

HEALTH-CHILE:

'Unacceptable' Work Conditions on Farms

Daniela Estrada*

SANTIAGO, Feb 18 (Tierramérica) - Pesticide poisoning, lack of official hiring contracts, widespread child labour and denigrating treatment are the daily reality of hundreds of thousands of agricultural workers in Chile, according to a local and international campaign for health and labour rights.

The condemnations come from RAP-AL (Latin American Pesticide and Alternatives Network), the Association of Rural and Indigenous Women (ANAMURI), the Latin American Observatory of Environmental Conflicts (OLCA), and three trade unions.

The campaign says there are some 800,000 people working in Chile's fields, half of them seasonal labourers during the October-April season, and that of those workers, 250,000 are women, with many children and adolescents rounding out the workforce as well.

Sixty percent of these workers do not have written hiring contracts, which makes them vulnerable to numerous types of abuses, including employers failing to keep promises about dates of employment or not paying the wages agreed verbally, say the activists.

The Chilean agribusiness community "takes advantage of the ignorance, lack of information and lack of mobility of most farm workers," ANAMURI secretary-general Alicia Muñoz told Tierramérica.

The unionists also denounce prolonged workdays -- up to 16 hours -- without overtime pay; clandestine child labour -- "many parents take their children as young as seven years old to the fields" --; and the proliferation of "enganchadores", intermediaries who supply workers to the big corporate farms, which mostly produce crops for export.

"They recruit, transport and pay the workers, obviously without hiring contracts. This contributes to diluting responsibilities when there are work accidents, illegal actions, irregularities, abuses and harm against the workers," said the groups in a statement presented to director general of the International Labour Organisation, Juan Somavía, a Chilean himself.

The letter says the "unacceptable conditions" for workers in that sector include worksites that do not meet the basic health and hygiene standards established under current law, and lack bathing facilities for the workers, potable water, a place to eat, and childcare facilities.

The groups also cite figures from the Ministry of Health, that from January to November 2004 there were 565 cases reported of acute poisoning from pesticides, resulting in two deaths -- no lives had been lost under these circumstances since 2000.

Many of the agro-toxins involved, says the statement, are included in the categories "extremely dangerous" and "highly dangerous" established by the World Health Organisation, and have proven harmful health effects in the medium and long term, including a greater propensity for cancer, neurological damage and reproductive problems.

"After going through the corresponding national agencies without achieving any change in the panorama, we turned to the ILO to make these facts known internationally and to prevent a veritable return to slavery," said Muñoz.

The groups asked the ILO to pressure the Chilean government to recognise and implement rules and practices in agricultural labour based on social justice and internationally established human and labour rights.

According to Muñoz, Somavía reacted with surprise to the denunciations, and proposed a dialogue with the Chilean government, but did not commit himself to anything specific.

The head of the Chilean Labour Directorate, Cristián Alviz, said in a conversation with Tierramérica that the charges come as a bit of a shock because "along with transportation and commerce, agricultural labour is the sector most closely monitored by our agency."

"During the 2003-2004 growing season we attended to denunciations that involved 90,000 workers, and we hope to expand coverage to 100,000 this year," said Alviz, adding that he thinks it impossible to monitor every farm operation in the country.

"The Labour Directorate has very good intentions, but that isn't enough. More resources are needed for more monitoring because the laws that have been made so far to protect farm workers are not being obeyed," RAP-AL regional coordinator María Elena Rosas told a local press conference.

According to Muñoz, a commission set up in 2002 to handle these issues, and made up of government, employer and worker representatives, has not been able to put an end to the continued widespread violation of labour rights.

"I am guided by the words of President Ricardo Lagos himself, who said in my presence that we cannot hold our heads high in the world at the cost of sacrificing our workers," said the activist.

(* Daniela Estrada is a Tierramérica contributor. Originally published Feb. 12 by Latin American newspapers that are part of the Tierramérica network. Tierramérica is a specialised news service produced by IPS with the backing of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Environment Programme.)

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