
Colombia: Oil palm plantation workers in Puerto Wilches on strike

The municipality of Puerto Wilches, located in the Central Zone defined by the Agricultural Plan for the Implementation of the Biodiesel Programme, is home to much of the agricultural activity in the department (province) of Santander. According to the Agricultural Plan, there are roughly 21,000 hectares of oil palm plantations in the municipality, representing 91.7% of the department's palm oil output.

Oil palm plantations invaded Puerto Wilches, destroying the original wetland and tropical rainforest vegetation, after large landholders succeeded in acquiring ownership of the land. As the Agricultural Plan itself recognizes, the destruction of these ecosystems "has had a direct influence on the extinction of varieties of flora and fauna and on the decrease in water resources which has modified the structure and composition of the soils."

Despite the enormous cost involved, the expansion of oil palm plantations in the region has not benefited the residents of the area in any way. According to the 2005 census, the rural region of North Santander presents low levels of socioeconomic development, reflected in an Unsatisfied Basic Needs Index rating of 45.4% – a figure that drops to 21.9% for the department of Santander as a whole when urban areas are included. (1)

In December of 2002, we reported on the abysmal working conditions on the oil palm plantations of the region, as described by a representative of the oil palm sector workers organization in the department of Santander (see WRM Bulletin N° 65).

There are approximately 5,000 oil palm sector workers in the region, yet only 610 are directly employed by the companies that own the plantations. The rest are members of so-called work cooperatives, which pay an average of less than 120 dollars a month, far below the legal minimum wage. Workers employed through cooperatives work for up to 16 hours a day, must pay for their own working tools and other equipment, and are charged stiff fines for picking unripe or overripe fruit. They are not granted even such minimum rights as pensions, health insurance or family allowances. The dramatic situation they face is reminiscent of the conditions suffered by Colombian workers when capitalism took hold in the country in the first decades of the 20th century. (2)

On 30 January, 350 workers on the Monterrey oil palm plantation in Puerto Wilches began a strike that quickly spread to the rest of the plantations in the municipality. There are now over 2,500 workers on strike against the Monterrey, Bucarelia, Brisas, Agropalma and Agrícola del Norte companies. They are demanding individual labour contracts, higher wages, and the elimination of fines based on the quality of fruit picked. They are also demanding that the companies pay for their transportation to and from the plantations, food, work clothes and tools – costs that the workers are currently obliged to cover themselves.

The oil palm industry workers and residents of Puerto Wilches are calling on the Colombian government to take responsibility for protecting the rights of the workers and ensuring that they are paid decent salaries, because "they are ultimately the ones who are generating wealth."

During a community assembly in February, the residents of Puerto Wilches resolved to call a civic strike to show their support for the oil palm workers. The strike was staged on 14 and 15 February, followed by a demonstration on 18 February. Both actions met with violent repression by public security forces, as denounced by the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) trade union federation. (3)

As the Colombian human rights organization Espacio de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de Derechos Humanos reported in a press release, "Social and trade union organizations in the region have pointed out that the expansion of oil palm plantations poses a threat to food security, because large concentrations of oil palm trees impoverish the soil and inhibit the growth of other types of vegetation. As a result, local residents pay a high price for a crop that leaves very little wealth in their municipality."

"The uprising has come at a time when the quality of life of the workers is extremely poor, due to the lack of workplace security. A worker died in 2007, apparently because of agrochemicals that are handled without proper protective gear. Working conditions are established through work cooperatives that serve as subcontractors and intermediaries for the large companies. 'Outsourcing' is a mechanism established by the state to benefit employers, since it allows them to evade their responsibility to provide employees with social security and benefits."

(<http://colombia.indymedia.org/news/2008/02/80323.php>)

CUT accuses the government of encouraging outsourcing and promoting the legalization of work cooperatives, temporary employment agencies and all other forms of precarious employment that serve to cut labour costs and deprive workers of their most basic rights. In a statement released on 21 February, CUT stressed that this hiring model "has spread across the length and breadth of our territory, sowing poverty and contributing to the worsening of the difficult social and economic conditions faced by the population." (4)

Staged in defiance of threats against trade union leaders and the use of tear gas to break up demonstrations, despite the presence of children and pregnant women, the uprising in Puerto Wilches is a milestone in the defence of the rights of oil palm sector workers.

(1) General Census 2005, Unsatisfied Basic Needs, National Statistics Department,
http://www.dane.gov.co/files/censo2005/nbi_censo2005.pdf

(2) Communiqué from the Press Office of Senator Jorge Enrique Robledo, of the Polo Democrático Alternativo, posted by Carlos A. Vicente, information officer for Latin America, GRAIN, email: carlos@grain.org

(3) "Huelga de trabajadores de CTA en Puerto Wilches", CUT website,
http://www.cut.org.co//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=955&Itemid=456

(4) Press release from the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Colombia (CUT), 21 February 2008,
http://www.abpnoticias.com/boletin_temporal/contenido/comunicados/359.html

