

The struggle for rights

ANDY HIGGINBOTTOM looks at how Colombian cane-cutters are fighting against oppression.

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TWO weeks ago, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe declared a "state of internal commotion" or state of emergency in his country.

Colombian society is in a heightened state of turbulence, as sector after sector throw themselves into unequal and bloody struggle against the Uribe regime. And attention has been taken by two deeply oppressed sectors of the working poor, the cane-cutters and indigenous peoples.

Some 14,000 cane cutters - *corteros de caña* - have been on strike since September 15.

Human rights NGO Nomadesc reports that these hardened men work 12 to 14-hour days and get paid by the ton. In a working day, they cut three or four tons to earn little more than £5. They are African descendants and the plantations they work are found along the river Cauca valley plain in the south-west of the country on 13 ingenios.

The ingenio is a production unit dating from the days of slavery, consisting of fields of cane clustered around the mill or refinery. But this slavery is modern and exploitation has intensified in recent years with the use of supposed co-operatives to subcontract labour, which deny the *corteros* employment rights.

The employers' federation Asocaña has refused to negotiate. Instead, the riot police, the notorious ESMAD, have been sent in to break up picket lines. Scores of *corteros* have been injured. On the point of starvation, families have taken up blocking roads and it is now the women and children facing the Robo Cop assaults.

The *corteros* have captured the imagination of the country - they have made visible the hidden suffering of real Colombia and they have risked their lives to go on strike. As Berenice Celeyta of Nomadesc writes, the *corteros* "have shown the country and the world that workers' rights are obtained by the iron will to transform their current inhuman conditions."

The persecution of indigenous people is as great a scandal as the assassination of trade unionists. The national indigenous organisation ONIC reports that 1,240 of its people have been killed since Uribe came to power in 2002. ONIC declared that October 12, the 516th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of the New World, would see a *Minga* - "a great gathering of indigenous and popular resistance." There have been mobilisations across the country, with the epicentre of the protests again in the Cauca valley.

Over 10,000 indigenous people have gathered in protest at their traditional site La María Piendamó on a plateau overlooking the Pan-American Highway. The Nasa people of this region are forced to subsist on one or two-hectare plots while the big landlords and foreign corporations take the best land.

Successive governments have failed to implement agreements to return their land and so the Nasa have taken to direct action, land occupations of their *Madre Tierra* - Mother Earth - that have been heavily repressed.

So, from October 12, the indigenous assembly blocked the highway and called on Uribe to come to La María to negotiate. Instead, Uribe sent in the army and ESMAD to speak for him.

Over 100 people have been seriously injured and at least one shot dead in battles on the road and the surrounding hills.

Uribe has accused FARC guerillas of formenting both the cortero and indigenous struggles as a way of justifying repression, which is not only brutal but systematic and targeted.

Trade union activists supporting the corteros have been picked on for detention and two French reporters and a German observer have been expelled. Uribe has accused them of transmitting distorted reports and suggested a connection with the guerillas.

Such false finger-pointing is a deadly game, for official stigmatisation is the prelude to unofficial elimination.