

THE INTERNATIONAL BANANA CHARTER

About 320 delegates from 45 countries attended an international banana conference to try to resolve the problems surrounding the global production and trade of bananas. *Patricio Solar of Banana Link reports.*

"At the International Banana Conference which opened in Brussels today consumers have been warned that behind the bananas bought in European shops is the blood, and sometimes the deaths, of banana workers". So read the first Press Release at the opening of an event which until now had no precedent in the history of international labour relations and the building of sustainable trade.

Most of the major actors in the global banana chain came to Brussels to reflect upon proposals regarding the social and environmental problems linked to banana production and trade: workers' organisations, small and medium producers' organisations, multinational companies such as Del Monte, Dole, Fyffes and Atlanta, NGOs, governmental and EU representatives, the Christian churches, scientists and representatives from civil society.

Such international recognition was in itself an enormous success for the Coordination of Latin American Banana Workers' Unions and EUR-OBAN (European Banana Action Network) who staged the Conference. The presence of the big banana transnationals could be construed to represent an open acknowledgment by them of the right of banana workers to freely organise themselves in independent trade unions, a right largely ignored and repressed during the 80s and 90s, and up to the present day; these and other rights were especially flouted in the two leading banana exporting countries, Ecuador and Costa Rica¹.

No one at the Conference was in disagreement about the need for "fair trade" in the banana sector, nor about the need to introduce and implement environmentally friendly methods of production. Fair trade and environmentally friendly banana production are inseparable from the survival of many thousands of small

and medium sized producers both in Latin America and the Caribbean. These producers and others in the rest of Latin America and the Philippines could benefit greatly from fair trade and organic production initiatives; family, smallholder production, specifically Caribbean islands banana production, has a much better record of looking after the environment compared to the large scale plantations in Latin America, the so called "dollar zone". And small scale production is more likely to internalise social and environmental costs.

The delegates were presented with a draft International Banana Charter. Under present trading arrangements, developed countries get cheap fruit while workers, small farmers and the environment in producing countries pay the cost. However, those asking for change are not only the workers and their families in the plantations living a life of poverty, social deprivation and contamination of their land, rivers and drinking water as a direct result of the malpractices of large scale banana production. In the words of the International Banana Charter: *"it is consumers in developed countries who are increasingly concerned, not just about food safety and standards, but about the social and environmental conditions under which the food they buy is produced...And they are increasingly willing to pay for this concern"*. Therefore the Charter makes absolutely clear that *"in a sustainable banana economy prices (will) have to reflect real costs at every stage of production"*. This would mean an end to the price structure to be found in the "10 pence banana" currently being sold in European supermarkets and shops: 1.5 pence goes to producers, while 8.5 pence is shared between transporters, importers, ripeners and retailers.

The International Banana Charter proposes the introduction of a Social Clause to be established by the WTO and the ILO which should contain minimum labour standards including those on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, the minimum age of employment, discrimination, equal remuneration and forced labour. The

WTO is formally committed to sustainable development.

An Environmental Clause should be based on a new agreement on trade and the environment within the WTO. Such a clause should take into consideration the environmental effects of the way in which a product is produced, and should specify the conditions and procedures under which trade measures could become legally binding. Both of these clauses should be the result of governmental and inter-governmental initiatives.

Private sector initiatives should find expression in Corporate Codes of Conduct with independent verification based on ILO conventions and on internationally agreed standards regarding health and environmental problems, such as those set out in the FAO's International Code of Conduct on the Distribution and Use of Pesticides. The creation and implementation of fair trade initiatives should also be the task of the private sector. Fair trade labelling (guaranteed by FLO-Fair Trade Labelling International), alternative trade and organic production are of great importance as instruments which enable producers - especially, small, disadvantaged ones - to increase their control over their own future and guarantee a just return for their work. The Charter also points out that any reform of the European Union import regime should favour the continuation of a tariff quota regime with individual country quotas. Preferential access for ACP countries should continue, in accordance with Protocol 5 of the Lomé Convention.

All delegates adopted the Charter in principle and will surely come forward with amendments. The goal is that all parties involved, including the WTO, should eventually take up the task of implementing its guidelines. However difficult this might appear for some, it is clear that this represents one of the crucial future challenges for the sustainable banana movement. *Patricio Solar*

The author is a consultant with Banana Link

¹ February 1998 saw the signing of a Collective Labour Agreement between SITRAP - a banana trade union in Costa Rica - and the fruit transnational Del Monte.