
Colombia: Anti-trade union policy in oil palm plantations

The more that is planted, the more rights that are lost. In Colombia, there are approximately 170,000 hectares of oil palm plantations. Testimonies by a delegate of the palm sector workers' organisation, connected to the Bucarelia and Las Brisas Palm Oil companies, denounce the poor working conditions in the oil palm plantations in the department of Santander, in addition to pressure and incentives to weaken the trade unions in the sector. Oleaginosas Bucarelia has 4,700 hectares and the other company some 2,800, all located at Puerto Wilches, Santander.

According to the words of this worker: "The companies' strategy to weaken and eliminate the trade unions is based on voluntary retirement plans, paying compensation higher than the compensation granted by law. Many companions have left the companies and the trade union too, but return to work in the sector under conditions imposed by the companies through cooperatives. The companies' policy aims at reducing conventional conquests reached over 20 or 30 years of struggles. Some of the company authorities have commented that the companies in which the workers are organised as unions are less competitive and furthermore, the workers are reluctant to accept the working conditions these companies want to impose --conditions attacking the workers health and dignity.

Finally, what they are suggesting is that trade union organisations should disappear. Another modality promoted by the companies is that the peasants become holders of palm plots, thus saving labour costs. In this way, these peasants must sell the raw material to the companies at the price they impose. People earn less and do not have any social security coverage.

By avoiding worker organization, the companies also avoid complaints over low salaries, and over one of the greatest problems facing the workers: the abominable working conditions. "For example, as the palm grows older it also grows taller and therefore the conditions for harvesting the bunches and pruning the trees make accidents likely to occur. The workers carrying out the harvest complain about pains in their spine and accidents are common when they are hit by the leaves that have many thorns on them. Moreover, the plantations are sprayed to control pests and diseases and the impacts on the environment and on health caused by these products are unknown."

All the above, and in particular the companies' policy to try to weaken the trade unions by means of workers employed through cooperatives and individual contracts, have led SINTRAINAGRO, the largest agricultural workers' union in the country, to establish the need to unify the unions in that sector, in order to preserve the conquests achieved so far and to seek the unionisation in those companies that do not yet have a trade union. Thanks to workers' organisation in Bucarelia and Las Brisas, some collective agreements have been signed and the workers in some of the cooperatives are now demanding better labour conditions.

It should be noted that in this article we are only referring to the social impacts of oil palm cultivation, but to these should be added the serious environmental impacts of the large-scale monoculture model, repeated in all the regions and countries where they are installed, and among them, the impacts on biodiversity, soil and water should be mentioned.

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