
Chile: The exploitation of forestry workers

The forestry sector in Chile has reached an enormous development basically thanks to the resources that the Chilean state has devoted to it and to the aggressive behaviour of the companies, which have acted with complete disregard to both people and the environment, determining the disappearance of peasant villages, the appropriation of traditional territories belonging to the Mapuche people and the deforestation of vast areas to give place to pine and eucalyptus monocultures. It can be thought that such "development" could have brought welfare to the workers employed in the sector. However, reality shows something else.

Jorge González, President of the Chilean Federation of Forestry Workers, states that only 25% to 30% of the 120,000 workers employed in the forestry sector in Chile have got permanent jobs. The situation regarding those working directly in the plantation areas shows that 75% to 80% out of them work on the basis of temporary contracts, suffering continuous job instability and exploitation. Workers in wood harvesting are employed during brief periods and are paid according to productivity standards established by the companies. This fact has got two negative consequences for the workers' interests. On the one hand, the risk of accidents increases, since workers try to cut as much wood as possible during long working days, to the detriment of security conditions. Accident rate in the sector is comparatively high and has reached 15%. Social security not always covers accident risk and official inspections are not efficient enough to ensure adequate working conditions. On the other hand, unionization of temporary workers is very difficult, because their priority is job stability and they know that companies do not see with good eyes those affiliated to the trade union, that is regarded as a potential threat.

A new item therefore needs to be added to the real social and environmental costs of the Chilean forestry model: that of the exploitation of its workers, that goes together with the enrichment of a restricted group of companies and the depletion of the country's natural resources. At the same time, the critical standpoint of unionized forestry workers indicates that a new force can be incorporated to broaden still further the citizen coalition that is confronting such depredatory model and proposing new alternatives.

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