
Brazil: Eucalyptus and the growing precarity of work in Mato Grosso do Sul

Nothing likes eucalyptus. If you let cattle loose among the eucalyptus, they start grazing around the outside, which is supposed to be a reserve. The cattle don't like it, neither do the birds, or the wasps. The hardest thing about a place like that is the wasps, but not even the wasps like to be where the eucalyptus is. (Video interview with Manuelzão, a character from the novel "Corpo de Bailes" by João Guimarães Rosa)

I will begin by highlighting the relationship between two factors that are intrinsically connected, although this is not always apparent: the expansion of eucalyptus plantations and temporary migration, the clearest symbol of precarious work. This is a situation which in itself exposes the reality of the eucalyptus-pulp equation, integrated into the discourse of development and progress, given the fact that support for this economic activity is sought by publicizing its potential for creating employment, although the nature of the jobs created is never revealed.

This is a fundamental question in the case of Três Lagoas, in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, a city that was recently proclaimed the “pulp capital” of Brazil due to the presence of pulp mills owned by such giants in the sector as IP, Fibria and Eldorado Brasil. In Três Lagoas, the dance of the numbers of jobs created is choreographed in such a way as to create a direct link between eucalyptus and employment in the minds of the public. As a result, the local press insistently reports certain figures from the general employment registry of the Ministry of Labour, such as the fact that 24,708 workers were hired in the local economy in 2011. However, that same year, the number of workers laid off was 22,818. Although the balance is positive, this should not and cannot be the main interpretation of the situation.

It is essential to point out, within these figures, a characteristic of the eucalyptus-pulp sector that is closely related to the instability of employment, because in the vast majority of cases, these are temporary jobs. In addition, the pulp mills operating in Três Lagoas are exempt from paying major taxes such as the ICMS and IPTU, as well as another tax, the ISS, while these plants are under construction. Added to this are the enormous amounts of financing granted by the federal government through the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDS). The most recent payout was 2.7 billion reais (1.5 billion U.S. dollars) granted to Eldorado Brasil – most of which is money from the public treasury, drawn from the Fundo de Amparo ao Trabalhador, or workers support fund.

Who are the migrant workers temporarily employed in construction in Três Lagoas? Let's look at the recent case of the construction of the “biggest pulp mill in the world”, which is scheduled to be ready to enter into operation in 2014 and is owned by Eldorado Brasil. There are around 7,000 men working on its construction. The majority of them are from Northeastern Brazil, uprooted from their homes and in a highly vulnerable situation. As temporary migrants, they belong neither here nor there. They are viewed with distrust by much of the local population, and because of the low wages they are paid, these workers end up living in “accommodations” that in many cases could only be described as ghettos.

On four occasions in the past year, these workers have broken the silence with strikes and demonstrations, denouncing to the entire Brazilian public that they are currently the main victims of the social contradiction created by the eucalyptus-pulp model. What are they demanding? Rights, such as the payment of overdue salaries and overtime; better working and living conditions; more days off; and better transportation, not only to and from the construction site, but also into the city, since some of their lodgings are in the outskirts of the municipality. Despite the strikes, however, it has been observed that the situation has changed very little, and according to the workers, this can be explained by the fact that the agreements signed have gone unfulfilled. It should be stressed here that when we talk about work conditions, we should not limit ourselves to the construction of the pulp mills, but also consider work on the plantations where the eucalyptus trees are grown, which involves, for example, the application of toxic agrochemicals. Plantation workers begin their work day at four in the morning, and earn roughly a minimum wage. Another issue that is seldom discussed is the paradox underlying the expansion of eucalyptus plantations. It may be true, on the one hand, that they provide (precarious) jobs. But on the other hand, they also create unemployment, due to the leasing of ranching estates for the establishment of eucalyptus plantations, which leads to the destruction of pasture land and thus the loss of jobs for workers in the livestock sector. As a result of this process, dozens of families have emigrated from the countryside to the city of Três Lagoas in recent years, leading to the stagnation of local communities.

This precarization of work is intrinsic to the pulp-plantation sector. This most recent case is by no means an isolated one. When Fibria's Horizonte pulp mill was under construction, during 2007 and 2008, the city of Três Lagoas lived through a similar experience. There are records which reveal that in order to lower the costs of providing accommodation for the workers on this construction project, the companies that hired them overcrowded residences and hotels with "beds that never got cold", with no concern for the poor hygienic conditions in which the workers were forced to live, among other situations of precarity and violence. The situation was eventually denounced to the Public Ministry of Labour, which established a commission to investigate. It was determined at the time that there were over 120 places of lodging in the city (both residential homes and hotels) being used by approximately 250 companies subcontracted by Fibria for the construction of the mill. Inspections undertaken by the ministry also uncovered numerous irregularities, which even led to the interdiction of five locations used by the subcontractors to house workers.

Very frequently, as well, when strikes break out or the mistreatment of workers and violations of labour legislation are denounced, the companies attempt to escape scrutiny by the media, passing the blame for the situation onto the subcontractors or sub-subcontractors, as if they were not responsible for the construction project.

Because they know that periods of turbulence and coverage of labour conflicts tend to dwindle as the construction work moves closer to completion, these companies are careful to ensure that work stoppages do not cause the work to fall behind schedule. To achieve this, hundreds of new workers are hired to replace the ones who fight back against their exploitation.

And what about the work situation in the eucalyptus-pulp sector when the construction is completed and the pulp mills are in operation? In theory, there are no work stoppages, demonstrations or strikes, because living labour is scarce. Instead, there is a sophisticated degree of mechanization (dead labour), which can account for as much of 85% of the work involved in planting and harvesting the eucalyptus trees – as promoters of the model boast.

In Brazil, migration driven by the irregular rhythm of public and private mega projects is nothing new; on the contrary, it is viewed as cause for celebration and a symbol of progress. Nor is there anything

new about the strategy of portraying this phenomenon as something natural, downplaying the conditions and social effects of this temporary relocation of individuals moved by capital, through which they are desocialized without being resocialized.

Nevertheless, history is not a mere repetition of events, which is why we see the migrant workers of today using the weapons of their time, such as mobile phones, social networks and newspapers, to denounce their exploitation and demand the rights they are denied in the land of eucalyptus.

Imagine, you work eight hours a day. You go back to the place you're staying to have a shower, you're ready to get in the shower, but, where's the water. And somebody might think, "Wow, this guy is a real slob, he stinks, he doesn't shower." The next day you put on your uniform, you go to work, you come back, and there's no water. So what are you going to do? You're going to protest, because we are human beings. (Worker at the construction site of the Eldorado Brasil pulp mill, interviewed on Dec. 14, 2011 by Guilherme Marini Perpetua and Tayrone Roger Antunes de Asevedo)

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