**West Africa Mission Report**

**SUMMARY**

By Banana Link and Peuples Solidaires, June 2011

It is difficult for African production to compete with Latin America. Although labour is cheaper, it is less productive. The costing of shipping is higher and the climate less favourable. However the problems faced by workers are very similar: poor working conditions, low wages, excessive overtime, and health and safety problems.

The situation in terms of trade unions organisation is complex although it appears that trade unions are accepted in both countries, they can suffer from corrupt systems especially in Cameroon. The level of workers’ organisation seemed better nationally in the Ivory Coast.

**CAMEROON**

Exports of bananas and pineapples are dominated by large enterprises – there is only one small organic exporter.

There are three companies exporting primarily to the EU:

1. The Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) is a para-statal organisation. The organisation deals with a number of products including palm oil, bananas and rubber. It is the largest employer after the government, with 19,500 permanent employees – 4,200 of whom work in the banana industry.

   Their banana plantations are located in the Anglophone zone. Its biggest group of plantations is the Tiko Banana Project. This has been managed in partnership with Del Monte since 1988.

   The banana expansion project is divided into two plantations. There are plans to double the area of the new plantations. The atmosphere at the new plantations seemed better than the Tiko plantation and the workers had higher wages (although not a living wage).

2. The Plantations du Haut Penja (BEP) is a subsidiary of Compagnie Fruitiere (CF) a French company, and all but one plantation is located in the Francophone Zone. It has 6,000 employees making it the largest private employer. Workers we interviewed stated that working conditions were terrible, the ex-mayor of Penja was imprisoned – officially for creating social discontent – but NGO workers in the area agree that it was because he denounced PHP as being an irresponsible company.

3. Societes des Plantations De Mbanga (SPM) is the smallest and newest producer. It was formed with French capital and seems to have close links with the country’s political establishment. It has 2,000 employees but hopes to expand. Part of its expansion plans appear to involve land grabbing.
Trade Unions

The structure of the trade union movement is complex. Trade unions exist officially but there appears to be no real social dialogue. It is evident that effective trade union rights are not respected.

In individual plantations staff representatives, even if part of a trade union, are usually given special benefits that effectively put them on the side of the management. Critics claim that many trade unionists in the French Zone are people with political/financial ambition and little grass-root support. The government encourages and in some cases even finances these individuals to ensure that real trade unions do not develop. This means that organising grass roots support is difficult. In the Anglophone zone there is a tradition of respect for trade union rights; however trade unionists are not political – they concentrate on achieving what they can through legal frameworks.

Cameroon has nine trade union confederations and many appear to have no grassroots base. There are three confederations which operate in the agricultural sector: CSAC (CCATU), CSTC (CCTU) and USLC (CCFTU).

Before 2008 wages were better at CDC plantations than PHP. However riots around some PHP plantations ended with wage levels being raised to match CDC. Workers are entitled to a monthly minimum salary according to their ‘category’ for working a 48 hour week. In practice companies tend to act in a discretionary way on the level of wages. Most workers talked of earning between 30,000 and 35,000 or even 55,000 66,000 FCFA – thanks to incentives. However, a minimum living wage would be 66,200 (approx. 100 Euros) a month. Workers are entitled to a housing allowance if accommodation is not provided and some companies offer free transport to work. Workers and their families in most plantations are supposed to be provided with health care. It has been claimed that on the Tiko banana project that women were medically checked for pregnancy before being hired. Workers complain about long hours.

Environment

Aerial spraying using aircraft occurs every 9-10 days. There are no buffer zones around water sources in several of the CDC plantations. There have been reports of workers being sprayed whilst working in the fields. Counter and Chlordecone (both banned products) are still being applied on some CDC plantations. Workers reported skin irritation caused by daily contact with chemicals. Communities around PHP plantations claim that they suffer from spray drift and their water is polluted by the chemicals used on the plantations. There is inadequate protection on most plantations.

Cameroon is known as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Ministers and Local Authorities often have financial stakes in the fruit companies. Land grabbing by PHP and potentially by CDC is a real problem and implicates local government or community leaders. Small producers and workers have little opportunities to see their basic rights respected. With unemployment at 60%, plantations at least present employment opportunities.

The answer to the high cost of production in Cameroon is to double production in ten years. This would provide the economies of scale which would rival some of the Latin American competitors. Meanwhile producers continue to remind their workers of the need to work hard for low wages in the face of this competition.
THE IVORY COAST

Pineapple production has declined rapidly from 2000; competition from the Asian market, loss of preferential access to the EU and the development of the sweet gold MD2 pineapples have all affected pineapple production. The political and social unrest in the country has also affected the industry.

The majority of production occurs at plantations owned by SCB the local subsidiary of Compagnie Fruitiere a French company based in Marseille (40% of the company is owned by Dole). SCB hires around 5,591. The company exports mainly to France and appears to be expanding its operation in the Ivory Coast buying land for little money from small producers who can no longer access the market. There are four unions which operate at SCB: Dignite, UGTCI, FESACI and SINATRA (not affiliated to the confederation).

There are three other smaller producers Elgin, Canavese and Richard Matthys. OCAB is the banana and pineapples producers’ organisation and is keen to stimulate the small farmer sector, a parallel organisation OBAMCI was recently created by a former president of OCAB and is linked to SCB.

Trade Unions

The principal three union confederations appear to cover by far the majority of trade union membership.

UGTCI (Union Generale des Travailleurs de la Cote D’Ivoire) was founded in 1960 and claims to represent the majority of members across all sectors. It is the most established union. However it can be considered as being close to employers and not real defenders of workers interests.

Dignité was founded in 1988 and, with 150,000 members, claims to be the main trade union in the banana sector. An affiliate organisation of Dignité called SYNTRASCB which organises on SCB plantations was founded in 2001. It appears to have good relations with the company and a framework agreement was signed in 2007.

During periods of high demand 70% of workers could be day workers in the SCB plantations. Around 70% of permanent workers were migrants from other francophone countries. The unions claim there is no discrimination against migrant workers. Women represent a small minority of workers predominately located in the packing plant.

Payments were based on piece-rates and there was a complicated set of payment structures depending on the task.

Concerns about exposure to pesticides were raised several times. But the union SYNTRASCB claimed that in general there seemed to be little concern about the levels of agrochemicals employed in the industry. However there seemed to be little awareness among workers that there may be long term environmental impacts due to intensive usage of agrochemicals.