



# How fair is fair trade? The case of pineapples and bananas



*Didier Leitón Valverde (on the left) with ENCA members at the June meeting*

In June this year, the Norfolk-based organisation Banana Link invited Didier Leitón Valverde from Costa Rica to visit Britain to make a number of presentations to a range of unions and groups. On Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> June, Didier attended and spoke to the ENCA meeting in London. ENCA member Stephanie Williamson translated and James Watson

transcribed the presentation and discussion and then edited the transcription into the following article for this newsletter. Didier covers particularly the struggles of trades unions on the banana plantations, especially in the face of the bosses' *solidarismo* unions, and the fairness or otherwise of fair trade bananas.

## The struggles of agricultural workers in Costa Rica

Summary of a talk given by Didier Leitón Valverde to an ENCA meeting in June 2010.

By James Watson

At our last meeting in June, ENCA was joined by Didier Leitón Valverde, a former Del Monte worker and now union organiser from the Costa Rican plantation workers' union SITRAP. Leitón was in the country on a trip hosted by Banana Link, an organisation working to promote links between banana worker unions and those in consumer countries. Leitón and Banana Link generously offered to include a meeting with ENCA as part of his schedule, to talk about the conditions for plantation workers and the environmental impacts of plantations in Costa Rica.



Photo: Bananalink

Costa Rica has long benefited from an international image of a relatively peaceful, developed country, with a good record on human rights and the environment, and of a beautiful and comfortable destination for tourists. Despite its apparent commitment to environmental protection, however, large areas of the country are given over to monoculture plantations of bananas and

pineapples. It seems that the country's politics are increasingly being influenced by the multinational companies who control this production – most notably the familiar companies Dole, Chiquita and Del Monte.

Leitón described to us how in the last ten years plantation agriculture has been on the increase in Costa Rica. The last two years in particular have seen a massive expansion of plantations from their traditional areas in the south of the country, to new locations on the Caribbean coastal plain and in the north. In total, plantations have expanded from 20,000 hectares across the country in 2005, to 47,000 hectares today. This has occurred in tandem with increasing consolidation of agricultural production into the hands of the largest producers, as the multinationals have simultaneously bought out their mid-sized competitors, and bought small farmers off their land.

All this expansion has spread the negative environmental impacts of the agricultural methods these large companies rely on to maximise their profits, and allowed them to act with increasing impunity. The Costa Rican government is extremely friendly to the large multinationals and their expansion, especially since the election of Óscar Arias in 2006, and the 2010 election of Laura Chinchilla as his successor looks set to continue that friendship. The expansion of plantations has been allowed to pass unhindered by Costa Rica's much celebrated environmental legislation. Despite a law that any new agricultural activity must first pass an impact assessment, this has regularly been side-stepped by the multinationals. Meanwhile, business and government have joined forces to undermine the environmental NGOs and trade unions that are working to put a brake on the worst side effects of plantation practices.

These side effects may well be common knowledge to our readers by now. In order to maintain constant crop rotations and even halve growing cycles to increase production, large amounts of chemical fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides are required. Without the firm regulation of a critical government, these chemicals are used unchecked, resulting in the polluting of rivers and ground water, and causing cancers and sterility among the workers whom SITRAP represent.

The dynamics between the multinationals and the government that give them impunity from environmental law also extend to their treatment of workers and unions. Leitón described the strong anti-union culture in Costa Rica, and how this has frustrated SITRAP and Banana Link's attempts to bring to fruition international regulations on workers' rights, such as those of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Costa Rican producer companies have come up with various ways of undermining union actions, supported by the government. Worker's organisation is commonly subverted by the companies themselves, which create so-called 'representative organisations' elected by the management and generally mirroring their opinions among the workers.

A particularly alarming trend within this anti-union culture is the emerging '*solidarismo*' movement. *Solidarismo* is rooted in a philosophy that is supported by members of the Catholic Church in Latin America, and principally by the Costa Rican priest Claudio Solano. It denies that conflicts of interest can occur

between workers and managers and calls on them to use Christian principles of agreement to settle disputes, using 'arreglos directos' – 'direct arrangements'. These arrangements are brokered through a permanent committee that is supposed to support the workers' interests, but is invariably selected by the management.

*Solidarismo* gives its members access to savings and lending facilities, with the financial support of Claudio Solano's church, and its links with the Church make it particularly influential among the workers. Meanwhile, the *solidarismo* members and organisers have been known to denounce trade unions as the devil's work, and stir up threats and violence towards union supporters. Again, the *solidarismo* and their anti-union activities are strongly supported by the pro-business government. Leitón told us how one of the last acts of Oscar Arias' government was to write protection for *solidarismo* into the country's own constitution, cementing its dominance over the unions.

When asked what was driving the recent expansion of plantations across Costa Rica, and the closer ties this has involved between the businesses and government, Leitón spelled out that only increased demand explains the rise in production. Dole, Chiquita and Del Monte are taking advantage of growing global markets for the products they sell, and the US, Europe and the UK's supermarkets are still absorbing the vast majority of the product.

Country:	Tonnes of pineapple imported:	Percentage from Costa Rica:
Germany	173,000	95+
United Kingdom	126000	85
Italy	149,000	85+
France	93,000	60+

Table 1: Source: Fresh pineapples: behind the 'boom' Presentation for EUROBAN. Banana Link, [www.bananalink.org.uk](http://www.bananalink.org.uk). Accessed 11/08/10. (Table prepared by Lucy Goodman)

As such, the flow of power that is allowing these companies to ignore local and international laws, and squeeze out voices of dissent in their producer countries, is coming straight from we consumers in the global North. Leitón told us that with his government ignoring the unions in Costa Rica, their largest successes were now through pressure applied by international bodies such as Banana Link, who can threaten the multinationals with international criticism.

Leitón was also strong in his assertion that in effect there is little if any difference between fair trade produced pineapples and bananas when compared with the conventionally produced crops. In support of this stance he outlined the control exerted by the major multinationals over the visits made by the inspecting and certifying organisations. This issue is taken up at greater length in the following article.



Photo: Bananalink

As the end consumers of these products, we are now therefore in a better position than anyone to fight the problems faced in Costa Rica. By communicating the importance of transparency and social and environmental responsibility to our supermarkets and governments, we can exercise the huge influence that we have on these companies. Banana Link has recently successfully brought large supermarkets such as Tesco to the table with producers and unionists in Latin America to come to agreements on plantation minimum standards. ENCA also donated a tiny sum of \$140 to SITRAP, and has offered to consider further environment-related proposals that SITRAP put forward for possible grants. So you can keep watching ENCA for new developments, and any support to us or Banana Link will help us to support these kinds of critical movements.

In the meantime, find the details of your local MP and your supermarket on the internet and write them an email or letter. Together we can make them realise that we have an opinion and that we want a voice on how our food is being produced overseas.

Banana Link website: [www.bananalink.org.uk](http://www.bananalink.org.uk)  
Also consult [www.detrasdelapina.org](http://www.detrasdelapina.org)



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# How fair is fair trade?

*This short article is based both on Leitón's presentation to last June's ENCA meeting and on an interview with Nela Perle, an Austrian national who lives and works in Costa Rica. Nela expresses her views completely independently of any organisation in Costa Rica or elsewhere. It should be noted, however, that she has considerable experience of working in the subject of agricultural production, with trade unions, individual producers and communities in rural Costa Rica. The interview was conducted by ENCA members Genna West and Martin Mowforth on 28<sup>th</sup> September 2010 in San José, Costa Rica. All quotations in this article come from that interview.*

In his presentation to ENCA members, Leitón made clear his scepticism about the benefits of fair trade production, especially from the point of view of the small producers. In particular, he described the process by which the fair trade certifiers visit the banana or pineapple plantations to inspect the modes of production and the criteria by which fair trade products are assessed. Leitón suggested that the certification visits are stage-managed and controlled by the large transnationals to which the producers are contracted to sell their produce. The certifiers are taken only to selected farms and speak only to selected workers, these selections ensuring that all the required conditions for qualification as fairly traded goods are satisfied. In fact, these conditions are not often satisfied by most producers for a range of reasons.

This gave considerable concern to all those present at the meeting, all of whom were keen on buying fair trade products where and when possible, firm in their belief that the extra money they pay for those products would be passed on to the producers. It seemed sensible therefore to check how widespread this view of fair trade production was within a major producing country, Costa Rica. Nela Perle has been in Costa Rica for five years and has worked for Aseprola (a Central American NGO which defends and promotes workers' rights) and CONGES (Consortium for Management of the Social Economy), and her work is financially supported by EED, the German Lutheran Church Development Agency. Despite these current and former links, it is important to emphasise that she talked with the two ENCA members on a personal basis and not representing any organisation, union,

church or other entity. She was especially concerned that what she said might be taken, wrongly, as criticism of the notion of fair trade, the principles of which she supports.

Initially, Nela pointed out that many trade union members are critical of the practice of fair trade; and equally, many small producers, particularly of pineapples, are too small to have trade unions on their plantations. These small fair trade producers "have to produce so many pineapples for the market in Europe that they don't have enough pineapples produced on their own farms, so they buy in from other farms, conventional farms, where there is no trade union, and often the same precarious working conditions as elsewhere." This means that a relatively high proportion of their supposedly fair trade production comes from farms where there are no trade unions, the liberty to belong to which is an important criterion for fair trade production.

Both Leitón and Nela talked about *solidarismo*, a movement which was started in Costa Rica in 1947. Essentially *solidarismo* is a type of bosses' union set up to appear benevolent to and provide selected benefits for its worker members. As Nela explains, "the problem is that it has been used in Costa Rica to reduce the power of the trade unions and to delegitimise the trade unions."

Nela also gave an example of the subversion of an information visit by a delegation of 15 Austrian journalists coordinated by Global 2000 and Fair Trade Austria. Fair Trade Costa Rica refused to integrate the trade union into the visit "because they were so worried about these people meeting with trade unionists."

Regarding the Rainforest Alliance standards for pineapple cultivation, there has been some debate about the distance between the cultivated area and local water courses, and some communities believe this distance is not great enough to prevent contamination. Nela suggests that however good the standards may be, if no monitoring and follow-up is carried out, they will not serve any purpose.

According to Nela, one of the principal reasons that the practice of fair trade now presents something of a problem is that "the system is too big to be controlled. ... fair trade is always for export to Europe and the States. Fair trade always depends on international markets, on international trade and must therefore produce in big quantities. Big quantities almost always mean monocultivation, synonymous with the abuse of natural and personal resources. In reality, fair trade is not the solution to the negative consequences of

conventional trade.” To paraphrase Nela, fair trade is for export, so it takes land away from people who grow for themselves and for local and national markets, thereby reducing food sovereignty.

But as Nela admits, “Fair trade is not the solution but is still a better choice than the conventionally-produced products. On the other hand, if we don’t eat the conventional monoculture crops, we would take away many workers’ livelihoods. It’s a very difficult issue”; but she suggests that we in the wealthy world should discipline ourselves to consume less tropical fruit – possibly just as special treats and on special occasions rather than incorporating them as part of our expected daily diet – and to pay more for them.

*ENCA readers will be aware that the problems associated with the production of pineapples in Costa Rica have been an issue of regular concern for our newsletter – Newsletter Nos. 26, 27, 31 and 41 - as have the problems of banana cultivation throughout Central America – Newsletter Nos. 36, 38, 39, 43, 44 and 48. Many readers will also be aware that during the first two weeks of October this year, The Guardian published a number of articles by Felicity Lawrence linking the UK’s supermarket price wars with many problems caused by pineapple production in Costa Rica. These articles give thorough details of the social and environmental problems caused by pineapple production in Costa Rica and we recommend them to our readers:*

*<http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2010/oct/02/truth-about-pineapple-production>*

## Solidarismo

*By Lucy Goodman and Martin Mowforth*

*Solidarismo* is a form of worker organisation that serves as an alternative to trade unions. In Europe it had its origins at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but in Central America it originated in 1947 with an idea of Alberto Martén and it is particularly associated with Costa Rica, where it has grown strongly through and since the 1990s. By its critics, it is often referred to as a boss’s union because it responds principally to the economic interests of profit maximisation held by businesses, owners and managers.

Despite its name, the movement does not seek to generate solidarity within the working class. Its aim is to create harmonious relations between work and capital in the workplace; and in the long term, ... the promotion of a form of ‘popular capitalism’.<sup>i</sup>

*Solidarismo* is a philosophical technique, like a movement with an evangelical route rather than a worker’s union. The concept suggests disputes between workers and bosses can be resolved through Christian principles and ‘*arreglo directo*’ (direct settlement) – a means of collective negotiation. *Solidaristas* contend that injustices and social inequalities are not the result of capitalism, but of unequal access to property, and that by becoming owners, workers will start to share their boss’s aim of increasing the productivity of the company.

*Solidarismo* also has a financial aspect to it which in Costa Rica is supported by law. People in *solidarismo* associations are often plantation administration staff, and the movement helps them to build their personal savings accounts by allowing frequent payments from wages to be made, and money to be loaned.

The methodology, however, is often abused because the three committee members of *arreglo directo* are supposed to be selected by plantation workers, but more often are put forward by the company and thus most disputes have a one-sided outcome. This is a way around collective bargaining and avoids the formation of unions which companies perceive as threats.

In Costa Rica the *solidarismo* movement is promoted by Claudio Solano, a priest who heads the Catholic organisation ‘Escuela Social Juan XXIII’. The organisation and its permanent committee have been officially recognised as the representative of *piñera* workers. This, of course, has the full support of the large transnational corporations (TNCs). According to Escuela Social Juan XXIII’s website, the school endorses a philosophy of respect for human life and working conditions, and aims to “foster good relationships between workers and strengthen harmony between labour and management”.<sup>ii</sup> However, the scheme has its own agenda - as soon as an attempt is made to establish a genuine trade union group, Escuela Social Juan XXIII immediately pressurises them to disintegrate – see next article. They say trade unions are of the devil and they intimidate potential union members with black listing.

In some cases, physical violence and even death threats against workers interested in forming unions have been acknowledged.<sup>iii</sup>

Despite the International Labour Organisation's pressure on Costa Rica to improve its legislation on this injustice, Laura Chinchilla, Costa Rica's current President, is looking to give more power to the *arreglo directo* arrangements and to increase usage of *solidarismo* movements.<sup>iv</sup> Given the dominance of a capitalist vision in Costa Rica and a relatively weak worker's movement, *solidarismo* has flourished in Costa Rica, where there are over 2,000 associations with 200,000 members and where 90 per cent of all TNCs operating in the country have *solidarista* associations.<sup>v</sup>

Today, the *solidarista* movement represents a serious challenge to unions throughout Central America. In Guatemala, the second place Central American country as regards *solidarismo*, only 4 per cent of the workforce are organised in unions, with less than 200,000 persons. The history of terror and repression of 1980s Guatemala constrained the growth of the union movement. Many of the more experienced leaders were assassinated or had to leave the country for several years, and many civil society organisations were eliminated.<sup>vi</sup>

One NGO campaigning for the rights of workers to form unions is Banana Link. In May 2006 this British-based organisation joined 73 other human rights groups in sending a letter to the Dole Food company, charging it with failing to respect basic workers rights, including freedom of association, the right to organise and the right to negotiate a contract. More recently, in January 2010 Banana Link instigated a project with retail supply chains of France, Germany and the Czech Republic, concerning banana and pineapple labour standards.<sup>vii</sup> The pineapple sector is becoming an integral part of Banana Link, and it has been working with trade unions for over two years in Costa Rica, but 'the government sees us as an enemy' says one member of staff.<sup>viii</sup>

Costa Rican union activist Achilles Rivera actively participated in environmental protection by raising issues of water contamination, land degradation and the rights to indigenous autonomy.<sup>ix</sup> Achilles is a supporter of The National Front of Sectors Affected by Pineapple Production (FRENASAPP) and fought to halt the expansion of piñeras in the area of Buenos Aires, Southern Costa Rica. He is now no longer able to continue his work due to a succession of verbal and physical death threats along with the theft of his computer, fax and a package of case files comprising complaints of piñera workers from his office in 2009.<sup>x</sup>

Less than 2% of workers in Costa Rica are currently unionised<sup>xi</sup>, but the scaremongering carried out by government and TNCs alike is commonplace and demonstrates why advances in government legislation are not happening.

#### Sources

- i. Equipo Envío (2009) 'Solidarismo: nueva arma contra los sindicatos', *Revista Envío*. no. 115
- ii. Escuela Social Juan XXIII website, [www.escuelasocialjuanxxiii.com](http://www.escuelasocialjuanxxiii.com) (accessed 26/08/10)
- iii. Didier Leitón Valverde of SITRAP (17 June 2010), presentation to the Environmental Network for Central America (ENCA), London
- iv. *ibid.* (Didier Leitón Valverde)
- v. *Op.cit.* (Equipo Envío)
- vi. *Op.cit.* (Equipo Envío)
- vii. Banana Link, 'Improving conditions for pineapple workers', [www.bananalink.org.uk](http://www.bananalink.org.uk) (accessed 11/08/10)
- viii. *Op.cit.* (Didier Leitón Valverde)
- ix. SurySur, (July 2009), 'Costa Rica: Death threats to community activist', [www.surysur.net](http://www.surysur.net)
- x. *ibid.* (SurySur)
- xi. International Labour Rights Forum

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## JFC: new union-buster on the block: how solidarismo operates.

*The following extracts are taken from an article in the Banana Trade News Bulletin, No. 44 (May 2010) produced by Banana Link. We are grateful to Banana Link for permission to reproduce this article.*

The Joint Fruit Company (JFC) is Russian-owned and aims to increase international fruit sales in Russian retail chains. JFC first invested in Costa Rica in 2007 and bought over 900 hectares, mostly planted in bananas. It also buys its products from independent producers. It is reported to have continued buying land in 2009/10.

One of the farms it bought was Campo 5 in Cariari, now renamed Finca Bonanza. During 2009, a group of workers had complained to the company and labour inspectors about non-payment of the minimum wage, increased working hours, exaggerated workloads and exposure to chemical spraying, but their complaints had not been addressed. In mid-February they therefore contracted the local SITRAP trade union official to request support in getting the issues taken seriously by the company. A group of 13 workers joined SITRAP and Bonanza was duly informed so that the appropriate deductions could be made from the payroll.

Even before receiving the list of new members, management had circulated a letter for workers to sign requesting the intervention of the John XXIII Social School, the Catholic church body that has led the

union-busting campaign for the last three decades in Costa Rica. Within 24 hours the School's promoters had been contracted in to prevent the union from gaining ground amongst the workforce. The promoters organised elections for a permanent workers' committee and even though they had lined up their candidates, two of the three workers elected were amongst those who had joined SITRAP.

The committee members were then taken off the plantation for the day with the intention of them signing up to a so-called 'direct settlement' (*'arreglo directo'*) that had been drafted by the School promoters. Even though the two union members pointed out that they had played no part in drafting a document that was about their pay and conditions, they were pressured into signing the 'settlement' on behalf of the whole workforce. The company then created a *solidarista* association as part of its strategy to discourage union membership. But direct pressure was also applied: one of the two members of the committee was visited almost daily by the School promoter, who went as far as threatening him with sending a hired killer if he didn't give up his union membership.

Just as happens on virtually every other plantation in Costa Rica where workers choose freely to join a trade union, a range of tactics deployed by the School and some company representatives have been put into operation. These include threats of being black-listed so that no other plantation will employ you or your family members, threats that the plantation will be forced to close down and offers to accompany workers to the SITRAP offices with their papers signing away union membership at the company's expense.

On Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> May, the local SITRAP official was escorted from the plantation by police, following a phone call alleging that the company's property was about to be damaged. The plantation manager had previously - and very aggressively - tried to evict the same official on the grounds that he was on private property. On 4<sup>th</sup> May, the company sent the police again during a meeting between the union official and members.

Such activities are in clear violation of international and national labour legislation. With very few exceptions, however, banana companies are all sooner or later drawn into what has become standard union-busting practice. Meanwhile, the industry and government authorities continue to make out that Costa Rica is a socially advanced nation where freedom of association is respected.

Bonanza Servicios, the Costa Rican subsidiary of JFC, has now become embroiled in these violations,

aggravated by threats of violence and even killing ordinary workers who find that their grievances are not addressed. It can only be hoped that the company realises that this kind of refusal to engage in any kind of dialogue, let alone free collective bargaining, with their workforce can only harm their operations in the long term.

When Vladimir Putin announced in March ... that cheap bananas for Russian consumers were part of a strategy of "keeping down food prices including tropical fruit", he was not necessarily aware that cheap fruit is often produced at the expense of the workers and the small producers. It is to be hoped that JFC will see that paying a fair price and treating workers fairly is an integral part of being a socially responsible multinational enterprise in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Sources:

URALSIB Fixed Income Research bulletin, Moscow 2006;

Various editions of *El Expreso*, Guayaquil, Ecuador, Dec 09 – Feb 10;

*El Ciudadano*, Quito, 05/02/10;

*La Nación*, San José, 16/06/09;

*johnhelmer.net*, Moscow, 25/03/10;

SITRAP reports, Siquirres, April and May 2010.

Visit Banana Link website: [www.bananalink.org.uk](http://www.bananalink.org.uk)

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# Pineapple and banana related news

## Nemagon case, Nicaragua

In November 2007, Nicaraguan banana workers won a case for compensation against Dole Foods as a result of suffering a range of illnesses due to using the pesticide Nemagon in their work on Nicaraguan banana plantations – see ENCA Newsletters 39, 43, 44 and 48. They won considerable damages as a result of the ruling. In July this year, however,



Some of the effects of Nemagon

Californian Judge Victoria Cheney rejected the case against Dole on the grounds that testimony from the plaintiffs had been falsified as part of a conspiracy by the American and Nicaraguan lawyers representing the banana workers. In April 2009, she had thrown out similar cases against Dole. Late in 2009, seven secret witnesses who had testified for

Dole against their fellow Nicaraguans, saying that many of the plaintiffs had never worked for Dole, came forward to say that they had been bribed to testify for Dole. One such secret witness was Sergio Antonio Garcia Gómez who shortly before his death at age 50 in November 2009 said that he was one of the 27 secret witnesses who testified for Dole. He said that Dole offered him US\$500,000 to testify that claimants had never worked in the banana industry.

Nicaraguan lawyer described Judge Cheney as “an insensitive and racist woman who sees Latin Americans as a blight, but even so we are going to continue to fight this monster [Dole].”

#### Sources:

Radio La Primerisima, 16/07/10; El Nuevo Diario, 4, 6 and 8/07/10; La Prensa, 08/07/10.

## Police kill banana workers in Panama

In July this year in Changuinola in the Bocas del Toro province of Panama, 4,000 workers at the Bocas Fruit Company struck over wages and were soon joined by thousands of independent producers. They were met by the full force of government repression and they claim that five persons were killed – the government says only two were killed – and 700 were injured. This rapidly converted the strike into a more widespread and general action by unions and other social organisations against what became known as the Sausage Law (Law 30), so called because it stuffs into one law a package of anti-democratic measures which include legalising the permanent replacement of strikers, abolishing union dues, eliminating environmental impact assessments on construction projects deemed to be ‘socially useful’, criminalising street blockades and establishing immunity for police who use lethal firepower and commit criminal acts whilst carrying out their duties.

Right-wing Panamanian president Ricardo Martinelli visited the province to apologise for the heavy-handedness of the police and postponed implementation of most of the law for three months. Despite these measures, the government response also included hundreds of arrests of union and civic leaders and the continued use of force. After 90 days of negotiations, however, on 10<sup>th</sup> October Martinelli’s government agreed to rescind the law and to replace it with six separate laws. According to Genaro López, a leader of the large, Only Union of Construction and Similar Workers (SUNTRACS), the agreement eliminates the main features of the Sausage Law, removing police immunity, restoring the need for environmental impact assessments for development projects, continuing union dues and banning of the hire of replacement workers in the case of a strike.

#### Sources:

The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations (IUF), <http://cms.iuf.org>  
The Banana Trade News Bulletin No. 45, September 2010, Banana Link, Norwich  
World War 4 Report ‘Panama: government withdraws anti-labour law’, [www.ww4report.com/node/9188](http://www.ww4report.com/node/9188)

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# The Mimat Recycling Project

Translated by James Harrison

On a more positive note, despite the dark days of repressive government in Honduras – see ENCA Newsletter Nos. 48 and 50 – a group of women in the Mosquitia region of Honduras have developed an inspiring recycling project.

Seven years ago, a group of women in the remote region of ‘Mosquitia’, in the Honduran Caribbean, the majority of whom are elderly widows or single mothers, began to banish their shyness with a waste recycling project that is now bearing its first fruits. They decided to break with the machismo of their town and organised themselves into the ‘Association of Misquitian Indigenous Women’ of the Atlantic coast (Mimat: **Miskito Miskitu Indian Mairinka Alsa Takanka** in Misquitian language - Mimat).

Mimat took on the challenge of cleaning up a large lake in the area and the streets of the six towns that make up Mosquitia, a region shared with Nicaragua of which 16,630 sq km is Honduras. The rubbish is classified, packed, loaded and sent to a private company which has agreed to buy the material. “We began little by little and I am happy because we have come a long way, but still have much to do,” said Mimat leader, Cendela López Kilton, a 58 year old mother of 6 and grandma to 18.

Between smiles that reveal her white dentures, she recounts that, “never did we believe we would be useful for the community and the country. The Misquitian culture is very difficult; our sons believe that the woman is solely for the house and to have children. The husbands complain about us because of the revolution that we are making, since now there is no stopping the Misquitian women.

In 2003 Mimat grew with the support of the Programme of Small Donations (PPD), part of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). But it was three years later when the project won local and international recognition. Apart from the cultural barriers, they had to defeat the mistrust of the authorities that felt the loss of one of their functions. Mimat coordinates 1,200 women throughout 6 towns and their headquarters are in Puerto Lempira.

Since 2006, the Mimat project (in which now men also participate) collects an average of 70 cubic meters of rubbish monthly. López feels proud of the result of the

collective effort where everyone has helped in the clean-up of the Laguna de Caratasca. The lagoon measures 60 km in length by 12 km in width and is part of the coastal wetlands, the largest of the Biosphere Reserve of Río Plátano, a World Heritage site.

“Previously the people dumped rubbish in the lagoon and Puerto Lempira looked ugly, full of rubbish and pollution that we created. It is from the lakes we take our principal food – fish,” explained López in a visit to Tegucigalpa, in the local headquarters of the UNDP. “With the pollution, we were attacked by malaria and diarrhoea, but now it has decreased,” she said.



**Loading bales of recycled material**

She described another important element: the locals have stopped burning rubbish in their houses and aren't creating the smoke that streams from them. “The women of Mimat have managed to achieve the building of an incinerator where the rubbish is processed – it's marvellous!” she exclaimed with contagious enthusiasm. After the incinerator, they acquired their first vehicle to collect the waste and to give part time jobs to the rotating teams that operate it. “With the jobs they feel useful. They know that they can make something for their children and for the environment. If we don't take care of our people, nobody will,” stated López.

Hugo Galeano, coordinator of PPD in Honduras, said that “the women of Mimat are proud examples for their country; they are a voluntary force and have enviable commitment. The time or the day isn't important; they always want to learn and seek to learn to use the computer and the internet. It makes me shiver with excitement when we see their development.”

La Mosquitia is a remote zone of Honduras. One arrives only by air or sea and the population is 50,000 inhabitants, of which 16,000 don't have identity cards because they are not officially registered. Some inhabitants have names of people as diverse as ‘George Bush’ or ‘Osama Bin Laden’, or of vehicles like ‘Mack’ and ‘John Deere’ and others.

Fishing, agriculture and diving are the principal sources of income. Many have been crippled by sea diving without adequate equipment. Mosquitia has also been an attractive region for the Mafia in the trafficking of drugs because of its mountainous nature, its desolate beaches and its border with the Caribbean. Given the extreme poverty in which the inhabitants live, the recycling of rubbish is an opportunity for the women of Mimat. They have shared the work responsibility and the payments for each job.

In its abundant beauty, with mythical legends, Mosquitia looks to Mimat "to make a history of its success" added Cendela López Kilton, who pressed her face as she said, "I hope the ideas don't escape from my head!"

## Ill-mannered embassies or just scared?

ENCA members who read the twice-yearly Central America Report will have read about the Salvadoran National Roundtable Against Metal Mining's attempts to deliver a letter to the



Hector Berríos holding the letter for the Canadian embassy

Canadian Ambassador in San Salvador. Access to the embassy was denied by the Salvadoran police and by security agents within the embassy, and the Ambassador declined to receive a small delegation from the Roundtable. Even more rudely and unnecessarily, the letter was returned to Hector Berríos who led the delegation and

who is shown here outside the embassy showing the letter to supporters of the delegation (which included two ENCA members). The essence of the letter was a request for Canadian companies to be withdrawn from El Salvador to prevent further damage to communities and the environment. As Hector pointed out, "If only we could do the same when they arrive with their machinery – not receive them when they arrive in our community and environment." (Hector Berríos interviewed by Martin Mowforth and Lucy Goodman, 23.07.10, San Salvador.)

Then in October this year, the US embassy in San Salvador denied a US entry visa to Hector who had been invited to attend a meeting of the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR). Other members of the Roundtable had earlier also been denied entry visas having been invited to the US to discuss the issue of mining and its links with the Central America Free Trade Treaty with the US, a treaty which has allowed Canadian mining companies to sue the government of El Salvador for canceling mining concessions.

# Latin America

## 2010

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## Protected areas of Tela Bay suffer land grabs and invasions

Extracts from an article in *La Tribuna*, 13.06.10  
By Ramón Wilberto Nuila Coto

The environmental and forestry laws of Honduras are being violated in the protected areas surrounding Tela Bay on the northern Honduran coast, and the National Agrarian Institute (INA) and Property Institute (IP) of the Honduran government are complicit in these crimes, which are threatening natural resources and local ecosystems in the area.

Leaders of a group with which ENCA has worked in the past, Fundación Prolansate, have publicly denounced these crimes and have called on the government to start taking the matter seriously. The four protected area in the region which are managed by the organisation are all affected: Jeannette Kawas National Park, Punta Izopo National Park, Texiguat Wildlife Refuge and Lancetilla Botanical Gardens.

Prolansate's President, Anastassios S. Anastassiou, says that "in Tela Bay we have been blessed with four priceless areas, but the threats, challenges and dangers are very serious, especially due to tourist developments which have generated a lot of speculation. Many people are looking to take over land in these parks ... Every day there are new claims appearing, without having gone through the required legal channels, and without any oversight by the INA, the IP or the Institute of Forestry Conservation (ICF). They are particularly taking over land by the beach, and each claim covers 60 by 40 meters with a stated agricultural purpose. We know these people – they are speculators who represent financiers elsewhere. ... Having bought up areas near the beach, they are now headed for the nucleus zone of the park. There are evaluators from the INA who are distorting the laws and spreading doubts about the Law of National Parks. ... We ask the authorities for prompt action against these crimes. Our town and Prolansate have

already given one life (that of Blanca Jeannette Kawas Fernández) in defence of these natural areas."

Dennis Sierra, director of the Jeannette Kawas National Park, says that the new Forestry, Protected Areas and Wildlife Law prohibits land titling in areas which are legally protected. Inspections of the land under question were made by personnel from the ICF and the municipality of Tela, and it was clear that the land was not of agricultural quality or use – they were areas of either forest, sand dunes or mangroves.



Bahia Escondido in the Jeannette Kawas National Park

Eduardo Zavala, Executive Director of Prolansate, stated that this problem affects all the protected areas along the Caribbean coast of Honduras and was due largely to the tourism boom and particularly the popularity of the beaches and the idea of having a house surrounded by natural beauty. ... He gave several examples of illegal land titling which had actually been facilitated by the Secretariat of Natural resources and the Environment (SERNA by its Spanish initials). He made it clear that the local communities involved are the correct owners of these resources and should be active participants in the management of those resources, as they have been for many years.

José Trinidad Suazo, ICF Minister, claimed that poor communication had prevented the holding of a workshop with personnel from INA and IP to decide on policy about this issue. (It is worth noting that since the coup in 2009 the ICF is widely regarded as having reverted to the corrupt practices of its predecessor governmental organisation, COHDEFOR.) In fact, the law already establishes that in forested areas it falls to the ICF to define what is permitted and there are clear restrictions on the titling of land in protected areas. Yet it is known that property titles have been granted in various protected areas.

**Fundación Prolansate website:**  
[www.prolansate.org](http://www.prolansate.org)

*ENCA Newsletter 51, November 2010, p.11*

### ENCA meeting dates for 2011



**20<sup>th</sup> Feb**

**19<sup>th</sup> Jun**

**16<sup>th</sup> Oct**

ENCA meetings are held at the NSC's office at the Durham Road Centre – see address on page 12. The nearest tube station is Finsbury Park on the Victoria and Piccadilly lines. Meetings are held on Sundays from 12:30 pm to 5 pm and we start with lunch which is made up of whatever people attending choose to bring with them to share.

# OTHER NEWS

## The US military moves into Costa Rica

In July this year, the Costa Rican Congress voted to allow the entry into and stationing in its territorial waters of the US Navy, specifically 46 warships and 7,000 marines. The stated purpose of this intrusion is for the US to give assistance to Costa Rica in its fight against drug trafficking, but given the 7 new US bases in Colombia, Venezuela might have cause to stay alert.

## Turtle protection Jacó, Costa Rica

Police in the Playa Hermosa Wildlife Natural Reserve are 'stealing' between 500 and 1,000 turtle eggs per night in order to beat the real thieves. The eggs are transferred to a nursery where they are allowed to develop naturally to ensure a reasonable survival rate. The police are trying to ensure that the professional nest-raiders do not put the survival of the turtles in jeopardy, and are enlisting the help of educational establishments in the area. MINAET (the Environment Ministry) places from 2 to 4 park guards in the Reserve which is not enough to provide adequate protection.

(Source: *La Nación*, 13 September 2010)

## Lake Atitlán, Guatemala

According to the Guatemalan Institute of Tourism, Lake Atitlán is one of its 'jewels in the crown' and used to attract 20% of foreign visitors. In October 2009, however, the lake's surface was covered by a brown layer – sewage from nearby towns and run-off from fertilisers used on local farms. Despite a search for solutions by government, environmentalists and residents, by mid-2010 there was little change and many of the hotels surrounding the lake had received many cancellations by potential visitors. Anna D'apolito, director of the NGO Friends of Lake Atitlán, said that the real problem is the lack of resources, which means that there are no waste water treatment plants or solid waste disposal systems to prevent it from ending up in the lake.

(Source: *Danilo Valladares, Tierramérica, 21.07.10*, <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=52230>)



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## Thermal power expansion in Nicaragua

Taken from *Nicaragua News*, 19.01.10, and *El Nuevo Diario*, 13.01.10.

The board of Polaris Energy Nicaragua (PENSA) and the Central America Bank for Economic Integration (BCIE) signed a credit agreement for US\$77 million to expand electricity generation at the San Jacinto Tizate Geothermal Plant by 36 megawatts from its current 10 MW for a total of 46 MW by April 2011 and 72 MW by the end of that year. The project is being financed by a consortium of Canadian and Dutch banks and administered by the BCIE.

When its final phase is completed at a cost of US\$149.5 million, the geothermal plant will produce 150 MW of electricity saving more than 540,000 barrels of oil a year and will create 260 permanent jobs. The first phase alone will save US\$38 million in oil purchases.

Treasury Minister Alberto Guevara and BCIE President Silvio Conrado also announced the signing of a loan for US\$22.9 million to finance construction of the Larreynaga hydroelectric dam which has the potential to produce 17 MW of electricity. This loan is on top of the US\$36.7 million already approved for the project. President Daniel Ortega spoke of the need to gradually reduce dependence on oil but also said that a mix of oil, wind and hydro power would be required as it would not be possible to produce 100% of Nicaragua's energy needs by geothermal generation.

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