A Green Desert in the South of Latin America

Imagine an area the size of 500,000 football fields planted with a single species of tree. Is it a forest? No, it is a green desert: no people, no water, no other plants. A few years from now, this will be the landscape in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil's southernmost state, where three companies are concentrating pulp production, leading to significant social and environmental damages.

The state of Rio Grande do Sul, like Uruguay to the south and Argentina to the west, forms part of an ecosystem known as the Pampas: fertile lowlands with a unique biodiversity encompassing hundreds of birds and mammals found nowhere else on earth. The subsoil of this region contains one of the largest freshwater reserves in South America.

And it is precisely because of these characteristics that this region was chosen by the Swedish-Finnish pulp and paper company Stora Enso for its pulp production operations. Eucalyptus trees, the raw material for pulp, can be harvested seven years after planting in Brazil. In Scandinavia, a tree planted for pulp production would need at least 50 years to reach the stage when it could be harvested for manufacturing paper.

There are three companies that control tree plantation and pulp production activity in Rio Grande do Sul, although in practice, they are essentially one and the same. Besides Stora Enso, the other two companies are Aracruz Celulose and Votorantim Celulose e Papel (VCP). But Stora Enso and Aracruz are co-owners of the joint venture Veracel, and VCP is a shareholder in Aracruz, as well as a partner of Stora Enso in another joint venture, Aracel.

With the further incentive of tax breaks granted by the Brazilian government, these companies bought up thousands of hectares of land, forcing small farmers and their families out of the region. In northern Brazil, in the state of Espirito Santo, Aracruz had already driven numerous indigenous communities off their territories and stolen 10,000 hectares of land.

The purchase of land in Rio Grande do Sul is also a violation of Brazilian law, which prohibits foreign companies from buying land in border areas. For this reason, Stora Enso created a ghost company, purportedly Brazilian-owned, to purchase land on its behalf.

In the towns and cities where these companies have set up operations, they have blatantly violated the rights of workers. Men, women and teenagers harvest trees on the plantations with no protective equipment. To avoid paying social security contributions, the companies fire workers after three months, then rehire them at a lower salary.

In addition to social impacts, monoculture tree plantations for pulp production also cause serious environmental impacts. In Uruguay, where the Finnish company Botnia and the Spanish company ENCE own 360,000 hectares of land, dedicated to eucalyptus plantations, water shortages have already hit the areas where they are operating. This is only natural, since it is estimated that a eucalyptus tree consumes 20 litres of water a day. According to Science magazine (23 December 2005), eucalyptus plantations in the Argentine pampas have reduced the flow of water by 52% and

dried up 13% of the rivers.

In Rio Grande do Sul, according to researchers at the Federal University, the eucalyptus plantations will consume 20% more water than the average volume of rainfall in the state. In addition to drying out water sources and causing desertification, eucalyptus trees also increase the acidity of the soil. One can only imagine what the consequences will be for the 3,000 species of plants in the Pampas ecosystem.

Moreover, these companies do not even have to pay taxes, since 97% the pulp produced by their mills is for export. When neoliberalism was at its peak, the Brazilian government created a law that exempts exported goods from taxes.

Until 2006, these companies pursued their goals in silence, relatively ignored by society at large. But the silence was broken on 8 March of that year by a group of women from Via Campesina, who demonstrated their opposition by occupying a eucalyptus plantation in Rio Grande do Sul. The following year the women returned, and this time they occupied eucalyptus plantations in other areas as well.

In 2008, once again on 8 March – International Women's Day – the women staged another protest and denounced the illegal purchase of land by Stora Enso. The response was swift and violent.

The Stora Enso plantation the women had occupied was cordoned off by the police, which prevented journalists from entering to document the events. The 900 peasant women protestors were attacked by the police with tear gas and pepper spray. No doctors or lawyers were allowed to enter. The women were forced to remain lying on the ground with guns pointed at their heads for hours. They were only allowed to eat after being held for 12 hours.

But the story does not end there. With their first protest, these peasant women alerted the Brazilian public to the dangers posed by monoculture plantations and pulp mills. Their continued efforts have served to promote greater coordination among peasant and environmentalist movements throughout South America. Just as capital has no borders, these Brazilian women have taught us that our struggle must have no borders either.

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