
The destructive character of the bioeconomy and the struggle of the Virgílio Serrão Sacramento community for their territory in Pará state, Brazil

On June 6, 2024, judge André Luiz Filo-Creão Garcia da Fonseca from the Agrarian Court of Castanhal municipality in Pará state, Brazil, issued a possessory warrant in favor of the Brasil Bio Fuels (BBF) industrial oil palm plantation company. The decision means the immediate eviction from their territory of 38 peasant families from the Virgílio Serrão Sacramento community. In his decision, the judge warned the families that in case they do not leave voluntarily, the Pará Military Police will enforce the decision by force. So far, the families have been waiting to be notified about the judge decision.

The Virgílio Serrão Sacramento settlement was born in late 2015 when dozens of families came together in Mojú municipality in the northeast of Pará state, part of the Amazon region, to take back an area of some 700 hectares from which many of them had been expelled by loggers and ranchers in the past. The families' motivation was the threat that BBF would take over the area as part of its project to expand oil palm monoculture plantations even more in the region. Further, the families knew that the 700 hectares they re-occupied were public land, belonging to the state of Pará. And as the country's Constitution prescribes, this land should fulfill its social role, which means benefiting peasant families rather than private companies like BBF.

But this is not what happens in the state of Pará. Right after the re-occupation in 2015, the families asked the state of Pará land agency ITERPA for the regularization of the area. But for years ITERPA refused to meet the families' demands despite promising more than once to carry out an agrarian study of the area. When BBF went to court in 2019 stating that it was the rightful owner of the area, ITERPA washed its hands of the matter for good, claiming it could do no more because the case had entered the judicial sphere. In 2020, the company obtained its first favorable preliminary injunction determining that the 38 families vacate the area.

But according to the families, BBF used bad faith, since it presented the judge with improper deeds. The families defense attorneys appealed and managed to reverse the injunction. However, in mid-2023, BBF obtained another preliminary injunction in its favor. At this point the case went over to the Agrarian Solutions Committee of the Pará state Judiciary for analysis. This is a body created to mediate agrarian conflicts in Brazil. But the parties did not reach an agreement because the peasant families were sure of their legitimate right over the 700 hectares, and unwilling to give up a single centimeter of territory. Owing to the absence of an agreement, the case reverted back to the judge, who decided to grant the land to BBF in order for it to advance with its oil palm monoculture plantation project, as mentioned above.

In a statement, the Pará chapter of the Small Farmers' Movement (MPA), a member organization of Vía Campesina, an international network in defense of peasants all over the world, has said that it is "neither just nor moral to privilege a company that violates rights to the detriment of 38 families that produce food". In their fields the families plant a great variety of food crops that feed not just the

families themselves, but also benefit the regional population. In the almost 8 years since the occupation they have built their homes, creating and re-creating their ties with the territory. Since 2020 – and above all at the moment –, they have suffered with the constant threats of eviction, as reported by one of the local dwellers: “My brother is crying like a child; his whole area was ready to be sown with watermelon when we got the news. I haven’t been able to sleep for three nights.” (1)

The state government’s option for the ‘bioeconomy’ and the palm oil agribusiness

The option made by the Pará state government, led by governor Helder Barbalho, to work toward increasing the profits of a private company like BBF and others in the palm oil sector to the detriment of peasant communities, is no surprise. After all, lately the governor talks about nothing but the ‘bioeconomy’, and industrial palm oil is considered one of the strategic ‘renewable energies’ on which the state’s ‘bioeconomy’ is based.

One example of the governor’s activities meant to benefit BBF was his participation in an event in April 2023 in London, side by side with Milton Seagall, the main executive of Brasil Bio Fuels. During his speech at the event, Barbalho stressed: “I draw your attention to the importance of paying attention to this new economic activity [the bioeconomy] in our country. The bioeconomy, starting off from investments in innovation, technology and research, will permit the leveraging of new businesses. Certainly, if you look at global windows of opportunity, you will notice how much the bioeconomy is what is on the agenda, allowing the world to dialogue with business, but above all with its biodiversity. Given that Brazil is the country with the planet’s largest tropical biodiversity, we cannot miss this opportunity.” (2)

Barbalho prides himself of the fact that Pará is the first state in Brazil to have a “bioeconomy plan”. (3) He states that this Plan was “constructed by listening to traditional peoples and [their] ancestry”. But in fact, the Plan was formulated by The Nature Conservancy (TNC). Headquartered in the United States, TNC has been called “the world’s richest environmental group” by The Washington Post. For this reason, it is a lot more akin to a company than to an environmental NGO. Furthermore, TNC has strong links with the elites of international financial capital, which has representatives on its Board. (4) In fact, the Bioeconomy Plan was conceived mainly as a way of attracting new business ventures, which Barbalho also remembered to mention in his speech in London: “We have identified, based on 43 types of products [from the bioeconomy], the leveraging of US\$ 120 billion in business deals”.

Oil palm monoculture plantations are one of the main activities among these “ventures”. In a video advertised on BBF’s web page, Barbalho considers that the state of Pará has a “vocation” for industrial oil palm plantations to produce “biofuel”, that oil palm plantations is a “clean” and “low carbon” activity, and priding himself of the fact that Pará is already “Brazil’s largest producer”. (5)

The face of the ‘bioeconomy’ of oil palm monoculture plantation: destruction and violence

If this is the future that the governor intends to present to the world as he hosts the COP30 Climate Conference in Belém in 2025, he will have to drive, mile after mile, past monotonous rows of dendê palm trees with his guests, in the midst of the constant spraying of toxic agro-chemicals that kill everything except the industrial oil palm trees and contaminate water courses. They will need to transit through a model that promotes injustice and rights violations.

These monotonous rows hide life stories of communities like Virgílio Serrão Sacramento, which – differently from what industrial oil palm plantations do – seek to give life to the land, thus allowing them to live with dignity. This is the same situation faced by several indigenous and quilombola families in a nearby region, the Acará River Valley: the same aggressions related to the expansion of oil palm plantations by BBF and other companies, such as Agropalma. They also face the State's refusal to regularize their territories.

The only indigenous land officially demarcated by the Brazilian State in the Acará River Valley, namely the Turê-Mariquita Indigenous Land of the Tembê people, with its 147 hectares, is the smallest officially demarcated indigenous land in Brazil. Tired of waiting for the Brazilian State, since 2021, indigenous people and quilombolas have carried out several land re-occupations. They have organized the IRQ (Indigenous, Riverine and Quilombola) Movement fighting together for the demarcation of their territory.

Since these re-occupations began, the communities have faced violent practices from various highly armed groups, including the state police forces, corporations' security guards and private militias, and organized crime "gangs". There have been frightful increases in persecutions, death threats, humiliations and even racism on the part of segments of the regional population against the Tembê, Turiwara and quilombola communities, which stand accused of standing in the way of development. Successive denouncements and police reports filed by the communities before the appropriate agencies have had no effect. (6)

Lastly, we vehemently repudiate both judge André Luiz Filo-Creão Garcia da Fonseca's decision in the case and the complete inaction of the state government, which fails to fulfill its obligation as the defender of the rights of the people of Pará, in this case the 38 families of the Virgílio Serrão Sacramento settlement.

The settlement's story shows in all clarity that the often spoken of 'bioeconomy' is not 'sustainable' and even less 'clean'. What it does is destroy communities' territories in the same way as the industries that promote fossil fuel-based extractivism have been doing for a very long time.

WRM International Secretariat

- (1) [Denúncia: 38 famílias de agricultoras e agricultores familiares do MPA no Pará estão sendo despejadas pelo estado do Pará e BBF](#), MPA, June 2024.
- (2) [Em conferência em Londres, governador do Pará anuncia concessão de áreas florestais para crédito de carbono](#), Globo, April 2023.
- (3) [Helder Barbalho discute Zona Franca da Bioeconomia no Pará com vencedor do prêmio Nobel](#), Environment and Sustainability Department, Government of Pará, September 2023.
- (4) WRM Bulletin 266, [REDD and the Green Economy exacerbate oppression and deforestation in Pará](#), Brazil, July 2023.
- (5) <https://www.grupobbf.com.br/noticias/estados-da-regiao-norte-apostam-em-energias-renovaveis-para-atender-a-populacao/>
- (6) WRM Bulletin 269, [The struggle for land in the Brazilian Amazon region against palm oil and mining corporations](#), February 2024.

