

Via Campesina women protest against a Cargill ethanol plant in São Paulo

Saturday, 10 March 2007

This morning, more than 900 women from Via Campesina occupied the Cevasa sugarmill in the region of Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo state. Cevasa is the largest sugarcane company in Brazil, and was recently sold to Cargill, one of the largest agricultural transnational corporations in the world.

The protest is part of a national "week of struggle", under the slogan "Women in defense of food sovereignty". The Ribeirão Preto region concentrates the largest sugarcane industries in the country, which are known for labor violations (including slave labor). Since 2004, 17 rural workers have died in the region due to excessive work. The industry is also responsible for environmental destruction.

The women want to contradict the false idea that the production on ethanol can benefit small farmers and protect the environment. They denounce air, soil and water pollution, and respiratory diseases caused by the sugarcane monoculture. Also, the expansion of this industry creates greater land concentration, increases poverty and other social problems.

In addition, the protest is against the proposal by the United States government to benefit large ethanol companies in Brazil, which is not in the interest of the majority of the Brazilian population.

Via Campesina women defend another agriculture policy, which gives priority to small farmers, who are responsible for 70% of food production in the country. Also, they defend a broad agrarian reform to deal with the serious problem of land concentration.

In order to guarantee food sovereignty, rural workers protest against the visit of president Bush, and against his proposal to use of country's resources to deal with the United States energy problems.

Background

In Brasil, beginning in the 1970s, during the so-called world oil "crisis", the sugarcane industry began to produce fuel, which justified its maintenance and expansion. The same was repeated in 2004, with the new Pro-Alcohol program, which principally serves to benefit agribusiness. The Brazilian government began to stimulate the production of biodiesel as well, principally to guarantee the survival and expansion of large extensions of soy monoculture. To legitimate this policy and camouflage its destructive effects, the government stimulated the diversified production of biodiesel by small producers, with the objective of creating a "social certificate". The monocultures have expanded into indigenous areas and other territories of native peoples.

In February of 2007, the United States government announced its interest in establishing a partnership with Brasil in the production of biofuels, characterized as the principal "symbolic axis" in the relation between the two countries. This is clearly a phase of a geopolitical strategy of the United States to weaken the influence of countries such as Venezuela and Bolivia in the region. It also justifies the expansion of monocultures of sugarcane, soy, and african palm in all Latin American territories.

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