

A parish priest in the Costa Rican area of Sixaola in Limon was handing out food to 600 banana workers on strike Wednesday, following reports in Prensa Latina that the situation was leaving them and their families in a 'critical' state of hunger. The workers allege Del Monte Fresh Produce (NYSE: FDP) subsidiary Bandeco has not respected a collective bargaining arrangement, but the company has affirmed that judicial authorities have declared the strike as illegal. For the unions themselves the issue revolves around what they claim to be anti-union reprisals, while the business says the strike arguments are "beyond logic".



Edgar Morales, an advisor at Costa Rica's Syndicate of Public and Private Company Workers (SITEPP), says the current banana strike is best understood with nationwide working conditions in mind, where the formation of unions is widely prohibited.

"As they are not allowed to form unions, out of the 1,200,000 workers in the country's private sector approximately 400,000 workers are not even paid the minimum wage, and so they have to work 14-17 hours a day to be able to earn just a little bit more than the minimum salary," he tells www.freshfruitportal.com.

"The conditions in reality are deplorable in this country."

While the formation of unions is discouraged in Costa Rica, SITEPP still manages to exist and the union groups of the three Del Monte farms in question fall under the syndicate's umbrella. Morales says the roots of the current protest are in a strike that took place six months ago.

"What we have definitively is the firing of 59 workers by the transnational company Del Monte - these layoffs took place after a strike on Dec.7, 2012, when more than 500 workers participated in a strike to oblige the company to negotiate a collective work agreement," he says.

"Afterwards a judge declared the strike illegal in May, and afterwards the company fired 59 workers in a selective way, including key leadership figures in the union and intermediaries. These dismissals are completely anti-union.

"Workers from the three farms of this transnational company in Sixaola have been striking for more than 17 days now, demanding that the transnational reinstates these workers to their positions."

He says around 90% of the banana workers are indigenous Guaymi people, who are

currently going hungry during the strike.

"They [Del Monte] aren't paying their salaries and in addition they have closed the stores where they can buy food with the objective of shutting down the movement," he says.

"They are mainly concerned about getting basic food elements like powdered milk for their children, beans, rice, cooking oil.

"But what we are mainly occupied with is to show that they [Bandeco] are not complying with the procedures agreed upon in the collective working arrangement. There is an established procedure but the company, in an arbitrary way, has fired workers."

Bandeco has denied closing down food stores as they do not fall under the company's control, while a spokesperson told www.freshfruitportal.com the layoffs were made on the basis of what is established in the labor legislation, as well as within the guidelines of the collective agreement.

Morales adds the solidarity strike is gaining momentum with other unions in Costa Rica, while SITEPP has sought out support from international unions such as the Common Central American Syndicate Platform, the World Federation of Trade Unions and the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas.

Website *Nacion.com* reported different groups across Costa Rican industries were planning a general strike in August to demonstrate discontent over labor rights, concessions and a lack of public action.

Bandeco's perspective

A release from Bandeco claims 52 workers were fired, rather than the 59 mentioned by SITEPP, within "strict accordance with the law and within the time allowed", after the December strike was declared illegal.

"The company explains that at all times we have followed the due process and all actions taken are within the law," the release said.

"This movement that has been occurring since June 5 does not respond to the search for economic and social demands. It is simply the reaction of a small group, attached to SITEPP union, to a legal measure authorized by the laws of the country to lay off workers that have participated in an illegal strike, as it is for the case in question.

"BANDECO representatives emphatically deny that 600 farm workers Sixaola 1, 2 and 3 are on strike. 450 of them are not part of the movement but they can not perform their normal duties in the areas of harvesting and packaging because a small group stops them."

The company also denies that it has cut water supplies, closed down eating inns or shut down stores where workers buy food.

"The taverns and commissaries belong to particular people and BANDECO does not have any interference with them.

"Meanwhile, the water tanks have stopped working only once a week because of disinfection and routine maintenance. This is a practice that must be done for liquid sanitation and in no way should be interpreted as a reprisal from the company.

"In fact, workers are opportunely informed when cleaning takes place and how, as is established in the collective agreement."

In the release, the company appealed to the small group of workers leading this movement, highlighting their arguments were "beyond logic and the law".

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