Cameroon. The banana industry generally is a tough place to work. But in Africa, already terrible living and working conditions are even worsened by European policy.

SLAVERY IN THE BANANA INDUSTRY

Caroline is 28 but she seems to be 15 years older. Even when she has the strength to smile, her gaze betrays illness and exhaustion. She steps aside from her doorway, pulling back the curtain. A double bed, a coffee table, two armchairs. In the shadows against a wall you recognize kitchen utensils. The room is four by three metres – a typical lodging for the 46,000 banana workers in Cameroon. Caroline lives squeezed in here with her twin daughters and her young son.

Welcome to 'Job', one of the compounds where workers of the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) are housed. This parastatal company is a legacy of times of colonialism. Its rubber, palm and banana plantations stretch along the coastal plain of Tiko in the South Western English region, two hours journey from the large port of Douala.

The district lives up to its name. Tin roofs of long houses, eaten by rust, are in places open to the rain. Courtyards are big puddles from where grey water runs towards central drains. This water is even occasionally consumed as drinking water, due to the housing's lack of taps. Communal latrines? A block of four dirty cubicles – for the some 250 people living here.

In Job, as elsewhere in Cameroon, a room is let for 10,000 CFA francs (15.25€) per month. This is half of what Caroline earns monthly by washing and sorting bananas. She also regularly pays her exploitative landlord 5,000CFA for an electric plug, without even knowing if this amount reflects her actual consumption since there are no individual meters. Costs for drinkable water, which must be fetched from a hydrant, adds up to a further 2,000CFA monthly. The CDC is expected to house its employees free of charge but its own lodging capacity is poor and houses are far stretched out over the area. CDC does pay a lodging allowance to those workers renting outside of its own accommodation – which is the case for most plantation workers. The allowance amounts to 25% of a worker's salary:

5,000CFA in Caroline's case. But the money which remains at the end of the day is not enough to get by on in a country where the minimum budget to feed an average household of six people is estimated 80,000CFA.She also regularly pays her exploitative landlord 5,000CFA for an electric plug, without even knowing if this amount reflects her actual consumption since there are no individual meters. Costs for drinkable water, which must be fetched from a hydrant, adds up to a further 2,000CFA monthly. The CDC is expected to house its employees free of charge but its own lodging capacity is poor and houses are far stretched out over the area. CDC does pay a lodging allowance to those workers renting outside of its own accommodation – which is the case for most plantation workers. The allowance amounts to 25% of a worker's salary: 5,000CFA in Caroline's case. But the money which remains at the end of the day is not enough to get by on in a country where the minimum budget to feed an average household of six people is estimated 80,000CFA.

Housewives are trying to provide additionally for their families by cultivating vegetable gardens, which are generally also rented. For employed mothers like Caroline it is especially difficult: mostly single parents and reliant on their occupation, they must cultivate their gardens on Sundays – their only day off.

Paid by task and endless working hours

Cameroonian workers earn little but they work, however, a lot to supply French and British markets, who represent the main consumers for Cameroon's banana exports. Six days a week, 48 weeks a year they get up at 4am. Work starts at six and finishes around 5 or 6pm. But for a Cameroonian banana worker it is not uncommon to stay until 10pm in periods of high demand. Salaries are not based on an hourly rate but rather on the task assigned by managers each day. If the set quota is not achieved, pay is withheld.

The gap between official salaries (starting at 31,777CFA for an unqualified worker) and the actual wages received can be significant. Therefore many, like Caroline, end up earning less than the legal minimum of 28,000 francs. On top of this, health problems often restrict actual working hours. At the same time, the workers' protection in the workplace is highly insufficient. Even though the European label GlobalGap, ensuring social and environmental standards of Cameroon's banana production, forbids aerial fungicide spraying – this practice is still used whilst workers are in the fields. Obligatory protective equipment is not always used. Most banana pickers explain that they have to buy new boots regularly themselves, necessary for protection from deadly snakes in the plantations. In the conditioning unit, where bananas are treated before being packed, women spend their working hours with their hands soaked in chlorine, often without gloves... except during inspection visits which are, of course, announced in advance. Medical provision is supposed to be completely covered by the banana company, yet in practice, workers must regularly purchase their own medicine.

But at least, banana workers in Cameroon have union freedom. The Fako Workers Union (Fawu) – (Fako is the department in the South-Western region where the CDC mostly operates) has 4,000 members, of which 2,000 work in the banana industry. This indepen-dent union, formed in 1947 at the same time as the CDC, is purely financed by contributions from its members (1% of their salary). Its small team of seven employees deals with many legislative infractions regarding work in the banana production: from abusive dismissals to age discrimination cases.

Their relationship with the company board remains proper however, says Charles Mbide Kude, in charge of legal affairs at Fawu:

"Six cases out of ten are amicably settled. When a complaint goes to court, we win 90% of the cases because they are often due to people ignoring the work code"

A CAMPAIGN FOR **'FAIR FRUIT'**

For fair and sustainable banana and pineapple industry!

The French NGO Peuples Solidaires, one of the pillars of the European campaign 'Make Fruit Fair', has just launched a petition addressed to the European Commission. Its goal is it to revise the EU's legislation to limit the devastating consequences of power imbalances between supermarkets and their suppliers. This initiative precedes the 2nd World Banana Forum on the 28th February in Guayaquil (Ecuador) – a forum for all actors of the sector, chaired by the United Nations.

To learn more and sign the petition go to: www.makefruitfair.org.uk

French anti-unionism

The relative union freedom in this parastatal business of CDC (responsible for 40% of the 240,000 tonnes of bananas produced in Cameroon in 2011) does not exist for the High Penja's (PHP) plantations, the nation's number one producer (responsible for 50% of the national harvest). PHP's main shareholder is the French Compagnie Fruitiere, based in Marseille. *"There is no dialogue. There is total exploitation"*, says Patrick Vewessee, president of Fawu. In its Tiko banana plantation, PHP has installed its own union whose president is no other than the chief of staff himself. The members of Fawu complain about harassment from the management and, among other things, that their union contributions (taken directly from their wages) are not given to Fawu but to PHP's own union.

Members complain that PHP working conditions are even worse than those of CDC: breaks of only half an hour at midday instead of an hour, lodging allowances of 5,000CFA instead of 25% of salaries... Unfortunately, it was impossible for us to have a closer look at this as the business refuses to open its doors.

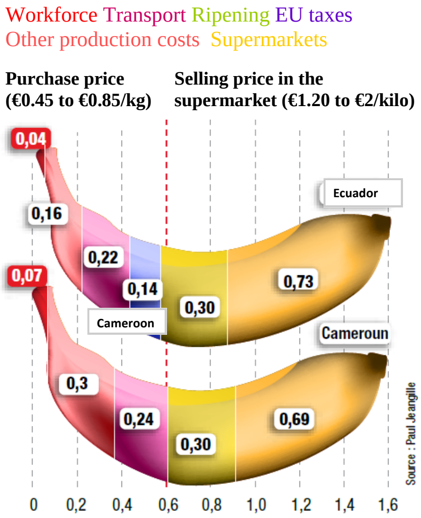
The media, including *Le Monde, Liberation* and the AFP, have accused the French affiliate of polluting land in the North, in the Penja zone, where most of PHP's activities are located. Then, there is also the Kingue affair. On the 28th of February, the opening date of the 2nd World Banana Forum (see box), it will be four years to the day that Paul-Eric Kingue, the ex-mayor of Njombe Penja – where PHP is based – was sent to the central prison of Douala. He was a victim of a never-ending trial, accused of embezzlement and inciting violence. Kingue had the audacity to demand that PHP and the other plantations in his constituency pay local taxes – a

CAMEROON vs ECUADOR

Average cost of a banana sold in the supermarket in 2011, in € per kilogram

Of the price of a banana sold in a French supermarket (around €1.60 Euros/kilo in 2011, but varying greatly), the share that goes back to the producers of the South is very small.

The average purchase price paid by the supermarkets barely covers production and transport costs in Cameroon. European taxes, which are continually reduced on Latin American imports, no longer make up for the gap in competitiveness with respect to Ecuador. Ecuador is the number one exporter of bananas in the world and this country's profit margins are also put under pressure by the prices imposed by the supermarkets, especially during promotional campaigns on bananas.



Workers' housing. Rents are exorbitant, with each family squeezing into a room measuring some dozen square metres.

request approved by the Board of Taxes on the 3rd of December 2007, but never put into practice. The ex-mayor claims that the municipality is consequently missing out on 2.7 billion CFA francs a year.

It will, however, be even more difficult for banana companies to make their practices more ethical while the industry itself is in danger. The PHP, which is the most productive plantation in Cameroon, can just keep its head above water, while the CDC's banana plantations and other companies are accumulating losses.

The threatened African banana industry

In spite of efforts towards modernisation, production costs in the African banana industry (3% of global exports) remain practically twice as high as in Central America (73%). *"There is no fertiliser produced in Africa and no cardboard packing worth mentioning – everything has to be imported. These two items account for 45% of the total production costs,"* points out Paul Jeangille, an economist in the industry who has been temporarily assigned by the European Union to the Association of Cameroonian Producers (Assobacam).

Another handicap is the decrease of tariff benefits offered by the EU to their former colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (the ACP countries) to protect them from the Latin American steamroller. Furthermore, the European market (33% of global imports) is the only one accessible to African production: While North America is supplied through its Latin American neighbours, Asia is geographically too far for banana exports from Africa. The last act of this play comes from the World Trade Organisation (WTO): the Geneva Agreement (of 15 December 2009) lowered customs duties (from which ACP bananas are exempt) from 176 to 148€ per tonne from that date on, and to 114€ from 2017 on.

By doing this, the Europeans aren't exactly giving in to the pressure of Latin American banana producers on the WTO. Instead, they are rather forestalling it: in May 2010, the EU, anxious to develop its commercial exchanges with Latin America, reached bilateral agreements with Colombia and Peru, paving the way for duties of 75€/t. Other countries, including Ecuador (a third of global exports), are expected to follow this example. In a generous gesture, the Union has agreed to support ACP producers improving their performances. But these 190 million Euros of subsidies – not a cent of which has yet been paid, deplores Deputy Joseph Owona, secretary general of Assobacam – will not allow these countries to stay on track since the gap in competitiveness is growing too big.

Make the supermarkets pay

While waiting for the D-day of a reform in the global banana market, we need to convince Europeans that in order to safeguard employment in these very poor countries, they need to pay a bit more for their African bananas and to assure them that they were produced under proper conditions. This strategy is currently being applied by Compagnie Fruitiere towards Flo-Cert, a certification organisation which issues the famous fair trade label Max Havelaar. The latter would discredit itself if it certified current practices that are eminently questionable.

Given the marginal share of the price of a banana that finds its way to the workers (see graphic), doubling the current salary of a Cameroonian worker by one brand would have very limited impact on the consumer price. Consumers should even insist that this extra cost is absorbed by the supermarkets. After all, it is the latter who set the prices these days and whose profit margins have continued to increase due to lower European tariffs. They are the real winners of the banana war committed by exporters from overseas to increase their share in the lucrative European market. A war which, today, is getting Caroline down and which, tomorrow, will simply put her out of the game. Who will take care of her children?

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Originally published in French in Alternatives Economiques, February 2012, under the title: 'Esclavage dans la bananeraie'.

Translated by Banana Link, May 2012.

Alternatives Economiques

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