

Interview with Simon Adjei-Mensah, Eastern Regional Secretary of GAWU (General Agricultural Workers Union of Ghana)

Photo: Simon- one head shot and one other?

Q. GAWU organises workers from which industries?

GAWU is an agricultural workers union and we have members in the industries of banana, cocoa, rubber, oil palm, mango and pineapple. We also have members in the agricultural research stations and work with small farmers in the region as well.

Q. How big is the banana industry in Ghana, how many workers are there on the plantations?

There are two main banana plantations in Ghana. One is owned by a Dole subsidiary called Golden Exotics Ltd or Compagnie Fruitiere Ltd. This has 1,500 permanent workers plus around 500 temporary workers. So 2,000 in total and about 300 of the workers are women, who mainly work in the pack houses.

The other plantation is a Fairtrade certified plantation owned by Volta River Estates Ltd, which has shareholders from Agrofair – a Fairtrade organisation from the Netherlands- and other shareholders within Ghana. This is a smaller plantation with 580 workers and 170 are women. Nearly all of these workers are permanent as this is part of the Fairtrade standards. This plantations is 90% organic but the Golden Exotic plantation is conventional.

Q. Are there many young workers on the plantations?

In Ghana you have to be over 18 years old to work and, due to pressure from the trade unions as well, most companies respect this law. The ages of workers of the plantations is mixed, with workers from 18 years old upwards

Q. What are the conditions like for workers on these plantations?

The Fairtrade plantation is older and the conditions on this plantation are good. The Golden Exotic plantation is new, about 3 years old, so they are still in the investment stage and the workers there have to do longer hours. The wages are equal to, or above, the national minimum wage on both plantations but this wage is too low in terms of the work they are doing and the long hours.

Q. And trade union freedom? What is life like for a trade unionist in Ghana?

*Trade unions are very strong in Ghana. The country's constitution is very strong and we have the **Labour Commission** and labour laws to reinforce this constitution. Because of this we have been able to develop good relations with the management at both banana plantations. All of the permanent*

workers on the plantations are members of GAWU which means we are able to resolve most issues through discussions with the management and work together to come up with the best solution.

Q. So what are the key issues for GAWU members on the plantations?

The main issue for workers is the lack of education they have access to on their labour rights and Health and Safety standards at work. The workers are generally provided with protective clothing at work but they don't always wear it because they are not aware of the impacts these pesticides can have on their health. Currently GAWU's main priority is to provide this education and training to enable our members to improve their conditions at work. We have provided some education and training for our members in the past but we are really limited in terms of resources so getting support to continue this work is a key issue for us.

In terms of workplace issues that we are working to improve, the issue of insufficient wage levels for the hours worked is one thing we are pushing with the employers on the Golden Exotic plantation. We are also currently trying to ensure that the workers are provided with transport to get to work. Workers travel an average of 5km to get to work, but some travel around 20km. The company has provided bikes but we would like them to provide alternative transport, like a daily bus to and from the furthest banana worker communities.

Q. What is the history and context of the banana industry in Ghana?

The banana industry in Ghana started off as small organic plantations. Most of the land that is being used for the big Golden Exotic plantation used to be a sugar plantation that was government owned, but the sugar production and infrastructure closed down so the land was left unused. The company then acquired the land from the government and local chief.

Much of the land has also been sold or is being leased to the companies by the chiefs of the local communities. In return the companies support the local communities with basic amenities but there are still real problems in terms of the social impacts on the banana production in the area. As most of the land is now leased or sold to the banana companies there are very few options for local people other than to work on the plantations. Nearly all agriculture in the area has been replaced by banana production and many people have had their land taken away so it can be used by banana companies. These people have very few opportunities and help is needed to support diversification and alternative employment. The opportunities of employment on the banana plantations has also meant that many people have moved into the area so there is a great pressure on the local health and education systems.