
For Brazil's Sugar Cane Workers the Day Starts at 4:30 AM and Debts Never End

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More than 115 years after the signing of the Golden Law (1), slavery is still a reality in Brazil, especially on the sugarcane plantations.

The sugar sector is in full expansion because the programmed liberalization of international trade supports the modes of production in this country.

The big multinationals, often American and European, do not make any mistakes, and they have been investing massively in Brazil for the past few years.

However, in their failure to respect workers' rights in this sector, they are now about to put in place a modern form of slavery and to import sugar produced under appalling conditions.

The "big ones" in the sugar industry in 2003 adopted a code of conduct for social responsibility in their companies which they actually presented as exemplary. But this code, beyond its insufficiencies and the limits inherent in this kind of action, does not apply beyond the European borders.

There is therefore a strong need to demand of the companies, and in particular of Tereos, the major foreign group in Brazil, that they extend their engagements to the whole line of companies.

The Lives of the Sugar Cutters

Antonio Malaquias is 35 years old. He is a sugarcane cutter. He borrowed money to come and look for work in the area of Piracicaba (state de São Paulo), one of the modern centers of alcohol sugar in the country.

A decision which cost him dear for he is so far indebted today that it is impossible for him to go back to his wife and his 5 children, whereas what he wanted to do was to bring money back to them.

The cutters often rise at 4:30 to take a bus which takes them over to their work place where they arrive 1 ½ hours later. Once at work, the rhythm is infernal, because the number of canes that they cut will determine their wages.

In the evening, the same 1 ½ bus trip back again. Once back at their lodgings, the workers have to prepare the food that they will take along to the field the next day, which has given them the nickname of "bóias frias" (cold chow).

The cutting season, which lasts 5 to 8 months in the year, causes the displacement of thousands of Brazilians, originating in particular from the areas in the North, the Northeast and the South.

In Piracicaba, these migrants account for 80% of the population. The large majority among them do not have any Social Security cover. Most of them are illiterate and the cutters are predominantly men, from 18 to 45 years of age.

Many fall sick because of the differences in climate conditions, without counting the industrial accidents that make many victims.

The rate of suicides in this social category is well above the average. For lack of means, they are often forced to remain at the work place once the season is over, but without work.

These infernal living conditions are denounced by Brazilian organizations like the FERAESP, Federation of the Paid Rural Employees of São Paulo, which works daily to improve the situation.

Putting an End to Slave Work

In fact, many Brazilian unemployed are reduced to slavery through a system of bound work (2). Agents for the big landowners recruit them promising good wages.

But once there, they must refund their travel costs, buy their tools and rent a lodging. They are indebted before they have even begun to work.

In 1995, the government created the Secretariat of Labor Inspection, which acts in collaboration with the police force to fight against this plague.

With President Lula coming to power, the Brazilian State reinforced this fight. But progress is difficult. It is actually necessary for a worker to denounce his employer so that the facts can be proven.

Moreover, the number of federal civil servants is insufficient. So in the end, poverty forces the unemployed to silently endure the worst possible conditions.

Nevertheless there are some positive signs. Denunciations multiply and, in 2004, the federal police force liberated a large number of people in a position "of modern slavery", to use the proper term, in the town of Piracicaba.

It is in this area that the majority of the investments of European companies is concentrated.

The Multinationals Concerned

In preparation for the reform of the sugar market, European investments, particularly French ones, increased considerably in Brazil over the past few years.

This sector is undergoing great changes. With the merger-acquisition of Beghin Say by Union SDA, the new group, Tereos, became the major foreign group in the country, along with other companies like Louis Dreyfus, the German companies Sudzucker and Nordzucker, British Sugar, Swiss Glencore and Alcotra and American Cargill.

However, most of the slave work problems are related to the subcontracting of labor, which is a common practice in this sector. The multinationals that way get out of their responsibilities.

However, in 2003, the European sugar industry in a very high-profile way committed themselves to a voluntary process of social and environmental responsibility by adopting a code of conduct.

Even if this voluntary step is insufficient to guarantee social and environmental conditions that would be satisfactory in this sector (3), this code could still help the trade unions in the South to obtain improvements.

On condition however that the text is not limited to Europe which is the case at the present time! It is thus essential that the multinationals concerned, first of all Tereos which has room for maneuver and has substantial possibilities of influence, respect their own engagements for the whole line of companies starting with the sugarcane plantations.

(1) Brazil has "imported" millions of African slaves to develop the raw materials and tropical products that are of interest

to the "Colonial Mother", Portugal. After independence (1822), slavery continued for the profit of the rich landowners. The "Golden Law" which officially put an end to this was signed in 1888.

(2) Cf Call n°236 of Network-Solidarity (May 24, 2001): Brazil - so as not to finish as a slave. Between 25,000 and 30,000 workers are probably in a position of slavery in Brazil.

(3) Cf "Codes of control, Tool for social progress or an advertising ploy?", published by Interdependent People, 2004, 114 p. The reform of the sugar market of the European Union, the Common Organization of the Sugar Market (OCM-sugar) ensured stable export earnings for a small number of ACP countries (Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific).

But the export subsidies of European sugar (beets) caused a dumping on the other markets, and a fall in the prices. The equilibrium in the sugar market is changing considerably on a world level. The complete liberalization of the European market is planned for 2009.

Moreover, the complaint lodged by Brazil, Thailand and Australia with the World Trade Organization (WTO) against the European sugar policy ran out on April 28 of last year, and this will require new negotiations.

These changes were anticipated by the multinationals which invested massively in the countries of the South to profit from liberalization.

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