



Bitter Bananas – the story of Nemagon

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To this day, up to 22 000 people in Nicaragua suffer or have died¹ from the late effects of a pesticide that, despite being banned in the U.S. for its horrendous effects, American companies continued to use in their plantations in other countries during the 1970s and 1980s². Nemagon, a highly toxic pesticide, poisoned humans and the environment in Central America, the Caribbean and Asia, where it was used by Standard Fruit Company (now Dole), Del Monte and United Fruit (now Chiquita) to grow their crops faster and stronger.

Worldwide, the number of victims is estimated at up to 60,000³. Almost all were labourers working in banana and other crop fields in rural areas with favourable hot climate conditions for crops like cotton, banana and sugarcane.

Promises of the “Green Revolution”

In the middle of the last century, the emergence of the “green revolution” shaped a new era of agricultural production, greatly increasing global food production. Big chemical laboratories and agricultural enterprises promised new and better pesticides and increased production that would end hunger, generating attractive profits.

The Rise of Nemagon

One of its outcomes is Nemagon, or Dibromochloropropane (DBCP), which was created in the laboratories of the Occidental Corporation, Dow Chemical and Shell Oil to combat nematodes attacking crops like bananas, sugarcane, pineapple and cotton.

These microscopic worms live in the soil and discolor the fruit, making it less attractive for the international market, obsessed with appearances.

In the 1960s, Standard Fruit Company (now Dole), Del Monte and United Fruit (now Chiquita) extensively used the pesticide to help the plant to grow faster, but it is a slow decomposition toxic chemical and can remain in the ground for hundreds of years, causing damage to human health and the environment. After discovering its side effects like infertility, Nemagon was banned in the United States in 1979, the year of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. Nevertheless, Standard Fruit,

a company which had already bought enough Nemagon for several years to come, threatened Dow to sue them for the breach of contract if it wouldn’t continue to provide the pesticide. Under these circumstances, the companies simply concluded that the chemical was prohibited only in the U.S. but not in the so called “banana republics”, where they could continue to use it with impunity, having workers mixing the poison by hand and pumping it directly into the ground without any protection. In Nicaragua, the Nemagon was still used until the middle of the 1980s, mostly in banana plantations in the department of Chinandega.



Picture credits: Florian Dörr

During the early 1990s, first deaths related to the chemical occurred as the number of people affected multiplied. Wells, rivers or springs were contaminated with the pesticide, spreading the chemical also to the population which had not been in direct contact before. In the rural areas of Chinandega, only 4% of households have drinking water from pipes⁴, the chemical started to affect the population with disease patterns from the loss of hair and fingernails, migraine headaches, loss of sight to kidney diseases and stomach cancer. Women are affected by uterine and breast cancer and miscarriages, while 67 percent of men are considered sterile⁵.

In the neighbouring countries, the situation is similar. In Costa Rica 15,000 to 20,000 workers suffer from health problems that are attributed to the highly toxic pesticide, in Honduras until 8000 banana pickers are affected. Worldwide, the number of victims is estimated at up to 60,000⁶.

Protest camps and empty laws

It is not until the beginning of the new millennium that the banana workers movement in Nicaragua organises and begins to take action. Thousands of affected people



marched a total of six times in 12 day walks from Chinandega to the capital, demanding justice and seeking help by the government in Managua.

Not receiving any attention, they feel forced to stay in poorly equipped protest camps in the middle of main roads in front of the Nicaraguan parliament in Managua with nothing to protect them against the tropical weather but black plastics and hammocks. Children would suffer the same hunger and poverty their parents did, being marginalised every week since their arrival.



Picture credits: Thomas Strothjohann

The polarized political landscape of Nicaragua put another obstacle to the negotiations. After the Sandinista Revolution in 1979 which ended decades of dictatorship by the Somoza family, President Daniel Ortega and his Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) lost the elections in 1990, bringing the US-supported liberal Violeta Chamorro, the first elected female head of state in the Americas, into office. Many of the affected labourers fought in the Sandinista revolution, which was used as an excuse by the liberal government who ignored their demands for years with the excuse that they were serving the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Back then, the Sandinista party itself provided little help to the victims.

Blockades and hunger strikes ultimately drove attention to them. In 2001, after long debates, the National Assembly passed the law 364 called the Special Law for Processing Trials for People Affected by Pesticide Use based on DBCP. This law became the only hope for farmers to be compensated, providing them with financial

and legal support of the state to bring lawsuits against the multinational companies.

Thanks to this law, in March 2001 the first lawsuits were brought against the Shell Oil Company, Dow Chemical Company, Occidental Chemical Corporation, Standard Fruit Company, Dole Food Company and Chiquita Brands International. A year later, a Nicaraguan court ruled in favour of about 600 campesinos, by commanding the payment of \$ 490 million by transnational corporations. Such high amounts of money attracted people who wanted a slice of the pie from the workers tragedy, which served the companies as the perfect pretext to delegitimise the workers' demands and to increase internal tensions. Ultimately, none of the companies recognised the court in Managua. To that date, over 2,000 banana workers had died by kidney failure or cancer only in Nicaragua⁷.

Hidden Agendas

From the Chamber of Commerce in the U.S., Dow Chemical wielded enormous pressure concerning the elimination of law 364. With its power, Dow Chemical introduced an addendum to the Fourth Amendment of CAFTA, which allows investors to bring lawsuits for compensation against contracting states if they consider that a national law or a judgment issued by local judges violates the principle of "fair and equitable treatment"⁸. Hidden under the guise of promoting free trade and foreign investment, the specific aim concerning Nicaragua is to neutralise the Law 364⁹.



Picture credits: Thomas Strothjohann

The Dole Deal: jobs instead of compensation

That "fair and equitable" treatment transnational corporations seek seems a mockery when claimants are poor farmers, combined with an almost nonexistent capacity of the Nicaraguan state to lobby CAFTA negotiations. What could the second poorest country in Latin Amer-



ica offer besides cheap labour and investment facilities for exports? Meanwhile, Dole Foods offered to reinvest in Nicaragua if the government withdrew the lawsuits against them for the use of pesticides. The affected workers were upset and afraid, the government could be negotiating with the corporations, with them being nothing but bargaining chips.

Ortega's modest compensation

Under three different governments, the victims demanded medical care, the commitment not to change the Special Law No. 364, strict compliance with of the ban on 17 pesticides and the payment of a pension for those affected.

Altagracia Solís has worked 14 years on banana farms. Now, she is the chairman of ASONEF, an association of banana workers and now living in Managua. She says the organisation is just "another step in the fight" which has started over 20 years ago to remind the companies about their responsibility. "I feel proud, because the battle is not yet over. 2,500 workers have died and many more are seriously ill, but here we are and fight without ceasing"¹⁰ she said tearfully.



Picture credits: Florian Dörr

Years after the reelection of Daniel Ortega in 2006, the street camps disappeared and the Sandinista government gave homes to 182 persons who are now living in Managua. Altagracias says "we are the legitimate banana workers which have evidence where, in which area and in which position we have worked", thanking the Ortega government as being the only which helped them and giving them a modest compensation with basic housing, food, water, electricity and medical care. Here they

sit on plastic chairs, waiting for death to come.

New generations of sick workers

It is the same "left" Ortega government which since its reelection promotes labour intensive monocultures like sugar cane and allows for the concentration of land in the hands of fewer and fewer large landowners and agricultural corporations.

Sugar, palm oil and soya grow particularly well in Latin America¹¹. These so-called "flex crops" can be used in the food industry and for energy. Therefore, they represent such an attractive investment for the national and regional elites in Latin America. In Nicaragua, the sugar cane industry is growing at double-digit figures and the oil palm is spreading, exploiting poor rural people without alternatives, dismissing them shortly after ruining their health without money for treatment. The state, however neither does anything against the exploitation, nor against the destruction of the environment. Too tempting are the duties of the agricultural industry for the state budget, too big their influence on the political level.

Each year, a new generation of sick workers is dismissed penniless, doomed to repeat history. The next human tragedy is already paving its way. From southern Mexico to Panama, over 24,000 workers who cut sugar cane have been killed by a mysterious kidney disease since 2000¹². Scientific investigation about the reasons for the epidemic is just beginning, but besides the inhuman nature of the work, suspicions about involved agrochemicals¹³ gain considerable ground.

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