They sell gloves at the plantation, but they get worn out very quickly - after 15 days they’re damaged. We’re obliged to wear gloves, because without them, we might damage the bananas with our nails.’

Risks of diseases and accidents are high throughout the production process. Jorge says they receive news of work accidents every single day: ‘Cuts - a lot of workers cut themselves. I take down the banana bunch, and they have to cut stalks, and sometimes they lose control of the machete and cut their feet. Sometimes workers fall, because the stepladders break. Insect bites are frequent and the other day a companion was bitten on the foot by a snake.’

When workers get sick, they often keep working out of fear of losing their jobs. María explains: ‘If you dare to complain, they send you to the central office and they say you should sign your dismissal and return when you feel better. Because of this, a lot of people work while sick, but others really can’t work anymore and resign.’

Additionally, many feel the public health services are of poor quality: ‘My bones hurt and ...they just give me pills. They always say “There is nothing wrong with you,” and they give you pills to relieve the pain,’ says Carlos. Many workers don’t even have access to these poor health services. A majority work without a contract and therefore have no social security.

¹ All the quotes from workers in this article come from Vitali (2015) or Velasco (2016).

With low salaries, bad working conditions and little or no social protection, the banana workers are one of the most precarious groups of workers in the country.

The expansion of the banana industry implied concentration of land ownership, the expulsion of farmers from their land, and elimination of other sources of work. Farmers became part of a big reserve of unqualified banana workers, completely dependent for their income and health on the goodwill of the plantation owners, who frequently contract workers through intermediaries and pay them according to productivity. That is why the workers are forced to always work more and harder yet still do not earn enough to feed their families, and become ill.

Women are affected even more

Sexual harassment by employers and colleagues, less pay for the same work, discrimination and maltreatment of pregnant women are some of the issues women workers have to deal with in the sector. Often, the institutions supposed to protect women's rights turn a blind eye on these issues. Velasco (2016) points out that the Ecuadorian Ministry of Labour does not have a department that specifically protects female workers. The Judiciary Council, the Ministry of Public Health and the Institution for Public Defence have specific competences regarding violence within families, but none for violence at work. Rita tells us: 'They made me clean the storage room with chlorine without protection, and these are heavy chemicals. They told me: "If you don't do it, you will lose your job." But a pregnant woman shouldn't do this kind of work. My child was born handicapped.' Catalina, who worked for more than twelve years in the packing area, was fired in 2010 when she was 3 months pregnant. A doctor had recommended that she should take two days of complete rest. The banana firm allowed her the sick leave, then fired her anyway, accusing her of leaving her workstation unauthorised. A friend explains: 'She was unemployed and left without health insurance [while] pregnant with some complications. She was put on the black list, a system that the banana firms in Ecuador use for workers who claim their rights, so that no one else gives them work again. In the end her baby was born with health problems, problems which, according to the doctors, may have been caused by the mother's exposure to big quantities of pesticides.'

Organising

Respect for freedom of association is key to guarantee the health of the banana workers and their families. But Ecuadorian labour law allows workers to unionise at

company level only if they organise 30 or more workers who work for the same employer. Any attempt to do that in the banana sector is stopped by blacklisting and threatening the members.

Since 2009, ASTAC (the agricultural workers and peasants' trade union association) has successfully organised banana workers at a sectorial level. Nevertheless, the association is still denied the right to register as a workers' organisation and its leaders and members are frequently threatened. ASTAC gained a lot of credit by gathering evidence on rights abuses, disseminating these to international press, filing complaints with the United Nations (UN) and throughout the supply chain, with the help of European NGOs and trade unions. ASTAC offers its members legal assistance and a backup if they are fired or harassed. That is why they now dare to share their testimony. To reduce their vulnerability, the only way forward for these workers is to unionise.

Magali Marega is a PhD candidate at the Center for Research and Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology, Mexico. She is part of the Study Group on Labour Issues at FLACSO University, Ecuador, and the Study Group on Labour and Social Conflict at the National University of Rosario, Argentina.

Jo Verweken is an economist and trade unionist who coordinates the Development Cooperation Program of FOS, the North-South organisation of the socialist movement in Flanders-Belgium, in the Andean region, in search of social justice worldwide.

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**Contact the editors for
questions or contributions:**

Nicolas Pons-Vignon
Nicolas.Pons-Vignon@wits.ac.za

Mbuso Nkosi
Mbuso.Nkosi@global-labour-university.org