
[Brazil: Worked to death by Aracruz](#)

Wherever the pulp and paper industry operates, it brings with it the promise of jobs. Unfortunately, for the people living in the area that the industry takes over, these promises rarely bring work. In a recent report for World Rainforest Movement, Alacri De'Nadai, Winfridus Overbeek and Luiz Alberto Soares, record how Aracruz Celulose, the world's largest producer of bleached eucalyptus pulp, has failed to provide work for local people.

The report, titled "Promises of Jobs and Destruction of Work: The case of Aracruz Celulose in Brazil" documents that since the 1980s when 9,000 people worked for Aracruz, employment at the company has fallen steadily. Increased mechanisation had led to large numbers of layoffs. Aracruz has outsourced many of its jobs, leading to less job security and lower salaries for those workers who managed to keep their jobs. Today, Aracruz directly employs only about 2,000 workers.

In 2002, Aracruz opened a new pulp line which increased the company's pulp production from 1.2 million tons to 2 million tons a year. The US\$600 million investment created 173 new jobs. That's about US\$3.5 million per job.

The jobs that the company and its subcontractors do provide are often dangerous and have serious impacts on the health of workers. In 2003, during an Open Trial in the Commission for Human Rights of the Federal Parliament in Brasilia, an Aracruz worker called the company a "murderer". He had seen several colleagues die as a result of health problems caused by working at Aracruz.

Last year, dozens of former Aracruz workers with serious health problems formed a new movement: the Movement of Injured Workers of Aracruz Celulose. The Movement also includes the widows of former Aracruz workers. None of these people have received any sort of compensation from Aracruz for their injuries.

The Movement has documented in detail the cases of 33 former Aracruz workers. Workers suffered spinal injuries caused by carrying heavy boxes of seedlings or chemicals. In the 1980s, workers were transported in trucks with wooden boards as seats. Many workers sustained spinal injuries as the trucks drove along roads full of potholes. Accidents with chain saws were common and included loss of toes, feet and cuts on the body and face. Some workers were crushed by falling trees. Other workers suffered spinal injuries while removing eucalyptus trunks. Workers responsible for maintaining and refuelling chainsaws and machines suffered from eye irritation and a disease called leucopenia, a reduction of the number of white blood cells in the blood.

Particularly at risk were workers in Aracruz's plantations who apply pesticides and herbicides to ensure that the monoculture plantations remain just that: monocultures. Among the symptoms observed in these workers were headaches, vomiting, pain in the mouth and stomach, spongy nails and impaired vision (including the risk of blindness).

Injured workers reported few accidents and illnesses to officials at Aracruz. Aracruz's medical services refuse to accept outside doctors' reports of illnesses as genuine proof of illnesses. Aracruz

sacked all of the 33 people injured while working for the company.

Today, many of the manual jobs at Aracruz, particularly those of chainsaw operators, have been replaced by machines. But illnesses among workers handling dangerous chemicals such as pesticides and herbicides are still common.

The report "Promises of Jobs and Destruction of Work" includes an interview with a 59 year old man who used to work for Plantar, one of Aracruz's outsourced companies. He worked for fourteen months applying pesticides in 2000 and 2001. After four months of working, he fainted while he was working: "My friend pulled me into the shade, grabbed a hat, and fanned me for about ten minutes until I recovered again," he told the researchers.

"Then I worked all afternoon long. Another two or three months went by and I fainted again." He became ill, but when he complained to his supervisor rather than receiving treatment, he was fired.

Another man who had worked in Aracruz's plantations described the death of a co-worker, Junio. Junio had complained of feeling sick during the day. When the workers finished work they noticed that Junio wasn't there. They went to look for him: "When they got back he was lying down, with the pump on his back."

In 2003, two people became ill while mixing three pesticides on one of Aracruz's plantations. They were employed by Emflora, another of Aracruz's outsourced companies. After a few days of working without boots, overalls or protective clothing they started to suffer headaches, dizziness, shivering fits and stomach aches. They were diagnosed with leucopenia. One of them is suing Emflora for bodily injury.

Aracruz claims to be "improving the quality of life of its employees". In fact, by using subcontractors like Plantar and Emflora it is attempting to evade its responsibilities. The report "Promises of Jobs and Destruction of Work" concludes that "Aracruz Celulose manages to find a way around proceedings and liability, and while the workers continue to risk their health and very lives without having their rights guaranteed, the eucalyptus plantations are growing."

The report "Promises of Jobs and Destruction of Work: The case of Aracruz Celulose in Brazil" is available here: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Brazil/fase.html>

By Chris Lang, E-mail: <http://chrislang.org>