

## ***David and Goliath by Jan Nimmo for STUC Scottish Review***

***Ecuadorian banana workers violently persecuted by one of Latin America's richest men.***

### ***The race to the bottom***

Readers of the Scottish Trade Union Review are familiar with stories from Latin American banana plantations by now but events in Ecuador are perhaps the most significant in recent years. I visited Ecuador at the end of April and was witness to some of the events.

Ecuador, the world's largest exporter of bananas, produces more than one in every three bananas traded in the world. This fruit is grown on over 5,000 farms covering over 320,000 acres of a country where 85% of people live below the poverty line.

The sector employs over 300,000 workers and by extension affects about two million people if we include workers' families. Most workers earn less than £3 a day, whilst it is calculated that they need at least double that to cover their most basic needs. 12-14 hour days are commonplace; child labour and lower wages for women are widespread. Most employers flout the law and fail to register workers with the national social security institution.

US based Dole is the world's largest banana company and is the second biggest exporter. Dole owns land in Ecuador but both Chiquita and Del Monte also buy cheap Ecuadorian bananas. The largest Ecuadorian company, responsible for over a third of the exports, is the Noboa Corporation, owned by Alvaro Noboa Pontón, the richest man in Latin America, and a candidate in the next presidential elections to be held this autumn. He has created his own political party, the Independent Renewal Party of National Action (PRIAN). Alvaro Noboa has 105 companies registered in his name. He spends most of his time in the USA.

The Ecuadorian banana workers' struggle is being watched very carefully by banana workers' unions throughout Latin America, whose wages and benefits are threatened by the dominance of Ecuador's non-union, low-wage banana exports. Ecuador now produces about 35% of world banana exports, and is leading the race to the bottom in terms of labour and environmental conditions.

### ***Unions in Ecuador***

Until around 1980 unionisation in the banana sector was reasonably high, but employers conspired to completely rid their plantations of unions, in some cases leading to violence. In 2001 there were just 1200 union members organised plantation by plantation. Workers feared instant reprisals if they as much as mentioned the word 'union'.

In July 2001, FENACLE, a small farmers' and indigenous peoples' federation affiliated to the Ecuadorian Confederation of Free Trade Unions (CEOSL), initiated a drive to organise banana plantation workers across the three main banana-producing provinces of the country. FENACLE's initiative has the financial and political support of Banana Link (funded by the Department for International Development), AFL-CIO (the US trade union confederation) and the General Workers' Union of Denmark (SiD). FENACLE is also an active member of the Latin American Co-ordination of Banana Workers' Unions, COLSIBA. FENACLE was founded 34 years ago with a history of popular education and organising rural workers and indigenous community groups. Its President, Guillermo Touma Gonzalez, who has held his post for the last 18 years, is a former banana worker from the Balao Chico plantation, which is one of the few plantations which has maintained a trade union for over 30 years.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 2002 the Ecuadorian Labour Minister officially approved new trade unions with the subcontracting companies Cliades, Beducor and Nenro (Alamos Division), who are the workers' direct employers.

### ***British and Irish trade union delegation visits Ecuador***

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2002, a War on Want trade union delegation travelled to Ecuador to raise awareness and build solidarity between the supermarket sector in Britain and the banana sector in Ecuador. The delegation was facilitated by Banana Link and FENACLE and comprised of representatives from TGWU, GMB, USDAW and MANDATE (Ireland). Ian King, Senior Organiser with GMB Scotland was one of the delegates. The visit coincided with the publication of a Human Rights Watch report\* "Tainted Harvest" which highlighted widespread child labour and obstacles to trade union organising in the Ecuadorian banana industry. The need for children to go out to work clearly cannot be separated from the need to allow union organisation and improve conditions.

The delegation visited some plantations in south-west Ecuador - including the Danish owned Rio Culebra - which left a deep impression on the delegates. When they went there, the workers had been on strike for 5 weeks. Delegates were horrified by living conditions. Ian King stated, "I am appalled by the living and working conditions that faced the plantation workers daily. It is hard to comprehend adults working in these conditions never mind children".

Delegates saw the living quarters where as many as 8 workers slept in one tiny room, two to a bunk. Panchita, the nurse, who has a personal commitment to helping her fellow workers, explained the difficulties she experiences: there are no medical supplies nor is there transport. Rio Culebra is 11 km up a dirt track off the main Guayaquil-Machala road, so if a workers is, say, bitten by a snake there is no antidote or way of getting to the nearest clinic. The company only employs

Panchita three days a week. There is no drinking water and the electricity has been cut off.

The delegation also attended a meeting with representatives from the Ecuadorian Government, the banana producers sector and the labour movement. Of this event Ian King commented, "Whilst the meeting between the government, banana producers and the trade unions was very high profile the conclusion was very low in substance. I asked the Government Ministers to reconnect the water and power supply to the striking workers on the Rio Culebra plantation but that fell on deaf ears".

### ***This year on Los Alamos Plantation – strike action***

Monday 25<sup>th</sup> February saw the first major strike action by Ecuadorian banana workers in over 20 years. Around 1000 of the 1400 workers at seven plantations producing for the Noboa Corporation (Alamos Division) went on strike demanding their basic labour rights. These are all rights established under Ecuadorian law.

Specifically, the workers are demanding to be paid overtime, for their employer to pay the deductions taken from their pay into the Social Security system, and to have access to healthcare facilities, fair wages and job security. They were tired with what they describe as their inhuman treatment at the hands of their employers. After legal advice, workers went back to work the next day, since their wildcat strike was technically illegal. Union supporters then began signing up hundreds of members and filed an application for legal registration of a union covering all workers on the seven farms. In the first week, 500 workers signed up for the union. There was a mass firing of 123 workers on 11<sup>th</sup> March, with another 180 workers being laid off that same day 'for lack of work'. This included eight trade union leaders.

The application to register a general Los Alamos workers' union was turned down by the Labour Ministry on 27<sup>th</sup> March. However, the next day, the workers registered three unions, one for each of the contracting companies which are their direct employers. The Labour Ministry approved these unions on 26<sup>th</sup> April.

Following the mobilisation of an international solidarity campaign by trade unions and NGOs in Europe and North America, the Labour Minister agreed to meet with Los Alamos workers, FENACLE and other Ecuadorian unions supporting the struggle. At the meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> April, Minister Martin Insua Chang told workers that he regarded the case as sufficiently important for him to take on a central role in trying to resolve the conflict.

An advert paid for by FENACLE, and endorsed by 85 international organisations including Scottish signatories, STUC, GMB Scotland, T&G Scotland, SCIAF, WDM and Glasgow Council Labour Group, was placed in the Ecuadorian press.

This was because these historic developments on Noboa plantations had been studiously ignored by the press.

### ***On the farm – working conditions***

After the approval of the new unions on 26<sup>th</sup> April, three union activists at Los Alamos were fired. On the 4<sup>th</sup> May 2002 workers from Los Alamos met at an assembly at Puerto Inca where they decided to declare a strike the next day. Because of this action I was able to enter the plantation with workers to observe and document conditions inside. Plantation visits usually have to be arranged in advance, with company permission.

What did I find there? Workers' living quarters are appalling – rooms have no furniture except wooden bunk beds with workers sleeping two to a bed and eight to a room. There are no mattresses – just cardboard banana boxes which say *Bonita* – Noboa's trade name for bananas and which is Spanish for *beautiful*. Workers also use boxes to store the few belongings they have. Outside the quarters there are streams with opaque, grey water, contaminated with pesticides. The toilet and washing facilities are extremely unhygienic to the point of being unusable – the women's toilets have some broken WCs while the men's have no WCs at all, just holes in the broken concrete floor – neither are ever cleaned.

The canteens are open sided structures with very basic kitchens and facilities: old rusty cookers, freezers and a few battered old pots and pans. Outside the canteens there are signs which read *Look after your health. Wash your hands before you eat* – this would be good advice supposing there *was* somewhere to wash you hands.

Like Rio Culebra, there is literally no health care provision – the first aid cupboard was bare when I visited and there were reports that the company had trained up one of the gardeners to provide medical treatment for workers.

In Zapotal, one of the seven packing stations on the plantation, there are some rickety makeshift workers' homes made from sugar cane that have bare dirt floors. This is where the workers who have families on the farm live. There is no running water or electricity. The only vaguely positive aspect to Zapotal is that workers have taken the initiative to build a couple of goal posts from scrap wood and twine so that they can play football.

On a later visit to the Rio Culebra plantation I was able to observe how families live in self-built shacks on this plantation. Water is taken from a contaminated well and is stored in plastic containers that previously carried highly toxic agrochemicals. One family live right beside the chemical store with only a wall made from sugar cane to separate them from the chemicals. Some children have bad rashes around their mouths. Workers use candles or kerosene lamps to light their homes. One family I visited explained how such a lamp exploded and burnt their baby and two year old daughter. Although this had been some time before my visit the scars on their bodies were still clearly visible.

## ***Pesticides and flag men***

Many readers will be aware of the dangers of the application of hazardous pesticides. Hacienda Alamos is similar to other large plantations in Ecuador that do not provide adequate protection of training for workers who apply and are exposed to agrochemicals. When aerial spraying takes place on the Alamos plantation workers are not given advance warning and continue to work within the plantation. Incidences of the canteen areas and workers' homes being sprayed over are commonplace. Many workers complain that they are not given time to shower after applying chemicals or even given a glass of milk to counter the immediate effects that the chemicals have on them. Workers suffer from severe stomach pains and vomiting.

In almost all banana producing countries in Latin America the job of flag-man or *bandarillero* is now prohibited. However, in Ecuador the flag-man, using flags to guide the crop dusting planes and exposed to high levels of toxic chemicals, is still to be found on many plantations. These workers are very rarely provided with any kind of protective gear and suffer from symptoms of intoxication including impaired vision and blindness. One worker from a plantation in Los Rios Province that met with the War on Want/Banana Link delegation showed the delegates the chemical burns on his skin and described his job as "a slow death". Alamos is no exception to this.

On Alamos no attention is paid to the environment – the chemical-coated plastic bags, in which the bunches of bananas are grown, are piled high and either burned or dumped along the banks of the riverbanks and irrigation canals that pass through the farm, allowing residues to contaminate the water – water which is consumed by the workers.

## ***David and Goliath: Peaceful workers attacked on Alamos.***

On the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> of May I received a call from Guillermo Touma of FENACLE who told me that he had received news that the Alamos workers had been violently evicted from the plantation during the early hours. After sending urgent e-mails we left Guayaquil, Ecuador's second city, for the Alamos Plantation. We really didn't know what to expect.

On arrival we were greeted by workers who had maintained a presence at the gate to the plantation. It was clear that the gate had been broken down by large banana trucks which were sitting just inside the entrance. The first thing that Arturo Pogo, an Alamos trade union leader, showed us was the pool of blood where worker Mauro Romero had been shot at close range in the early hours.

What exactly had happened? I spoke to many workers that morning and later in the evening and was able to build up quite a clear picture of what had gone on. At around 2.00am, when workers were asleep in their quarters, masked armed men (police estimates say around 400) entered the plantation breaking down the gate at the entrance with the banana truck that we saw. They kicked in the doors to the workers' rooms and threatened them saying that they were the police and that they must hand over their papers. Not only did the armed attackers steal some of the workers documents – they also took their money. Workers were forced from their rooms with rifle butts and taken to the radio office where the attackers assembled some 80 workers. They were threatened and some were beaten.

The workers were then taken in pick-ups to the banana container lorry at the entrance to the gate. They were forced into the container – they were told that they were to be killed and dumped in the river at Durán, near Guayaquil. This is when Mauro Romero was shot in the leg. His colleagues were told not to go to his aid – doing so would have resulted in the same happening to them.

The attackers crushed more and more workers into the banana truck and tried to force the door shut, but luckily the workers inside were able to resist, and other workers outside let down the truck's tyres. By this time someone had also called the police, who arrived later that morning.

We were all shocked at what had happened. The strike had been peaceful and workers had taken care of all the plantation installations as they knew that any damage would be blamed on them. So why such force?

The armed men were still present when we arrived. To date Noboa has never denied that these were men hired by the company and two of the men claimed at the time to be Alvaro Noboa's personal bodyguards. Alvaro Noboa and his lawyers acknowledged to a US Congressional delegation that the company had brought in the armed thugs ("security personnel") to Los Alamos but belittled the violence as "minimal" and said it was necessary because the workers were destroying or about to destroy his property.

Since the strike began on Alamos, FENACLE had been appealing for police protection for the workers. This protection was never afforded except for the presence of half a dozen officers who were present on the 16<sup>th</sup> but who refused to intervene. FENACLE had been pressurising both the Minister of Government and the Labour Minister to send police protection, and orders had been given to Colonel Cubero, Chief of Police, to send in reinforcements for the six police officers present at Alamos. They never arrived.

Representatives of SiD (General Workers of Denmark Trade Union) were also present on 16<sup>th</sup> May as observers. They returned to Guayaquil at around 4.00pm to send out reports to the international community and I stayed on to observe. At 5.00pm the workers were told by the armed men that they would have to leave by 6.30pm, otherwise they would be forced to leave. The aggressors didn't wait until then. At around six the armed "guards" gave permission to a local bus driver, whose bus had been enclosed in the plantation since the beginning of the strike, to remove it. Workers were unhappy about this as it would mean that their picket would be broken. They gathered round the bus to prevent it from leaving. This apparently became an excuse to open fire on the workers. Some of the attackers ran off into the banana plantation to shoot at workers from the side as well as from behind. Four people were injured. Bernabé Menendez was shot three times in the stomach, has shrapnel in his neck and face and lost a tooth. Alex Mata received a bullet in his forehead and has miraculously survived. A policeman was also injured with a gunshot wound in the arm.

The injured were bundled into Guillermo Touma's pick-up and we drove to Naranjal about 20 minutes south of Alamos where the wounded were sent in an ambulance to hospital in Guayaquil.

The same evening angry workers closed the main Machala-Guayaquil road in Puerto Inca, a small settlement where some workers live. The police were, in this instance, on hand to re-open the road.

Mr. Noboa's lawyer, Rafael Pino, attributed the violence to the workers, saying the guards had been sent in to protect property that was being vandalised. "At no moment were there shots from our side," he said. (New York Times 13.7.02). Having read this remark in the in the New York Times, I asked Stephen Coates from Chicago based US LEAP to respond to this statement as I knew that he had met Alvaro Noboa and that there had been inconsistencies in the company's response to the attack on workers.

"Mr. Noboa and his lawyers didn't deny that there was violence but said it had been blown out of proportion, protesting that, "There wasn't that much violence!" says Coates who adds, " Mr. Noboa took full credit for the attack on the workers in our meeting. He said that security guards had been sent in to remove the workers because they were damaging--or about to damage (it was unclear which)--his plantations. He didn't explain why this forced eviction required violence in the middle of the night".

### ***Who are the victims?***

Mauro Romero Carranza worked for six years on the Alamos Plantation and supported the workers' struggle for justice. He was one of the workers who was

violently evicted on the 16<sup>th</sup> of May. His right leg was later amputated in hospital. Mauro is a 33 year old widower with a four year old son, Fabián, to support.

Now Mauro is trying to learn to walk with two wooden crutches. On release from hospital he stayed with his sister, in a poor neighbourhood of Guayaquil. His sister is as poor as he is - she has no furniture in her home. Mauro was with her while he tried to recover. He is upset and tired. He talks about the pain in the stump of his right leg, which is worst at night and keeps him awake. His doctor says that this pain will slowly fade over the next few months, after the sawed bone, flesh and veins heal. Mauro does not talk about the psychological and emotional pain caused by his mutilation.

His family and 75 year old mother, Cruz are doing their best to support him. Mauro's brother, Jacinto, has started the process of obtaining a disabled pension. Jacinto also made a claim to Mauro's employers for the payment of an artificial limb that would cost \$5,000. A secretary said that the Noboa Corporation would take care of this but there is still no formal commitment or any documentation that would lead us to believe that the company will guarantee payment. According to international observer, Helge Fischer, if the company paid for the artificial leg it would not pay the monthly retirement pension. So far hospital costs have been covered by FENACLE.

The IESS (the Ecuadorian State Social Security Dept.) should pay Mauro a retirement pension. Although Mauro has the right to a pension that matches his last salary, in practice the IESS generally only pays 25% of this, which means that Mauro would only receive \$34 each month.

Mauro has returned home to Balzar to be with his son.

### ***International campaign to counter company denials***

A growing international campaign against the actions of Noboa Corporation, whose bananas are sold under the Bonita brand, has failed to move the company and its chief owner, Alvaro Noboa, to the negotiating table. Indeed, a month and a half after admitting to hiring armed thugs that violently attacked striking workers on the Los Alamos plantation in Ecuador, workers report that the Noboa Corporation has not only refused to reach any settlement with the unions who represent the striking workers, but has tried to form a company negotiating committee, similar to a company union, in an effort to block negotiations. The union reports that the company union has members who don't even work on the Los Alamos plantation.

In a meeting in Ecuador with US LEAP and US Congressional aides, Mr. Noboa did not hide his antipathy towards unions. "I don't like unions. I will

fight unions.” He suggested that the workers had been stirred up by a political opponent, a "mafia-type".

According to Guillermo Touma, Noboa alleged that the strike was over. However when the US delegation visited Alamos the delegates were able to talk to striking workers and to witness strike breakers leaving the plantation. Touma claims that many of the strike breakers are underage.

On my last visit to Alamos with the US Labour Attaché, Peter Harding, on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2002, I had been able to observe that one of the ringleaders of those who made the attack on the 16<sup>th</sup> of May was present and had a cordial relationship with the police.

Tribunals were held in June for each of the three unions that were set up for each of the sub-contracting companies. The Labour Ministry has been relatively supportive of the unions' demands in the tribunal negotiations that have been taking place since the attack. FENACLE report that this support by the Labour Ministry is the first seen in recent history.

While the unions and the Labour Minister have made progress in forming a settlement, Noboa representatives regrettably often choose to leave meetings rather than engage in the negotiations.

Despite the companies' union-busting and stalling tactics, FENACLE has continued to mobilise and organise, and has reaffirmed that the majority of workers at Los Alamos support the union. On Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> June, the unions held an Assembly meeting away from the plantation which was well attended. The company tried to hold a party inside Los Alamos for the workers at the same time as the union had planned the Assembly - but the workers left the plantation anyway and the union Assembly was a great success.

In June, the Ecuadorian Ambassador to Europe accepted the invitation of the Development Committee of the European Parliament to respond to questions about conditions on Los Alamos and Rio Culebra. The GMB, IUF, SiD (Danish union) and Banana Link also co-ordinated a delegation from FENACLE to the European Parliament. The Ambassador claimed that a full investigation would be carried out into the violence that took place on the Alamos plantation.

The FENACLE delegates also visited the company Bonita Pacific Fruit in Belgium (Bonita is the trade name under which Noboa exports and sells bananas), to meet with general manager, Ronan Raes, who had only heard the Noboa Corporation's version of events. He described Alamos as a very good plantation – we can only assume he was referring to production rather than social and working conditions. Moises Fuentesfria of the Alamos trade union described to Raes how there was no appropriate protective gear for workers applying agrochemicals. Raes replied that there had always been gear supplied when he

visited the plantation but the workers were “too macho” to use it. Guillermo Touma of FENACLE responds, “If we take the example of what Noboa’s European representative says when he refers to the use of safety equipment: He doesn’t have the remotest idea of what this really means, he talks about machismo, as if when they give out the protective clothing it was as if the workers were being given skirts to wear when they carry out their work!”

Raes also described the attackers as legitimate security guards who had a right to what they did – “you see security guards outside any hotel or shop in Ecuador – it’s normal”. So is it legitimate to attack peaceful unarmed workers?

Touma from FENACLE continues, “When he (Raes) refers to security guards, allow me to contradict this disparaging statement, they aren’t “private security” any longer, they are murderers and criminals, the lowest of the low, who when paid a few cents, have no qualms about harming workers who are demanding their just rights. We can’t take any more, we cannot remain silent when we hear such a useless series of justifications from the company aimed at discrediting the workers.”

### ***NOT a boycott***

These struggles are being watched very carefully by banana unions throughout Latin America, whose wages and benefits are threatened by non-union, low-wage exports from Ecuador, the world’s banana capital. Banana Link is not calling for a boycott. International support has been and continues to be crucial for FENACLE and its affiliates in achieving their goals: justice, dignity and the growth of a meaningful trade union movement within Ecuador’s banana sector. International pressure has persuaded the Labour Minister to approve the trade unions and to support their demands, which has been a major breakthrough. On the other hand the perpetrators of the crimes against the workers remain unpunished. There is still a lot we can do – together: Please add your voices to the growing support so that consumers here in Scotland can enjoy bananas that aren’t stained with blood and injustice.

Ian King agrees that a that a boycott was not the answer “by raising an awareness among the retailers, the importers and the politicians could have the required impact”. King continues, “We have to do everything we can in order that exploitation particularly, of children, can be eradicated and that all the wealth creators can enjoy a real quality of life”.

There is still a lot we can do – together: Please add your voices to the growing support so that consumers here in Scotland can enjoy bananas that aren’t stained with blood and injustice.

**Jan Nimmo 22/08/02**