



▶ Background note: Labour relations and COVID-19

October 2020¹

Collective agreement on a Bio Security Protocol against COVID-19 in Colombia's banana plantations

▶ Industrial relations in Colombia

Colombia has ratified the [ILO Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 \(No. 87\)](#) and the [Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 \(No. 98\)](#), both in 1976. However, as noted by the ILO supervisory system, important challenges remain regarding the free association of workers in trade unions and union recognition. Trade union density and collective bargaining coverage both remain low. Collective bargaining is mostly decentralized and predominately takes place at the company level.

The employers' organization [Augura](#) (Banana Association of Colombia) represents national and transnational producers, including the international trading companies Uniban, Banacol and Proban, representing 73 percent of the total land area with bananas planted in Colombia for export. [Sintrainagro](#) is a Colombian agricultural workers' union and one of the biggest workers' organizations in the country. Sintrainagro has 22,000 members covered by a collective bargaining agreement with Augura and 13,000 members working in the sugar, flowers and palm oil sectors.

▶ Protests from workers of banana plantations amidst COVID-19

Colombia is the world's fourth-largest exporter of bananas sending 90 percent of its production to Europe and to the United States of America. Urabá, a subregion in the Colombian Department of Antioquia is home to about 70 percent of the banana production in Colombia.

On 22 March, the Government issued Decree 457 which announced a 19-day period of Compulsory Preventive Isolation across the country, beginning on 25 March. The

decree exempted several economic sectors, including agriculture. Following its entry into force, hundreds of workers from the largest banana plantations in Urabá decided to stop work and closed roads in protest over what they considered unsatisfactory health and safety conditions in which they were expected to work during the coronavirus pandemic.

▶ Collective agreement on a bio security protocol against COVID-19 reached between Sintrainagro and Augura

Following the 25 March protests Sintrainagro and Augura reached a [collective agreement on a bio security protocol against COVID-19](#). The collective agreement covers 22,000 workers in banana plantations in Urabá. The agreement aims to protect the health and incomes of workers, to prevent the spread of the disease, and to ensure continued banana production in order to supply national and international

markets. Employers agreed to pay workers who missed work and participated in the protests.

The main provisions of the agreement cover:

- Protective equipment provided to workers, physical distancing and hygiene enforced, and regular disinfection of work premises (e.g. gloves, face masks, hand washing, disinfectant, safe distancing measures).

¹ This background note was compiled in May 2020. Additional details will often be accessible through the provided sources.

- Improved work organisation and information (e.g. workers' assignment to workstations are to be posted 24 hours in advance at the various work sites).
- Improved workers transportation (e.g. individual allocation of workers to a predetermined bus/timetable, physical distancing while in the waiting line, a maximum of 20 workers per bus, disinfection of buses).
- Regular monitoring of workers' temperature.
- Staggered meal provision (two shifts for the main meals: breakfast and lunch; distance signs on the floor and tables; disinfection of the canteen before the meals; strict hygiene standards in food preparation).
- Active workers over 65 are exempted from work for the duration of the government decree on containment measures. To that effect, those workers will use their leave days during that absence. If those leave days are exhausted those workers will be allowed to anticipate the following leave period. After all such leave days have been exhausted those workers will be given a paid leave consisting of the legal minimum salary plus an 8 per cent supplement. These measures will also apply to workers with high-risk pregnancies or with pre-existing medical conditions (i.e. cancer, diabetes and obstructive pulmonary disease).

► Enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with the agreement

Joint union-management health and safety committees monitored the implementation of the bio security protocol and a phone line was set up for union members to report non-compliance. Sintrainagro officials are visiting plantations regularly and report that despite some identified irregularities being pointed out, in general, the vast majority of the

plantations followed the bio security protocol. Additionally, Sintrainagro prepared tutorial videos that cover several chapters of the bio security protocol and in which workers themselves explain how the protocol is being implemented in the banana plantations.

► Key effects of the agreement

Through this collective agreement, Sintrainagro and Augura demonstrated that it was possible to defend their members' interests whilst simultaneously reaching agreements on priority issues for each party, based on mutual trust and respect. As a result of the agreement, over 900 workers with vulnerable health status could stay at home and receive the benefits provided for in the agreement, whilst reducing exposure to risks among workers who continued working in the plantations.

The community of Urabá was also concerned with the arrival of cargo ships that would carry the produce to Europe, which was perceived as the epicentre of the COVID-19. To address those concerns, safety and health measures were agreed regarding work in the ports. These policies, which also involved local governments, and reflected international

protocols, ensured that workers would enter a vessel only after full implementation of those protection measures. Moreover, they provided that ships' crews would remain on the vessels while in port.

Employers that are members of Augura – with the cooperation of workers – were able to keep 100% of jobs since the start of the pandemic. This contributed to a more modest increase in the unemployment rate (2 per cent) in the region during the crisis, compared to 14 per cent nationally.

In addition, several enterprises who were members of Augura (including Unibán, Banacol, Tropical and Banafrut) have supported the community by donating funds that covered 56 ICU beds in Urabá and the distribution of 320,000 masks

► Access to further information

- Augura highlights that Urabá kept social and economic stability during the quarantine: <https://augura.com.co/boletin-agroclimatico-nacional-50-febrero-2019/>
- [Collective agreement on a bio security protocol.](#)
- Tutorial videos by a representative from the 'Comité obrero Finca Negritos' explaining the bio security

protocol on COVID-19 (and precautions towards the fungus *Fusarium Raza 4 Tropical, T4R*) in Banacol exploitations:

- » [1st chapter of the bio security protocol.](#)
- » [2nd chapter of the bio security protocol.](#)

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