
Colombia: The hard life of oil palm plantation workers

For some time now we have been addressing the issue of oil palm plantations. But it was in our June 2001 special bulletin --entirely devoted to the subject-- and in the book "The Bitter Fruit of Oil Palm: dispossession and deforestation", that we entered more specifically into the derivations that this large-scale monoculture has on the situation of the workers.

Thus, continuing along these lines, it is now the turn of the workers from the trade union of the Empresa de Plantaciones Unipalma de los Llanos S.A., to talk. This company has oil palm plantations in the regions of the Meta and Cundinamarca llanos, in Colombia.

Oil palm was introduced into the country in 1932, but its commercial development started at the end of the fifties, reaching 130,000 hectares in 1995, basically in the north, central and eastern zones. Presently, in the framework of the Colombia Plan, the intention is to substitute the so-called illegal plantations by oil palm plantations and there are plans to introduce it all over the country, reaching 300 thousand new hectares (see WRM bulletin 47). However, for the local population the remedy may be worse than the disease and the case of Unipalma de los Llanos is an example in this respect.

In fact 12 years ago, the Unipalma de los Llanos trade union had 400 members but presently there are only 132, out of a total of 150 direct workers. This change is the result of a new modality promoted to displace direct workers. The company promotes associated worker cooperatives, a figure that can be used to sub-contract companies providing services and thus evade responsibilities and the payment of social security. There are some 300 indirect workers working for these sub-contracting companies.

The Cundinamarca plantation is an hour and a half away from the village. The company takes the workers there on Monday mornings and returns them on Friday afternoons, and during the week they stay at lodgings on the plantation.

Some of them tell how the work is done: "On Mondays you reach the plantation at 6.30 a.m. settle into the lodgings and the day starts at 7:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. with an hour for lunch. From Tuesday to Friday the day starts at 6:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. with an hour for lunch. The work is hard and risky. The palm tree has many thorns and the bunch weighing 50 kilos, at 12 metres up the palm, falls at a tremendous speed and is dangerous. To cut it an aluminium rod like an antenna is used, and it has a knife on the end called a "Malay". If you want to knock down the bunch you must first knock down the leaves on which it is resting. The leaves are enormous, they measure about six metres and, oh brother, how they weigh! This work is done by a harvester and there are many people who get hit by the leaves or by the bunch.

The thorns are a problem: "They are everywhere! You get pricked every day and it is a problem for those who are cutting. Often you are walking among the lots, you slip, fall on a leaf and prick yourself. Listen... that really hurts!"

The high level of application of agro-toxic products --the most usual one being the herbicide

Roundup-- causes much intoxication. However the trade union has managed to get them to make Colinesteraza examinations, showing the connection between the application of this poison and health problems. In these cases the company usually ends up by recommending the worker to be transferred to another sector, putting another worker in his place and thus generalising the problem.

All the workers agree that the company does not provide them with protective equipment and in the event that someone does request it, they have a numerous "reserve army" generated by the high rate of unemployment as an element of pressure.

Furthermore, the salaries they pay are very meagre as the low Malaysian production costs are used as a reference for the oil palm. This is its "comparative advantage."

One of the workers concluded: "There are companies that attempt to link the family to the work, it is like entering a slave system and total exploitation. I would tell the workers of other countries that the oil palm generates subjugation and not simple employment."