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Paying the price: the banana trade in focus

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***Banana Split*. Directed by Ron Harpelle and Kelly Saxberg, Shebandowan Films, 2002. DVD. 46 minutes.**

Banana Split is a Canadian produced award-winning documentary lasting 46 minutes, which provides an overview of the historical, social, economic, scientific and environmental aspects of banana production. In recent years most attention has been focused on the long running banana trade war between the United States (U.S.) and Latin American governments on the one hand and the European Union (E.U.) on the other. The result of which has been the abandonment of preferences for African, Caribbean and Pacific imports into the E.U., and the end of a large-scale banana export industry in the Caribbean. While the dispute has been very important in determining international trade policy as well as the economic profile of the Caribbean, there are other contentious issues related to the banana, and this film is useful in focusing attention on these.

The international banana trade is worth around US\$10 billion each year, with annual exports amounting to approximately 12 million tonnes. Only the Cavendish variety is exported but there are hundreds of other varieties. The banana is the most popular fruit in the world, and the fourth most important staple food crop after rice, wheat and maize. Latin America accounts for 80 percent of world banana exports, and the major banana exporters are Ecuador (4½ million tonnes per year), Costa Rica and Colombia (1½ million tonnes each). The main producer is India with 17 million tonnes, but none of the bananas are exported. Overall, only about 25 percent of all bananas produced are exported, and the most prominent companies involved in the trade are Chiquita (formerly known as the United Fruit Company) and Dole each with a 25 percent share, and Del Monte with an eight percent share. Chiquita and Dole are U.S.-owned, while a Chilean-based company controls Del Monte. The film attempts to assemble all the various elements of the banana trade to highlight the North/South split between consumers and producers.

The first part of the documentary assesses the banana industry in Canada and includes the observations of consumers, retailers, banana ripeners, and banana company representatives. Such an opening is probably necessary to introduce the issue of the banana to the lay viewer, but

too much time was taken to set the scene. One example was the segment on the International Banana Club Museum in California during which time the curator talked about his collection of banana-related paraphernalia. Although mildly amusing it conveyed an unwarranted frivolous note to proceedings. Some judicious editing here would have made this part of the film tighter and more focused on the important issues to come. Indeed, it was not until one third of the way through the film that the nature of banana production in Latin America was considered.

Once in Latin America the film first provides a brief overview of how the industry was established through the pioneering work of entrepreneurs such as George Busch, Minor Cooper Keith and Lorenzo Dow Baker from the 1880s onwards that would eventually lead to the creation of the United Fruit Company (UFC) in 1899. From this moment the UFC established significant interests in Latin America and Jamaica that included sizeable land ownership (3.5 million acres at its peak) and control over infrastructure and local communities. Such control formed the notion of “banana republics” and the UFC as *El Pulpo* (the octopus). The film focuses on Honduras, which today exports around 500,000 tonnes of bananas, for its consideration of the role of the UFC in Latin American banana production. Indeed Honduras was the first country to be known as a “banana republic” because of its formerly high dependency on the banana industry.

The film focuses on two regions, Tela and La Lima, which have been scarred by their banana experiences. For a more historical perspective, Tela situated on the north coast facing the Caribbean Sea, is profiled. In early April 1954, dock workers in Tela refused to load one of the UFC’s cargo ships, demanding the overtime pay to which they were legally entitled. Within several days the strike had spread across the country to include workers employed by a number of other companies. Collectively the strikers demanded a number of improvements, including higher pay and better working conditions, as well as the right to collective bargaining. The strike lasted over two months, involved at its height 30,000 people and placed the Honduran economy under considerable strain. The striking workers were accused of being communists and drawing support from Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán who was soon to be overthrown with the aid of the U.S. government and the UFC. After violent attempts by the Honduran authorities and the companies to defeat the strike an agreement was reached that met some of the workers’ demands. Despite the strike marking a step forward in establishing organised labour in Honduras, the UFC soon left Tela, leaving behind a demoralised and destitute population. The film illustrates well the events of the time via a series of personal recollections.

A more contemporary perspective is given when the film considers

the nature of banana production in La Lima, in northwestern Honduras. Again using the testimonies of several workers including a trade union leader, an evaluation is given of the social and environmental effects of banana production today. Several positive outcomes are highlighted including full-time workers receiving housing, education, health care and other services. Conversely, the banana companies' preference for temporary labourers is also recognised, which enables them to exclude workers from legal-minimum wage standards, job-security guarantees and benefits. Also, the film touches upon the long working hours (often 10-12 hours a day) and the low and declining wages of less than US\$5 a day despite the fact that workers have more responsibility than before (including the application of chemicals, pruning, wrapping the stems with plastic, harvesting and loading the bananas on the aerial cables). There is also mention of banana company attempts to undermine trade union organisation. Dismissal for organising union activity or even just joining a union is widespread. Workers are often fearful to defend their rights in case they are fired particularly as there may be little other employment in the region. Instead companies promote the *Solidarismo* movement a group of self-financed pro-management workers' associations that do not engage the company on core issues such as wages and working conditions.

Banana production is also linked with several environmental issues, and the documentary refers to a number of these. One of the gravest problems is associated with intensive pesticide use. The large-scale monocropping of bananas has given rise to sizeable pest populations and potentially devastating diseases. To combat these threats pesticide use is widespread, and can contribute to both environmental contamination and public health problems. For example, the use of the DBCP pesticide led to birth defects, damage to the liver and kidneys and allegedly caused sterility in male workers. DBCP continued to be used on banana plantations in some cases up to 1990 after it was banned for use in the U.S. in 1977. Other issues of concern include deforestation, soil depletion, flooding, waste disposal and water pollution. This section of the film also details the devastating impact on banana cultivation in Honduras of Hurricane Mitch, which hit in late October 1998. In 1998 banana exports amounted to 502,000 tonnes, while in 1999 the figure was only 120,000 tonnes.

The focus on the events in Tela and La Lima represent the central core of the film and the personal testimonies of a number of existing and former workers brings home the important role of Chiquita and other companies in banana production in Honduras and elsewhere in the region. Following on from the largely dispiriting account of the banana industry in Honduras the last part of the film offers some hope

by focusing albeit briefly on the growing market in fairly traded bananas. Since the late 1980s consumer interest in fairly traded goods including bananas has grown significantly. Fairtrade labelling was created in the Netherlands in 1988, when the "Max Havelaar" label was launched. Similar Fairtrade labelling organizations were set up, including "Transfair," in North America. The first Fairtrade bananas became available in 1996. Since 2002, there has been a single international Fairtrade mark run by the Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International. The mark guarantees that the bananas have been produced to certain standards and that the producer gets a fair price along with a premium for investing in making social and environmental improvements. In 2007, the Fairtrade share of the banana market in Switzerland and the United Kingdom reached 45 percent and 20 percent respectively. In Canada Fairtrade bananas became available only in 2004, and therefore their market share is very small at present. With regard to production Fairtrade bananas are available from countries like Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, and the Windward Islands, but ironically, in terms of the focus of the film, not from Honduras.

Following the section on Fairtrade the film concludes by recapping its central themes, but ends weakly by giving further coverage to the curator of the banana museum. This represents a disappointing and anticlimatic ending. At its conclusion viewers might also ask why a number of very important issues are not touched upon. First, the central position of Ecuador in the banana trade is ignored. Ecuador whose banana industry is domestically owned exports twice as many bananas as any other country in the world, but its low-wage, non-unionised production is driving down conditions for banana workers elsewhere. Second, the film does not recognize that the major companies have reduced their own plantation holdings and begun to outsource production to local independents. This allows companies like Chiquita and Dole to avoid responsibility for labour and environmental conditions. Third, the documentary should acknowledge the key role of supermarkets in the banana chain. Indeed, supermarkets are the only players in the industry to obtain regular profits from bananas. Their dominance of the retail trade both in North America and Europe has given them increased power to determine prices and production patterns, largely to the detriment of producers and workers in Latin America. The inclusion of these issues would have helped to give the film a broader and more insightful perspective.

Overall, the film does provide a fairly engaging introduction into the international banana trade, and illustrates the split between producers in the South and consumers in the North. Many of the connections between the different parts of the banana chain are highlighted, and the focus on the nature of the banana trade in Honduras forms a strong

centre to the film. The deployment of personal testimonies to show the dependency and vulnerability of banana plantation workers is effective. However, the film is let down by poor editing that gives too much time to frivolity and inconsequence, and as a result its serious purpose is somewhat undermined.

Time to Break Down the Cages

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***Sweet Sugar Rage*. Co-directors Honor Ford-Smith and Harclyde Walcott, cinematographers John Swaby and Franklyn St. Juste. Produced by Sistren Theatre Collective, 1985. 45 minutes, colour.**

*“Time to break down the Cages
We want better wages”*

Sweet Sugar Rage documents a particular moment in the Women’s Movement in Jamaica. Its primary project is to demonstrate and to teach that solidarity among working class women and middle class women will bring about change in the lives of women throughout Jamaica and will shape a better nation. The video ends with this message.

As an example of the pioneering use of video in the struggle for better wages and working conditions for women in the region, this production is of significance. It does not see itself obviously as an exercise in aesthetic innovation nor is it concerned to go beyond mapping the required terrain and promoting its message. That message is however well conveyed.

As an historical document this 1985 work is a useful record of an initiative by the Sistren Theatre Collective. It chronicles the actual processes used by the Sistren Collective in their strenuous attempt to uplift women and does so through the mechanism of intercutting between landscapes, work in the cane fields, videoed interviews and drama workshops in session, captions and through the use of a voice over narrator. Through this use of montage the film shapes a generalised image of the conditions of low pay, burdensome hard work, isolation and powerlessness of women within a patriarchal system, in this instance exemplified by