

Danger: Work May Be Harmful to Health!

Plantations: bananas (and health risks) by the bunch²

Bananas are tremendously popular among consumers: they are the fruit traded most on the world market and, after apples, the fruit eaten most in France.³ In 2017, the French ate nearly 600,000 tons, imported from Africa, Latin America, and the French West Indies.⁴

Above all, bananas feed the people of the producer countries. Only 15 to 20% of production is exported.⁵ Ecuador is the world's top exporter, followed by Costa Rica, Guatemala, Colombia, and Honduras. In Africa, Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon are the foremost producers but are far behind their Latin American competitors.⁶

Banana production employs around 600,000 workers and provides a livelihood or means of subsistence for more than 4 million people.⁷ But, too often, the pay from this activity is so low that it does not allow for a decent standard of living. As for the working conditions, they are often disastrous.



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As for the big planters, "They're all-powerful. They are the assassins, and the government acted in collusion."

This health scandal affects the entire population of the French West Indies. The soil, the rivers, and the sea coasts are contaminated, and with them most of local food production. An official study by the French national public health agency, as quoted by the newspaper *Le Monde* in 2018, indicates that contamination has affected nearly all the people from Guadeloupe and Martinique. In fact, this population holds the world record for prevalence of prostate cancer. Generations of people there will have to live with this pollution that, depending on the type of soil, can remain for up to 700 years.

Furthermore, the workers of banana plantations are faced with other health and safety problems, with the risk of accidents and musculoskeletal disorders exacerbated by carrying heavy loads and working in elevated positions.

Occupational health and safety in Latin America: like the French West Indies but worse!

The chlordecone scandal in the French West Indies⁸

In 1972, chlordecone seemed like a miracle remedy when it was authorized by the French Ministry of Agriculture to combat the banana weevils that were destroying crops in Martinique and Guadeloupe. Yet, this chemical substance had been previously tested, and the results were already showing its toxicity on rats. As early as 1979, the World Health Organization classified it as a possible carcinogenic agent. Despite this, and due to pressure from the big planters, it was not until 1993 that France finally banned the product.

The greatest victims of this poison are the workers on the banana plantations. "Cancer, cancer, cancer... It's become our everyday lot. At the time, we didn't know where it came from," explains Firmin, an agricultural worker for 30 years. "When we opened the bag, heat and dust came out. We breathed it. We didn't know it was dangerous."

While the labor conditions in French banana plantations have shown the very serious failings by employers and public authorities in the protection of agricultural workers and, more generally the local population, the situation is even worse in Central and South America. Rare are the countries that are concerned about protecting workers against chemical risks. One example: aerial spraying of chemicals is carried out on banana plantations when the workers are there.

But it is not just chemical contamination that undermines the health and safety of banana plantation workers. In Costa Rica, on a plantation belonging to the multinational firm Del Monte, the workers are paid by bunch of bananas delivered and earn barely €250 per month. For this insubstantial pay, they must run about to deliver more than 200 bunches daily, with each bunch weighing up to 80 kg. They work 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, in temperatures that can reach 40°C.⁹

2 - To find out more, read the document (in French) at the following link: <https://www.calameo.com/books/0046291835c518622bbfe>, published as part of the "Health and Safety at Work in the Banana Industry" project, with CGT (French General Confederation of Labor), the coordinating body of 28 banana plantation unions of Latin America (Colsiba), CGT Guadeloupe (CGTG), Indecosa-CGT, the association Banana Link, and support from the CFSI.

3 - Interfel: <https://www.lesfruitsetlegumesfrais.com/filiere-et-metiers/les-chiffres-cles/les-produits-les-plus-consommes> (page consulted on 23/08/2018).

4 - FranceAgriMer: "La banane en 2017", August 2018: https://mm.franceagrimer.fr/bilan_campagne?banane

5 - Banana Link: <http://bananalink.org.uk/content/where-bananas-are-grown> (page viewed on 23/08/2018).

6 - FAO: "Banana statistical compendium 2017", 2018: http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/est/COMM_MARKETS_MONITORING/Bananas/Documents/web_Banana_statistical_review_2017.pdf

7 - CGT *op. cit.*

8 - This section is based on two articles from the newspaper *Le Monde*: "Le Ministère de l'agriculture mis en cause dans un rapport sur le chlordécone", 24/08/2010: https://abonnes.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2010/08/24/le-ministere-de-l-agriculture-mis-en-cause-dans-un-rapport-sur-le-chlordecone_1402098_3244.html and "Chlordécone : les Antilles empoisonnées pour des générations", 06/06/2018: https://abonnes.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2018/06/06/chlordecone-les-antilles-empoisonnees-pour-sept-siecles_5310192_3244.html

9 - See the film by François Cardona: *Hold up sur la banane*, 2016: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_uRcagn7HA



Epanouissement en Ecuateur © Make Fruit Fair

In Honduras, female workers, who are mostly hired for the packing lines, work up to 14 hours a day, in suffocating heat. Carrying heavy loads of more than 40 kg causes organ prolapse, varicose veins, and shoulder and hand pains. Indeed, their hands—constantly plunged in water—are damaged by pesticides, which in turn threaten their lungs and their fertility and also lead to congenital malformations or to premature puberty among children. Furthermore, lack of social protection means the workers cannot keep their job if they are struck with serious health problems.¹⁰ Conditions are better in banana plantations where labor unions are established, but their actions are often hindered by the repression they frequently suffer.

BOHESI: the Banana Occupational Health and Safety Initiative for plantations

This program, launched in 2014, is coordinated by Banana Link and the World Banana Forum, among others. It brings together public institutions, companies, and civil society organizations and is supported by the ILO and FAO. It has led to pilot operations in Cameroon and Ecuador to improve respect for the right to health and safety in banana plantations (publication of handbooks, organization of training, and others).

Wine growing: my cup runneth over (with pesticides)

Excessive alcohol consumption is dangerous for health. The same goes for the pesticides massively used in many vineyards, to the detriment of the health of those who work there or who live nearby. Vineyard workers additionally suffer from work accidents and musculoskeletal disorders.

South African wine leaves a bitter taste

South Africa is the world's sixth largest wine exporter in volume.¹¹ In 2017, Vinmonopolet, Norway's state-owned retailer with a monopoly on wine sales, conducted an audit of 22 of its South African suppliers. Its conclusions were damning, especially regarding the risks faced by workers.¹²

The audit corroborated the observations of an investigation by Human Rights Watch¹³. As one worker described, "The tractor sprays pesticides when people are in the field. So the spray touches you and your skin. If your skin is exposed, then [you] get a rash. The wind will carry pesticides to people.... The tractor driver gets mask, but not the people in the field.... It's not fair to spray... when [the] wind [is] blowing [on] all other peoples" (sic).¹⁴ Another worker explains how his employer does not provide him with suitable clothing. He must use his own and wash them at home, exposing his three children to chemical risks. Even if rules do exist, they are often poorly applied. As for the labor inspectorate, it lacks the means to fight these abuses. During the investigation, the South African government also acknowledged that the legal framework concerning pesticides had to be improved. For example, South African law did not specifically ban the spraying of pesticides when agricultural workers are in the fields.¹⁵

10 - CFSI: Honduras: améliorer les conditions de travail des femmes dans les bananeraies, 20/12/2017: <http://www.cfsi.asso.fr/actu/honduras-ameliorer-conditions-travail-femmes-bananeraies>

11 - International Organisation of Vine and Wine (OIV): Éléments de conjoncture mondiale, April 2017, p.13: <http://www.oiv.int/public/medias/5264/oiv-noteconjomars2017-fr.pdf>

12 - Peter Kenworthy: "South Africa's new world wine smells off", *New Internationalist*, 9 August 2017, <https://newint.org/web-exclusive/2017-08-09/south-africa-wine-exploitation>

13 - Human Rights Watch: *Ripe with Abuse: Human Rights Conditions in South Africa's Fruit and Wine Industries*, 2011, pp. 57-65: <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/safam0811webwcover.pdf>

14 - HRW, *op. cit.* p. 57.

15 - HRW, *op. cit.* p. 59 and 62.



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In addition to chemical intoxication, the workers also risk suffering work accidents and musculoskeletal disorders (cuts during grape harvests, carrying too-heavy loads, etc.). They rarely have access to showers and drinking water,¹⁶ despite the fact that these are essential given their exposure to dangerous products and the heat in which they often have to work. They are housed on the farms and continue to work even when sick, out of fear of being evicted from the housing. Nor do they benefit from adequate health care, due to lack of money.¹⁷ The barriers to labor union freedom make it very difficult to organize agricultural workers and for the latter to make their rights respected.

French vineyards: pesticide connoisseurs

The situation is of course better in France, but there is much room for improvement. France is the world's second-largest producer of wine, after Italy, and the top exporter in value terms.¹⁸ Nearly 500,000 direct and indirect jobs exist thanks to wine growing.¹⁹

The French vineyards rely on a large volume of pesticides, to the detriment of workers. Indeed, in volume terms, wine growing consumes nearly 20% of phytosanitary products annually, while vineyards make up only 3% of cultivated agricultural land in France.²⁰ The French national Institute for health and medical research (Inserm) indicates that "positive associations have been observed between professional exposure to pesticides and certain pathologies such as Parkinson's disease, prostate cancer and hematopoietic cancers." Professor Robert Barouki, Director of Research at Inserm, adds that there is "80% certainty that there

is a causal link between certain cancers and exposure to phytopharmaceutical products for professionals."²¹ As one worker deplures, "I see violations and shortcomings in employee protection on a daily basis." And she adds, "Some products irritate the throat. I have respiratory problems, allergies, and skin rashes. In the end, I endanger my health for €1,115 per month."²²

Local residents exposed to pesticides

Exposure to pesticides also has serious impacts on people living near vineyards. The association Générations Futures reports the following: "A recent study by the French national health agency on the incidence of Parkinson's disease revealed that, compared to people living far from wine-growing districts, the rate of declaring Parkinson's disease is 13% higher for agricultural workers [...] and 10% higher for the general population living in a heavy wine-growing district!"²³ The area of Bordeaux wine production is one of the regions most concerned. In May 2014, 23 children were intoxicated after the spreading of fungicides near their school.²⁴ Defending agricultural workers' right to health and safety is becoming increasingly aligned with citizens' concerns.

Besides the chemical risks, the French national agency for the improvement of working conditions (Anact) explains that "despite the mechanization of a certain number of tasks and the change in tools and equipment, work in vineyards remains physical, repetitive, and taxing for the body [...]. Under these circumstances, occupational illnesses continue to grow, with most of them affecting the arms and back of wine growers."²⁵

16 - HRW, *op. cit.* p. 56.

17 - HRW, *op. cit.* p. 64 and 65.

18 - International Organisation of Vine and Wine, *op. cit.* pp. 7 and 13.

19 - CNIV, key figures: <https://www.intervin.fr/etudes-et-economie-de-la-filiere/chiffres-cles>

20 - INRA: "Plan Ecophyto : des vignes résistantes prêtes à relever le défi", 29 November 2017: <http://institut.inra.fr/Reperes/Documents/Science-et-elus/Numero-1-Vignes-resistantes>

21 - Joint information mission on the use of phytopharmaceutical products, information report, French National Assembly, 4 April 2018, §. I.A.1.a: http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/15/rap-info/I0852.asp#P222_36054

22 - *Le Monde*: "Pesticides : 'Je mets ma santé en danger pour 1 100 euros par mois'", 10 July 2014: https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2014/07/10/le-combat-contre-les-pesticides-d-une-salariee-de-la-vigne_4453404_3244.html

23 - Générations Futures: "Riverains de parcelles agricoles exposées aux pesticides", 2018, p. 6. https://www.generations-futures.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/riverains-victimes-des-pesticides_web.pdf

24 - *Le Monde*: "Omerta sur les pesticides dans le vignoble bordelais", 6 July 2014: https://abonnes.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2014/07/04/omerta-sur-les-pesticides-dans-le-vignoble-bordelais_4450944_3244.html

25 - Anact: "Prévenir les troubles musculosquelettiques (TMS) en viticulture", 1 March 2018: <https://www.anact.fr/prevenir-les-troubles-musculosquelettiques-tms-en-viticulture>



Citizens rally to the issue

In solidarity with producers, be they agricultural workers or peasant farmers, citizens are taking action to preserve the environment and protect their health by consuming organic and fair-trade food and by relaying their concerns to public authorities and enterprises.

Organic production has become popular among a growing number of consumers. In France, the value of food products stemming from organic agriculture was estimated by Agence Bio at €8.373 billion in 2017, representing 17% growth over 2016.²⁶ This trend is beneficial overall for producers working in organic agriculture, even if they sometimes have to do harder work, explains the association Bio Consom'acteurs: "In organic agriculture, the work is often harder than in conventional farming, according to Inra. Not only in terms of workload—be it daily, monthly, or annual—but also in terms of technical nature, complexity, and difficulty. That said, that which is much less unpleasant about organic agriculture is not having to be in constant contact with chemical pesticides."²⁷

Fair trade was introduced to France by Artisans du Monde in 1974, with the goal of providing fair pay and decent working conditions to producers of foodstuffs such as coffee, cocoa, and tea, as well as to artisans.²⁸ Fair trade is also experiencing increasing success among consumers. In 2017, its market exceeded 1 billion euros, a 10% increase over 2016. The share of organic products in the fair-trade market is also on an upswing and represented 80% of the products sold in 2017.²⁹ Thus, fair trade—thanks to its use of organic agriculture—also helps to improve the health and safety of workers and peasant farmers faced with the risks related to pesticide use.



In addition, civil society organizations have been carrying out advocacy campaigns to influence public policies and business practices. In 2017, for example, ActionAid France organized a campaign targeting the multinational Fyffes, following worker intoxication and union freedom violations in melon and pineapple plantations in Costa Rica and Honduras. In January 2019, this mobilization contributed to an initial victory: Fyffes finally recognized Sindicato de Trabajadores de l'Agroindustria y Similares (STAS). This was an encouraging first step towards negotiating the improvement of working conditions.³⁰

International cooperation also makes it possible to help better achieve this right to occupational health and safety. The CGT, for example, has been involved since 2015 in the "Occupational Health and Safety in the Banana Industry" project, together with the platform of the 28 banana plantation unions of Latin America (Col-siba), CGT Guadeloupe, Indecosa-CGT, the association Banana Link and with support from CFSI. This project seeks to make the "Health, Safety, and Work Conditions" committees and their actions operational.

26 - Agence française pour le développement et la promotion de l'agriculture biologique: "Le marché du bio", 2018: <http://www.agencebio.org/le-marche-de-la-bio-en-france>

27 - Bio Consomm'acteurs: "Travail en bio vs travail en conventionnel", 27 May 2016: <https://www.bioconsomacteurs.org/agir/agir-au-quotidien/trucs-et-astuces/travail-en-bio-vs-travail-en-conventionnel>

28 - For a full definition of fair trade (in French): <https://www.artisansdumonde.org/comprendre/le-commerce-equitable/definition-du-commerce-equitable>

29 - Fair trade in France, "Les chiffres clés du commerce équitable en France en 2017", 2018: https://www.artisansdumonde.org/images/actu/chiffres_du_secteur_2017_vf_ppt.pdf

30 - More information (in French) at: <https://www.actionaid.fr/nos-actions/dignite-au-travail/victoire-contre-fyffes-au-honduras/>

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Strengthening and implementing the international right to health and security in agriculture

The right to occupational health and safety is a human right. Article 7 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1966, asserts that the States parties to the Covenant "recognize the right of everyone to the enjoyment of just and favourable conditions of work which ensure, in particular [...] (s)afe and healthy working conditions." The Covenant has been ratified by 169 States, including France.

As we have seen, the situation is especially worrying in agriculture, which alone accounts for 50% of fatal work accidents. It is thus crucial to strengthen the international right to occupational health and safety, to include it into national law, and to see that it is truly implemented.

We request States to:

1) Ratify Convention 184 on health and safety in agriculture

Convention 184 of the ILO was adopted in 2001.³¹ It indicates that Member States "shall formulate, carry out and periodically review a coherent national policy on safety and health in agriculture. This policy shall have the aim of preventing accidents and injury to health arising out of, linked with, or occurring in the course of work, by eliminating, minimizing or controlling hazards in the agricultural working environment."

This very important convention had been ratified by only 17 countries as of March 2019.³² At that time, France had already launched its ratification procedure several months previously but had not yet completed it.

As the ILO explains, "Ratifying countries commit themselves to applying [a] convention in national law and practice and reporting on its application at regular intervals. [...] In addition, representation and complaint procedures can be initiated against countries for violations of a convention they have ratified."³³ Although the penalties are chiefly moral in nature, conventions are nonetheless useful because they can act as reference for improving national laws.

2) Implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas

Following mobilization by the international peasant movement Via Campesina and two reports from the Advisory Committee of the Human Rights Council took note of their extremely serious situation, the Council decided, in 2012, to draw up the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas.

Article 14 of the Declaration promotes the right to safe and healthy working conditions, along the lines of the ILO's Convention 184.³⁴ This is thus a way to give it more weight, given the small number of countries that have ratified it.

31 - Text of the Convention: http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C184

32 - List of ratifications: http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO:11300_P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:312329:NO

33 - Source: ILO : <https://www.ilo.org/global/standards/introduction-to-international-labour-standards/conventions-and-recommendations/lang--fr/index.htm>

34 - To find out more, see these two documents coordinated by the CFSI within the framework of Coordination Sud: "Defending the Rights of Peasants: for a United Nations Declaration", January 2018: <https://www.coordinationsud.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Notes-of-SUD-n%C2%B014-Defending-the-Rights-of-Peasants.pdf> and "The Right to Seeds: a fundamental right for small farmers!", May 2017: <https://www.coordinationsud.org/wp-content/uploads/The-right-to-seeds-C2A-2017.pdf>

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Although a declaration is not binding, its content can become so when it is adopted in national law, as seen by the example of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.³⁵ It is thus an important tool for improving national laws on occupational health and safety.

In France, the CFSI and Confédération Paysanne are coordinating the mobilization of civil society, with participation from Coordination Sud, Fian-France, SOL, Fédération Artisans du Monde, and Secours Catholique Caritas France and support from nearly 70 civil society organizations.

On 17 December 2018, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration by a very large majority (121 for, 8 against, and 54 abstentions).³⁶ France’s position on the Declaration is very disappointing, although it did change for the better (it abstained, despite its initial opposition to the decision to draft the Declaration). Following the adoption of this important text, civil society is working for it to be applied in actuality. ■

Written by : Pascal Érard (CFSI), with the help of Alice Bordaçarre (ActionAid France), David Erhart (Fédération Artisans du Monde), Roger Perret (IRESA/FNAF-CGT), Alistair Smith (Banana Link), and Renata Tretiakova (CGT).

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Contact : Pascal Érard – **Email :** erard@cfsi.asso.fr



Comité Français pour la Solidarité Internationale
32 rue Le Peletier - 75009 Paris
tél. 01 44 83 88 50 - info@cfsi.asso.fr



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35 - Cf. "The Right to Seeds", *op. cit.* p. 14.

36 - Text of the Declaration: http://www.hlrn.org/img/documents/A_C.3_73_L.30_EN.pdf