

More than one billion people in the world are employed in agriculture, and most work in extremely precarious conditions. They cannot guarantee the food security of their families. Improvements will come only if these workers are better organised and better able to engage in collective bargaining. The IUF is working with its affiliates to make this happen.

Agricultural workers still struggle for their rights

SUE LONGLEY*

“**W**e grow it, we reap it, we can't afford to eat it” – those were the words of the pay campaign of the British agricultural workers' union in the 1980s.

Thirty years later it is still as pertinent as it was then, and rings as true across the globe as it does in the UK. Agricultural workers remain at the bottom of the pay league, with wages well below the poverty line.

Low pay, however, is not the only problem facing agricultural workers. Agriculture is one of the most dangerous industries to work in, alongside construction and mining. Indeed, it is the sector with the most fatal accidents. Agricultural workers face many hazards: dangerous machinery, livestock, extremes of temperature and inclement weather, dehydration due to lack of access to potable water, and exposure to biological hazards arising from pesticides and other agro-chemicals.

Losing a breadwinner to a fatal accident or having a family member with a disability or illness caused by their work plunges many agricultural workers'

families deep into poverty, from which they cannot escape and which, in turn, pushes them into escalating food insecurity.

Agriculture is the single biggest user of child labour, accounting for 70 per cent of all child workers. Around 130 million girls and boys under 15 work in agriculture, often starting early, sometimes as young as five. They work long hours and can be involved in forms of labour that puts their health, safety and education at risk. Indeed, child slavery and child bonded labour still exist. Child labour is often hidden, when adults employed on task rates or piece rate take their children along to help them to complete the job.

Children work mostly because their parents are poor and the family needs the income they bring home to survive. Yet child labour undermines the ability of trade unions to negotiate living wages, and thus helps to maintain the cycle of poverty that traps many rural families.

The agricultural sector is also heavily dependent on migrant, temporary and seasonal workers;



* Sue Longley is the IUF's agricultural coordinator, based in their head office in Geneva. The IUF (International union of food agricultural, hotel, restaurant, catering, tobacco and allied workers) is the global trade union representing workers throughout the food chain. The IUF has 363 affiliated trade unions in 120 countries.

Box 1: Moving forward in India

Lack of employment and lack of rights are the daily reality for millions of agricultural workers in India. In 2005 the Indian parliament passed historic legislation, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), which guarantees 100 days of employment for rural households across the country. Initially focused on 200 districts, it was extended to 330 districts the following year and, from 1 April 2008, it has covered all rural districts in the country.

The potential benefits of the NREGA are significant:

- its employment guarantee goes some way towards securing livelihoods for the most marginalised section of the workforce and contributes to a reduction in extreme levels of hunger and poverty;
- it can help to sustain livelihoods in the countryside and thus to reduce urbanisation;
- it can deliver greater employment opportunities to women;
- it can develop necessary basic infrastructure in rural areas, including education, health and environmental sustainability;
- it can deliver social justice in areas of significant inequality.

The NREGA guarantees payment of the legal minimum daily wage and is specifically geared towards unskilled labourers working in water conservation, drought proofing, irrigation, repair (for example, de-silting), land development, flood control and road works. During employment, workers are entitled to drinking water, access to shade, medical kits and childcare. If workers are unable to obtain employment through the scheme, they are entitled to unemployment benefit. The act also specifies that records of funds received and projects carried out through the NREGA are publicly available at district level and can also be obtained through Right to Information legislation.

Following implementation during 2006–7, the average number of days worked per household was 17. This covered a very significant range across different states, however: from 77 days in Rajasthan to 3 days in Kerala. In the initial stages of the NREGA schemes, concerns were raised about the take-up rate and problems of corruption.

By organising workers, trade unions have managed to achieve much greater adherence to the payment of the minimum wage and to get more workers participating in the scheme. For example, members of the IUF-affiliated Andhra Pradesh Vyavasaya Vruthidarula Union (APVU) in the south of India were able to achieve three times as many work-days than the state average. In addition, while in 2006–7 40 per cent of workers in the scheme at a national level were women, in those schemes where APVU members participated, women's participation reached 52 per cent. While the average wages earned by agricultural workers before the introduction of NREGA in Andhra Pradesh ranged from Rs. 30 to a maximum of Rs. 60 per day, after the introduction of NREGA, the average wages earned have been between Rs. 81 and Rs. 93 per day. Similarly, the rate of distress migration of agricultural workers has fallen by 70 per cent in several districts of Andhra Pradesh.

In Bihar, in the north of India, where the state-wide average work per household in 2006-7 was 8 days, members of the IUF-affiliated Hind Khet Mazdoor Panchayat (HKMP) were able to obtain 60–70 days' employment. In the North Bengal district of West Bengal, in eastern India, following interventions from IUF affiliate Paschim Banga Khet Majoor Samity (PBKMS), rural workers in one area were able to get 45 days' work per household in 2006, while the district average was 12.7 days per household.

The NREGA is a major improvement in social protection for agricultural workers. It shows that by intervening actively trade unions can monitor and fight corruption and ensure that social justice is delivered to rural workers.



1 International Labour Organisation, Report IV, *Promotion of Rural Employment for Poverty Reduction*, 97th Session, 2008, International Labour Conference, Geneva http://www.ilo.org/global/What_we_do/Officialmeetings/ilc/ILCSessions/97thSession/reports/lang-en/docName-WCMS_091721/index.htm

2 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

the precarious conditions in which these workers labour often rob them and their families of food security.

In a 2008 report,¹ the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimated that more than one billion people were employed in agriculture – often in very precarious conditions. Asia accounted for the largest share (some 70 per cent of the world total), with over 700 million agricultural workers, while sub-Saharan Africa, with 192 million

workers, came second (about 20 per cent). Even so, the proportion of workers employed in agriculture is falling: while in 1991 45.2 per cent of the global workforce was employed in agriculture, by 2007 its share had fallen to 34.9 per cent. The ILO has noted, however, using information from relevant government ministries, that despite the decline, the actual number of people working in the sector has remained fairly constant and is forecast to remain so over the next 10 years.² In many countries

agriculture still employs more women than any other sector.³

Many millions of these workers in the agricultural sector are among the world's one billion chronically hungry. In a report published in 2008, the ILO noted:

Landless people are often among the chronically poor, especially in South Asia. Among the rural chronically poor in India, casual labour was the largest single occupational group. Income insecurity in migrant and seasonal labour constitutes a key factor leading to a decent work deficit. Casual labour provides few opportunities for households to invest in developing skills and building assets and unequal power relations with employers limit households' capacity to improve their security and working conditions.⁴

Yet if you look at UN policies to address food security and sustainable agriculture, you will find little, if any, recognition either of the needs of these workers or of their contribution to ensuring the global supply of food. The Comprehensive Framework for Action of the UN High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security crisis has nothing to say about the role of employed agricultural workers, although it does acknowledge the role of smallholders and their potential contribution to ensuring global food security.

The recent Declaration from the World Summit on Food Security also had nothing to say on agricultural workers. In the IUF's opinion, the failure of governments and inter-governmental organisations to understand both the contribution and the situation of agricultural workers means that both agricultural development policies and poverty elimination strategies are missing a vital element, and their effectiveness is reduced.

In 2001, after many years of campaigning by agricultural trade unions, the ILO developed and adopted a new convention on safety and health in agriculture.⁵ This gives agricultural workers the same rights in international law as other workers. Getting governments to ratify the Convention and then implement its provisions is the next big challenge. By the end of 2009, only 11 countries had ratified the Convention.

In many countries, agricultural workers are excluded from the labour code and other legislation that protects workers. In other countries, lower standards apply to them: for example, health and safety legislation often allows agricultural workers to lift heavier weights or to work longer hours than other workers. In many countries, labour inspection in agriculture is virtually non-existent.

The heart of the challenge of ensuring food security for agricultural workers is to help them to confront the restrictions they face in their attempts

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

5 International Labour Organisation, Convention no. 184, "Convention Concerning health and Safety in Agriculture", Geneva, 2001. <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc89/pdf/c184.pdf>



Photo: Svetlana Boincean/IUF

A nine-year-old Kyrgyz boy in Shymkent region, southern Kazakhstan, prepares tobacco leaves for drying. The tobacco sector in Kazakhstan is heavily dependent on migrant labour from neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. Many Kyrgyz children migrate with their parents and work alongside them in the fields.



Extract from the speech of IUF general secretary, Ron Oswald, to the International Labour Conference 2008

“It has been estimated that every percentage point increase in the price of staple foodstuffs can send an additional 16 million people into hunger. The first question to ask, therefore, is why are so many millions already on the edge, and why are so many of them employed in agriculture?”

“Where is the linkage between commodity prices, retail prices, wages and purchasing power the WTO assured us liberalised trade would achieve through the ‘optimal utilisation of resources’? Dependence on volatile global commodity prices has pushed entire populations to the brink of starvation.

“How can we rush to a faster conclusion of the Doha Round when it was the WTO regime – and the Agreement on Agriculture in particular - that facilitated import surges that have devastated vital systems of local and national food production. Between 1995 and 2000, the price of maize in Mexico fell by 70 per cent while the price of tortillas, the staple maize bread, increased by 300 per cent, and quadrupled in the space of a few months last year. In these five years, an estimated 1.3 million workers and small farmers were forced to abandon the countryside in search of work.

“Commodity prices in themselves tell us nothing about the capacity of the world’s agricultural workers to feed themselves, or the urban poor. The key issues are vulnerability, volatility, and the extraction of value along the food chain.

“In 2008, while an additional 100 million people face possible starvation as a result of rapidly rising cereal and oilseed prices, corporate profits for the traders and primary processors are at record levels. Cargill, the world’s leading trader, registered an 86 per cent increase in profits from commodity trading in the first quarter of this year. 2007 profits for ADM, the second global trader, were up 67 per cent per cent last year. Bunge, riding the wave of demand for oilseed for biodiesel, enjoyed a 77 per cent increase in first quarter profits this year. Nestlé, the world’s largest food corporation, posted exceptional 2007 profits and launched a 25 billion dollar share buyback programme - while telling its workers that higher input prices mean they should brace themselves for layoffs and wage cuts.....

“The missing link between investment, production and decent work – the title of this panel - is social regulation. No matter how many billions or even trillions flow into agriculture, this investment fails to deliver decent work and fails to advance the right to food. What we see instead is more volatility and therefore more vulnerability. Social regulation at national and sub-national level, including the implementation of ILO standards, is necessary to ensure that these capital flows are channeled into decent work, poverty alleviation and sustainable food security. Governments must have and be able to exercise the right to protect food and food workers.”

to form associations and to carry out collective bargaining. Apart from the legal barriers outlined above, another impediment they face is the feudal attitude of landowners and employers who treat agricultural workers as serfs. If workers attempt to join or form a union, they are sacked; this often means losing not only their job but also their home and access to a school for their children. Physical isolation due to distances from population centres also make it hard for trade unions to reach rural workers.

So for the IUF our priority is to work with our affiliates to ensure that agricultural workers have the same rights as other workers so that they can organise and bargain and thus ensure their own and their families’ food rights. This involves:

- setting up training programmes at plantation and national level to increase the capacity of trade unions to represent rural workers;
- building trade union influence within the major transnational companies that dominate

the food sector (for example, negotiating international framework agreements with TNCs that ensure they respect an agreed package of rights within the company);

- trying to influence national and international policy-makers to take into account the needs of agricultural workers and to acknowledge the contribution they make.

At the January 2008 Madrid summit on the food crisis, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon called for a “third track” in the response to global hunger: “the right to food, as a basis for analysis, action and accountability”. This is to be welcomed, but he was only reaffirming something that is already anchored in international law and the Charter of the United Nations. Governments have an obligation to protect, defend, and advance the right to food. The IUF understands the dual nature of food rights as both the right to food and rights for those who produce food, thus achieving decent work in agriculture is, for us, fundamental to advancing the fight against hunger. 

