

World Food Day 16 October 2003

The ILO and decent work in agriculture

They feed the world, but their children go hungry

Today, the number of people working in agriculture is put at more than 1.3 billion. They make up half of the world's active population. They feed the world, but what is their fate? Unenviable, according to a whole series of first-hand accounts at the symposium on decent work in agriculture, held recently under the auspices of the International Labour Organization in Geneva.

"If she hasn't finished her work quota, she'll have to carry on the next day, and that's when she'll get her 'day's' wage, because she's paid by the job. If everything goes well, she will earn the equivalent of 35 US dollars (32 Euro) in a month. The overseers are all men and wage blackmail is part of the arsenal of sexual harassment. In the tea plantations, most of the children living with their mothers don't know their biological fathers. Ironically, the employers are reluctant from the outset to recruit women who have family responsibilities, and pregnancy tests are common practice before hiring."

Accounts like this one from Phillipina Masha, a trade unionist in the tea plantations of Tanzania, featured strongly in the four-day colloquium on decent work in agriculture held in Geneva last month by the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities. Masha's Zimbabwean colleague, Gertrude Hambira, described the tense situation in her country, where the agricultural workers' unions are right in the firing line. "The so-called agrarian reform promoted by the government has led to a state of war on the farms, where the new owners have installed a reign of terror. The agricultural sector used to employ half of the active population, but most of the labourers have been fired and have had to leave the places where they lived. Those who oppose this 'revolution' are regarded as enemies. They are hunted like animals..."

600 trade unionists murdered

In Colombia, the agricultural workers' union (SINTRAINAGRO) has lost 600 of its members since 1980. All murdered. Five days before setting off to testify in Geneva, Guillermo Rivero Zapata was informed by the authorities that the protective measures laid on for him had been withdrawn. "They are depriving me of protection to make me stop organizing workers," Rivero told the ILO meeting. But he is more determined than ever to press on with his fight. It is a never-ending struggle. In Colombia, as in many other developing countries, the number of impoverished people in the rural sector has soared in recent years. Between 1994 and 2000, the proportion of the agricultural labour force living in poverty rose from 65 to 80 per cent. In the course of five years, wages went down by 15 per cent. Elsewhere in Latin America, a delegate reported, there is hard evidence that women are given injections to make them sterile throughout the harvest. To complete this world overview, delegates from Asia and Europe gave equally disturbing accounts.

Women targeted

For instance, according to a report distributed at the symposium, the extent of child labour and discrimination against women (who now make up half of the labour force there) are major concerns in Asia's agricultural sector. The proportion of the active population engaged in the sector ranges from 80 per cent in Bangladesh to 14 per cent in Malaysia. Significantly, everywhere the slice of national income generated by agriculture is smaller than the proportion of the labour force engaged in it. The effects of weak incomes are reinforced by highly unjust distribution systems, explained A. Navamukundam, National Secretary of the Malaysian plantation workers' union. "Distortions" in the agricultural market were meat and drink to the negotiators and journalists in Cancún (Mexico) where, just a few days before the ILO symposium, hopes of a new multilateral agreement for the sector were buried. But the selfsame distortions were cited in Geneva by those speaking for the men and women who toil on the land.

After Cancún

Disappointed by the failure of Cancún, the symposium participants called for a multilateral agreement that pays attention to the fate of small farmers and agricultural workers, particularly in export-dependent countries which see themselves being elbowed out by subsidized agriculture in the North. Guillaume Attigbe (Benin), a worker member of the ILO Governing Body, has taken up the cudgels on behalf of the ten million African workers whose earnings from the cotton they produce are threatened by American or European cotton. This is subsidized and is therefore substantially cheaper on the international markets.

"The American and European subsidies on agricultural exports to the countries of the South are tantamount to handing out two dollars per day for every cow in the industrialized countries, while the agricultural workers in the South sometimes have to live on less than one dollar!" protested Leroy Trotman (Barbados), the workers' spokesperson at the ILO. He called on the ILO to launch an urgent programme on decent work in agriculture and, as the representative of the World Confederation of Labour also requested, to get a say for the ILO within world trade talks, on the same basis as the WTO, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Nor are the transition countries spared by the inconsistencies of world trade. In Russia, a delegate noted, New Zealand butter is cheaper than the local product and pork from Denmark seems to have pushed home-grown meat off the slab. The result, said the union representative, is "an exchange: the industrialized countries send us cheaper produce, and we send them our migrants." Once Eastern Europe's granary, Ukraine recently lost 5 million jobs during the transition. The unemployment rate has seen a 29-fold increase. Wages in the towns are hovering on the poverty line. In the countryside, they are three times lower.

As ILO Director-General Juan Somavia told the workers' symposium, "those who produce the world's food often don't earn enough to put a meal on the family table. They form the majority of the people known as the working poor."

If the international community is serious about fighting and eradicating poverty, or even about halving it by 2015, then the rural sector must become a priority. "We must fight for jobs, sustainable incomes and activities that produce such incomes. This is about promoting real opportunities, not charity," Somavia insisted.

But how did things get into this state? Somavia, who heads the only tripartite UN agency, feels that "the present globalization model treats labour as a commodity. But it isn't a commodity. This model is unjust and it won't solve the problems." His views are shared by Michael Sebastian, acting Director of the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities. "Decent work is dependent on the means for fulfilling the objectives embodied in ILO core labour standards. When the means are frustrated through trends in international trade, then it is obvious that decent work as a goal will be unattainable", said Michael Sebastian, pointing to the inequalities in ownership, in control of technology in capital and markets access as key problems facing agriculture. "These problems are often compounded by unfair trade practices", he added.

Unfairness was also denounced by Ron Oswald, General Secretary of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF). The IUF is the world's biggest organization of workers in agriculture, a notoriously difficult sector to unionize. "It is a fact that the companies' growing control over the sector is one of the main factors contributing to the many decent work deficits in agriculture, Oswald noted. He regards the currently dominant agricultural structures as "a system which favours production models that are not socially, economically or environmentally sustainable."

Production monopoly

The working paper for the symposium shows just how far the transnational corporations control the global food system as well as food and agriculture policies worldwide. For example, it demonstrates that the ten biggest companies in agriculture control about 80 per cent of a world market valued at 32 billion dollars. Just two companies distribute more than 80 per cent of the world's cereals. Five firms control three-quarters of the banana trade. Three enterprises preside over four-fifths of the trade in cocoa and three others control the same share of tea trading. The world's five big coffee roasters have a combined turnover of one billion dollars, and they run half of the planet's coffee production.

But while the companies' profits are rising, the prices paid to the producers are continually falling. ILO agricultural expert Ann Herbert points up the contrasts. "While a kilo of arabica coffee fetched 4 US dollars for the producers in 1970, today it earns them \$1.42. A peasant farmer gets \$0.14 dollars per kilo of instant coffee, which sells at \$26 in the supermarkets." The drop in commodity prices has, of course, hit agricultural wages even harder, as well as the living and working conditions of farm labourers.

Ricardo Yaque started working in Uruguay's citrus groves in 1996. Soon, he was helping to organize and resurrect the rural workers' union Sudora. An apt

name. Sudor is the Spanish word for sweat. The union is based around the port town of Salto on the River Uruguay. Yaque even managed to organize the plantations owned by the Caputto family - a real feat, say his local colleagues. In Geneva, he spoke out for the plantation workers whom he now represents as Sudora's General Secretary. He has not forgotten the state of things back in the groves, though. The special shirt that you have to wear when picking oranges and that you fill up with 60 to 70 kilos of fruit which you then have to carry, at a run so as not to waste time, to the people at the far side of the field who buy the oranges after weighing them. "We're paid by the kilo. The work is physically exhausting and most pickers are so worn out that they have to give up at the age of 45 or 50, which is too early to draw a pension". He also speaks of the anti-union repression that marks the sector.

Union freedom lacking

The lack of trade union freedom causes many problems for workers in this sector, the symposium participants emphasized. In many Latin American countries, says Maria Moya Hinojosa, from the Chilean Peasants' Federation, most of the subcontractors who recruit workers carefully screen out those who are unionized. Blacklists of "social agitators" are exchanged. A survey organized just before the symposium by the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) is illuminating: 52 per cent of workers' organizations in some 35 countries state that their officers or members have been harassed. Job blackmail is commonplace. So are dismissals. Discrimination against union activists is flagrant, and the authorities sometimes follow suit: 16 per cent of the organizations polled mentioned arrests of trade unionists. Labour leaders have been assassinated in Colombia (the tragic world record-holder for murders of trade unionists), in Bolivia and in Brazil, where a report from the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) notes the killing of 1 588 rural workers and 71 peasant trade unionists between 1988 and 2002. In 2002, 16 rural workers were murdered and 73 union activists received threats. In most cases, official investigations of these crimes are at best slow-moving. At worst, they are thrown out of court. In 2002, around a hundred Brazilian military police officers, accused of involvement in the massacre of 19 peasants in Eldorado dos Carajás in 1996, were ultimately all acquitted.

Social dialogue - an investment

"What governments and companies must understand is that when trade union freedom is denied, the nation is impoverished, because it has to do without its most valuable resource for development, namely the ability of men and women to engage in productive tripartite dialogue in order to find peaceful solutions to the economic and social problems facing them." These words from the ILO Director-General went down well with the assembled trade unionists, but also with representatives of international organizations, UN agencies, financial institutions and even employers.

There were few employers at the symposium, which was aimed mainly at trade unionists, but George Jaksch, representing the multinational Chiquita as a guest speaker in the debate on social dialogue, did not take issue with the Director-General's remarks. "We can't envisage a profitable business that does not have a good reputation on human rights," Jaksch declared. "Good

social relations have a direct effect on a company's profitability and sustainability." Chiquita was not invited at random. The multinational employs more than 20 000 people, mainly in Latin America. Many of them are union members. Since 1998, Chiquita has been embarked on a "corporate social responsibility" drive. The concept has not yet banished all of the unions' doubts, but it enabled the IUF to open up a breach in the banana sector, as it led the IUF and Chiquita to sign the first-ever global framework agreement in the banana business. In the agreement, Chiquita undertakes to respect eight basic ILO standards on trade union freedom, the right to collective bargaining, non-use of child labour and forced labour, non-discrimination in employment and occupation, and equal remuneration. It also acknowledges its responsibilities on occupational health and safety and, in cooperation with its trade union partners (as well as the IUF, the Latin American banana plantation workers' union coordinating body COLSIBA signed the agreement), it commits itself to promote better working conditions.

And none too soon. Sadly, agriculture holds the world record for deaths due to accidents at work: 170 000 per year. As the symposium working paper points out, increased agricultural productivity, faster work rates and technological developments have a strong impact on agricultural workers' health and safety. Pesticide poisoning has become a serious occupational hazard. The World Health Organization puts the total number of cases at between 2 and 5 million per year, of which 40 000 prove fatal. This was obviously a major topic at the ILO symposium. And there was open astonishment when Swedish trade unionist Sven-Erik Pettersson mentioned the possibility that paraquat, a powerful pesticide, might be taken off the European Union's list of banned products. Pettersson's call for a trade union campaign to maintain the ban was certainly well noted in Geneva. "There is no such thing as a safe pesticide," insisted Malaysian delegate Navamukundam.

Health and safety in agriculture is a priority topic for the ILO. Adopted in 2002, an international Convention on this issue came into force in September 2003. Convention 184 has so far been ratified by three countries. Amongst other things, it permits workers to refuse a task if they consider that it could damage their health. During the symposium, and in their adopted conclusions, the union representatives emphasized the basic link between Convention 184 and the ILO Convention on the worst forms of child labour (No.182), adopted two years earlier. As the working paper stresses, the fight against child labour in agriculture should include promotion of Convention 184. Article 16 of that standard sets a minimum age of 18 for work which, by its nature and the conditions under which it is performed, constitutes a threat to the safety and health of adolescents. And child labour, most often in its "worst forms", is endemic in agriculture. In fact, each year 12 000 youngsters die on the land. Nor, of course, does the exploitative situation faced by more and more women leave their children unaffected.

Feminization, insecure jobs, migration

Feminization of the workforce and dwindling employment security, with fewer and fewer permanent jobs and increasing use of occasional and temporary labourers, are the hallmarks of today's agriculture. So is the exploitation of

migrant labour, and all the abuse and discrimination that go with it. This is of concern to agricultural unions in North and South alike. Everywhere, they are trying to rein in hordes of increasingly unscrupulous middlemen who, in some countries, look very much like mafias. Poverty wages, atrocious working conditions and downward pressure on the terms of collective agreements negotiated by the unions are all part of the immigrant workers' fate. They embody the whole decent work deficit in agriculture.

Everybody's business

Agricultural workers' lot is the concern of the union organizations which drew up a real campaign plan in Geneva, but of course it also concerns the employers and governments, who should facilitate and promote the emergence of true social dialogue based on trade union freedom. In fact, it is everybody's business. For instance, lower profit margins, right the way down the chain of those who share out the fruits of the labourers' toil, would mean that peasants and their families could also eat their fill.

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