

Brazilian cane cutter died from working 70 days without break

V. Hugo in São Paulo
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After analyzing the working conditions of sugar-cane cutter Juraci Barbosa, 39, who died on June 29, 2006, the Brazilian government's Public Ministry of Labor concluded that before dropping dead, Juraci had worked 70 days without a break, between April 15 and June 26 of that year.

Moreover, in the days preceding his death, he had cut a volume of cane that substantially surpassed the daily average of 10 tons. João Amâncio Batista, the doctor who evaluated all of the documents presented by Juraci's employer, the San Jose sugar mill, told the Brazilian daily *Folha de São Paulo* that one fact caught his attention. "On the 28th of June, one day before his death, he cut 17.4 tons of cane," the doctor said. But this was by no means the only day that Juraci was exposed to a tremendously intense level of labor. The doctor noted that "on April 21, he managed to cut 24.6 tons!"

The conclusions of the ministry and the occupational health doctor confirm the observations made by a researcher at the State University of São Paulo (UNESP) that "there is a direct relation between the deaths and the increase in productivity." The Institute of Agricultural Economy (IEA), linked to the Secretary of State for Agriculture, revealed that the daily productivity of workers in the cane fields of the state of São Paulo has risen 7.89 percent in the last three years. During this period, exhaustion caused by excessive levels of work has led to the deaths of 15 rural workers in the state's interior.

Sergio Torquato, an IEA researcher, states that the hiring practices of the sugar producers put enormous pressure on the workers. With the advance of mechanization, those jobs that remain are being filled by the *bóias-frias* (rural workers) judged to be the strongest. "The companies," he concluded, "are increasingly picking younger people." As a result, the worker has no choice: it is either pick up the pace of a crushing work tempo, or you lose your job and go hungry.

On May 10, 2006, close to 1,000 demonstrators gathered in front of the Agrishow, the largest agricultural trade fair organized in the country. There were tense moments as Military Police were brought in to block part of the demonstration and prevent the workers from going into the event.

The protest, organized by Feraesp (Federation of Rural Employees of the State of São Paulo), with the support of the MST (Landless Workers Movement) and of the local rural unions in the cane-growing region of São Paulo, marked the initiation of a campaign for wage increases for these workers. Among their demands are a 30-hour week—at present it is 44 hours—raising the monthly base salary from the current 450 reais (approximately US\$225) to 1,620 reais (about US\$810), an end to the demand that workers meet daily production quotas, better health protection, control of production by the workers themselves, an end to the use of labor contractors, free transport and food ("sufficient to guarantee the nutritional needs of the workers").

The demonstration revealed the confrontation between two worlds: on the one side, the world of high technology, computerized agricultural machines, monitored via satellite exhibited at the show, and, on the other, the world of the *podão* (the machete-like tool used to cut cane by hand), the world of wage slavery in which the precarious conditions of labor have reduced the working life of the average cane cutter to below that of the slaves of the nineteenth century. This leads even to their deaths through overwork, as was the case with Juraci and others unable to survive the levels of exploitation demanded by agribusiness.

The insatiable hunger for profit of this first world, spurred on by the development of high technology, is responsible for the simultaneous destruction of both the human workforce and of nature.

Driven by the prospects of an ethanol profit boom, the

capitalists and their political allies are determined to plant more cane and invest more in machinery, no matter what the impact on the environment or conditions of life for the working class.

Brazil's ex-minister of agriculture and co-president of the Inter-American Commission on Ethanol, Roberto Rodrigues, delivered a recent speech in Ribeirão Preto, in the interior of the state of São Paulo, in which he argued that the work of the cane cutters should be eliminated and that they should be replaced by machines.

Admitting that "the work of the cane cutter is grueling," he said that eliminating the workers' jobs would resolve the problem of cane cutters falling dead from overwork. But in the Ribeirão Preto region alone, Brazil's largest cane-producing area, there are close to 170,000 cane cutters. Where are these workers to go? Rodrigues proposes that the state create a program in which those areas of land that are least suited to mechanized production be shifted to the production of fruit, wood or even rubber.

To realize this plan, which he calls the "humanization of the cane sector," he suggests that "the government of the state of São Paulo create a proposal for financing. That way we kill three birds with one stone: eliminating manual cutting, creating activities that provide income for the workers and the agricultural owners and reducing the concentration of monoculture."

Nevertheless, there is one thing that the ex-minister fails to explain: how are 170,000 workers going to find employment in an area that consists of barely 10 percent of the land on which they are now working? In the end, the production of fruit, wood or rubber is not more labor-intensive than the cutting of sugar cane. It is obvious, therefore, that in this minuscule area there will not be room for everyone. In reality, the "humanization" proposed by Rodrigues has a less pretty name: mass unemployment.



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