

Chemical-Cocktail-Fruit

Jan Nimmo

A Glasgow-based artist, over the last 20 years I have worked on a wide range of creative projects from printmaking to filmmaking and facilitating for community groups. Since the early 1990s I have been a regular visitor to Latin America, carrying out research into popular arts and establishing links with community organisations.

For almost 10 years I have worked on and off with Banana Link¹, which campaigns on banana trade issues and provides a voice in the UK and Europe for the banana and now pineapple workers' trade unions. For 5 of these years I worked as Banana Link's Scottish Worker, co-ordinating speaker tours with trade unions and campaign groups in Scotland.

My work in Latin America is essentially about the lives that people lead, from earlier projects in Cuba and Mexico to more recent projects in Costa Rica, Panama and Ecuador, where I have been working specifically with banana workers. I have become increasingly involved in labour rights and occupational health issues, through listening to the testimonies of the banana workers and interpreting for Latin American community activists visiting Glasgow. This has brought home to me the parallels with what has happened to workers in Scotland, with the experience of my own family and my father's working life as a miner, shot-firer, driller and road-builder – all jobs which had a serious effect on his health. My father has recently received compensation for the emphysema that he now suffers from, though somehow this does not compensate for the loss of a comfortable retirement after a hard working life.

In all of this I see my role as part of a bigger project – that of building bridges between people and across cultures. To do this I need to keep my work simple, I don't want to bamboozle, and I can't diverge into the abstract and conceptual when I need to communicate with as wide an audience as possible. I see myself as a campaigner as much as an artist – I need to speak directly to get the message across, which may be complex but it cannot be ambiguous.

Trouble in Paradise?

Costa Rica is a country so rich in biodiversity – referred to by some as the Switzerland of Central America; "politically stable", a country with no standing army – that it has been promoted as a destination for eco-tourists, and is widely seen as a tropical paradise in comparison to other Central American countries. But outside the boundaries of the country's national parks there is another Costa Rica, one of cash crop monocultures and multinational fruit companies: here the picture is very different – environmental destruction and the blanket use of pesticides, chronic health problems and the repression of workers rights, suppression of trade unionists and the intimidation of those who speak out.

I first met Carlos Arguedas eight years ago in Glasgow. While I was translating and playing host to him and a fellow trade unionist, I got to understand something about the situation in the banana-growing region of Costa Rica. I kept in touch with Carlos and, over the years, came to learn more about the history of the exploitation of the Atlantic Zone for banana production. This story begins over 100 years ago with the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita) and its domination of the economies of Central America, but through Carlos I learnt more about other struggles and the personal toll these had taken on him and the other people living and working on and around the banana plantations.

In the 1970s, Carlos, like many other workers, was made sterile through exposure to the pesticide Nemagon (DBCP). Nemagon was already banned in the USA. Carlos was 27 years old at the time.

He was imprisoned on numerous occasions for his trade union work and community activism, including land occupation. He also took part in organising action against Dole and Dow Chemicals, the manufacturer of Nemagon. After a two year campaign by the unions Costa Rica banned the use of Nemagon but the companies ignored the new laws and continued to use Nemagon for a further two years.

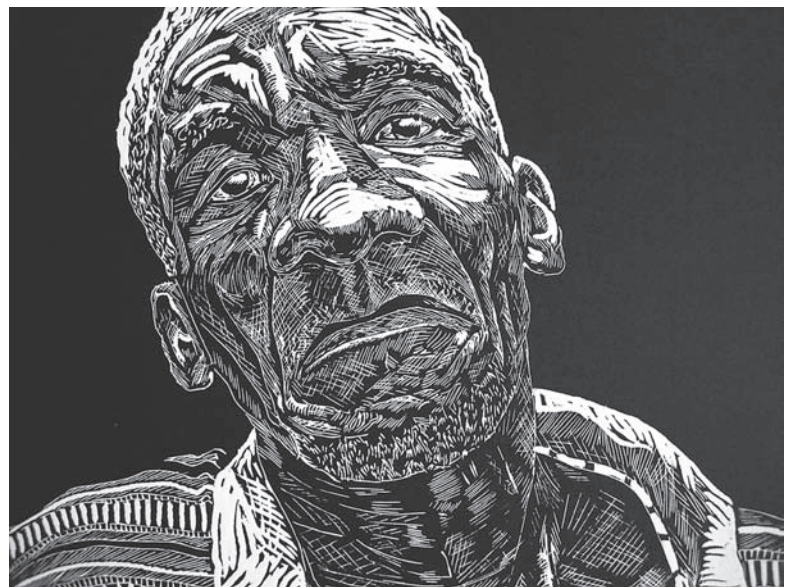
One of the things which for me marks Carlos as someone special within the trade union movement is that as well as campaigning for trade union and labour rights he is also a passionate environmentalist.

Almost half of the material costs on the average plantation are spent on a whole variety of agrochemicals used throughout the growing process. While working as Scottish Co-ordinator for Banana Link I met one of the few scientists prepared to speak out and not toe the company line (and that of the Costa Rican government) on the effects of agrochemicals on human health and on the environment. Dr Caterina Wesseling works for IRET, the department of toxicology at the University in San Jose and is also the Director of Central American occupational health programme, SALTRA. Dr Wesseling has carried out detailed investigations that show the extent to which pesticide and other chemical residues are present in homes and schools in the banana-producing areas. These chemicals come from the plantations and include allergens and carcinogens associated with a wide range of health problems.

Much of the pesticide residue is airborne, coming from the aerial spraying which is carried out routinely but haphazardly, over the plantations and anything else in their proximity. There are various fungicides that are applied aerially, including Chlorothalonil and Mancozeb (both known carcinogens and allergens). The aerial spraying of these chemicals has had a huge impact on workers and communities living around the plantations: I have interviewed people with severe skin allergies and acute bronchial problems. The law in Costa Rica states that workers should be evacuated from the plantations while aerial spraying is taking place, but according to the testimonies of the workers, in reality this doesn't always happen. I have also seen for myself how spraying is carried out and it is clear that there is no protection to the roads and smallholdings around the plantations.

Other chemicals are associated with the bagging of bananas. The blue, Chlorpyrifos impregnated polythene bags are as common a sight as the banana plants themselves and discarded bags make up a significant and very visible proportion of the waste stream of commercial banana production. Most at risk are the baggers themselves (the bags have to be placed over the growing fruit by hand) but the chemical somehow finds its way into the bedrooms, kitchens and classrooms of the local community. Chlorpyrifos is an organophosphate and a neurotoxin – associated with anorexia, suicides and depression (similar problems had been linked to exposure to sheep-dip in Scotland). Chlorpyrifos has already been banned on a number of plantations in Honduras – thanks to the pressure exerted by local trade unions and a study carried out by SALTRA. An international campaign is now building to ban the use of this chemical altogether, however its use remains widespread and global - Chlorpyrifos has even been found in bottled Coca Cola in India.²

We may ask why bananas need such a cocktail of chemicals to grow healthily or to produce an economically viable crop. The Cavendish variety of banana grown universally for the world market is in fact a sterile hybrid, which while producing fruit that conform to the shape and colour the world expects, remains susceptible to disease in



the warm and humid regions where it is grown.

Reliance on chemicals continues in the washing and packing plants, where women workers are more exposed to the chronic effects of the pesticides and disinfectants. Protective gear such as rubber gloves create as many problems as they solve, as contaminated water and disinfectant become trapped inside. The results are clearly visible in the disfigured hands of some of the workers.

I had seen that conditions in the banana industry were bad – but what about the other cash crops grown in the area? Since the market for bananas became saturated with cheap fruit from Ecuador, Costa Rican producers have taken the hint to diversify. Unfortunately this is not as positive as it sounds, as it means the substitution of one monoculture for another. These crops include melons and ornamental plants but the most damaging of all has been the pineapple – the production of which is both environmentally more destructive and more dependent on chemicals than the banana.

Just like bananas, pineapples are grown in intensive conditions with the aid of a cocktail of chemicals. However, the pineapple is a short plant and lacks the ground cover and humus-producing leaves of the banana. The loss of ground cover has resulted in a massive increase in erosion and accelerated the run-off of pesticides into the once pristine lowland river systems. The pineapple plants also play host to a fly, which feeds off the blood of cattle in the neighbouring fields and can cause them each to lose a kilo in weight per day. As a result the cattle farmers are also using more pesticides to tackle the flies. I have spoken to smallholders forced off the land, their livestock poisoned, their livelihoods gone, leaving them with no option but to sell up to the fruit companies. I visited communities that depend on the river as a lifeline and which are now seriously affected by the poisoning of fish and the silting up of waterways. These communities rely on subterranean fresh watercourses as their only source of drinking water but these aquifers have also been affected by pesticides (such as Bromasil) and the wells are now contaminated.

Both the trade unions and Caterina Wesseling are very damning about the certification of fruit production. Some of these framework agreements are voluntary internal standards, which lead us to believe that fruit is produced in a socially and environmentally responsible manner. External monitors do visit the plantations but they only see those workers who have been selected by the company and not the trade union representatives or the scientists involved in monitoring, so they do not get a clear and accurate picture of what happens day-to-day. In fact, many of the workers enjoy the days when inspections take place, since correct working procedures are more likely to be adhered to and they may get the chance to go home early! Dr Wesseling is particularly critical of Rainforest Alliance: “Yes, what a lovely name - it would lead you to believe this was paradise - but as far as we are concerned they continue to certify conditions which are unacceptable.”

I also saw that exposure to pesticides is by no means the only threat which the workers have to put up with. They work excessively long hours (12 hour shifts are common, up to 24 hours on pineapple plantations) and have suffered from years of union repression. I wanted to know why the unions hadn't done more to oppose these conditions. From Carlos I learnt about the history of Solidarismo – “yellow unions” set up by the banana companies with the support of the government and the right wing of the Catholic Church, supposedly to represent the workers but with the real intention of making it more difficult for them to form free trade unions of their own.



In reality it is no better than a Christmas club. But the development of free trade unions has not been entirely suppressed by Solidarismo. I know one activist who joined the free trade union when he saw what Solidarismo was about – he has since visited Scotland, representing the banana workers during the G8 protests.

The switch to pineapple production has also brought with it a change towards the “Ecuadorisation” of production. The fruit companies have learnt the lesson from Ecuador and we now see in Costa Rica the increased casualisation of the workforce and the adoption of more “flexible” working practices. This has allowed the situation to arise where workers are exposed to dangerous chemicals for still longer periods, without adequate protection or guidance. There is no possibility of forming trade unions or gaining access to their representatives. The position of women and children has been made more vulnerable, both through poorer working conditions and through the effects on family life of casualisation and a mobile workforce. There are now more single mothers on the plantations, forced to work and with no access to child care. In an environment where sexual harassment by foremen is rife this clearly brings with it other risks to the women workers.

Pura Vida?

The testimonies I have gathered from travelling around Costa Rica with Carlos and other trade unionists form the basis of my latest film, *Pura Vida?*

Pura Vida? exposes the human and environmental damage caused by the expansion of big cash crop plantations and the use of pesticides and other agrochemicals in the Atlantic Zone of Costa Rica. This is an entry level film aimed at raising awareness amongst consumers in the UK of the hidden costs behind the fruit we eat. I feel that this is especially relevant, given the position of

the big supermarkets squeezing the producers in a “race to the bottom” to produce readily available and ever cheaper fruit for our tables. However, the supermarkets still manage to take up to 40% of cost to the consumer as profit, even while the commodity prices are falling. *Pura Vida?* will be premiered in Glasgow at this October's Document 4 Human Rights Film Festival. My first film, *Bonita: Ugly Bananas* was first shown at the same festival two years ago (Document 2).

Bonita told the story of the first free trade unions in twenty years to be established on the plantations of Ecuador – and what happened when they decided to go on strike. Those events took place four years ago and I had hoped that conditions would have improved since then – but the latest news from Ecuador is that the company owner who had so violently oppressed the workers has announced his last minute candidacy for the presidency – brandishing a bible and describing himself as a hero of God!

Both *Pura Vida?* and *Bonita* form part of a larger project – Green Gold³ – which has given me the opportunity to use longer editions of the workers' testimonies along with video installation from the plantations and packing plants and woodcut portraits of the workers themselves. *Green Gold* is a travelling exhibition that can be adapted to suit a variety of venues, events and organisations, from arts organisations and festivals to trade unions, shopping centres and community groups. The *Green Gold* website is also a source of information for consumers and campaigners. So please get in touch if you would like to host an event to help build a bridge between banana workers and consumers, to give a human face to their struggle.

Footnotes

- 1 www.bananalink.org.uk
- 2 www.indiaresource.org/news/2006/1084.html
- 3 www.greengold.org.uk

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