

The Cold Winds of Caramanta

Translated by Stacey Schlau, a CSN volunteer translator)

“Human vanity reaches to here”

By the Youth Network of Medellín

Caramanta is a town in the southeast sub-region of the Department of Antioquia. In this region, the crisis in Colombian society is expressed in the cold that whips against the mute walls of streets filled with absence, structures preserved by those who are no longer there and those who will not be there. The black hand of Uribe Vélez has already passed through here, and after its legalization, misnamed as demobilization, the landowners maintained their presence, the population was cut almost in half, and the crisis of small producers intensified, because of more than a decade of silence and impunity, which allowed the landowners to establish a monopoly on the town's economy.

We say with indignation that everything is certainly evident simply from what they have appropriated and what remains to Caramanta. Because many people of Caramanta are starving in the capital cities, while the landowners own more than half of the privatized land: “they filled the lands where several generations have lived with pastures for cows. They are going to mine minerals and it will be many years before the lands will be able to be cultivated again. They want to consolidate the monopoly on the production of brown sugar, while we lose independence and the benefit of commercialization, besides being subjected to employee status. They set up the local administration, manipulate projects in the region with the backing of the central government, and we, we continue resisting, intending to stay on the land, seeking ways of putting out products, as with the association store, but there is no interest from local administration to strengthen these projects.”¹

When the story of Caramanta is told, it speaks of the cultivation of coffee, avocado, corn, beans, some fruits, of families dedicated to the production of brown sugar, and the number of people wearing a ruana [shawl] is much higher than what current statistics imply. Because of the consolidation of land ownership, the lands used for agriculture have been designated for other purposes, imposing the law of the haves over that of the have-nots, creating with the process of secularization the loss of socio-

¹Testimony of a peasant from the area.

cultural norms for the youth of the region, who are increasingly fewer, given their migration to the cities: “The processes of land appropriation have been going on for some fifteen years, more or less, and since about six years ago a model has been imposed by which one person is the owner of almost half the town, and a series of single-crop cultivations has been established.”²

“It is all a well-mounted spectacle . . .” With the direct persuasion of the mass media, the so-necessary farce has been maintained, to enable in the town the maintenance of legal injustice with which the policies of succeeding governments restrain us: “They arrive in Caramanta and film videos of what they assume we are, pretty takes, sure, but they only show two or three things and that is what they have.” They show the sheep of the only flock they have in one farm, the tendency toward mono-cultivation of bush tomatoes, passionflower, and jaspí avocado, a variety of which the bosses say is the one that “works,” given that it is only grown in cold climates--and they have already cornered the market on all of that land; as well as some timber-yielding plants, without mentioning that in order to establish these, they had to cut down the natural forests.

The ambition that plagues business, together with the economic crisis, has begun displacing customs, ignoring traditions, eliminating reference points for the communities. Facilitating this process of disorientation, the federal government approved resolution 779 in 2006, which regulates the production of brown sugar, guarantees the impossibility of strengthening the organizing efforts of the small farmers and producers, leaving as the only outcome slavery, facing the exigences of modernizing the sugar mills while contemplating costs of up to 80 million pesos. These laws are based on the cancerous and exclusionary process of globalization, through which the landowners and the corrupt intend to perpetuate and expand.

Speaking of government help, strategies with unilateral goals can be seen again. As a proposal of the local administration and governance, the Center of honey gathering appears, which is predisposed to be supported by the small sugar producers, who do not have the capability of modernizing their mills, so they are forced to form alliances in order to move from being producers and business people to mere salaried workers.

“ . . . large mills existed where the benefit of production and commercialization of brown sugar was divided in half between the grower and the mill owner.” Not so in the proposal created by the government, since with the storage facility they only intend to demand the production of honey

² Testimony of a peasant in the region.

from the grower, while intermediaries usurp the commercialization of brown sugar and benefit from it. “It is all a well-mounted spectacle . . .” The large sugar mills became extinct in the period when sugar was no longer profitable and the “owners” of the land chose cattle. They began by paying small producers for the plants, the cultivation of sugar cane. These processes of buying and selling were easy in most cases, but where force was needed, there was no hesitation. For instance, there was the fire in the sugar cane fields of Manzanares, Sucre.

“Currently there are only small mills left, the majority are médium-size and only two community-owned ones remain. There is one in la Sierra, which houses 20-30 families of producers, that is, 120-150 people. In addition, near the mills there are still some collectives, which benefit from the planting of sugar cane.” Given the status of brown sugar as food, it is clear that the mills must be modernized, but it is also clear that without help this will not happen. There again the exigencies of the administration are put into play, since it is understood that the only small producers who will get help are those who commit to day labor through associations.

The Association of Agricultural Producers of Caramanta—ASAP--, together with several communities, seeing the essence of the proposal as slavery, have taken on self-subsistence and local strengthening with agro-ecological projects, as a basis for beginning to compete on other levels of business. The fundamental basis of their project is to recover tradition and they presented it to the administration even before the local development plan was formulated, so that it could be included, but they were ignored. The project was moved to where there is no sugar cane and now the government proposes to build a sugar mill, at a value of about 120 million pesos, to begin to establish sugar cane production in areas that are not traditionally sugar producers.

A few days ago, a meeting took place with governor Alfredo Ramos and the “donation” of a sugar mill to the community was left on the table. The dilemma is where to build it: “The decision was left in the hands of the administration and we have indications that it will not be where the community has requested.”

In the community meetings called by the administration, in which dissident peasants have been able to participate, because they have not been able to in all, since the devil knows whom to deceive, what the peasants have received in answer to their petitions is poor treatment accompanied by discrediting and being targeted, which has required personal protection. Besides, the heavy hand on the table of Tesalia S.A.’s legal representative is

clear. This is a business to which the majority of private lands are attached, and the presumed majority stockholder is Hernando Mario.

Tesalia already has a mill up and running, which fulfills all the specifications of the resolution and now they are buying up the lands surrounding it, taking advantage of the crisis because of which the small producers who are in their way are failing: "This is how displacement, poverty, and of course easy access to cheap labor is achieved."

The policies of deception will have an effect when the sugar mills are built that need supporters. Additionally, the popularity that Hernando Mario has been gaining is guaranteeing the permanence of the administration. Today, when, for instance, brigades of health arrive at the communities, they are no longer coming on behalf of the administration, thanks to the general taxes and therefore a right to which all should have access, but rather it appears that it is this man who is providing them: ". . . they already have something like an internal administration."

Behind a not-very-noble wool curtain, the mining interests have been seen; they have proposed in some areas to openly exploit the land where it has already been defined and linked to companies like Anglo Gold Ashanti Mines, whose name in Colombia is Kedhada S.A. The earth is then forced to suffer these tragic events; while the administration acts as guarantor in this kind of process, which has not been difficult, with the appropriation of 75% of the land. To add insult to injury, the town appears to be advocating for the environment, with the firm intention of prohibiting the raising of pigs in garages, a source of sustenance for some families, they say because of pollution; it is nevertheless not in their plans to build a pig pen for 250 pigs.

Today, approximately five thousand people of Caramanta continue subsisting from the agricultural economy, while some six hundred work for the government and in private industry. The media makes it seem as though progress were coming because of La Tesalia Company and they do not give credit to this clear majority which continues trying to inculcate the joy of living from one's own work in search of the common good.

About mining in the open they do not give out accurate information, no matter how much it is requested in meetings. The damages to those who suffer the repercussions and their time frame are not brought out with clarity. They dig without wasting time consulting the communities, as in Yarumalito, Buenos Aires, near Sucre, in Manzanares, San José, San Antonio, only asking if the issue of mining is ok with them or not. Without much preamble, they approach the least well-informed, with the inherited weight of the boss, and go around pushing the supposed approbation, for noble ends, of the projects.

“Along the Arquía River they have already identified some four projects for micro-centers for electricity; it is believed that they will be used for all the mining work they will undertake.”

With the goal of not destabilizing the identified projects in other areas, from the administration comes the idea of building two more sugar mills, one “in a community near Valparaiso, which has optimal conditions for fruit orchards,” and the other, “in lands where coffee was traditionally grown and cattle raising.” To strengthen the production with years of experience and the existing sugar mills is not in the plans of the current administration, but rather to advance the interests of the private sector. In fact, they have already drawn up the “dream map” of the town, besides they are standing where all the waters that supply the region originate.