
Chile: What is not said about work in tree plantations

Forestry development in Chile –meaning monoculture tree plantations- is marked by a great imbalance in the distribution of the monetary wealth generated by this industry. The huge profits obtained -subsidized by the Chilean people- enable the economic groups that own these companies to generate enormous wealth, while the population does not receive in exchange any real benefits from this activity.

The economic damages produced by environmental disasters are suffered by the affected people (in Río Mataquito, Río Cruces in Valdivia, due to loss of water in planted areas, etc.). For their part, the State and the companies turn a deaf ear on the damage caused by their pine and eucalyptus plantations to the neighbouring and mainly Mapuche communities.

The conditions of forestry labour and forestry workers are hidden from public opinion and invisible to the community. These workers are unable to access the mass media that could reflect the many difficulties they face, both regarding labour and their physical and psychological health. The difference with workers from other sectors such as mining and transport is that these have the capacity to expose their problems because they generally live in urban or populated areas and the mass media disseminates their views more often as they are closer to the news. However, forestry work generally takes place in distant areas that are hard to access and usually restricted as they are private forestry property. To this is added the workers scant organizational capacity as they usually work for small contracting or sub-contracting companies.

The loss of access to natural resources affected by tree plantations, such as water -which is becoming increasingly scarce around the plantations- is causing the migration of peasants and poor Mapuche people to the cities. The new arrivals normally end up in urban poverty belts and require assistance from the different social welfare services.

Furthermore, the millions of dollars of damages to highways and bridges caused by the heavy traffic of trucks loaded with timber, fall directly on small farmers, as they are prevented by these circumstances from taking their products to consumer centres, very often losing them. The costs involved are thus not taken on by the companies but by the Chilean population which provides the money to pay for the repairs on the damaged highways.

The salaries of forestry workers are based on production or yield, measured in cubic metres. Sometimes the figures are altered, making out smaller figures. This is a mechanism used by some Forestry Service Companies to manipulate the information given by the workers regarding salaries to be paid.

No complete information is available about the total number of work-related accidents because minor accidents (falls, sprains, injuries that do not require major care) are frequent and treated outside the official system, generally at private clinics or with private doctors and are not reported. In this way they avoid increasing the rate of work-related accidents and the cost of insurance.

The labour regime keeps family heads away from their homes for 12 days, and are then given 3 days rest. This does not facilitate a healthy family life and alters the maintenance of well constituted homes.

Contact with plantations recently sprayed with pesticides, herbicides and fungicides, among others, and the companies' scant concern over regular health checks does not enable the workers to receive due information on the risks they are exposed to.

The clearest proof of the repercussions of this development model is to be found in the high poverty rates and low human development in regions mainly dedicated to forestry activities, such as the eighth region and the province of Malleco in the ninth region of Chile.

Of course the forestry model produces wealth, in abundance, but the question is what type of wealth and how much of it goes to benefit those involved in its generation (forestry workers such as chainsaw operators, strippers, loaders, foremen, operators, drivers, mechanics, etc.) and how much only goes to fatten the coffers of unscrupulous economic groups that benefit from us Chileans bearing the load of the negative costs of this industry.

There is no doubt that forestry work generates more poor people than those who come out of poverty thanks to this activity. The excuse most frequently-used by the government and the companies to promote the forestry model in the poorest regions of Chile, is that it creates jobs and therefore absorbs labour. However the facts show the contrary as, due to the forestry industry, there has been a loss of well paid, independent jobs, with workers putting in hard work, but obtaining sufficient reward, being free and not causing major impacts on the environment, such as the jobs generated by artisan fishing, tourism and farming. In exchange, poorly paid, slave-like and risky jobs have been created, while at the same time generating considerable impacts on the environment.

What type of jobs do we want? What type of employment do our leaders want? It would seem that this is of no concern to them, as long as they can keep their own jobs.

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