

## 18,000 Slave Workers Rescued in Brazil, But No One Went to Jail

Contributed by Alessandra Bastos  
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Brother Xavier Plassat, coordinator of Brazil's Land Pastoral Commission's Campaign to Combat Slave Labor, said that he considers it an advance that the Brazilian judicial system has condemned federal deputy Inocêncio Oliveira (Partido Liberal, Pernambuco state) for the degrading labor conditions in which 53 workers were found on lands he used to own.

The Maranhão Regional Labor Court imposed a fine of US\$ 241.39 thousand (530 thousand reais) on the deputy, who is first secretary of the Chamber of Deputies' leadership commission.

"It is a courageous step by the Labor Court system, following up on what inspectors caught in the act when they visited the properties," the friar told reporters in an interview.

He recalled that "there was a time when these occurrences did not even warrant legal proceedings." He pointed out, however, that even now the penalties do not correspond to what the law determines in cases of rural workers submitted to slave conditions:

"We have a hard time getting the courts to deal effectively with these violators. Nobody has ever been sent to jail for this crime, despite the fact that more than 18,000 workers have been rescued in the past ten years. Over 500 individuals responsible for abuses should have been convicted."

Deputy Oliveira issued a note, Wednesday, February 8, claiming that the sentence he received is unconstitutional, since degrading labor is "not covered in the labor laws."

For Brother Plassat, this argument "is a flimsy excuse, since the current version of Article 149 says that subjecting anyone to degrading labor conditions is considered slave labor. Degrading labor and slave labor are redundant."

The friar was referring to Article 149 of the Penal Code, which characterizes as a crime against individual freedom: "reducing someone to a status similar to that of a slave, whether it be by subjecting him to forced labor or a relentless work schedule, subjecting him to degrading labor conditions, or in any way limiting his freedom of movement in consequence of debts incurred with an employer or employer's agent."

The penalty, according to the Code, is from two to eight years in prison and a fine, in addition to the penalty for having committed acts of violence.

The Land Pastoral Commission, which coordinates the Campaign to Combat Slave Labor, is associated with the Brazilian National Bishops Conference (CNBB).

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