Chile: The “modern slaves” of the “forestry boom”

The rural-urban migratory process in Chile is the result of internal conflicts in the agrarian structure and, in the case of the VIII Region – the Bio-Bio Region – it is linked to a productive restructuring which is in fact forestry restructuring.

The forestry sector is advertised in Chile as a key economic sector, representing the second largest export after copper mining. However, comparatively the territories where plantations and forest industries are installed show adverse effects rather than the benefits that could have been obtained if the land had been turned over to alternative economic activities.

In spite of the gravitation forestry activities have in the macro-economy, this has not been reflected in job generation, characterized by its cyclical nature, considerable lack of stability and precarious salary levels. While over the past 20 years employment has grown 66%, forested areas have grown by 277%. Furthermore, in some cases, the expansion of forestry activities has taken place on land previously exploited by small landowners who have been absorbed by the so-called “green mantle” (referring to the millions of trees in the monoculture tree plantations). According to estimates made by the Forestry Workers Confederation (CTF - Corporación de Trabajadores Forestales) considering all the various forestry occupations, between 1997 and 2000 the work-force decreased by 12 per cent.

Forestry activities “offer” seasonal work in association with certain stages linked to the process of growth and care of the species planted (plantation, thinning, logging, etc.) An enormous majority- probably some 75–80 per cent – of the workers employed in the Chilean forestry sector work under temporary contracts. The loggers and chain-saw operators work for brief periods and they are paid in accordance with productivity standards established by the companies themselves, involving exhausting working days. According to available information, at least 26 per cent of the workers in the forestry sector declare that they normally work for over 10 hours a day.

The drastic reduction in workers’ rights and in their negotiating capacity – which makes it possible to increase each worker’s productivity – is linked to another characteristic factor of the workforce employed in forestry: the worker’s relationship with the forestry companies is influenced by the action of contracting companies selling their services to forestry companies which hire workers for seasonal work. These companies respond to the forestry companies’ productive demands, leading to high worker turnover and seriously hindering their possibility of getting organized and defending their interests. The results are poor quality jobs and a remuneration that does not really enable the workers and their families’ to enjoy the possibility of welfare.

This is the segment where the greatest exploitation of the workforce takes place, both because the tasks themselves are carried out far from urbanized centres (demanding lengthy travel to the workplace) and because these workers have no possibility of organizing themselves into trade unions to face the frequent violation of their rights and to improve their working relationship.

In 1988, 80 per cent of the workers in the sector did not belong to any kind of union and were open to management arbitrariness, obliged to work up to 16 hours a day for minimum wages, to live in

subhuman conditions and to work with tools under minimum safety conditions: “modern slaves,” the other face of the so-called “Forestry Boom.”

It is worth looking at work-related accidents in the forestry sector, which shows the highest accident rates (the accident rate corresponds to the number of accidents occurring in one year per one hundred workers). This may well be due to the great effort demanded from the workers causing their exhaustion and with it, such high accident rates. The workers try to cut as much timber as they possibly can during long working hours to the detriment of their own safety. According to information supplied by leaders, work-related accidents cause the death of 15 workers per year.

From the above it may be deduced that the forestry sector is an excluding sector, that it does not generate development and that it is framed in the rationale of a neo-liberal model, only seeking to consolidate and perpetuate itself, and that it responds to the conscience and interests of the class that governs it.

Extracted and adapted from: “Los cambios socio-espaciales producidos por la explotación forestal en la región del Bio-Bio, particularmente en la comuna de Mulchen” (Socio-spatial changes caused by forestry exploitation in the Bio-Bio region, particularly in the Mulchen commune), by Juan Luis Muñoz L. Thesis to apply for a Graduate degree in Education, History and Geography honours. University of Concepcion. The complete report is available at: http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Chile/Tesis_Munoz.pdf