



## ***Hostile Harvest:***

### ***U.S. Agribusinesses and Labor Rights Abuses***

Massive U.S. agribusiness companies ADM, Bunge and Cargill depend on cheap labor for their soy and palm oil operations around the world. These companies, as well as their subsidiaries and their suppliers, engage in or are connected to slave labor, debt peonage systems, the exploitation of women, and the use of unsafe agrotoxins.

#### ***Debt Peonage***

According to Anti-Slavery International, "A person enters debt bondage [or debt peonage] when their labor is demanded as a means of repayment of a loan, or of money given in advance."<sup>1</sup> Debt peonage ties the worker to the owner or company for as long as it takes him to repay the loan. In different forms, this practice of forced labor can be linked to ADM, Bunge and Cargill.

- ▶ In Indonesia, small palm oil farmers are forced to depend on massive agribusiness companies, repaying loans they receive to pay for seedlings and fertilizer with labor and palm fruit.
- ▶ In Papua New Guinea, communities are pressured into joint-venture "mini-estate" partnerships with Cargill in which Cargill charges the communities for all fertilizers, labor and transport and then demands 90 percent of the profit. Communities must continue to plant oil palm until their debts are repaid.

#### ***Indonesia: Plasma Plantations***

In Indonesia, palm oil companies set up massive "core" plantations, known as inti, which are surrounded by several two-hectare plasma plantations on small-farmer-owned land. Palm oil crops depend on massive amounts of fertilizers and pesticides, large trucks for transportation, and nearby mills that can buy and process the fruit within two days of harvest. Poor farmers who choose or are coerced into having plasma plantations are given starter loans which include seedlings, fertilizers, pesticides and other inputs. Rather than demand payment in cash, the companies that provide the loans require farmers to sell their palm fruit back to them at prices set not by the market, but by the companies themselves. Small plasma farmers also remain dependent on these companies for transportation. As a result, the farmers are tied to the core plantation under terms set by the companies until their debts are completely paid off.

#### ***Slave Labor***

In Brazil, people desperate for work often migrate or are taken into remote areas of the Amazon to clear forests for cropland and work on plantations. Many of these laborers lack money for travel and depend on companies for food and supplies. Others are forced into outright slavery, working for nothing simply to stay alive. Human rights organizations estimate that between 25,000 and 40,000 people could be working in slave-like condition in Brazil.<sup>2</sup> While Cargill and Bunge have signed on to Brazil's National Pact for the Eradication of Slave Labor, they have yet to develop mechanisms to guarantee that their operations are in no way linked to forced labor. ADM refuses to sign the pact.

#### ***Gender Issues***

Women's plantation work is different and often more difficult than the work done by men. Women are often assigned tasks that seem less onerous, but which are actually more dangerous and physically demanding than that of their male counterparts.

<sup>1</sup> [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

<sup>2</sup> *Slave Laborers freed in Brazil*, [www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6266712.stm](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6266712.stm), 3/6/07

In Indonesia, women are often designated to spray pesticides because it is less physically taxing than other plantation work. Unfortunately, they are rarely given proper protective gear like gloves and masks. When they return home, they have to prepare food for their families, often with pesticide residue still on their skin and clothes.

In Papua New Guinea, Cargill has set up two distinct schemes for harvesting palm oil—one for each sex. Men are responsible for cutting the fruits off the trees with large sickles, while the women pick up the loose fruits that fall to the ground when the large bunches are harvested. Referred to as the “Mama Lus” scheme, this back-breaking labor forces women to bend over for hours at a time picking up individual acorn-sized fruits. By day’s end, they have collected up to 30 kilos of loose fruit—which is approximately the same weight as one large, intact palm oil bunch. Though most of the intact bunch ends up being discarded as chaff, Cargill pays the same amount per kilo for the big bunch as it does per kilo of loose fruit. This means that men are capable of earning much more than women, even though the women provide a better-quality product that is far harder to obtain.

### ***Issues of Agrotoxins***

In many countries, U.S. agribusiness companies still use pesticides that are outdated and illegal in America. Both the pesticides and the methods of spraying them cause serious problems for workers, local communities and the environment.

In Indonesia, ADM still uses an herbicide called Paraquat that has been outlawed in the United States. Cargill uses Paraquat in Papua New Guinea. Neither company provides protective gear to those they hire to spray pesticides, and many of the palm oil workers have reported pesticide-related illnesses.