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The Truth About The Banana Trade

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Fairtrade fortnight may recently have finished, but the wider battle lasts all year. To demonstrate the need for more Fairtrade awareness, we reveal some unpleasant truths about the banana industry.

101 uses for a banana: number 73. Peel banana. Eat yellowy white flesh. Lie skin on windowsill of bedroom and allow to dry. Wait several days. Take newly dried banana and attempt to smoke in vainglorious teenage-style attempt to get high. Fail. Every time. Curse Donovan for not including clearer instructions in 1960s dopey hit Mellow Yellow.

Number 74. Become one of world's top tennis players. Wow crowd with daring glimpses of torso as one changes heavily branded cotton shirt. Chomp bananas in ostentatiously simian fashion between sets to restore lost energy. Leave skins for ball boy to dry later.

Number 75. Stand for 11-12 hours a day sweating in tropical heat, wearing ill-fitting rubber gloves and rubber apron, hands sunk constantly in a chemical-filled tank. Scrub pesticide-covered bananas to remove toxic residues before the fruit arrives on western supermarket shelves...

It's all a question of perspective. As we amble down the strip-lit hedgerows of the supermarket aisle, those gleaming yellow bananas stand out - their unblemished skins a symbol of purity, health and energy. We too can have that torso.

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Unlike Maria. When her baby was born, his head was four times bigger than his body. Her husband Juan, a Costa Rican banana plantation worker, had routinely handled the highly toxic and now banned chemical DBCP during the course of his work. 'I couldn't even hold him because it seemed to make things worse,' Maria says, looking at her deformed child. 'It's the worse thing that can happen to anyone. There are no words to tell what life is like.' It's doubtful Maria knows what Wimbledon is.

A tragic exception perhaps? The result of one careless worker not following stringent safety precautions? If only. A 1999 study by the National University of Costa Rica found that women working in packing plants for the country's banana industry suffer double the average rate of leukaemia and birth defects. And 20 per cent of male banana workers in the country have been left sterile. Could it possibly have something to do with the amount of pesticides they unwittingly consume during the course of their work - eight times the global average at a staggering 4kg per person, per year?

YELLOW PERIL

There are thousands of people toiling in conditions like these across the globe. As a result, bananas remain the world's most popular fruit with over 86 million tonnes of them produced annually. The European Union is the world's biggest importer, with its average citizen eating around 10kg a year - that's two and a half times as much as your average Costa Rican consumes in pesticide. In the UK the banana has been the most popular fruit since 1998, when it overtook the apple. Annual sales of around £750m make the banana the third most popular product sold through major supermarkets. It is outsold only by those other two essentials of modern life, petrol and lottery tickets. Yellow gold, black gold, fools' gold.

In short, it's a very big business and, like all big businesses in today's global economy, it is dominated by giant multinationals. Three are particularly prominent - Chiquita, Dole and Del Monte, who between them control approximately 60 per cent of the world market. Until the 1990s these three banana behemoths were making huge profits. However, over the last decade, the shape of the world food industry has changed. The power and profits now ripen in the hands of the giant supermarkets.

The chain of banana production now looks something like this. Too many bananas are being produced for export. So the price paid to producers has collapsed, even though when we go shopping we are still paying the same price. Meanwhile the supermarkets' un-natural demand for cosmetic 'quality' means they insist upon large, blemish-free bananas, which in turn means even more dependence on the sort of chemicals mentioned above. The fact that this has nothing to do with actually producing the best tasting banana seems to have somehow passed the retailers by.

In response to this power shift the big banana companies have done the only thing they know how - reduce the wages and benefits of plantation workers. Many of those who have attempted to join

independent trade unions in order to fight for a fairer deal have been persecuted. As a result, a Costa Rican banana worker who earned an already paltry \$250 a month in 1993, was earning just \$187 by 1997. By 2001, many workers' wages had sunk as low as \$160.

As their wages went down, so did workers' rights, with women suffering most. Describing working conditions on Latin American banana plantations in 1998, Gilbert Bermudez Umaña, a former plantation worker and now deputy co-ordinator of the Coordination of Latin American Banana Workers' Unions, wrote: 'Women are constantly exposed to sexual harassment by their supervisors, even by their own male colleagues. The woman worker has to put up with the attitude of her superiors for fear of being left without work. Several labour rights relating to women workers are not respected in many banana companies, such as the right to maternity leave and to regular healthcare. They are also not allowed to freely join a trade union. If a woman does manage to join the union, she will suffer persecution in the form of, for example, being assigned heavier or worse-paid jobs.'

TOP BANANA

However, thankfully there is now a way to combat this dangerous race to the bottom. It comes in the shape of the Fairtrade banana, which is raising standards, wages and welfare as fast as you or I can buy it. It is a little less shiny, costs a fraction more, but tastes a whole lot better for all concerned.

Arturo Jiménez Gómez used to work for Chiquita, but 20 years ago the company pulled out of the part of Costa Rica in which he worked. In order to survive he and his co-workers founded a co-operative, which they called Coopetrabatur. After many years, Coopetrabatur achieved Fairtrade registration. It is now the major supplier of Fairtrade bananas to Europe.

The benefits to the co-operative's workers and their community are instantly apparent. Since it began operating along Fairtrade principles, Coopetrabatur has stopped using paraquat and other herbicides, reduced chemical fertilisers, started recycling all plastic waste, cleared up a toxic rubbish pit and begun replanting trees along local canals.

Where in the past workers who attempted to unionise would be blacklisted, threatened and on occasion even killed, the co-operative is well-run, open and democratic. Recently wages have risen considerably. Furthermore, because the Fairtrade price covers not only increased salaries, but also a 'social premium' which is set aside for community projects, workers have been able to afford repairs to their housing, and to employ the service of an agronomist and five environmental specialists.

Elia Ruth Zúñiga, who works in the co-operative's packing plant, explains the benefits: 'With Fairtrade our salary has greatly increased, so that we have a better life for our families. We have water, we have electricity and we have a house given to us by the company. Everything here was in a bad way due to contamination. Rivers didn't have any fish. Due to chemicals we were losing everything. Water was really contaminated. Now it's different. We don't use chemicals.' Elia has one wish, so that the situation can continue to improve. She says: 'I would like the markets to get bigger in Europe. That would be great for us.'

If the market for Fairtrade bananas continues to grow, the benefits will grow too. More producers, seeing what has happened at co-operatives like Coopetrabatur, will be encouraged to follow suit. As the workforce grows, so too can the number of products available.

Multinational corporations will be further moved to adopt similar principles in order to regain lost market share. Governments, always happier following a trend than setting one, will be encouraged to clean up their own act and urge those they deal with to do likewise. But most importantly, the many thousands of people around the world working in near slave-like conditions will be given the opportunity, like Arturo, 'to dream of being free, to dream of being looked upon as a human being, not an object'.

One day, maybe, Fairtrade will last longer than a fortnight.

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