

Fighting forced labour through labour inspection: A photo report from Brazil

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05/01/2011

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This June, the 100th Session of the International Labour Conference in Geneva will hold a general discussion on labour inspection. Efficient labour inspectorates have the potential to prevent accidents at work, protect workers, improve their working conditions and enhance productivity by guaranteeing a decent working environment. They can also help to make an ILO vision become a reality: that no human being spends a day of his or her life working under coercion or suffering degrading or inhuman treatment.

Brazil has taken a lead in realizing this vision. Successive national action plans adopted in 2003 and 2008 have resulted in the liberation of thousands of workers through labour inspection activities and measures to fight impunity of employers. The ILO, through its Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour, has supported these national efforts over the past decade.

Among the key measures adopted by Brazil in the fight against forced labour is the creation of a Special Mobile Inspection Group (GEFM) in 1995, under the Ministry of Labour, combining the efforts of specially trained and equipped labour inspectors, labour prosecutors and police officers.

Since 2002, with support from the Governments of Brazil, Norway and the United States, the ILO has implemented successive technical cooperation projects to support the implementation of the national action plans and to strengthen the management capacity of Brazilian suppliers and buyers, thus reducing the risks of forced labour within their supply chains. The projects have sought in particular to strengthen the capacity of national agencies, including the GEFM, under the coordination of the CONATRAE (National Commission against Slave Labour). Other activities have included the development of a database for the Labour Inspection Secretariat, the drafting of state-level plans of action against slave labour, and training of the judiciary and law enforcement agents in those parts of Brazil where the incidence of forced labour is most severe.

More than 39,000 slave workers rescued

Between 1995 and 2010, more than 39,000 slave workers have been rescued by the GEFM. In 2010, it inspected 305 farms, releasing 2,617 slave workers. The total compensation paid to these workers was 8.7 million Reais (about US\$5.2 million). Since 1995, the total compensation paid to freed workers is over 62 million Reais (about US\$37.1 million), with a significant growth in the amount of compensation paid each year over the period.

The GEFM is a key element of the Government's strategy to combat slave labour. Using teams composed of labour inspectors, labour prosecutors and Federal Police officers, the GEFM investigates complaints of slave labour in situ, frees workers and prosecutes the owners of estates or other enterprises where workers have been found in conditions analogous to slavery.

Complaints of slave labour are made by workers who manage to flee from estates and walk – sometimes for many days – to reach a city, or by those who have been freed at the end of their service and subsequently denounce the ill-treatment they have received. The main bodies that help victims of slave labour to file a complaint are the Pastoral Land Commission, represented by priests and missionaries acting in local parishes, the Federal Police, rural workers' unions and workers' cooperatives.

Surprise inspections to free workers

GEFM teams undertake surprise inspections of estates in order to levy fines and free workers when irregularities such as severe forms of exploitation, slave labour or child labour are discovered. Some of the abuses that the teams look out for are: indebtedness; the presence of armed guards; evidence of ill-treatment or degrading working conditions, generally associated with lack of hygiene in workers' living quarters; lack of work safety; very low wages; and excessive working hours.

Workers generally incur an initial debt towards the employer when recruited. The debt is then artificially maintained, because they have to pay for their transport to the farm and subsequently buy everything (garments, food, medicines and even working tools) in the estate shop, at prices far above those of the market. Workers are prohibited from leaving the farm, and are regularly threatened to discourage them from attempting to do so.

If the situation discovered on an estate is particularly serious, and the landowner refuses to pay fines or creates obstacles to the work of the GEFM, the Ministry of Labour may request that the bank accounts of members of the agricultural enterprise inspected be frozen, and may arrest those involved.

The activities of the Special Mobile Inspection Group have promoted significant changes in the behaviour of landowners and in their relations with workers. The presence of the GEFM has taught victims of slave labour about their rights and taught landowners their obligations. This has helped to improve working conditions and to weaken the climate of impunity and easy money present in some regions of Brazil.