
Oil palm plantation workers in Central America: The experience of Rel-UITA

Over the past several decades, large-scale monoculture oil palm plantations have spread throughout the tropical regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

We spoke with Giorgio Trucchi, a correspondent for the Latin American regional branch of the International Union of Food Workers (Rel-UITA, its acronym in Spanish) in Central America. Rel-UITA has been involved in numerous cases of denunciations of human rights violations and union conflicts connected to oil palm plantations.

- Rel-UITA has member unions in most of the countries of Latin America. Are there any oil palm sector unions among its affiliates in Central America?

The situation of oil palm plantation workers in the different countries of Central America is very similar: the existence of trade unions in the sector is inconceivable. We have monitored the expansion of plantations in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, where unionization is hindered by outsourcing and company pressures.

According to the testimony of people who work or have worked on oil palm plantations, it is impossible for them to organize, because the company immediately reacts by firing you, and sometimes even puts you on a blacklist which makes it difficult for you to find a job on other plantations or estates. The big landowners all have the same policies when it comes to labour, rights and business practices.

Another characteristic of these oil palm plantations is that the owners of the estates almost never appear in person. The person who deals with the workers is the contractor, who is locally based and knows the area and the people's needs very well. The contractor negotiates a specific job proposal directly with the company: the number of hectares to be planted, the amount and terms of payment (per unit of work or per day), the terms and conditions of the food provided for the workers and the percentage that the contractor will receive for each worker. Once the deal has been agreed upon, the contractor goes out to look for workers.

- What are the labour relations between the workers and contractors like?

There are basically four different forms of labour relations:

Permanent workers with contracts, for whom all social security contributions are paid. This category includes high-level management, foremen and engineers, but never the workers involved in harvesting or other work directly associated with the plantation.

Permanent workers without contracts, who do not have access to social security benefits but in some cases reach an agreement for the payment of social insurance contributions.

Temporary local workers, who live with their families in the community near the plantation, where they might have a small plot of land of their own for subsistence farming, but complement their income with seasonal work on the plantations, without a contract or any type of social security benefits.

Temporary workers who come from faraway. If a contractor needs to hire people for seasonal work, he will put out a call for applications through different types of media in other parts of the country. People who have no work in their own communities and respond to this call end up living in dismal conditions on the plantations, with no social security benefits, far from their families, and without the sustenance they used to get from their parcels of land. They are left dependent on the ups and downs of seasonal work and the conditions imposed by the contractors and engineers.

One strategy implemented with non-permanent workers is to hire them for two or three months (depending on the country) and then lay them off. They go home for a month, and are then rehired. This means that they do not need to be registered with the Ministry of Labour or insured.

More than 90% of oil palm plantation workers have no social security coverage, work on a subcontracting basis, and are also under the pressure of knowing that behind them there is a line of people waiting to take their place. As a result, it is practically impossible for these people to organize unions to demand their rights or even to push for improvements in their working conditions.

- This model of large-scale production of an exotic tree species requires the use of significant amounts of toxic agrochemicals. Has this had any impact on the health of the workers?

There is very little said about this issue. There is almost no information on it because of a lack of official records, the result of the high levels of outsourcing and precarious employment. When we speak with the workers, they all talk about the lack of hygienic and work safety measures in the application of agrochemicals, and the fact that they are not provided with the necessary protective equipment. Often the backpack sprayers they use to apply the chemical products leak onto the workers' bodies. There are cases of poisoning, but the problem is always "solved" by the contractor, who assumes the risks. For the workers who are lucky enough to be treated at public hospitals, it is very difficult for them to afford the medications or to keep up the treatment prescribed; if they do not work, they have no money. As for the workers who develop chronic illnesses or die, there are no protections whatsoever. The companies distance themselves from these situations, and take absolutely no responsibility for what happens on the plantations.

- The expansion of monoculture oil palm plantations implies changes in land use and ownership. What was on these lands before they were occupied by oil palm plantations?

In Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua alike, oil palm has replaced other monoculture crops (bananas, cotton, sugar cane) destroyed by climate phenomena or by falling world market prices, which have made them less profitable. But above all, oil palm plantations have taken over land that used to be in the hands of peasant farmers and indigenous communities.

One of the main impacts of monoculture oil palm plantations is land grabbing and concentration of land ownership in just a few hands. The big plantation company owners come in to buy land from indigenous and peasant communities. In many cases this is not so simple. The communities who have lived on the land for centuries, with their subsistence crops, their culture, do not want to sell it. Very few families decide to sell their land voluntarily. In most cases they are coerced into selling through threats or repression, or through deception, with promises that are never kept. A prime

example of this is the situation in the Bajo Aguán region of Honduras.

Faced with this situation, families react in different ways. Some refuse to sell their land and endure the threats and repression. Others sell because they have been threatened, but they keep a small parcel of land to continue growing food, because they know they need it to survive; or else they sell it all and lease a hectare or half a hectare of land for subsistence farming. Finally there are the families who sell everything, and they are the ones who suffer the most from the loss of food security and sovereignty. They go from being small farmers with a certain degree of autonomy, to being totally dependent on the oil palm plantation. This makes them much more vulnerable to being pressured, and forces them to accept all of the working conditions imposed on them.

- At first oil palm plantations were geared to supplying the pharmaceutical and food industries; in recent years, under the pretext of climate change mitigation, they have begun to be used for the production of agrofuels and as carbon sinks.

In order to promote these initiatives, both the company owners and officials from the IDB and World Bank claim that these plantations bring investment, development and employment to rural areas with high rates of poverty. Do you see this in the communities where you have been?

The international financial institutions are promoting these monoculture plantations as CDM (Clean Development Mechanism) projects in countries of the South, used to justify continued pollution in countries of the North.

The major expansion of oil palm plantations since the 1990s has been promoted primarily by the IDB and the World Bank, with direct responsibility and using this discourse of their supposed benefits. In reality, they are generating slave labour and causing food insecurity, conflict and death.

In Honduras, for example, business magnate Miguel Facussé has said that oil palm brings well-being and development to the community. When you talk to the plantation workers in the Bajo Aguán, they tell you that this is what they were promised. But the fact is that since the arrival of oil palm plantations here, the only ones who have benefited, aside from the plantation owners themselves, are the owners of the pulperías or local food stores, and families have never been saddled with so much debt as now, when almost everyone works on the palm plantations.

Some of the workers comment, "Before I didn't have as much cash money as I do now, but now I don't grow food on my parcel of land anymore." With the money they earn on the plantation, they buy a range of products in the local stores that are imposed by the market. More money and more consumption do not equal more well-being. In addition, their wages are so low – usually less than a minimum wage – that their money runs out before the end of the month, and they end up buying on credit at the local store, with the money deducted from their next month's wages.

The oil palm plantations have created jobs, but comparatively fewer jobs than other monocultures such as bananas or cotton, with the added problem of the poor conditions in which people are forced to work. The expansion of oil palm plantations has not improved the lives of the workers' families or contributed to the development of their communities.

- Do women work on the plantations?

Women are usually hired to work in the nurseries. They work under the same conditions and for the same hours, but they face pay discrimination, earning significantly less than men.

All of the changes described above (in forms of production, access to land, the rupture of social and family ties) have had greater repercussions on women, who are directly affected by them. If families no longer grow food crops on their own parcels, they have to buy food, but when there is no money or the money does not last until the end of the month, there is no food. And it is always the women who have to figure out a way to survive. Interpersonal relations within the family become strained; a man who has no work or who is overexploited at work is likely to take out his frustrations on his family, and especially on his wife.

And so women are doubly affected, by the direct impacts of work in the nurseries and by the impacts that oil palm plantations generate within the family unit, which end up affecting women especially.

- What has been the role of national governments in all of this?

In Central America they have fully backed the big landowners, with the usual discourse of how the plantations bring well-being and employment. They have passed laws on temporary and hourly work, and one of the sectors that has benefited most from these is the agricultural sector, and especially banana and oil palm plantations. Wherever there are unions, whether they are already established or just being organized, laws like these destroy them. They destroy the possibility for workers to protest or demand their rights, because workers are hired for three days, and if they behave well, they get rehired, but if they do not, someone else gets hired in their place.

- How has Rel-UITA worked on this issue and what challenges have you faced?

Rel-UITA has closely monitored the issue of monoculture plantations in Central America. What we have seen is that the most serious problems, repression, murders and violations of all kinds of rights – human rights in the broadest sense of the word – take place on oil palm and sugar cane plantations.

Through our press coverage we have given ongoing support to the workers and local communities, making local governments and the international community aware of the impacts of these monoculture plantations on people. This is how a number of concrete cases have been exposed, such as, for example, the situation in the Bajo Aguán. We formed part of the international fact-finding mission that went to the region to investigate the human rights situation. The final report, which has been submitted to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, among others, directly links the expansion of oil palm plantations with the violation of human rights.

As another example of our work, we are currently organizing and convening a public hearing and international seminar on human rights in the Bajo Aguán, in coordination with local human rights organizations and peasant organizations. We will also provide press coverage of the event.

We are fully committed to this cause, working in coordination with international organizations like FIAN and WRM, among others, while continuing in the very important work of forging and strengthening ties with peasant and human rights organizations in each one of the countries affected.

