

The Real Cost of Your Bananas: Terror, Death Squads, and U.S. Multinational Corporations

By: Lance Cortez



[79 cents per pound](#): that's the price that a consumer will typically pay for bananas when rolling through the check-out line at almost every U.S. supermarket.

For most of us, this seems perfectly normal—and convenient for our wallets. After all, bananas are widely considered to be a dietary staple across the world. In the past few decades, their popularity has even surpassed that of the apple, becoming the [most consumed fruit in the U.S.](#)

Yet, there's a hidden cost to this seemingly wholesome fruit: one that's based in the structural and ruthless exploitation of banana plantation workers. Like many other agricultural commodities, the rise of the banana as a popular Latin American export is directly rooted in the violent history of [U.S. economic imperialism](#) in the 19th and 20th century—a legacy that continues to intensely shape the contemporary banana market. Maybe you've heard of the infamous United Fruit Company? Or the [1953 CIA-backed coup](#) they led against the Guatemalan President, Jacobo Arbenz?

What many people might not know, however, is that this same system of violence and exploitation is still very much alive.

How is this possible? The answer lies in the character of the oligopolistic banana market that is [controlled by three main U.S. multinational corporations](#): Chiquita Brands International (previously, the United Fruit Company), Dole Food Company, and Del Monte Fresh Produce. Together, these companies continue to hold an enormous amount of power and influence at home and abroad, often resorting to extreme measures if their profits are threatened.

Here's a rundown of the human price of a banana.

How did the banana trade begin?

Bananas are relatively new to the U.S. In fact, when they were first introduced at the [1876 World Fair in Philadelphia](#), tropical fruit was considered extremely rare. Yet, it was this early demand and excitement that prompted U.S. foreign businesses to rapidly buy up arable land in the tropical regions of Central America for banana production.

One of the first businesses to do so was the Boston Fruit Company in 1885 (later, rebranding itself as the United Fruit Company), followed by several more. As U.S. companies began to trickle in, these [foreign producers rapidly monopolized](#) what once had been a market dominated by *poquiteros* or small-scale landowners. Bananas quickly became a large-scale export operation. A 1907 edition of the [Fruit Journal](#) best encapsulates this interstate set-up as an **“an occupation...with ironclad certainty for immense returns of wealth.”**

By the 1930s the Central American isthmus had become a classic export enclave, or a regional economy of extraction and dispossession dominated by the U.S. market. As a result, American fruit companies came to own an overwhelming amount of land. In fact, by 1950 the [United Fruit Company owned almost three quarters of Guatemala's arable land](#). Banana exports would remain the life-source of the region's economies for years to come without much attention towards other forms of economic development.

What are multinational corporations and how are they related to U.S. economic imperialism?

[Multinational corporations](#) are large businesses that operate in more than one country at a time, usually for a reduction in the cost of production or to access cheap labor markets. As you may have already guessed, the aforementioned fruit companies are all multinational corporations.

Within the context of Central American agricultural markets, these corporate entities have a long history of intervening in foreign state affairs. Historically, their tactics have ranged anywhere from [financing corrupt government officials](#) who—through a mutually beneficial partnership—support their enterprise, to more extreme actions such as [funding death squads](#) to assassinate labor organizers.

Perhaps, the most famous example of U.S. foreign intervention can be found in the case of the CIA-backed coup of 1954, deposing the democratically elected Guatemalan President, Jacobo Arbenz. Arbenz was famous for his implementation of [Decree 900](#), which sought to redistribute more than 1.4 million acres of unused land to 100,000 poor rural families. Part of this reform expropriated over 400,000 acres from the United Fruit Company, while compensating them with government bonds.



[Guatemalan Genocide following the 1954 Coup D'état](#)

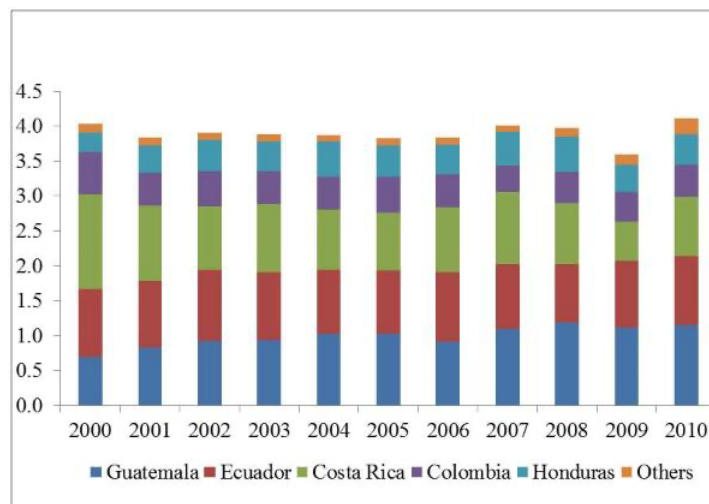
Seen as a threat to their profit, the United Fruit Company used its connections to the Truman and Eisenhower administrations to argue that Arbenz was about to turn communist. In 1954 the president authorized a [CIA-backed a coup](#) to overthrow the Arbenz government and reconsolidate the United Fruit Company's land. The American-backed regime that would follow became one of the most oppressive in the world, [killing more than 200,000 indigenous people](#) in the civil war that would follow.

This example is not an isolated case as much of the region became embroiled in their own civil wars due, in part, to the growing inequality gap between the political elite and poor that had been exacerbated by U.S. foreign enterprise.

How are these same cycles of violence and exploitation still present today?

Since the consolidation of the Central American agricultural market by U.S. multinationals, not much has changed. As a matter of fact, the [demand for bananas in the U.S. has increased](#) while production has expanded further into Latin America, now incorporating Ecuador and Colombia.

The same goes for the corporate oligopoly. Currently, three U.S. multinationals rule over the banana market—Chiquita Brands



[Major suppliers in US fresh banana import market, 2000–2010 \(million metric tons\)](#)

International, Dole Food Company, and Del Monte Fresh Produce—each one of them with their own record of human rights abuses.

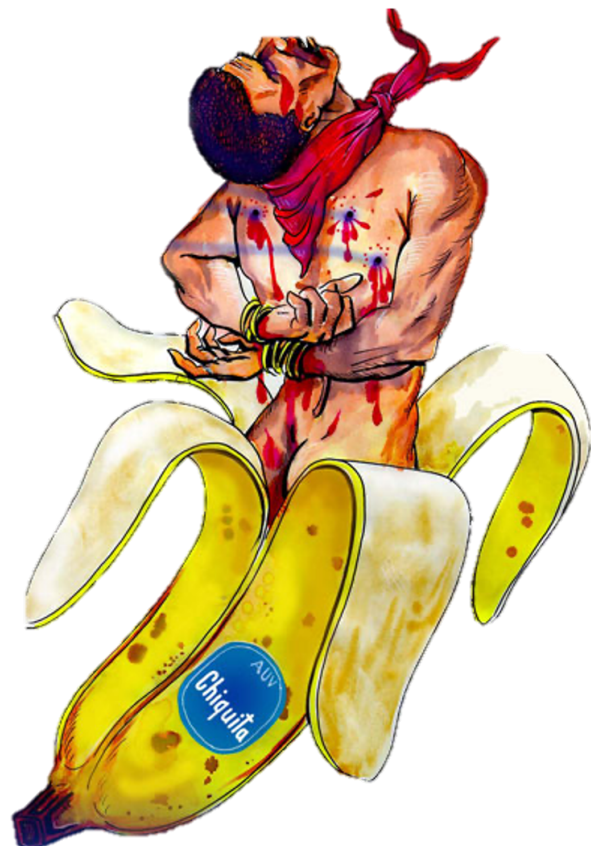
The only deviation from past patterns of exploitation is the added layer of independent plantations between multinational corporations and plantation workers. Let's put it this way: it's defensible to say that most banana plantations overseen by Del Monte provide "acceptable" wages to their employees; however, most of Del Monte's bananas actually come from [independent plantations](#), which are rife with horrid working conditions and human rights abuses. Examples include [13-hour workdays](#), [grueling labor conditions](#), [denial of overtime](#), [wage-theft](#), [exploitation of child labor](#), and [exposure to dangerous pesticides](#).

This is not to say, however, that banana plantations operating directly under multinationals aren't still exploiting their laborers. Even while making immense profits, plantation workers still receive very low wages, approximately [1-3 percent](#) of a banana's retail value for what they pick. In the poorest parts of the region, workers may use up to [80 percent](#) of their income on food.

One of the more popular tactics utilized by these specific plantations includes continuously rehiring their employees on short-term contracts to prevent them from obtaining benefits. One of the more outrageous examples of this strategy is when Del Monte and Dole [discharged thousands of employees](#) from their plantations only to rehire them with more stringent contracts, including a pay reduction of 30-40 percent.

Yet, nothing compares to the terror that is fabricated by these U.S.-based multinationals through anti-union retaliation. While multinational banana firms and state producers continue to boast of their respect for labor rights, trade unionists organizing against these entities frequently receive death threats. In some cases, these threats are directly issued by the [suppliers of the U.S. Fruit Companies](#).

Each year, dozens of union leaders are killed in Central America. Between 2004-2007 there were [87 union leaders killed](#) in Guatemala alone. In Honduras, more than [30 were killed](#) between 2009-2015. Although these murders haven't been directly traced back to U.S. multinationals, the corporations remain highly complicit in these patterns of violence.



More recently in 2007, Chiquita pleaded guilty to illegal, concealed payments to the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), a right-wing paramilitary death squad. The payments are said to have totaled at least [\\$1.6 million dollars](#) over the span of seven years. In a 1997 handwritten note—the year that the corporation began the payments—a Chiquita executive stated that these payments were the “[cost of doing business in Colombia.](#)”

This wasn't all. In addition to direct payments, the banana giant also facilitated the transfer of [3,000 AK47s and 2.5 million rounds of ammunition](#) from the Nicaraguan government stocks to the Colombian terrorist group. Clearly, not much has changed since the era of the United Fruit Company.

So, what should we do?

As you've already seen, the price of a banana comes at a steep human cost, masked by a cheap retail price and embedded in a relentless cycle of violence and terror for those who harvest the tropical fruit.

But is it enough to simply cut down on our consumption of bananas, or to stop buying them entirely? Well, it's definitely a start. Every time we purchase bananas from one of these corporations, we essentially buy into the very system that perpetuates human rights abuses—the violence, the exploitation, the threats, and the death squads.

However, this collective struggle should not be confined to consumer consciousness or the market. Instead, it should be rooted in international solidarity with the plantation workers of Latin America. What might this look like? Examples may include organizing local boycotts against the multinationals or sharing this information in the physical and virtual spaces you inhabit.

Although this crisis may seem far-off, we can also work to advocate for banana workers through intersecting points of connection. For instance, Central American are currently migrating to the U.S. Southern Border in record numbers. This is due, in part, to the instability and violence that was caused by U.S. economic imperialism throughout the latter half of the 20th century, which largely involved the multinational fruit companies. Many of those migrating are, in fact, [small farmers or agricultural workers](#). By actively working for the abolition of deportation and detention centers in the U.S. or [donating to migrant shelters](#) at the border, you can also make a significant difference from your own community.

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