

'Solidarismo' or Union-busting Costa Rica-style

In the early 1980s, an unholy alliance of the multinational banana companies, the US Embassy, Costa Rican government institutions and a section of the Catholic Church hierarchy, set about trying to create an alternative to the independent plantation workers' unions, which had almost 100% membership and strong collective bargaining agreements industry-wide.

Born out of the civil war in Costa Rica in 1948 - and inspired by Northern European social democracy movements in the immediate aftermath of World War II - 'solidarismo' is a peculiarly Costa Rican phenomenon. Although the movement promotes the concept of '*paz laboral*' - peaceful labour relations - the movement's energy has been deployed to try and rid the economy of free trade unions.

The solidarismo movement is a federation of self-financed pro-management workers' associations, and now has as many members in Costa Rica as the independent trade unions, especially in the commercial sector and light industrial sectors.

Trade unions see solidarismo as a deliberate attempt to eliminate and replace fundamental workers' rights to freedom to organise trade unions and engage in free collective bargaining.

What is 'solidarismo' in practice?

A Solidarista Association is a legal form of workers' association. The Associations are partly funded by the companies and partly by deductions from the workers' wages. Initially, 5% of the worker's wage is deducted and matched by the employer from company funds, creating a huge pool of cash, to which workers have access in the form of loans, at least in theory. Some associations also run shops inside or nearby the banana plantations. Solidarista Associations also provide a range of activities including social, cultural and sporting events.

Management and administrative staff are allowed to join the association and often control the key officer posts, such as treasurer or chair.



Gracias al Solidarismo

Solidarista associations sign so-called *arreglos directos* - 'direct agreements' - with management, covering wages, piece-rates and some health and safety issues. In contrast to negotiations between a union and employers, the Solidarista Associations do not challenge the company on core issues such as wages and working conditions nor do they attempt to address grievances or defend individual or collective workers' rights.

Solidarismo exists in a particularly virulent form in the banana export industry of Costa Rica, where the movement continues to conduct daily psychological warfare against legal trade unions inside the 180 large-scale banana plantations.

Violating international labour standards

By the early 1990s, the solidarismo movement had almost destroyed the independent trade unions in the banana industry in Costa Rica. Complaints by independent trade unions were put to the United Nations International Labour Organisation, and were in many cases upheld. The ILO has specifically ruled that Solidarista Associations do not meet the requirements of 'free association': if several administrative staff are office-holders in the Association, if there is interference in trade union organisation, or if the Associations become involved in worker representation through the permanent committees, then ILO conventions are being violated. All these are features of solidarismo in the Costa Rican banana industry, but most banana companies continue to actively support the movement today.

In its response to the complaints, the Costa Rican government said in the case of one plantation: "*From the investigations carried out it was found that workers were being harassed to resign their membership of the trade union and preferential treatment was given to members of the Solidarista Association, whose executive committee included employers' representatives.*"

A labour law reform in 1993, provoked by an ILO ruling criticising the government, confirms that Solidarista Associations must not attempt in any way to prevent the development of, or the substitution for, other forms of workers' organisation, especially when it comes to negotiations on wages and conditions with employers.

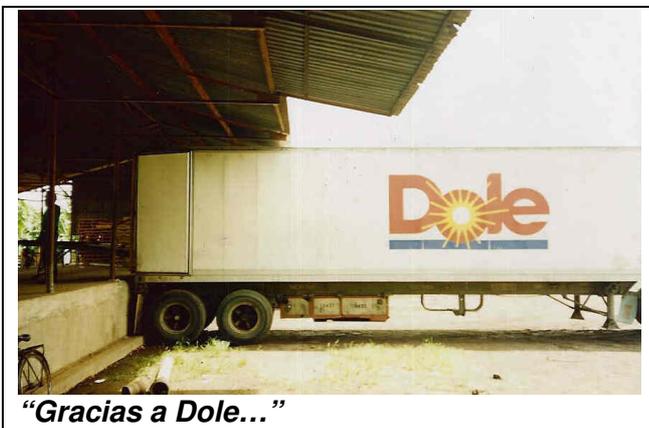
"The [ILO] shall... ensure that the legislation and the functioning in practice of the solidarista associations do not interfere in the activities and functions of trade unions."

275th Report of the ILO Committee on the Freedom of Association, Case 1483, Costa Rica, 1993.

Union-busting campaign dollars

Funds for the campaign to win the hearts and minds of banana workers who may be 'tempted' by the independent trade unions, are channelled through a Catholic Church institution, known as the *Escuela Juan XXIII* (John XXIII School). The School is run by a Catholic priest, Padre Solano, who personally led the drive to bring *solidarismo* into all the country's banana plantations from 1981. A central part of the message which workers receive at the School is that God smiles on *solidaristas*, whilst trade unions are the work of the devil.

The movement was given an early boost when it was openly handed a two million US dollar cheque from the US Embassy at a press conference in San José in 1982. Since then, companies like Bandeco (Del Monte) and Standard Fruit (Dole) have shelled out tens of millions of dollars for the work of the *Escuela Juan XXIII* over the last two decades, presumably to buy 'peaceful labour relations'.



"Gracias a Dole..."

Trade unionism *versus* **Solidarismo**: unions fighting back

The key battleground has been the 'Permanent Workers' Committees' elected by workers in each plantation. The Solidarista Associations have sought to control these committees by getting their active members elected. It is through these committees of 3-7 workers' representatives that the 'direct agreements' have been drawn up and signed with the companies. In plantations where the unions have had members, they have tried to get elected to the permanent committee, so as to try and influence the content of the agreements. In cases where the union has over 50% of membership of the committees, they can have recourse to the law and oblige the company to recognise the union and negotiate a collective agreement; but every time the unions have come near to achieving a majority of membership in any one plantation, *solidarismo* has concentrated its human and financial resources to prevent recognition of the independent trade union. Collective bargaining agreements between a union and an employer have only survived in two of the 180 or so plantations of Costa Rica.

Del Monte: an agreement too far?

Following a campaign in Britain and Costa Rica by the World Development Movement, Banana Link and the independent union SITRAP, Del Monte was persuaded to sign a 'Framework Agreement' with the union in December 1997. Since the early 1980s, union members had been forced to operate clandestinely, because of a wide range of repressive tactics against workers known to be members of - or sympathetic to - SITRAP.

The Framework Agreement allowed for the union to organise freely alongside *solidarismo*, without fear of reprisals. SITRAP members had the majority in one third of the elected permanent committees in Del Monte's 24 plantations, and in the course of 1998, SITRAP membership rose to over 20% of the 4300 Del Monte workers.

Clearly, the company had not expected so many workers to freely choose the trade union over the associations and boosted its campaign to win back hearts and minds. By late 1998, when this did not appear to be working, Del Monte resorted to its habitual tactics of firing workers seen as key SITRAP activists, initially in twos and threes then, in September 1999, by sacking the entire workforce overnight! The next day, the company re-hired workers prepared to accept a 40% cut in wages and an end to benefits such as free electricity for those in company housing and free medical care.

The 'Framework Agreement' was, *de facto*, dead in the water and only the knowledge that the company was just waiting for SITRAP to declare the agreement dead – in order to have a scapegoat for its dirty tactics – stopped the union from declaring the experiment over. Since then, given that virtually all SITRAP members refused the drastic cuts in wages and benefits, the union is forced back into clandestinity; the psychological warfare tactics of the *solidaristas* are as strongly entrenched as ever, whilst the handful of brave unionised workers go in permanent fear of the sack.

Beginning of the end for Solidarismo?

By the dawn of the 21st century, the Banco Solidarista had become one of the biggest banking institutions in the country, flush with hundreds of millions of dollars of workers' savings. However, in the late 1990s, workers had started finding that they could not take out personal loans based on their own savings. It emerged that unscrupulous owners had used the funds of their *solidarista* association to finance their company's debt. In several cases, workers made redundant when the company they worked for went bankrupt found that they could not even withdraw savings because they had been spent. Needless to say, this coupled with a major corruption scandal in the senior echelons of the national Solidarista Bank started to undermine the credibility of the movement.

Since 2001, despite the 'black list' of 'union-friendly' workers circulated around all banana employers, and despite constant sackings of union members and a vast array of other tactics used by employers to frighten people off the unions, the four member organisations of the Coordination of Costa Rican Banana Workers' Unions (COSIBA-CR) had started to make gains in membership. With all the odds loaded against them for the last 20 years, it seems that the efforts of solidarismo to convince workers that trade unionism is part of a dangerous plot to undermine Costa Rica's very particular type of social democracy are beginning to be met with scepticism.

A new generation of low-waged, 'casualised' plantation workers – enjoying almost none of their legal labour rights – may be starting to see that solidarismo has done nothing to improve the lot of the ordinary banana worker, who is poorer than he or she has been for many decades, works longer hours and is exposed to some of the most toxic substances to which human beings can legally be exposed. Change is in the air.

Written by Banana Link, 2003

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Available from the Banana Link office:

"El Solidarismo y los arreglos directos en las fincas bananeras de Costa Rica" by Gilbert Bermúdez, 2000

"What is Solidarism?", ASEPROLA, Costa Rica, 1994

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