

Summary Sheet: Windward Islands Bananas

Based on an article in The Observer, Sunday March 13, 2005

(full article available at: www.guardian.co.uk/globalisation/story/0,7369,1435692,00.html#article_continue)

Dominican industry

Dominica is a beautiful island in the sunny Caribbean Sea. It is part of a chain of islands called the Windward Islands, and its main industry is bananas.

In fact, sixty cents in every dollar come from banana production!

Farmers who are growing Fairtrade bananas can pay themselves a bit extra and support community projects like installing lighting in the local health centre or putting desks and chairs into the primary school. But it's still a hard life.

Now the Windward Islands' banana industry is under threat. From January 2006, the world trade rules that govern bananas are changing.

British Rule

Dominica is now independent but it was once ruled by the British. Most banana growers in the Windward Islands are descendants of slaves, brutally uprooted from Africa then put to work growing a series of crops. When sugar production became unprofitable, Britain encouraged the Windward Islands to grow bananas. The farmers believed that they were guaranteed a market for their bananas in the UK.

Transnationals

But big companies (or "transnationals") in the United States are arguing that this guaranteed market is unfair. They want the trade rules changed. They want the chance to sell their own cheaper "dollar bananas" (i.e. produced for US companies) in UK outlets where the Windward Islands have always sold bananas. The Caribbean farmers know that many supermarkets will choose to sell the cheaper bananas and that the Caribbean banana industry could be finished.

Hard labour

Transnationals grow many of their bananas on huge plantations in Guatemala, where labour is cheaper because most workers do not have unions.

"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." *Selfa Sandoval, a trade union organiser in Guatemala*



Windward bananas under threat

The Windward Islands cannot compete with "dollar" bananas. Already people are leaving Dominica. One farmer says that 5,000 people have emigrated from his area. Caribbean banana growers are also finding it difficult to get loans – the banks view them as too risky.

“ ***If this new banana regime goes ahead, we can be reduced to poverty overnight*** ”
Lewis Straker, St Vincent's deputy prime minister

St Vincent's deputy prime minister says that British consumers have a choice: buy sweet, well-produced Windward bananas from decently paid workers, or bananas from "multinational corporations reaping profits on the back of slave labour".

Hope

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