

Teacher's Background: Windward Islands Bananas

Extracts from: The Observer, Sunday March 13, 2005
(full article available at: www.guardian.co.uk/globalisation/story/0,7369,1435692,00.html#article_continue)

The importance of bananas to Dominica (one of the Caribbean 'Windward Islands') cannot be overstated. Sixty cents in every dollar... are generated by banana production.

...Dominica and the other Windward Islands manage to make a living from bananas – but only just. ...From the premium price generated by the Fairtrade label, farmers pay themselves a bit extra and plough the rest into community projects like installing lighting in the local health centre or putting desks and chairs into the primary school.

But despite all their efforts, the Windward Islands' banana industry now faces extinction. From January 2006, the world trade rules that govern bananas are to be changed.

These rules are complex and still under negotiation, but the historic quota system that guaranteed Caribbean bananas a sure market in Britain is to be swept aside... The US, representing the interests of US-owned transnational banana companies like Chiquita, Dole and Del Monte, argued that the protection extended to these ex-colonies was discriminatory. It has browbeaten the European Union since the early Nineties into progressively opening up its market to imports of 'dollar' bananas. These are intensively produced bananas from Latin and Central America where powerful US companies control production.

...In the last 10 years, as the European banana market has been altered to give less protection to Caribbean growers, [one farmer reports that he] has seen 5,000 people emigrate from Marigot [on Dominica] alone. Banks are not keen to lend to Caribbean banana growers any more. Recognising the threat that hangs over them, the banks view loans to them as too risky.

...The majority of banana growers in the Windward Islands are... descendants of slaves, brutally uprooted from Africa... then put to work growing a series of profitable crops. In the early Fifties, when sugar production became unprofitable, the Windward Islands were encouraged by the former colonial power – Britain – to switch to bananas. They did so in the belief that they could rely on the market in the UK.

... The Windwards cannot possibly compete in a totally free market with intensively grown dollar bananas... "Put it this way, a Latin American plantation



is bigger than the whole of St Vincent. If this new banana regime goes ahead, we can be reduced to poverty overnight," explains Lewis Straker, St Vincent's deputy prime minister. The British consumer has a choice, he says. Buy sweet, well-produced Windward bananas from decently paid workers, or bananas from "multinational corporations reaping profits on the back of slave labour".

Big banana companies are now moving their operations to Guatemala's Pacific coast, where labour is cheaper because workers are not organised.

Selfa Sandoval, (a trade union organiser in Guatemala) says, "Unless they work on a plantation where the union is active, Guatemalan banana workers earn below the minimum wage for a 12- to 14-hour day, six days a week. Sometimes they also have to get up at three in the morning to get transport to work."

...At the start of the Nineties, the Windwards supplied around two-thirds of the UK's bananas. This has fallen to one in ten as their market has been whittled away by cheaper Latin American imports.

...Banana Link, a Norwich-based NGO campaigning for a sustainable and fair banana trade, says that, following a banana price war started by Asda in 2002, one banana importer saw the price it was paid for a box of bananas slashed from £11 at the end of 2001 to around £7.75 by the summer of 2003...

Now... they are waiting to see if the British government will stand up for Caribbean bananas. They know that no other government in the EU will.