

Lack of Rain in the Rainforest

by Nora Rätzel

From work or nature to work and nature: another kind of unionism

On a one-week tour organised by João Paulo Cândia Veiga from the University of São Paulo and Manoel Edivaldo Santos Matos from the Union of Rural workers (Sindicato dos Trabalhadores y Trabalhadoras Rurais de Santarém, STTR) in Pará, a region of the Brazilian Amazonas, we visited eight communities along the Rivers Arapiuns, Maró and Amazonas. These are small communities of between 90 and 300 people. They are of mixed indigenous and Portuguese origin, some groups defining themselves as indigenous. Traditionally, they lived from fishing, hunting, gathering fruit and planting manioc. But with the arrival of timber companies their lives have become unstable. In the eighties, but on a much larger scale in the nineties, timber companies entered more remote areas of the rainforests. Game, fruits and fibres on which people had lived began to decrease radically. In the middle of the nineties, supported and organised by the STTR, the communities living in the areas began a struggle for the ownership of the land they worked and lived on. They won this struggle but their battles have not ended. The timber companies remain, employing carrot and stick strategies to get at the wood: threatening activists on the one hand and promising to provide electricity and jobs on the other. The companies do not keep their promises, jobs are heavy and wages are low. But when survival is difficult, some people see no other choice than to work for them. Others are too concerned with the future of the forests to accept such an option, which creates tensions within communities.

Industrial unions often have a hard time finding solutions for the apparent contradiction between protecting jobs and protecting the environment. The most promising perspectives are developed by unionists who see labour and nature as inseparable and conceptualise them as allies: without nature there is no labour and without labour, nature cannot help to fulfil human needs. Nature's rights need to be protected as well as workers' rights. In the global South, especially in Latin America, the debate about the relationship between labour and nature has intensified since Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2011) included the "Right of nature" into their constitutions (Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature).

Ernst Bloch suggested: "A Marxism of technology, once it is thought through, is not a philanthropy for abused metals, it is the end of a naive application of the point of view of the exploiter and circus trainer to nature" (Bloch 1959/1978, 813, translation by the author).¹ Our research on environmental

policies of international unions and unions in Brazil, South Africa, Sweden and the UK found that some unionists in South African union NUMSA² and in some international confederations supported this view (Rätzel and Uzzell 2011a) and 2011 b).

For the STTR the protection of their livelihoods and the protection of nature are the same thing. These unionists risk their lives to protect the environment: "Fifty of our members are on death lists. The state should protect them, but instead, the hitmen go free while our members have to stay locked in their homes to avoid being killed".³

Not only rising emissions, but also the destruction of the rain forests has an impact on climate change. The climate change is already felt by the communities and adds to the destabilisation of their lives: for example rising temperatures lead to declining fish populations and declining harvests. Rain has become scarce in the rainy season; instead, sudden heavy rains destroy small plants. Seasons are disappearing. We saw mango trees with small green fruits when they should have been ripe.

How does the trade union work?

The short journey changed my view about what unions can be. Hearing that trade unions are organising communities in the Amazonas, I imagined some avant-garde unionists from the cities venturing into rural communities to convince people that they should stand up against the timber companies. Instead, we experienced a dense network of union members in the communities, working closely together with the community associations. Unionists see to it that old people get their pensions; mothers receive support and a share of the poverty alleviation programme. But they were also indispensable in supporting the communities politically in their fight for land rights and in creating structures of self-organisation such as community associations. Without union-organising, the communities would have been too scattered and disintegrated to win their rights. In helping to create the necessary community and producers' associations, the union in this particular area can be seen to be a community organisation as well.

In the social sciences, unions have come to be perceived as inflexible, bureaucratic organisations – dinosaurs of an industrial age, not fit to face the challenges of a post-industrial "liquid modernity". Hopes for change and research efforts have shifted to "new social movements",

more recently to “civil society” and its Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). In the Amazonian communities such perspectives were reversed. Here, the union is an important grassroots force, helping to develop alternative, resource-saving forms of production. The union also supported and co-created a local environmental organisation Saúde y Alegría to provide health, education, water, and energy on a long-term basis. All communities had stories of disappointment to tell about Western NGOs starting projects and then disappearing, leaving the communities without the promised water or energy supplies – and without any explanation. Solar panels were set up to provide energy for a school. But when the batteries needed to be replaced, the community could not afford them. The neoliberal ‘projectification’ of welfare systems in Europe is brought into an area where this approach is even more harmful. It is not established NGOs, but the union that is the flexible grassroots organisation working on a long-term basis. Their leaders are elected in the communities and thus accountable for what they do or don’t do. Thus, what trade unions and NGOs “are” has to be analysed in context.

Not a world outside our world

Most communities in the area we visited are dependent on manioc, not only as a staple, but as the main, often only, product they can sell in the city. The price producers get for the flour does not cover the amount of work they put into producing it and so they do not earn enough to buy the things they cannot produce – for example, sugar.

Some of our travel companions were disappointed with the expressed need for money, 24 hours electricity, running water, telephones and even television. They expected to find autonomous communities working cooperatively without private ownership. But even though some communities need 12 hours by boat to get into the next town, they are not out of touch with the world outside. They are no havens of goodness: there are conflicts over scarce resources, one community accusing another of overfishing, another not wanting to include artisans of a neighbouring community into their association. Some are divided over whether to work for timber companies or not, others over whether to define themselves as indigenous or not. Women’s groups falter for lack of resources, others flourish. These are ordinary people living ordinary conflicts under harsh conditions. But it is precisely because they are not heroic, but – like all of us – part of the world they live in, that their achievements are so admirable. Because increasing scarcity of natural resources due to logging and climate change produces conflict, the degree to which solidarity and communal practices prevail is impressive.

What do people need?

To overcome the growing scarcity of the natural resources due to logging and climate change and the dependency on manioc, new activities have been developed that provide a living, such as artisan work and fish farming. These efforts

are important but a more fundamental transformation was said to be needed: the diversification of agriculture. This is difficult, because there is no agricultural tradition in the communities. They have lived on hunting, fishing, gathering fruit, not on agriculture. Knowledge, techniques and technologies are needed. This is an opportunity for unions and other organisations/individuals to support the work of the STTR, to provide long-term support for the creation of a diversified agriculture that respects the natural resources.

Together with their union the communities have achieved a lot. They have won the rights to their land, created and established themselves as communities with structures allowing them to run their own affairs. Now is the time for consolidation and for this they need education, transportation, communication, health care and new forms of production. Otherwise, their existence is at risk and without them there is hardly anything or anybody able and willing to resist the pressure of timber companies longing for unlimited access to the rainforests.

Is it not ironic that in Europe we press governments to preserve their rainforests, reminding them of their responsibility towards humanity, while those who have the will and need to halt deforestation remain largely invisible and without support? Here is a possibility to act in accordance to our concern for the rain forests and at the same time practice international union solidarity.

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1. “Marxismus der Technik, wenn er einmal durchdacht sein wird, ist keine Philanthropie für misshandelte Metalle, wohl aber das Ende der naiven Übertragung des Ausbeuter- und Tierbändigerstandpunktes auf die Natur.“ (813)
2. NUMSA = National Union of Metalworkers South Africa
3. Personal conversation. For background information see: (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/aug/31/rainforest-activists-protection-death-threats>) (accessed March 6, 2012)

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