

# Bitter fruit

**THE BANANA is Britain's favourite fruit and millions of us will eat one today. But its production is often steeped in brutality.**

**The Latin American plantations where the fruit is grown are harsh environments, where workers' well-being is sacrificed in favour of cheap farming methods.**

**The carcinogenic pesticides used on the fruit are sprayed indiscriminately on the workers themselves, causing a horrendous catalogue of sickness and disease, and wreaking untold harm on the environment.**

**Should the workers unionise to press for better pay and conditions, their demands are frequently met with violence rather than negotiation.**

**Scottish film-maker Jan Nimmo (pictured right) has documented their plight. She was there when a ruthless plantation boss reacted to workers' demands with a hail of machine gun fire.**

**Her harrowing documentary will be shown in Dundee tonight as part of the city's Fairtrade Fortnight.**



**Above: Bananas are covered in blue bags coated with organophosphates, a dangerous toxin that is carcinogenic. Below: Children make the bags into kites.**



"It was really terrifying. I filmed it for a while and saw several people shot. One man was hit in the head, another in the leg. Then a man standing next to me was shot in the stomach and I decided to take cover.

"The police were there and I went and hid behind their vehicle. They did absolutely nothing to stop the shooting and I have no doubt they were in the pay of Noboa."

Jan's documentary clearly shows

the police standing watching on as Noboa's men fire into the picketing workers. Miraculously no one was killed in the attack, but 12 people suffered gunshot wounds and one, who was blasted at close range, was so badly injured that his leg had to be amputated.

"It was really, really grim." The shootings drew international attention, with the American ambassador for Ecuador visiting to tell the workers he would be praying for them.

Eventually Noboa reached a settlement with the workers, promising them better pay and conditions, and they returned to their jobs—although the union leaders were fired.

Months later, however, the benefits promised still hadn't been delivered and the workers were as impoverished as ever. The government has once again tightened the rules on forming unions, making organised labour movements more difficult than ever to form.

"My documentary went out on cable news across the continent," Jan says. "At that time Noboa was running for the presidency of Ecuador. He was a very powerful man and everyone expected him to win, but he went on to lose.

"His treatment of his workers was largely responsible for his downfall and I'm quite proud to have played a part in that."

Jan now lives in Glasgow, where she teaches art to children and the unemployed. She also campaigns to raise awareness of the plight of plantation workers in Latin America.

Her second film, Pura Vida, saw her travel to Costa Rica, where she discovered the horrendous environmental and human cost of the chemicals used so that we in the west can enjoy cheap, plentiful fruit.

"I had originally intended to do another film on the trade union issue, focusing on Costa Rica this time, but then I was told about these terrible agro-chemicals they are using.

"The blue bags banana plants are wrapped in to boost sunlight and warmth are coated with organophosphates, a dangerous toxin that is carcinogenic.

"Workers handle the bags all day long with no protective gear at all. And children play with them, they make them into kites.

"They use planes to fly low over the fields and spray them while people are still working in them. The workers have no protection at all and are covered by these chemicals.

"They even spray them over the staff canteen causing the workers' food, plates, bowls and cutlery to be

contaminated. The workers ingest the chemicals as well as being sprayed with them."

Exposure to these powerful pesticides and fertilizers is causing cancers to develop early. Workers are becoming sterile. Respiratory complaints and eye problems are becoming commonplace. The chemicals can also affect the brain, causing depression and mental illness. Many of the workers are losing their sexual drive and some are becoming suicidal.

As well as the terrible human cost, this intensive, dangerous farming methods are having a devastating effect on the environment.

"The plantations are losing their ground cover. Erosion and silting mean a process of desertification is occurring. Areas that used to be lush and fertile are now barren.

"The chemicals are just washed into nearby rivers and all the fish in them are dying. Rivers where there were fish, iguanas, bird life, are now just muddy and contaminated. They can no longer support life like they once could.

"Children, who don't know any better, are still swimming and playing in the rivers, unaware of the danger."

Much of the problem, Jan believes, stems from supermarkets and our desire to have cheap produce all year round. In recent years, the Fairtrade movement has emerged and grown stronger, but the vast majority of workers in Latin America do not work for Fairtrade employers.

"Fairtrade plantations employ much less than five percent of the workforce and people can wait years and still not get a job in them. The trouble is Fairtrade is not seen by the supermarkets as a responsibility but as a market.

"Just like organic produce and vegetarian meals, they treat it as a niche product. There's no move at all to try and make every product fair trade because then people would have to pay more for their groceries.

"But when you go to the countries that produce the food we eat and see the human cost it's a real eye opener. And when you see the desertification and all these chemicals pouring into rivers and flowing down into the Caribbean, killing plant and wildlife, you realise it's not sustainable.

"One day soon, things are going to have to change."

● Jan Nimmo's film on the effects of agro-chemicals, Pura Vida, is on at the Hannah Maclure Centre cinema, on the top floor of Abertay Student Union, at 6pm this evening.

For more information on Fair Trade visit [www.fairtrade.org.uk](http://www.fairtrade.org.uk)

**By Jack McKeown**

JAN NIMMO first started travelling to Latin America around 10 years ago. Initially, the Campbeltown-born artist documented the lives of artists and musicians in Mexico and Cuba, but increasingly she began to notice the conditions endured by low-paid workers, particularly on the big fruit plantations.

Gradually she switched her focus to the abuses of human and labour rights she saw going on all around her.

Her first film on the subject, Bonita: Ugly Bananas, was made in Ecuador in 2002. Jan (44) arrived there just as a massive popular movement to unionise and take on the plantation owners was getting into full swing.

The streets were thronged with demonstrators picketing for the right to unionise. Eventually, and unexpectedly, the Government gave in and changed the rules, allowing them to form a union.

"Within four or five days of that happening, the plantation workers at the Bonita banana company were striking for better pay and conditions. They set up a picket line across the entrance to the plantation, vowing to keep their strike entirely peaceful."

Bonita, owned by Ecuador's richest man, magnate Alvaro Noboa, is the world's fourth largest banana company and exports the fruit all over the world. Noboa's workers earn \$3 a day, far below the minimum wage.

Because production was stopped entirely and the strikers were, at that point, in control, Jan was able to enter the plantation—the first time a documentary maker has ever been able to access a plantation.

What she found contradicted starkly Noboa's public statements that his employees were treated well and worked in good conditions.

"Workers were living in utterly horrendous conditions. They lived in damp, cramped accommodation, sleeping eight to a room. Drinking

water was stored in plastic barrels that used to contain dangerous chemicals. Sanitation was completely non-existent."

Jan's documentary shows the female "toilet block," a single, cracked and filthy WC shared by 50 women. Raw sewage trickles out and seeps into the ground nearby.

The workers have no health care in an environment where they drink contaminated water, are exposed to dangerous chemicals, work with machetes and where malaria and dengue fever are rife.

The plantation workers, whose number included many women and elderly, had been carrying out their strike with good humour despite their extreme poverty and the likelihood of dismissal.

Jan arrived at the picket line the next day to find the workers dispersed, two of their number having been shot and injured by Noboa's men. Blood from their wounds had pooled on the hard pack ground and was still not dry. Armed mercenaries stalked the compound, glaring menacingly at the remaining strikers.

Undaunted, the workers returned to the picket lines the next day and the two injured men, one of whom was shot in the leg, the other in the head—the bullet lodged in his skull—bravely stood with them.

The following day, Jan received a call to get to the plantation as soon as possible as things were again turning nasty. She got there to find around 200 armed men swarming all over the compound.

The leader of the strikers was in tense negotiations with them. They were given an ultimatum: abandon the strike and leave or things will get nasty. The strikers were given an hour to clear the area.

Less than 20 minutes later the gunmen opened fire.

"This string of gunshots erupted from all around us. The mercenaries were running into the plantations and firing from the cover of the banana plants.



Planes are used to spray the fields while people are still working.

**totallyweddings.com**  
**Exclusive Exhibition**  
 sponsored by  
**Wedding Ideas**

**Sunday 11th March**  
**11am - 4pm**

**The Old Course Hotel, Golf Resort & Spa, St Andrews, Fife**

Innovative catwalk show at 2pm brought to you by Tantrums and Tiaras

For more information please call 01383 621888

Free admission. Pre-register at [totallyweddings.com](http://totallyweddings.com) to claim your fantastic free goodie bag courtesy of Lush

**HOME-START DUNDEE**

**DO YOU HAVE PARENTING EXPERIENCE? MAKE A DIFFERENCE—BECOME A HOME-START VOLUNTEER**

Home-Start Dundee is a voluntary home-visiting organisation, working with families with at least one child under five, who are experiencing difficulties.

Our carefully trained Volunteers, who all have parenting experience, give emotional and practical help to families, often representing a lifeline for many parents who are finding it hard to cope.

**VOLUNTEERS BENEFIT, TOO, BY:**  
 Personal Development, On-Going Quality Training and Support, Meet New People, Confidence to Move on to Other Things, i.e. Further Education or Employment, References, Out-of-Pocket Expenses, Being Respected and Valued.

**COULD YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE? A SHORT COURSE OF PREPARATION STARTS SOON.**

For more information please contact  
**HOME-START DUNDEE**  
 30 WHITEHALL STREET, 3RD FLOOR LEFT, DUNDEE  
 TELEPHONE **01382 202040**

**WIDEX** **WORLD LEADER IN DIGITAL HEARING TECHNOLOGY**

**HEARING PROBLEMS?**

Poor hearing can affect your enjoyment of life – **improve your hearing with the latest cutting-edge technology from Widex**

**AIKIA™**  
 life in balance  
 AVAILABLE ON 30 DAYS' **★ FREE TRIAL ★**

**FREE**

**★ FULL HEARING ASSESSMENT ★ 30 DAYS' TRIAL ★ 2 YEARS' GUARANTEE ★ HOME VISITS ★ 1 YEAR'S SUPPLY OF BATTERIES**

**PERTH HEARING CENTRE**  
 54 South Methven Street, Perth  
 Tel: 01738 637444 • Perthshire's Premier Hearing Centre

**DUNDEE'S NEWEST LOUNGE BAR**

Setting the standard for discerning customers, 'Mondo' is a new up-market Lounge Bar set within a wonderful Art Deco environment with secure 24 hour valet parking. Be one of the first to enjoy it!  
 Open Mon - Sat 11.00am - Midnight. Sun 12.30pm - Midnight.

Free Finger Buffet 6-8pm each evening  
 All drinks buy 2 get 1 FREE  
 Vodka Mixers £1.50  
 All Pints and Bottles £1.75  
 Happy Hour 5-8pm Friday & Saturday

**MONDO'S STEAKHOUSE OPENS SHORTLY**  
 Call for Details & Reservations

**MONDO**

3 Session Street, Dundee 01382 201054/202022