

Trade unions and indigenous communities combating forced labour in the Peruvian Amazon region

Case study prepared by Sanna Saarto, ILO's Programme to Combat Forced Labour, Peru, for the guide to to ILO Convention No. 169 "Indigenous and tribal peoples' rights in practice", Geneva, ILO, 2009.

Indigenous peoples have for centuries been the most affected by practices of forced labour in Latin America. The region has the second highest number of victims of forced labour in the world, over 1.2 million people according to ILO estimates. In-depth field research in the rural areas of Bolivia, Paraguay and Peru, has confirmed that indigenous peoples are particularly vulnerable to a form of forced labour called debt bondage. Indigenous workers are recruited by labour intermediaries who – through wage advances and other manipulations - induce them into an artificial debt that they cannot repay. Long hours of work are not sufficient to repay this debt, thus trapping the workers into greater debt and a longer debt repayment period. This system perpetuates the poverty or extreme poverty of the workers and impedes human and social development.

In Peru, a study carried out in 2004 by the ILO and the Peruvian Ministry of Labour and Employment Promotion confirmed the existence of forced labour practices in the context of illegal logging in the tropical Amazon region, with an estimated number of 33,000 victims, most of which belong to indigenous peoples.

The study revealed two main forms of forced labour in logging activities in the Amazon:

- The most common modality is that indigenous communities are contracted to provide timber from their own land. The communities in return receive money, food or other goods that are advanced to them under the condition that the community members, who know the area, will deliver timber.
- The second modality consists in situations where indigenous and other workers are hired to work in logging camps.

Both modalities use deception to entrap workers in a cycle of debt and servitude that is often passed on from one generation to the next.

These forced labour practices are linked to the larger issue of discrimination against indigenous peoples in the labour market. They are frequently at the bottom of the occupational ladder, engaged in low-pay, irregular and unprotected employment and subject to discrimination in remuneration.

In 2006 and 2007, the ILO office in Peru and the Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI) signed two agreements to specifically address forced labour. The two organizations committed themselves to a series of joint activities, on awareness-raising, dissemination of information, and efforts to organize workers in the forestry sector.

As a result, a trade union pilot project to combat forced labour in the forestry sector in Bolivia and Peru was launched in August 2008, financed by the Netherlands Trade Union Federation (FNV). The project is implemented in the Ucayali Region by the National Federation of Workers in the Wood and Allied Industries (FENATIMAP), an organisation that comprises workers from several trade unions and associations linked to the forestry sector, mainly located in the Peruvian Amazon region. FENATIMAP has for many years coordinated its actions with representatives from indigenous communities, and has further extended its relations with indigenous organisations during the implementation of this project.

The objective of the project is to contribute to the reduction of the number of workers in situations of forced labour through a series of awareness-raising and capacity-building activities. These activities include training of trade union promoters on issues such as forced labour, fundamental rights of workers and indigenous peoples, legal mechanisms to respond to violations of these rights, and organisational ways to advance collective action. Indigenous leaders participate in the training and later organise training and awareness-raising activities in their respective communities and organisations, together with FENATIMAP's promoters.

As a result of the coordinated implementation of the project, indigenous organisations are establishing formal links with FENATIMAP to enable further joint action to protect the fundamental rights of workers and indigenous peoples. Awareness-raising activities are being organised in several locations in the region, and the network of indigenous communities and organisations participating in these actions is expanding. The established links are also proving valuable for the collection of information on situations of forced labour and illegal logging in the region. The project has additionally disseminated information on forced labour and

indigenous peoples' rights in the local media, making the issues more visible to the authorities and the general public.

The project demonstrates that the coordination between indigenous organisations and trade unions can facilitate indigenous peoples' access to legal mechanisms; provide a wider network of support; and open up new possibilities of dialogue within institutions where they have traditionally not participated. The trade unions have gained a better understanding of the realities and problems faced by indigenous peoples, and can raise their concerns in diverse contexts, including the different mechanisms of social dialogue in which they participate.

Further resources

This case study is part of the following guide:

- [Indigenous and tribal peoples' rights in practice: a guide to ILO Convention No. 169](#) / International Labour Office. – Geneva, ILO, 2009 190 p.

To learn more about the situation in Peru:

- Bedoya and Bedoya: [Trabajo forzoso en la extracción de la madera en la Amazonía Peruana](#), ILO, 2005