

Working tobacco hands

Abstract: *Workers who produce tobacco form part of an industry that is characterised by various forms of inclusion and exclusion. They have little or no access to labour rights; their working hours are long, and their wages are unregulated and subject to abuse. Work is also not the same for everyone and in particular Mexican indigenous workers are trapped by the informality that characterises farm labour governed by transnational companies such as Philip Morris and British American Tobacco.*

Key words: *Tobacco, indigenous workers, Mexico*

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It has been argued that unfree or semi-free labour, still bound to the soil, sustains capitalist industry (Basok 2002; Cohen 1999; Kearney 1986; Meillas-soux 1981). Cohen (1999) argues that “capitalism has always revived and even thrived, by deploying substantial numbers of unfree or semi-free labourers”, thus contesting Marx’s view that the capitalist mode of production relies exclusively on free wage labourers. My research, based on 14 years of fieldwork in the Coast of Nayarit in Mexico, reveals that the tobacco industry has deployed free, unfree, and semi-free labourers through different work regimes². Moreover, it is undeniable that the tobacco that companies such as Philip Morris and British American Tobacco buy and promote, is largely grown and maintained by indigenous workers who have no labour rights or dignified working and living conditions. These are families from the Huichol, Cora, Tepehuano and Mexicanero ethnic groups who, at specific times of the year, travel through the mountains of Nayarit and other nearby states to harvest and string tobacco on the Coast of Nayarit. Each and every member of the family works in tobacco, as is the custom in their communities of origin, in which all members of the domestic group participate in the domestic economy from a young age. It has been calculated that 68% of workers bring their families with them during harvesting seasons. This includes children of which 50% are under 3 years old ³.

Child labour linked to the production of tobacco has been heavily criticised by academics, NGOs and government ministries. Furthermore, from the point of view of producers and nonindigenous workers, child labour has become an obstacle to and an additional pressure in the production of tobacco. This in turn, has become a problem for tobacco companies, who, in coordination with government programmes, now aim to discourage child labour and to improve the working and living conditions of indigenous migrant workers. At the same time, nonindigenous tobacco growers believe that the issue of child labour among indigenous families is neither their business nor responsibility.

2 - Most of these photographic records presented here were taken during March 2020 on the Coast of Nayarit as part of my postdoctoral research. The project was funded by the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACyT). During this time, I accompanied tobacco growers, their families and their indigenous and nonindigenous workers, (some of whom I have known since 2006), in the tobacco fields.

3 - Information is available from: <http://www.jadefo.org.mx/jwp/florece/> (accessed 23 July 2020).

Nimble fingers

Indigenous workers are in charge of stringing the tobacco leaves onto long strings to create sartas. A sarta can consist of up to 800 tobacco leaves and an individual can make between 8 and 20 sartas per day. Working hours are not fixed but often exceed 12 hours as workers are available 24/7 since they live close to the tobacco fields during harvest season. Unlike local and seasonal nonindigenous farmworkers, indigenous farmworkers are paid on a piece-rate basis, earning 18 pesos (around 0.81 US dollars) per sarta.

Indigenous workers are seen as having nimble fingers and therefore are considered particularly suited to the activity of stringing tobacco leaves. Although nonindigenous people regard this as a valuable skill, this “positive” characteristic masks the fact that indigenous workers have to work harder to prove themselves, and, ultimately, a sense of inferiority is mobilised.

Nonindigenous workers are not willing to do the activities that indigenous workers do, which they see as being beneath them, and when they are working in the same field they rarely speak to each other. The job of nonindigenous workers consists of building ramadas (shelters with branches for roofs in the tobacco fields where indigenous workers work), spraying fertiliser and inhibitors to prevent the growth of flowering stalks (or suckers) and checking water pumps. They also hang up the tobacco sartas in outdoor structures, count them, and make tobacco bales. Their working hours vary according to the activity in question and they are paid around 250 pesos per day (around 11.2 US dollars).

Class antagonism

Does the workers’ belief in God help them to make sense of their exploitation? Ofelia and Apolinar who are indigenous workers explain that they once worked for an employer who treated them badly. He reprimanded them because they had asked him if they could borrow dishes and cooking utensils from him. Even worse than that, he then failed to pay them. However, when the employer died in an accident by crashing his car into the canal used to irrigate the tobacco and for bathing by the indigenous workers, retribution

was done: “My God made him pay,” Apolinar exclaims. For Ofelia and Apolinar, their God is a just God. He is also the God that the Franciscans taught their ancestors to worship during colonisation, but who they still worship today alongside other gods, for example, the sun and the earth. This story encapsulates sentiments of class antagonism. There are, of course, many ways in which alienation is expressed and managed. However, whereas indigenous labourers look to God as a source of justice, nonindigenous workers look to indigenous labourers to justify their own social position and reaffirm their status as workers who work no more than eight hours a day.

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A tobacco labourer, 24, cuts a new batch of tobacco leaves.



A woman and the hand of a young labourer thread tobacco leaves.





A young girl learns to thread tobacco leaves as her older sister holds up her child after breastfeeding him among the tobacco leaves.





Lunchtime in the tobacco fields. A little girl sits in the dirt to eat a tortilla made for by her older sister.



Nonindigenous workers do not talk to indigenous workers while hanging up the tobacco sartas or strings.







A nonindigenous worker ties the tobacco into bails.





The tobacco canal.