
Brazil– mining company VALE promoting oil palm in Pará: Impacts of the "green economy"

In the 19th century, the region around Belém, capital of the Amazon State of Pará, Brazil, witnessed the so-called "Cabanagem", one of the largest popular uprisings in the history of Brazil, where indigenous peoples, afrodescendant populations and sectors from the middle of society organized to fight for freedom and justice. These uprisings are little known because they were made invisible by the ruling classes in their "official" version of history. Today, there is no imperial power in Brazil but there are new threats trying to force rural workers into a logic of oppression, by restricting their freedom and autonomy, and aiming to take control of their territories. One example is oil palm monoculture expansion.

Around 2006, a process of expansion of oil palm monocultures began in Pará, reaching as far as the municipalities of Acará and São Domingos do Capim, about 100-150 km away from Belém, the state's capital. Companies like VALE and the oil company Petrobras appropriated land in the region and oil palm plantations' arrival expelled many families from their territories. Until today families still resist along the roads, while others are already trying to survive in the cities. According to local residents, the process also caused deforestation.

The upheaval experienced by rural workers was denounced by trade unions and prompted government intervention, which made companies change their tactics: they tried to convince peasants to begin planting oil palm on their lands - the government even opened a specific credit line to provide loans to peasants. A farmer from the Taperuçu settlement said that for 3-4 years now he has a contract with Biovale (a VALE company). Last year he picked the first palm fruits, and earned approximately R\$1,000 (US\$ 268) per month. This year he expects to double his crop. However, this peasant still has not begun to repay the government loan, and does not know how to cope with the situation from 2017 onwards, when the company Biovale will no longer be responsible for transporting the fruit to the processing factory, a stretch of more than 100 km. On top of that, on the land of the settlement, apart from oil palm, there is a tree plantation to sell timber. He is no longer planting cassava; the most consumed staple food in the region, the price of which has increased significantly since the cultivation of palm trees began to expand.

The same peasant told us that he had to use agrottoxins – as stated in the contract with the company Biovale - but he had to stop because he started to feel ill. Still unwell and shaky, he continues to suffer from the consequences of applying a poisonous product. In a region with high temperatures and humidity, the use of individual protective equipment is extremely difficult; which in any case is not a safe protection either. Another hazard of working in plantations is the existence of many poisonous snakes. We heard stories claiming that the company could have released snakes, and asked for them not to be killed, so as to control the rodent presence, which was allegedly jeopardizing production. It seems the company is not concerned about workers' health, since snakes represent another hazard.

The problem with agrottoxins is also very serious as local residents told stories about having seen

dead fish in the region's rivers. They attribute this to the arrival of oil palm and the contamination resulting from application of agrottoxins. The renowned Public Health Institute Evandro Chagas of Belém confirmed those accusations with the detection of agrottoxins in water sources which the people in the region depend upon. One of the products used is, for example, endosulfan, a highly dangerous product for human health and already banned in several countries. Based on this analysis, the Public Ministry of Pará is trying to agree on a code of conduct with companies to attempt to reduce the contamination.

With Biovale's oil palm plantation, the region entered the "green economy" path. The doubling of railway tracks used to transport VALE's iron ore from the largest mine in the world - the Carajás complex - to the Brazilian coast, will increase the demand for biodiesel from palm oil further. But the project serves mainly as "green" propaganda for VALE, since 80% of its demand for diesel is obtained from oil. With the planned expansion of the railways and the iron ore production, the company will also increase its oil consumption and, therefore, increase its carbon emissions (see information on the impacts of VALE and the resistance in the [article from our Bulletin of June 2015](#)). This is an example of how the "green economy" rather than being a recipe for emission reductions, is a way to create a "smokescreen" that allows companies to further increase their production and burn fossil fuels. Instead of leaving oil and other fossil fuels underground, the "green economy" is a way to perpetuate its use for longer, until the last drop of oil runs out.

Since the arrival of oil palm plantations in the region, the State has enhanced road conditions to meet the companies' demands. Some works from the IIRSA plan (Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America) are also planned for this region, thus facilitating the entry of new companies. All of this resulted in an increase of land prices in the region and, in consequence, a process of land speculation and overvaluation. Worse still, several quilombola communities in the region, like the Concordia community, which are waiting for the recognition of their constitutional right to land titles and the collective recognition of their territories, reported that this fight has become even more difficult now. Collective titles are very important for these communities to access public policies, but above all, to guarantee a future - including access to land - for future generations. But at the same time, the State does not cease to encourage individual land titles because that fits well with the proposal of companies for peasants to plant oil palm on their land under individual contract with each producers.

While visiting quilombola communities in the region which are already surrounded by palm oil plantations, the inhabitants told us that they also suffer from other impacts such as wild animals taking refuge in their areas, fleeing from monoculture areas where there is no food to find. And insect infestations originating from the plantations that affect peasants' lands for example. People talked about a general environmental degradation and even the re-emergence of illnesses once thought to have been eradicated such as the Chagas disease. They also mentioned that it is mainly men who find work with the companies, but working conditions are often akin to "-slavery", since workers need to carry out very hard labour for a monthly minimum wage (R\$ 788 or US\$ 211). Finally, it is important to highlight the problem related to drug consumption of the workers responsible to plant the oil palm seedlings. The issue has been raised in some interviews and published articles, but it deserves to be further investigated.

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*** This article is based on a two-day visit to the cities of Acará and São Domingos do Capim, organized by FASE-Amazônia, an activity that was part of the Latin American Conference on the*

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