

Forced labour in Brazil: 120 years after the abolition of slavery, the fight goes on

On May 13th 1888, Brazil became the last nation in the Western Hemisphere to formally abolish slavery. One-hundred and twenty years later, it is estimated that 25,000 to 40,000 workers are still victims of conditions analogous to slavery in this South American country. The problem is particularly serious in the northern agricultural states, where widespread poverty and the vast distances make it very difficult to detect violations. However, with the guidance of the ILO and the help of employers, the Brazilian government is gradually turning the situation around. ILO Online reports from Brazil.

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MARANHAO (ILO Online) – Natanael Pereira Laurentino, a twenty-nine year old rural worker from the state of Maranhao, in northern Brazil, was unemployed and living with his father when one day he heard a radio advert offering jobs in the neighbouring state of Piaui.

Tired of being a financial burden for his father, he applied for the job and was hired. A few days later he boarded a bus together with other workers expecting to find a decent job when they arrived.

“The problems started right away. It took us three days to get to the estate, which was located one-hundred kilometres from the nearest town. We had very little to eat and had to sleep on the highway”, recalls Natanael.

As soon as he and the others arrived, the employers collected their employment cards (a document which every worker in Brazil has to present when joining a new job) and stamped “cancelled” on them.

Natanael was put to work clearing fields with a chainsaw and without any kind of protective gear. When he asked about his pay, he was told “later”.

Natanael's story is not unique. It is estimated that between 25,000 and 40,000 poor workers are still victims of forced or slaved labour in Brazil. The agricultural states of the north, like Piaui, Maranhao, Pará and Mato Grosso, are the most problematic.

After two months of hard work and no pay, Natanael and two others simply stopped working. The man who had hired them – a person who in Brazil is known as “gato” or “cat”, because of the mysterious ways in which he moves – took them to the nearest town and told them to wait there while he collected their money. They never saw the “cat” again.

Natanael was one of the lucky ones. Other workers never have a chance to leave or if they do, they sometimes fall victims to other “cats”, since they are penniless and hundreds of kilometres away from their homes.

But Brazil has taken this problem very seriously, and other Latin American countries like Bolivia, Peru and Paraguay have followed its lead with a determination to put an end to this scourge.

The government has set up a Special Group for Mobile Inspection (Grupo Especial de Fiscalização Móvil), which is made up of labour inspectors, federal policemen and labour law prosecutors. In the past 14 years, it has rescued around 30,000 workers from forced labour conditions.

In recognition of Brazilian efforts and as a means of securing Conventions No. 29 and No. 105 and the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, the ILO and the Brazilian Government initiated in 2002 the Technical Cooperation Project entitled Combating Forced Labour in Brazil.

The project supports national efforts, including the government's mobile inspection teams, as well as initiating awareness-raising and prevention activities. It also addresses another crucial question: what to do with the workers once they are freed.

One of the most successful initiatives in this sense has been the Instituto Carvão Cidadão or Citizen's Charcoal Institute (ICC), an institution created by 14 companies to monitor producers of charcoal in northern Brazil and to eliminate forced labour in the steel industry.

The ICC, together with the support of the ILO and the German technical cooperation agency GTZ, has been carrying out a programme to rehabilitate rescued workers. It first offers them skills-training and finds them a job.

Last year, Natanael along with 104 other rescued workers joined the ICC and were offered jobs with steel makers in the states of Para and Maranhão, although for personal reasons Natanael finally decided to try his luck in another state.

The idea is not only to eliminate forced labour just in the sectors where it happens, but all across the supply chains as well.

In this sense, again with the assistance of the ILO, the Brazilian authorities have launched a National Pact to Combat Forced Labour, which almost 200 hundred private and public companies have adhered to since 2005.

The pact obliges them to remove from their supply chains any inputs produced with any involvement of forced labour. A significant share of Brazil's GDP is committed to this fight, now that Petrobrás, Vale do Rio Doce, Pão de Açúcar, among other giant Brazilian companies, have signed on to the cause.

The Labour Ministry also publishes a so-called "dirty list" every six months with the names of companies and employers who were caught using forced labour. As of 2003, victims saved from forced labour automatically receive three months of unemployment benefits, and as of December 2005 those who have children are also eligible to receive benefits from the "Every child in school programme" (Bolsa Família).

"The challenge now is to implement a monitoring system of the National Pact. This will bring more transparency to it and better articulate employer's action against forced labour", says Andrea Bolzon, the manager of the ILO's Combating Forced Labour in Brazil project.

The law that abolished slavery in Brazil 120 years ago today, known as the "Golden Law", had only two articles. The first one prohibited any form of slavery; the second one stated that all dispositions to the contrary were illegal.

The succinctness of the law had a purpose: there were no conditions to the freeing of all slaves. Despite great efforts by the Brazilian government, one-hundred and twenty years later, some people still don't get it.

"Forced labour is a global problem, affecting almost all countries of the world. It takes different forms, including debt bondage, trafficking and other forms of modern slavery. It is estimated that there are at least 12.3 million persons in forced labour today. Most victims are poverty-stricken people in Africa, Asia and Latin America, whose vulnerability is exploited by others for a profit. Yet over 350,000 women and men are also in forced labour in industrialized countries, trafficked for either labour or sexual exploitation. With political will, forced labour can be eradicated. The ILO is promoting a Global Alliance to achieve this, with partner agencies pooling their efforts to wipe out all forced labour worldwide by 2015. A significant step in this direction was taken at a recent UN Forum Against Human Trafficking in Vienna, where employers' and workers' organizations were among the 1,200 high-level representatives from around the world who reached agreement on the need to intensify international action against trafficking and forced labour.