

Colombia

With Guillermo Rivera

Big banana companies and the government are out to destroy SINTRAINAGRO



SIREL met recently in Argentina with Guillermo Rivera, President of the National Union of Agroindustry Workers (SINTRAINAGRO). The expansion of oil palm plantations, outsourcing practices, the Union's commitment to peace and development, and the challenges of the upcoming collective bargaining process were some of the issues discussed.



The expansion of African oil palm “Green Napalm”

-What is the situation of the banana sector in Colombia?

-After a crisis that lasted many years, brought on by difficulties with prices, European tariffs and other problems, many medium-sized and independent businesses in the industry have been forced to hand over their operations to larger economic groups that have the capacity to keep up production. This has caused a serious social problem, because none of these groups reinvests in the area, taking instead their profits to other departments of **Colombia** or abroad. The producers that did invest were the small and medium-sized ones, and their drop in numbers has generated chaos throughout the region.

-What exactly does this chaos translate into?

-It touches every aspect of the economy, because everything is affected by the shortage of money in the region. Over the years, small producers have always maintained their assets in the region, and they reinvested their profits locally. With their elimination comes more poverty and more marginalization.

-What other problems are you experiencing right now?

-We're suffering the impacts of **an agricultural policy that gives producers incentives to abandon banana crops and join the large programs that plant oil palm for agrofuel production.** They even do this with small family farmers who grow plantains.





Commemoration of the Massacre of the United Fruit Co. (Chiquita Brands)

A 200-hectare banana plantation employs 200 workers, while the same extension of land devoted to oil palm employs only 25.



Mural commemorating the Massacre of the United Fruit Co. (Chiquita Brands)

Already there are many producers who are adopting these government incentive plans, and this will lead to a dramatic drop in employment. Just so you have an idea: a 200-hectare banana plantation employs 200 workers, while the same extension of land devoted to oil palm employs only 25.

The consequences are critical. For many of these workers that will be left without a job there aren't many options available: some will enlist in the guerrilla groups, or in the so-called «self-defense» forces that are still active and committing crimes throughout the region, and others will find work in the coca plantations that are spreading in rural areas where agricultural production is eliminated and peasants are displaced. All of this exacerbates a process of social disintegration, not just in **Colombia**, but in the **United States** and **Europe** as well, which is where the cocaine is exported to.

-How important are banana crops in Urabá?

-It is the leading source of employment in the region. Thousands of families depend on banana and plantain production.

-How are banana crops being substituted by oil palm crops and what are the consequences of such substitution?

-Banana crops were introduced in the beginning of the 20th century, in the Magdalena region. They were introduced by the very same transnational corporations that are now controlling banana production, exports and trade.

In 1928 they massacred workers who had dared to form a union and had presented a list of demands. The **United Fruit Company** (today **Chiquita Brands**) was behind this massacre, supported by the government of the time. We have just attended a commemoration of that heinous act, in which hundreds of workers were murdered, and we can say that many of the working conditions that led workers to strike back then remain unchanged.

Fifty years ago there were 120 thousand hectares of banana crops in Magdalena, which provided jobs – however precarious– for many people throughout the region. Today there are barely 9 thousand hectares of banana plantations left, and plans are under way to replace three thousand of those hectares with oil palm crops.

-What happened to the 111 thousand hectares of banana plantations that disappeared?

-They were replaced by African palm. That is where that product's large processing companies are, companies that are owned by members of the region's traditional political establishment, with very close ties to **US** demand.



We may call a strike, because we won't stand for a change in the system of contracting. To do so would be to put an end to workers' stability, labor rights and the union itself.

The small agricultural producers were wiped away, driven out. The land is now in the hands of an oligopoly formed by three families. Today, in municipalities like Magdalena, Cesar or Santander, only African palm is produced. **People aren't just poor there, they're destitute! They're starving to**

death because there is no agricultural production and no jobs there. There's only single-crop production of oil palm.

This same policy applied by the transnational corporations in Magdalena, with these results, is the policy they want to impose in the banana region of Urabá with the support of the government. Our Union has staged several actions, together with Rel-UITA (the IUF's Latin American Regional Office), to reject the mass planting of African palm, which is a real catastrophe for our region's society and for our organizations.

In 2007 we organized an important Citizen Forum where we debated and raised awareness on the social consequences of replacing banana and plantain crops. We're talking of, for example, **some 50 thousand hectares that are owned by small farmers and would pass into the hands of large landowners**, because palm is only profitable in large-scale production. These plots are four hectares in average, an extension that allows families to live off the land if they grow plantains or bananas, and raise a few animals. If worse comes to worse, they can eat the bananas and plantains they grow. With four hectares of palm crops they have practically no income, and they can't use what they harvest as food either.

Businesses are promoting this change because it is their way of destroying the labor movement, because oil palm is a crop characterized for eliminating jobs.

-What is the total area currently covered by plantain and banana crops in Urabá?

-We have 35 thousand hectares of banana and 50 thousand of plantain. The vast majority of the workers here are people displaced from **Magdalena**, because **wherever African palm goes, the land is scourged. People can't find jobs there, there are no schools left, and health care centers have been abandoned.** Municipalities like Aracataca, Sevilla, Río Frío, which were historically banana-producing areas, are now sunken in the most abject poverty.

-What are the chances of attaining your objectives?

-We think that this catastrophe can be stopped, and that is why we're working so hard on this. We also have some hope that a new agreement can be achieved with the new **US** administration, which will make it possible to protect jobs, not just up North, but also in countries like **Colombia**.



Carlos Amorín and Guillermo Rivera during the interview.

In defense of industry-wide collective bargaining The struggle for decent work

-What will be on the bargaining table in the next round of negotiations for the Collective Bargaining Agreement?

-Every three years we conduct a bargaining process that is valid for all workers in the 380 banana plantations that are grouped in several associations. It is, therefore, an industry-wide bargaining process -the only one of its kind in the country- which is divided into three main parts: the first deals with guaranteeing trade union rights, that is, acknowledging the organization and the union permits that allow leaders to work in the organization. When workers take off from work to perform union duties, they're not paid, but for every crate of bananas produced the companies contribute 15 cents to a union fund used to compensate union leaders.

The second part deals with what we call «extra-legal» aspects, which are gains that are not included in the Fundamental Code of Labor, but have been achieved through our struggles.

The third has to do with the «cultural tasks.» These are connected with crop maintenance tasks in every plantation, which is where the main worth of our people is, as they are the ones who really know the work. That is the reason why only people who have are employed on a permanent basis are allowed to conduct

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these tasks. They require great responsibility because they are at the heart of the business; and both productivity and working conditions for the entire year depend on these. These include cutting and packing tasks.

The percentage of raise that is achieved is applied to all tasks, even the «extra legal» ones.

-What are the Union's expectations?

-The situation is complicated. In addition to the government's policy of subsidies and incentives for African palm production to the detriment of banana and plantain crops, large business groups such as **BANACOL** and **UNIBAN** are pushing for a change in the workers' contracting scheme...

-...the Associated Work Cooperatives...

-That's what they want. Under our Collective Bargaining Agreement, the vast majority of the workers in the sector must be hired for an indefinite period of time. But following a model that is being implemented throughout the world, **companies here are resorting to blackmail, claiming that the only way to continue with banana production is to incorporate associated work cooperatives, independent contractors and outsourcing schemes.** We know that this is going to be one of the difficult points in the negotiation of the new List of Demands that we will be presenting in the next few days.

If they continue with their position we may call a strike, because we won't stand for a change in the contracting scheme. To do so would be to put an end to workers' stability, labor rights and the union itself.

We're getting ahead of ourselves, talking about a strike when the negotiation process hasn't even started, but our people need to be prepared. Because **if necessary we will do like the indigenous movement: we'll camp out in Plaza Nariño, in Bogotá, as there is no way we're going to accept the change they're proposing in the contracting scheme.**

This struggle is an important point in the **IUF's** agenda, and we know that we will always have its support and commitment, because if we are alone it will be much more difficult to stop the onslaught of these businesses which have the support of the government of **Colombia.**

-What characteristics does SINTRAINAGRO have which have made it the only organization in Colombia with an Industry-Wide Collective Bargaining Agreement?

-Ours is an organization that defends workers' rights, but we also devote great efforts to social work. We have housing projects developed with the municipalities and Conventional resources; we carry out a health care project that not only benefits **Urabá** banana workers, it also covers the communities of the region. **Today we have basic health care coverage in every**

municipality, and two clinics owned by the union, which enable us to enhance social security and health care services.

We've built schools with our own resources and in alliance with banana business associations and municipal governments. **And a new school –one of the best in Urabá– was built with support from the General Workers' Confederation of Spain (UGT), the Labor Institute of Cooperation for Development (ISCOD), the IUF and the Union itself.**

In this way we provide a different alternative, as we not only negotiate Lists of Demands, we also seek to improve living conditions in general and further development in the region, working with the local governments. This is our strategy to prevent **Urabá** from becoming a region governed by violence and globally notorious for its labor conflicts. **We want our region to be known for promoting peace and development.** That is why **SINTRAINAGRO** is recognized today throughout the country as an organization that carries out projects that benefit the people. **This has given the Union its profile of social organization, renowned around the country as one of the strongest organizations in the agricultural industry, with clear proposals, initiatives and definitions.** ■

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