

Public hearing against agrofuels in Valle del Cauca, Colombia

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Nearly 7,000 sugar cane workers attended the Public Citizens' Hearing, organized by the Senate of the Republic, and by the local committees of workers, unions, environmentalist organizations etc which took place in the municipality of La Pradera, Valle del Cauca on Saturday 14th June 2008.

During the course of the event, testimonies about the barbaric exploitation suffered by the sugar cane workers could be heard. They have no social security and are exposed to high risks which often leave them disabled from a young age, all in return for a derisory salary paid on the basis of tonnes of cane cut in order to enrich the sugar mill owners.

The Presidential plan refers to agrofuels as a principal objective to be implemented on the land.

The workers have no control over the scales used for weighing the cane which they have cut, so they do not know whether they are receiving the wage corresponding to their work diary. They are being subjected to a contract work model which gravely affects their workers' rights under the auspices of workers' cooperatives, in which they are held responsible for paying for their own benefits and social security. Moreover, they are being treated with indifference by the health insurance companies, by providers of accident insurance and pension funds. They are being treated in a cynical manner which includes work-related illnesses not being recognised, nor medical conditions related to extremely long working days, with workers having to spend up to 16 hours a day cutting cane. Neither are invalidity pensions being granted to those who, for the same reasons, have become paralysed as a result of recurrent joint and muscular illnesses due to the constant strain of cutting sugar cane.

During the hearing, one of the female sugar cane workers denounced the working conditions: She addressed the audience in the name of all those who, like her, have to take on a heavy workload to maintain the family, getting up every day at three o'clock in the morning in order to prepare the sparse food for which their husbands had to carry in order to sustain their long working day from which they do not return until nine o'clock at night. Nonetheless, she added, at the end of the fortnight, the salary paid to them was not enough "for our sons to eat, nor for them to enjoy an ice cream in the park on any Sunday or public holiday".

The hearing had been proposed in the Senate of the Republic by Senator Alexander López Maya and it was held despite the fact that the government and the group of parliamentarians belonging to the traditional parties of the region had sent instructions to the sugar mill owners to do everything possible to prevent them from taking place. On top of this there was further militarisation in the area by the state forces, and workers as well as those who were

helping them with transport were subjected to blackmail and personal threats.

The most important aspect of the assembly was the presence of civil society organisations representing indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, peasants, unions, the workers of Puerto de Buenaventura, users of public services, human rights organisations and finally the wide range of social resistance groups. The Workers' Cooperatives of the cane cutters, which have about 20,000 affiliated members took the initiative to organise this hearing and guaranteed the presence of a considerable number of affiliated members.

The hearing also denounced that sugar monocultures are leading to desertification in the Department, not only as a result of soil erosion but also because the sugar mills are using most of the freshwater sources for irrigation. Furthermore, the hearing denounced that those monocultures which are currently, with state subsidies, being adapted to produce ethanol, are undermining food sovereignty, as part of an international strategy by the big agribusiness capitalists to utilize land which could potentially serve to meet people's needs for food in order to produce agrofuels as a substitute for hydrocarbons. In Colombia, this is part of a larger development strategy by the national government, which is laid out in the so-called presidential plan "Colombia 2019" and which refers to agrofuels as a principal objective to be implemented on the land.

The most important thing about the hearing was that it allowed for the empowerment of the local communities and the workers who were confronting the problems that were concerning them. This empowerment is happening through an alliance of workers, of Afro-Colombians and indigenous peoples in the region against predatory monoculture production. They declared a "national strike of the sugar cane workers", agreed by consensus and applauded enthusiastically by all participants. We are therefore convinced that the workers and the general public can themselves find the solutions to their enormous problems. The success of the hearing is an additional argument for continuing the work of building the organisational capacity to reclaim the rights of workers and of the communities in the region of the country.