

SUGAR CANE AND THE HUNGER PROBLEM

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Introduction: The history of sugar cane

The sugar cane crop arrived in Colombia around 1760, and it was primarily used to feed the African and indigenous slaves working in the mines. As sowing and manufacturing methods advanced, sugar cane production became an industry which required cheap and abundant labour. In 1900 the first sugar refinery opened in Manuelita Palmira, in the Cauca Valley in Colombia. It was a modern structure belonging to the North American-descended Eder family, whose father was Consul in the region before the founding of the refinery.

From the 1950s through to the present, the sugar cane industry has employed workers from the Chocó, Cauca and Nariño regions to perform the manual labour required in sugar cane production. The workers are drawn to the industry by the guarantee of continual work, decent pay and of free transportation to and from the fields; they are attracted to the ethanol production industry for similar reasons. The workers also set up mono-crop farming in rich soils to produce rice, cotton, millo (similar to maize), soya and fruit.

Unfortunately, this resilient source of employment is being wiped out by technological advances in the area of sugar cutting. One machine replaces 120 to 150 workers, and there are now 63 cutting machines available for use in the sugar refineries. Threats of labour cutbacks are being heard throughout the industry with between 62 and 80 per cent (7,500 and 9,500) of the 12,000 cutters currently working vulnerable to mechanised cutting and unemployment. Taking into consideration the probability that each worker is earning for an average family of four persons, this adds up to between 30,000 and 36,000 people affected in the region.

Labour conditions

It is important to remember that current salaries amount to \$700 United States dollars (USD) per month, from which social security benefits and

others are taken. In reality, these wages barely reach the basic legal minimum wage, which is currently \$497 USD. However, despite working 10 and 12 hour days, the Cooperative Company of Associated Work does not recognise sugar cane cutters as employees due to their unstable and impoverished working conditions.

The region where the cutters live is populated by Chocoanos, Nariños, Caucanos and Vallecaucanos people, and they depend to a large extent on the agro-industrial business of sugar cane. Currently, the majority of workers live in inadequate conditions, and the boost in ethanol production is worrisome as it will result in even more unemployment.

Many agriculturally-based Colombian workers, particularly sugar cane cutters, are presently living in very worrying conditions involving: state abandonment; lack of education and health care, poor living conditions and recreation; low salaries; and unattainable former public services that have been privatised. This means that living costs are steadily increasing, work hours are long and education is unattainable for adults and our children; young people are denied access to university because the cost per semester is exorbitantly high and sugar cane salaries are not sufficient to cover the payments. Health care services have been largely privatised and the entities that offer these services are interested more in increasing their profits than in serving the public community.

The same phenomenon occurs with pension and disability funds. At present, there are many agricultural workers unfit to work, with spinal injuries and other physical impairments and the companies, insurance entities, and the government all fail to respond with pensions or payments to allow them to survive. Some have been reduced to begging, after having spent their lives working for the development of the industry and the wider economy of the country. This all contributes to a continually unstable labour system.

I live and work in the valley of Cauca, where 80 per cent of the cultivable land is planted with sugar cane. The owners of these sugar cane farms are currently initiating a project which will mechanize the cutting of sugar cane, replacing the more than 12,000 local workers with machines. There is no plan by either the sugar industry or the government to offset this 'delabourization', which will bring not only unemployment but social

catastrophe for those who depend on the industry directly and indirectly. This plan will be disastrous for the region, socially and economically. Practically all of the labour force will be redirected to the ethanol and biodiesel industries, whose purpose is to fuel the machines and vehicles that are replacing workers in agricultural industries across the country. The quality of life is no longer a priority for the industry or the government, nor are basic human rights respected; our lives are dominated by the needs and demands of business and profit. Additionally, the biodiesel business is replacing those crops which are basic food staples with crops that produce agrocombustibles (fuel), creating an even more severe food shortage. There are no labour guarantees in Colombia for the people who work in these agricultural sectors industries.

Conclusion

There was an attempt to address this problem at a national level in 2008 with the owners of the sugar refineries and the government, but the workers were not heard. At eight sugar refineries in the region, there was a strike which lasted 87 days without resolution, due to political unwillingness by the government and the owners of the industry to reach a settlement with workers. There was a military strike and no labour deal was negotiated. During this strike, 33 workers were wounded by riot police and there were six imprisoned, charged with crimes they did not commit. These events reflect the lack of guarantees and the absence of democracy for our population.

This account is offered as a personal, detailed experience which can hopefully be useful in educating people outside the sugar cane industry and outside of Colombia about poor labour conditions and the difficulty of exploited workers in being recognized and protected by their government. This can open up discussion on how this system needs to change to better respect the rights of workers at all levels of industry, and how people around the world can help advocate for them, either by encouraging local ethical consumption or through educating on how labour policies vary in different countries. It is important to engage with these issues both looking at wider development themes and looking at specific personal accounts such as this.

http://www.redcolombia.org/oscar/vallecauca/NegozioCanna_Sinaltrainal_es.pdf

Juan Cambindo is Director of the Sugar Cane Workers Union in Colombia. For more information please see: http://www.redcolombia.org/oscar/vallecauca/NegozioCanna_Sinaltrainal_es.pdf.