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Artist Jan Nimmo was sickened by her experiences of the banana trade Picture: Ian MacNicol

Worst of the bunch

BILLY BRIGGS

A LATINO MAN LIES NAKED on the hospital mattress. His name is Mauro Romero and he is stretched out on an old, metal-framed bed. A sheet is pulled up to cover his groin; his left buttock is supported by an orange cushion. Romero has been given morphine to alleviate his pain and wears a dazed expression as he tells concerned friends, family and the film-maker gathered at his bedside how he was shot in the leg. The bullet caused so much damage that doctors had to amputate his right leg above the knee in order to save his life. He stares disbelievingly at the bulky turquoise and white dressing that covers his stump. The previous day, his leg was there.

Romero's only crime was to be part of a peaceful occupation of the banana farm owned by Alvaro Noboa, Ecuador's richest man. He's the owner of Noboa Corporation, a firm trading as Bonita Brands, which is the world's fourth-largest banana company.

Fed up with years of exploitation, Romero and his co-workers formed a trade union to protest against wages that kept them at poverty level, and the dangerous working conditions they endured at the Los Alamos plantation in the country's Guayas province. But in Ecuador unions are not suffered gladly by the banana industry. Romero was one of a number of employees assaulted or shot by armed men brought in to break up the strike action - a bloody episode that was caught on film. Then the camera cuts to testimony from other injured workers. "They are killing us little by little," says one frightened man.

The footage was shot by Scottish artist and filmmaker Jan Nimmo, whose powerful film, *Bonita: Ugly Bananas*, captures the May 2002 violence and exposes the human rights abuses of banana workers in the South American nation. At the root of the violence, says Nimmo, is the belief common to many plantation owners that workers organising to negotiate improvements in their conditions pose a threat, a fear that means unions are still not widely tolerated in Ecuador. But her film has had a major impact in the South American country: it was broadcast on TV and widely debated during last year's election, when Noboa ran, unsuccessfully, for president. The film will be screened as part of the Edinburgh World Justice Festival, along with *Pura Vida*, another of Nimmo's documentaries, highlighting the environmental damage caused by intensive banana and pineapple production in Costa Rica.

"I felt completely sickened that the so-called healthy fruit we buy at the supermarket can have such a devastating effect on the environment and on people's lives," says Nimmo, a Glasgow-based artist who has travelled extensively in Latin America and whose work focuses on trade injustices. She first visited Ecuador, the world's largest exporter of bananas, in 2002. Nearly 250,000 people are employed by the nation's industry, some earning as little as 33p a day, making Ecuadorians among the poorest paid banana workers in Latin America, if not the world.

Over a period of two weeks, Nimmo was able to document one of the workers' first attempts to stand up for themselves. On the first day of the strike, when workers locked the gates and occupied the Los Alamos farm, she was given unprecedented access to film inside the plantation. "The conditions were appalling," she recalls. Her film shows rubbish strewn everywhere and floors awash with raw sewage from leaking toilets shared by up to 50 workers. In the accommodation blocks, eight people inhabit one small room, and it's common for two people to share a single bed. The mattresses are made from cardboard Bonita banana boxes.

Disease is rife because of the poor sanitation and although dengue fever, malaria, and snake bites are major problems, employees say they have no access on-site to health care. "Entire families live on the farm but there is no school for children and despite the company being the fourth-largest banana firm in the world, it refuses to lay on a bus for employees' children to go to the nearest school seven miles away," says Nimmo.

On 16 May, ten days into the strike, Nimmo witnessed a violent backlash when up to 200 gunmen arrived at the plantation, some wearing Noboa election campaign T-shirts. They'd been sent by the company and were armed with shotguns and rifles. They informed workers they had one hour to leave, but just 20 minutes later they opened fire. A number of workers were shot, including Romero, who was filmed being lifted, bleeding, on to the back of truck. "I ran for cover beside some policemen - they just stood by and watched," Nimmo recalls.

Exposure to dangerous chemicals is another issue for banana workers, and both Bonita: Ugly Bananas and Pura Vida show the extent of the problem. During intensive farming, bananas are grown in blue plastic bags coated in organophosphates, and crops are sprayed with toxic chemicals which can damage the immune system. Workers say they are not provided with goggles, boots or overalls.

For Pura Vida, Nimmo asked Dr Catherine Wesseling, of the Department of Toxicology at the University of Costa Rica, to analyse samples of dust collected from a banana plantation in the Limon province of Costa Rica. Dr Wesseling found that in some cases up to eight pesticides were present and concluded that workers are at risk from skin and eye conditions, suicidal tendencies, reproductive problems and, in the long term, cancer. "The samples were taken from schools and homes next to the plantation and from mattresses that children slept on," Nimmo explains.

Beyond the considerable human cost, Nimmo's two films draw attention to the environmental impact of the mass production of fruit. In Costa Rica, for example, where the pineapple industry has rapidly expanded in recent years and the fruit is intensively farmed, there's widespread pollution due to the runoff of pesticides into soil and water. Both the Pacuare River and the El Tortuguero National Park have been polluted with diazinon, herbicides and chlorothalonil. "This is very worrying - the water table is the world's reservoir of drinking water," says Marcos Barrats, a warden at the Pacuare Nature Reserve.



A banana worker in Costa Rica

SUCH is the interest in Nimmo's work that there are plans by the Scottish Trade Union Congress, in conjunction with the Scottish Executive, to show *Bonita: Ugly Bananas* to secondary school children across Scotland as part of the government's *Determined to Succeed* programme, in an effort to heighten their awareness of labour rights. Nimmo has been involved in education projects in schools, art colleges and universities since 1986, using mediums such as drawing, painting, collage, printmaking and video to get her points across. "I want to build bridges between traditional art and campaigning and to make a local-global connection about workers," she says.

Her timing is right on target. Last month it was widely reported that jailed Colombian warlord Salvatore Mancuso, a leader of illegal paramilitary groups, had accused various US multinationals of funding death squads while sourcing bananas from war-torn regions of Colombia. In a deal with the US Justice Department, one company, Chiquita, recently acknowledged paying paramilitaries £860,000 over six years. They were fined 25 million (£13m). It said the payments were made in order to protect Chiquita's workers, but campaigners claim some of the money was used to finance the assassination of union leaders who lobbied for better pay and conditions.

And last month it also emerged that following a legal struggle spanning three decades, Nicaraguan banana workers would finally get their day in court this summer over claims that exposure to the pesticide DBCP has resulted in the sterilisation of some 800 employees. In her ruling, Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Victoria Chaney broadened the potential reach of the case by linking it with four other pending lawsuits in Los Angeles that involve sterility claims on behalf of more than 3,000 former banana workers from Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala and Panama. Nimmo's films depict testimony from a number of people claiming they developed serious health problems because of exposure to chemicals, including one man who says he is sterile because of DBCP.

Although no UK supermarkets currently stock *Bonita* bananas, they have come under fire nonetheless. With just five companies - Dole, Del Monte, Chiquita, Fyffes and Noboa - controlling 80 per cent of the international banana trade, fair-trade campaigners say supermarkets are the most powerful players along the international supply chain. Banana Link, an organisation that campaigns for a sustainable banana trade, says British supermarkets have engaged in "banana price wars", matching each other's price cuts to such a low level that it is now impossible for many plantation workers to earn a living, or even a legal minimum wage.

In April, Banana Link and fellow campaigners Action Aid accused Asda of starting a price war after the supermarket cut 20 per cent off the retail price of bananas, with Tesco and Sainsbury's quickly following suit. "Between 2002 and 2003, as a result of the first Asda-Walmart-led banana price war, Tesco - the main competitor and number one in the market by a long way - cut the price it paid to suppliers by over 30 per cent, exactly in line with the retail price cut," says Alister Smith, International Coordinator of Banana Link. "Our research shows that a series of price cuts have coincided with reduced real wages, longer working days and more insecure employment." He adds that many banana companies and supermarkets fail to accept responsibility for the social and environmental impact of their behaviour in producer countries.

The supermarkets strongly deny they are responsible for lowering wages. Asda says it is fully committed to ensuring that all products are sourced in a fair and ethical way, employing 200 full-time auditors worldwide to ensure that a strict ethical code of conduct is adhered to. "The price we pay our suppliers is fixed - it is not linked to the retail price in our stores. For example, we recently cut the price of bananas from 79p per kilo to 64p per kilo. The amount paid to farmers did not change and will not," says a spokesman. Tesco says it has been selling fair-trade bananas for almost five years, while Sainsbury's says it is committed to converting its banana range to 100 per cent fair-trade and is on track to achieve this by next month.

Nimmo says the public should buy any banana they want to, and that her work is only about highlighting trade injustices. "I want people to be aware of these issues then make an informed choice if they want to campaign to help people like Romero," she says.

Five years after losing his leg, Romero no longer works in the banana industry and now earns his living selling lottery tickets. Banana Link reports that the union was broken at Los Alamos, and there has been little improvement in conditions for employees there.

Bonita told The Scotsman that Los Alamos was "regrettable". Eric Crisman, director of external affairs, says: "Tragic injury and suffering on all sides was deeply disturbing, we all agree. From my understanding, the courts found evidence of involvement by outside union agitators. The case was dismissed by the highest courts of Ecuador. In addition, I understand the case was deemed 'null and void' by the Conciliation and Arbitration Service of the Ecuadorian Labour Ministry."

Crisman added that conditions in the Ecuadorian banana industry are improving and that Los Alamos was awarded "Banana Production Facility of the Year".

Guillermo Touma, a sacked worker who led the 2002 strike, issued the following statement on 16 May, 2007, the fifth anniversary of the shootings: "For us Ecuadorians, remembering the five years of struggle by the workers at Los Alamos has allowed us to raise issues at a national level which had been taboo. Issues such as child labour, the labour sub-contractors, disrespect for workers' rights, the abuse of agrochemicals and the decision by workers to organise in trade unions to demand their rights have all become topical issues of debate and have entered the national political arena with the current government. On behalf of the Los Alamos workers, we want to thank you and all the other organisations for the support given to the agricultural workers of this country. Thanks to our collective efforts, the world knows about the inhumane conditions in which bananas are produced." sm

• Bonita: Ugly Bananas and Pura Vida will be shown at the World Justice Festival at St Augustine's Church, 41 George IV Bridge, Edinburgh on Thursday at 8:30pm. Visit www.ewjf.org.uk [<http://www.ewjf.org.uk>] for more details.

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