Farmwork in Central America: back to the bad old days

Time seems to have stood still in the plantations of Central America where trade unions are suppressed and near-slavery working conditions still offered by Chiquita, Dole and their suppliers. Workers are exposed to pesticide and afflicted by a mystery illness that damages their kidneys. The gruelling work conditions may be to blame.

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Chichigalpa counts its dead. Two thirds of men in Nicaragua's sugar cane capital have kidney diseases. Image © Giovanni Gallo
Agriculture is still the biggest employer in Central America, providing jobs for between 25 and 27% of the workforce. But quantity does not mean quality, and farmwork here is about exploitation of workers and does nothing to develop rural communities. To the contrary, it is behind many problems, especially in the main crops: sugar cane, banana and palm nuts. All three products are controlled by local large landowners and multinationals in the business of agricultural exports. The latter's aims to increase areas under crop, boost productivity and maximize profits have given rise to labour disputes and serious environmental and human health problems.

Land grabs still happen where whole communities are kicked off their farmsteads. In the Bajo Aguán region of Honduras, powerful groups backed by President Porfirio Lobo have a free hand to expand industrial monoculture of oil palms used especially in the production of biofuels. Guaranteed total impunity allows them to strongarm thousands of peasant farmers off their land. This is in a country where half of the rural population lives on less than a dollar a day and 300,000 peasant families have no access to land.

Giorgio Trucchi, a staff journalist with the International Union of Food Workers, says that 57 people who refused to leave their farmsteads have been murdered by hired killers or state law enforcement agencies over the last three years. "Not one person has been put on trial for these crimes, whereas over 3,000 farmers have been prosecuted for land theft and hundreds of families have been forced from their homes. Meanwhile, we are seeing unprecedented militarization and control of the area by what amounts to an army of private security guards in the pay of big landowners", claims the Italian journalist.

The banana companies are alleged to be behind these brutalities, perpetuating the history of Central America littered with a century of land-related conflicts. A report by the Coordinating Body of Latin American Banana Plantation Workers' Unions (COLSIBA) catalogues a 10-year list of many reported cases of persecution and harassment of trade unionists, as well as discrimination and sexual harassment against women on some Chiquita-owned farms and those of some national farmers who sell their produce to it. Negotiations with unions have been deliberately impeded in order to usher in insecurity, deregulation and casualised working conditions, and force wages down.

Workers and trade unionists have been come down on heavily. Permanent workers have been sacked and replaced by seasonal or outside labour. These policies have taken a heavy toll, with eight unions having gone and more than 10,000 people sacked over the past ten years. Similar abuses and complaints have also been reported on farms linked to Dole Fruit and Del Monte.

COLSIBA representative Iris Munguía argues that unionised workplaces are better off, hence the all-out union-busting effort by the multinationals and big landowners. This aggressive union-bashing strategy aims to cow union members by blacklisting them, filing private prosecutions, forcing down their working conditions, etc. This campaign of harassment is backed up by the development of "mutual self-interest organizations" or "company unions" to fill the void left by the savaging of traditional unions.

COLSIBA is also concerned with other farm enterprises in Central America, where things are worse still, and even child labour is used. "There are no unions on oil palm and coffee plantations or melon farms, which makes for depressing work conditions and environments. Ditto the pineapple sector, despite tentative efforts to organize workers in Costa Rica, and melon-growing in Honduras. Some unions in sugar cane production have very low membership rates because 95% of farm workers are outsourced, which makes organizing them harder", laments Iris Munguía.

Living in shacks

In the 1970s, thousands of banana workers in Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala were exposed to the pesticide DBCP, commonly used in plantations linked with Chiquita, Del Monte and Dole. Today, thousands of former workers suffer infertility to varying degrees. They have said they did not know that the chemical was toxic, were
not told about its toxicity or given protective equipment. They worked barefoot and in ordinary clothes for poverty pay, living in huts on the banana plantations with no sanitation, and using water from wells likely to have been contaminated by pesticides.

Little seems to have changed in this regard today. A study by the Central American Institute for Studies on Toxic Substances of workers are labouring in the fields and in disregard of local communities. It is even more dangerous where basic precautions like information, training and the use of protective equipment are ignored.

Other risk factors stem from the extreme insecurity of agricultural work in the region where human factors, weather conditions, the risk of injury from work tools and equipment and hygiene standards in some jobs are widely disregarded.

Instead of improving working conditions, some producers pare spending on work health to the bone and harass those who demand it. Unions have reported threats to sack workers certified as medically unfit to work and workers who claimed medical care branded as malingerers. Some employers are reportedly not paying their social security contributions while deducting contributions from workers’ wages. Outsourcing of clinics and medical services to private firms has meant that medicines are now in short supply on some farms.

A 2005 study in a number of Costa Rican banana plantations found “some 1 in 100 workers are labouring in the fields and in disregard of local communities. It is even more dangerous where basic precautions like information, training and the use of protective equipment are ignored.”

Aerial spraying of plantations goes on while workers are labouring in the fields and in disregard of the local community.

3 000 deaths in sugar cane plantations

Casual labour and outsourcing have become commonplace practices the immediate consequences of which are insecurity and a poverty risk. They also allow employers to abdicate various work and health responsibilities. Furthermore, many of these jobs are paid not by a fixed wage, but as piece work. A combination of very low pay and a very poor workforce means that sugar cane harvesters have to work at a fast pace even in harsh weather conditions.

These sugar cane plantation working conditions may well be behind one of the worst tragedies to affect Central America’s workers in recent years – the deaths of over 3 000 people from chronic kidney disease (CKD). Figures from the Nicaraguan association of CKD victims are even more alarming – 3 600 deaths in that country alone. Reported cases stretch across a swathe of 1 000 km spanning the Pacific coast from southern Mexico to Panama, although Nicaragua, El Salvador and less so Costa Rica, are the worst affected countries.

The aetiology of this variant of CKD, already considered of epidemic proportions, is unknown. Although found among other types of farm and occupation, and even the unemployed, it is mainly prevalent among sugar cane plantation workers. Some groups and experts suggest it may be linked to exposure to agrochemicals. Research is now moving in another direction, however, albeit a role for these chemicals is not ruled out.

Thinking at the present time suggests that CKD may be linked to a combination of working conditions, heat and dehydration. So suggest Boston University epidemiologist Daniel Brooks and reports such as those written by the SALTRA Programme on Work and Health in Central America.

This high frequency of CKD could be caused by severe dehydration affecting the kidneys produced by the conflation of two factors. One is the high temperatures reached in some sugar cane plantations. A study by the SALTRA programme in Costa Rica found that these temperatures can range from 32°C and 36°C, topping 40°C in some areas. This is not only due to the heat or the stifling humidity of the region, but also the fact that the cane has to be burned before being cut, forcing farmworkers to toil alongside still glowing ashes.

States and Europe. Some have amassed huge fortunes but cannot give their workers a decent life, while the political class stands silently by, doing nothing to tackle this serious problem.

COLSIBA reported that the same conditions are being found in some farms overseen by private organizations like the Rainforest Alliance, which specializes in certifying fair working conditions to international standards and corporate social responsibility requirements. But this activity in fact conceals a propaganda exercise designed to artificially improve corporate images so that consumers in the North will believe that they are working for progress and the well-being of communities in the South.

The divide between an entrepreneurial class seeking to maximize profitability, and an impoverished and downtrodden working class is widening. A United Nations Development Programme study done in Costa Rica concluded that the banana-growing regions were the country’s poorest and least developed. This contrasts sharply with the cosseted comfort in which local aristocrats and fruit company shareholders live. Clearly, in the century or so since the United Fruit Company arrived in the region, the situation is as parlous as before. Today, history is stuck on repeat.