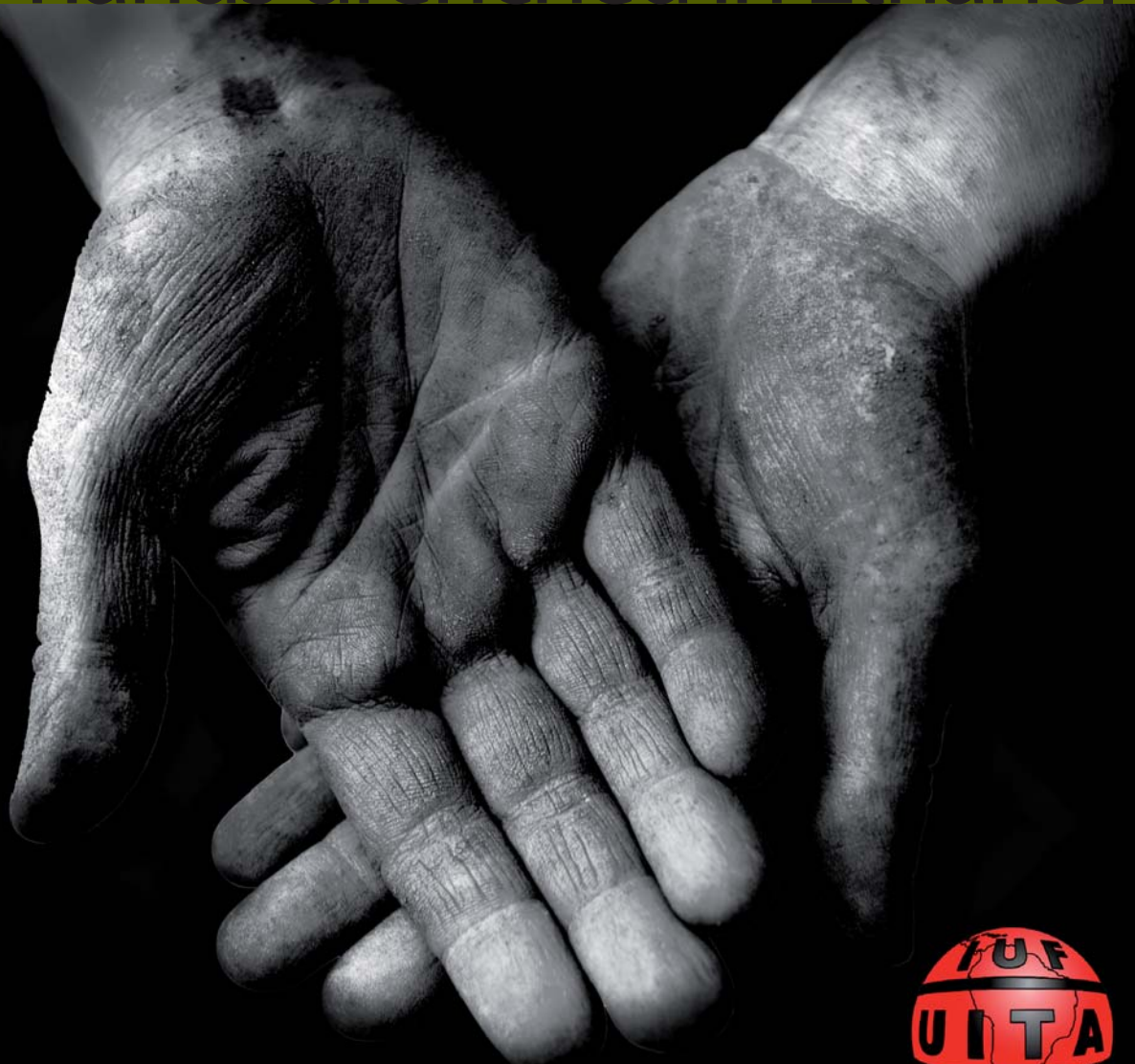


# BRAZIL hands drenched in Ethanol



A video by Rel-UITA and FERAESP, sponsored  
by NGG of Germany and LO-TCO of Sweden





From the highest spheres of government and agro-industry, Brazil is promoting ethanol as a “clean” fuel fit for the modern age. But behind this shiny front and the official marketing propaganda, hundreds of thousands of workers leave their health and even their lives behind in a task that is anything but “clean” or characteristic of the “21st century.”

# Ethanol: a new technology

## The Usual Poverty

As far as the eye can see all that is visible are the rippling waves made by the soft wind as it grazes the crests of the sugarcane plants under a blue, open sky with only a spatter of clouds, white as sugar, far out on the horizon. You have to see it to believe it, because it is hard for the mind to picture the unbroken, green desert formed by the sugarcane fields that extend over wide areas of the northern Brazilian state of **São Paulo**.

Touted as “**clean energy**” and the “**biofuel of the 21st century**,” ethanol is the carrot dangling from a stick behind which all ambition runs. The flagship of the Brazilian government, ethanol production rests on a mega agro-industry and is fueled by hundreds of thousands of poor laborers who work under appalling conditions to meet a significant part of the global demand for this product.

With the support of **Germany’s Food, Beverages and Catering Union (NGG)**, the **Swedish Confederation of Workers (LO-TCO)** and the **Federation of Rural Laborers of the State of São Paulo (FERAESP)**, **Rel-UITA**, the Latin American Regional Office of the IUF, went out to gather the testimonies of these workers, who form the base of this wealth, while all they possess are their own two hands and a body used and abused to cut sugarcane, under a scorching sun or the pouring rain, to make a meager living.

A **Rel-UITA** team formed by **Silvia Martínez**, **Pedro Dantas**, **Daniel Santos** and **Carlos Amorín** traveled recently across the state of **São Paulo** to film a

documentary on the working conditions endured by the region’s sugarcane cutters.

Accompanied by members of **FERAESP**, the team visited a wide area of cane fields, venturing into several sites where laborers were cutting cane, speaking with cutters in various situations, and interviewing technical experts with the **São Carlos University** and the **Labor Inspection Office of Araraquara**, as well as union activists and leaders.

**Rel-UITA’s** fieldwork confirmed what many have been denouncing for years, but which has rarely been recorded on film. The reality, however, was no less shocking because it was expected.

**This mega agro-industry that has a self-reported annual income of 28 billion dollars, accounting for two percent of the national GDP, employs 900,000 sugarcane cutters who can barely make enough to avoid starving to death along with their families.**

Cutting cane is in itself an extremely harsh and physically draining task. Every morning the cutters make their way into the cane fields brandishing their machetes, knowing that after a long day in which they will have advanced hundreds of meters and cut 10 to 12 tons of sugarcane a piece, they will have hardly made enough money to buy food and, in the case of migrant workers, occasionally some extra money to send their families back home.

# A day on the cane fields

## Working in Hell

The workday starts at 4:30 in the morning, when workers get up at the break of dawn to prepare their “bolas frías,” or cold meals, to take with them to the fields. They set out their work clothes and gloves, which they washed the night before to get the gritty soot off them. They fill up a large five-liter bottle of water to drink while they work, and have a quick cup of coffee before stepping out to wait for the bus that will take them to the fields that need cutting that day.

The ride out to the fields can take an hour and a half, or even two hours when the end of the harvest is near and the fields that have not been cut yet are located farthest from the townships. Work starts as soon as the cutters arrive at the area selected for the day's harvesting. The laborers cut and cut without stopping until 11:30 noon, when they break for a brief lunch.

Exhausted, having lost several liters of fluid, the cutters walk back to their buses where thin tarps are spread out to provide a bit of shade, and some tables and foldable chairs are set out. As of some months ago, all buses are required to have a cold-water dispenser to provide drinking water for the workers, but many bus drivers prefer to save on fuel and fail to comply with this requirement. The bus drivers and owners are often the same people who work as foremen and hire the cutters.

**The containers with the workers' meals are kept inside the buses where the temperature can easily rise above 40° C. None of the buses are equipped with refrigerators. Although precooked, the food often ferments with the heat and is barely edible by the time workers get to it. Under such precarious conditions, hygiene is non-existent. Stomach and intestinal infections are common.**

After their lunch and rest hour, the cutters return to the field. The more they work, the heavier the machete grows, the heat

is suffocating, the ashes left by the burning of the cane rise up from the ground and fill their lungs, blackening their saliva. Some finish faster than others, and to shorten the wait they help their slower mates. They will do anything to get out of the burning hell as quickly as possible.

It's 4 p.m. On the bus ride back home, nobody talks. The little energy they have left they use to drink water and eat whatever was left over from lunch.

The buses drive through town unloading their human cargo. When the worker gets home, if he lives with his family, he will be able to take bath right away, put on clean clothes, spend some time with his wife and children before going to bed to rest until dawn, when he has to start another exhausting workday.

**If he doesn't live with his family, chances are his sleeping quarters are shared with several other workers, almost always migrants from the north or northeastern regions of Brazil. He will have to wait in line to shower and wash his work clothes. He'll eat something hastily cooked up and climb straight into bed, or lie down on a straw mattress or a simple cardboard mat on the floor, with little time for anything else. Many are often so tired from the devastating workday that they drop off to sleep, exhausted, without finishing their meals or washing their clothes.**

**As they drift off to sleep they are not even comforted by the knowledge that they have earned a decent pay. If a worker cut a lot of cane, his pay will be around 30 reais; if he didn't cut enough it will be more like 20 reais - a little over one U.S. dollar. With that he has to cover all his daily expenses: electricity, water, cleaning products, food, gas.**





After their lunch and rest hour, the cutters return to the field. As they work, the machete grows heavier and heavier by the minute, the heat is suffocating, the ashes left by the burning of the cane rise up from the ground to fill their lungs and blacken their saliva.

# Sugarcoated dreams

## Nightmare of the cane fields

Many come from far off places with the illusion of saving up enough money to send their families back home so they can start building a house. But when they arrive all they find is the most ruthless exploitation. The feeling that springs from the lips of anyone who overcomes their fear and dares to speak is always the same: humiliation.

**They not only feel exploited, they feel humiliated, trampled by their foremen and bosses, discriminated by the local communities who tolerate them as a necessary evil, but deny them the consideration that all human beings deserve, refusing to accept them as their equals. They're treated as cane field animals.**

They live on the outskirts of towns, in squalid lodgings built especially for them by local operators or neighbors looking to make a profit, who rent them out at steep prices. In the best of cases the houses are made of concrete, but no matter what the building materials, their walls always hold too many men, overcrowded beyond tolerable limits. The families live in similar conditions, in small houses of only one bedroom, a living room and one bathroom.

**But the "single" men are crammed 12 to 14 in a single lodging the size of a family house. When there are so many tired people packed together, it's hard to keep the place clean. Each man sleeps on whatever he can find for a bed. Some sleep practically on the floor, the whole nine or 10 months the harvest lasts. Some are lucky enough to organize and maintain an order that bears some semblance to home, even with so many of them living in very close quarters.**

These are just some snapshots of the reality that the Rel-UITA filming crew found on the field.





# Ethanol, a State Policy

## The State, the fuel powering ethanol

Most cases of modern slave labor in **Brazil** are found on the sugarcane fields where the ethanol industry obtains its raw material. And that's not merely chance, it's a defining characteristic of this industry.



Meanwhile, ethanol mill owners try to make everyone forget that they are heavily indebted to the State, owing billions of U.S. dollars in virtually unsecured credits granted by the government, and that's without taking into account the billions of U.S. dollars that the mills have received as direct subsidies.

The industry continues to grow fostered by the government. More and more mills are being built. Sugarcane crops are expanding into new regions, to lands previously planted with food crops.

Most cases of modern slave labor found today in **Brazil** are in the sugarcane fields where the ethanol industry obtains its raw material. And that's not merely chance, it's a defining characteristic of this industry. **FERAESP** and other trade unions are fighting tirelessly - even risking their own safety - to reach out to these workers with a message of hope, labor organization and dignity. In many cases they succeed, in others they fail, coming against the fear sown by ethanol companies and the workers' lack of awareness of their labor rights and their rights in general, as cane cutters are mostly illiterate. And they often have to start all over again each year, as there is a high turnover among the cutter workforce.

While filming, the crew found cutters camping outside the towns who were duly registered with the government and unions to receive a plot of land to farm. There were also some who had already received their land and were planting. These farmers are joining up with others to organize and support those who are still waiting for their plots.

Many may ignore their rights, but they haven't forgotten where they come from. They are well aware of their roots. What these peasants - who have been displaced from their homes by poverty and hunger and turned into an army of cheap, almost slave laborers - are clamoring for is an agrarian reform. But not just any reform. A true, far-reaching and radical reform that will make land use not only economically meaningful, but also socially, politically and culturally meaningful, giving sovereign control to the people. They've experienced for themselves that land can liberate you when it provides a livelihood for your family, but that it can kill you when you are simply a cog in the machinery of industrial production. ■

# BRAZIL: Hands Drenched in Ethanol

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