

Slave-Like Labour in Brazil and the Vida Pós Resgate Project

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Between 1995 and mid-2020, [more than 55,000 workers](#) were removed from conditions analogous to slavery by the Brazilian State, without any indication that there has been a reduction in this type of criminal exploitation of labour in the country. On the contrary, many workers are repeated victims of extreme exploitation. Data from the Digital Observatory of Slave Labour in Brazil reveal that [1.73 per cent](#) (corresponding to 613 workers) of the 35,341 workers rescued between 2003 and 2017 were victims of slave labour at least twice. That number refers only to those who received Unemployment Insurance after being rescued. Research carried out by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which interviewed people rescued between October 2006 and July 2007, found that [59.7 per cent of the workers](#) had previously endured this type of situation.

Since the recurrence suggests there was no significant change in their social vulnerability, this scenario highlights the need to strengthen support measures for rescued workers.

Projeto Ação Integrada

In Brazil, there are two main public policies to support workers rescued from slave-like conditions. The first one was implemented in 2002 through an amendment to Law 7.998 of 11 January 1990. It consists of the Unemployment Insurance benefit, which is granted in three installments, each in the amount of one minimum wage to the rescued worker.

The second public policy is the Projeto Ação Integrada (PAI), which was created in 2009 as a result of a partnership among the National Union of Labour Inspectors, the National Council of Justice, the ILO and other entities. The Project offers rescued workers or vulnerable individuals professional training courses to improve their chances of being reintegrated into the labour market.

The importance of PAI's proposal is unquestionable. If implemented efficiently, it allows the worker to be more competitive when entering the labour market. Nonetheless, despite its relevance, the Project's objective constitutes its main limitation—which is structural in nature. Since it is a public policy that focuses on job offers, it ultimately depends completely on economic dynamics, particularly on the demand for a workforce. Thereby, no matter how qualified the workers are, they remain dependent on the performance of the labour market, which is, in turn, largely influenced by oscillations in the economy. Accordingly, the workers remain in a situation of structural vulnerability vis-a-vis their possibilities of physical and social reproduction, which is one of the driving factors of exploitation.

Between 2009 and 2017, PAI offered qualification courses for 106 rescued workers.[1] Among those, 72 workers were qualified during a period of economic expansion (2009 to 2014), representing 67.90 per cent, and 34 workers were qualified in a period of economic slowdown



(2015 to 2017), corresponding to 32.10 per cent. Of the workers trained in the period of economic expansion, 79.17 per cent were able to find formal employment after completing the course. However, by 2018, only 25 per cent of those were still employed in the formal sector. Of the workers who were qualified during the economic slowdown, 52.94 per cent found formal employment after participating in the course, but less than a third of those remained formally employed by 2018. These results are very similar to those experienced by rescued workers who did not go through the qualification programme.

Vida Pós Resgate

The project “Vida Pós Resgate” (Life After Rescue) was created in 2017, through a partnership between the Federal University of Bahia’s Faculty of Economics and the Federal Labor Prosecution Office for the 23rd Region, with the goal of investigating the fate of workers who have exited slave-like conditions in Brazil, particularly in the states of Mato Grosso and Bahia. The main objectives of this project are: 1) to map what happened to workers removed from slave-like conditions in Mato Grosso and Bahia between 2003 and 2016; 2) to provide subsidies for alternative initiatives that can sustain workers in the face of the instabilities of the labour market and that promote ecologically sustainable practices; and 3) to collaborate in the analysis of and adjustments or changes to the existing public policies for the assistance of rescued workers.

The Vida Pós Resgate Project defends the hypothesis—which is supported by the aforementioned data—that the professional qualification of rescued workers alone can neither ensure a stable livelihood nor reduce their vulnerability.

To sustainably combat slave labour and allow survivors and their families the ability to resist exploitation, the Vida Pós Resgate Project seeks to facilitate self-sufficient rural production. This production should be implemented, preferably, in survivors’ places of origin. The acquisition of land as well as purchase of other necessary tools for production and distribution can be carried out using funds from public civil proceedings or from the terms of conduct adjustment pertaining to lawsuits or extrajudicial procedures related to inspection activities carried out by the Federal Labor Prosecution Office (MPT) and the Secretariat of Labour Inspection (SIT).

Rural production should be carried out in a family and/or associative work regime, without subordinate ties, either related to the occupancy or ownership of the land, depending on the legal and operational ruling. The collective organization of workers should take the form of an agricultural or cooperative association, so that workers can collectively lead the production process independently. As a result, workers would no longer depend on the context of the labour market to survive and would be able to maintain their livelihood through rural activities, but under autonomous conditions.

The proposed project would serve to reduce the rural exodus, as there would be strong alternatives to the often-deceptive offers of unscrupulous recruiters because the workers



would be able to live with dignity in their places of origin. Consequently, instead of a palliative, providing rescued workers with a path towards autonomous rural production is a socially sustainable proposal. It offers the possibility of relative emancipation from the instabilities of the labour market, which is an underlying driver of exploitation and, as result, slave-like labour.

Currently, Vida Pós Resgate is being expanded from the Federal Labor Prosecution Office for the 23rd Region to the General Prosecution Office, in an effort to reach the entire country. The project is beginning to establish contact with rescued workers to evaluate their interest and profile to engage in the proposed public policy. It is also trying to establish partnerships with local governments to ensure the necessary field assistance.

[1] The following data were collected from the Projeto Ação Integrada database and the General Register of the Employed and Unemployed (CAGED).

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