

# Ethanol Slavery Found On Brazil Plantation

by Valerie Rush

On June 30, Brazil's Labor Ministry anti-slavery team freed 1,108 sugarcane workers who were held as virtual slaves on the plantation of one of the biggest ethanol producers in the northeastern state of Para. In March, nearly 300 sugarcane workers had been rescued from enslavement in the state of São Paulo, but the June raid was the largest number of workers to be freed from conditions of slavery in recent Brazilian history, surpassing the previous record of 1,000 in 2005, when a sugarcane plantation in the state of Mato Grosso was raided. That plantation, too, produced ethanol.

These are not anomalies. As *EIR* first documented 20 years ago, the only way that biofuels can be "cost efficient" is by the utilization of slave labor. And Brazil is the leading case in point.

Most of the sugarcane workers at the Para plantation had been lured in from nearby states, with the promise that they would receive wages high enough to send money back to their families. Once there, they found a very different story. They were forced to work 14-hour days, and to sleep piled on top of one another; many were sick from the rotten food and bad water provided, and at the end of the month, most either received no pay, or were informed that they owed money to the company, because of exorbitant deductions from their wages for food, transportation, and so on.

This is exactly the *modus operandi* of that old Al Gore family mine memorialized in the famous American folk-song: "Sixteen Tons": "You load 16 tons, and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt. Saint Peter don't you call me, 'cause I can't go. I owe my soul to the company store."

According to a documentary produced with the aid of the Brazilian Catholic Church and shown at a hemispheric meeting in Havana this Spring by filmmaker María Luisa Mendonca, conditions are no better at the supposedly "modern" plantations proliferating around the country. "In Brazil, sugar and ethanol are soaked in blood, sweat, and death," said one Labor Ministry investigator cited in the film. Cane cutters are expected to cut a minimum of 15 tons a day, working often from 3 a.m. to 8 p.m., and earning a mere \$3 per day. Many of the cutters are migrants, poor, often indigenous, and include many children. They are transported in cattle trucks, provided with no bathrooms or running water, no health care, vacation

time, or safety equipment to protect against the swinging machetes which are their tools.

## Biofuels, Bio-Fools

Because of Brazil's cheap and plentiful labor, it costs only \$165 to produce a ton of ethanol on its plantations, compared to \$700 per ton in the European Union nations. Under the sponsorship of the Bush Administration in Washington, the Lula government promotes its ethanol program as the economic salvation for poor countries from the Caribbean to Africa. In fact, the only "economic salvation" ethanol offers is to the supranational food cartels like Archer Daniels Midland and Bunge, while promising mass genocide in those developing nations too weak—or, like Brazil, too foolish—to resist.

Under the ethanol push, ever-increasing tracts of land, concentrated in the hands of the cartels, are displacing traditional crops grown for domestic consumption in Brazil. This increases deforestation and soil degradation, and drives millions of farmers off their lands and into the ranks of either the urban unemployed, or plantation slaves.

President Lula da Silva was born to a family from another impoverished northeastern state, Pernambuco, whose primary product has been sugarcane, since the days when Brazil was a Portuguese colony under British Crown protection. He knows firsthand what brutal working conditions exist in the cane fields. It is especially ironic, therefore, that Lula, a former trade union activist, should so vociferously defend the conversion of Brazil into a "biofuel republic" dependent upon slave labor. Cuban President Fidel Castro, a longtime friend of Lula, has devoted repeated articles in recent months to railing against the deadly pitfall of viewing ethanol as anything but a fraud perpetrated by the cartels, and yet Lula has turned a deaf ear, or worse, to the warnings of his old friend. Indeed, in interview after interview, Lula has furiously argued that Brazil will lead "an energy revolution in the world," where developing nations "will have to come to us to ask how to do this the right way."

Nearly 20 years ago, *EIR* researcher Mark Sonnenblick wrote an article on Brazil's biofuels program, and pointed out that gasohol "appears 'efficient' only in a technologically backward nation that plans to stay that way, or in a nation that is being deindustrialized and made backward." Sonnenblick documented how the gasohol program of the late 1970s had "so diverted croplands and labor resources from food production, that the nation—the world's second-greatest agricultural exporter—is running into severe food shortages, high inflation for food prices, and the need to import more than \$1 billion in foodstuffs that could be cheaply produced at home." Biofuels "don't work in Brazil," Sonnenblick concluded in 1979.

Third World nations, and others, who are being promised huge profits from biofuels should take note. Biofuels means slavery, as well as corruption and scientific incompetence. They should be rejected now.