

Brazilian coffee plantations still addicted to slave labour

The hidden suffering behind the Brazilian coffee that jump-starts American mornings

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When police rescued Abelar Rebouças from a coffee plantation in southern Brazil, he was bone thin. The 51-year-old worked long days for a month in the hot sun, hauling 15-gallon bags of coffee beans.

His drinking water came from a ditch near a septic tank, according to government reports. When his employer refused to pay his salary for a month, he said, he was forced to live off papayas and rice.

“It was a difficult life that I don’t wish on anyone,” Rebouças said. “You go there seeking a living wage and can end up in a coffin.”

Rebouças was one of more than 800 workers freed by authorities from degrading labor conditions in 2016, according to the Brazilian Labor Ministry. Brazil has been a pioneer in the global fight to [eradicate slave labor](#) since 2003, when the government drastically expanded raids on plantations and factories, raised fines for companies that violated labor laws and began publishing a “black list” of businesses caught using forced labor.

But a [stagnant economy](#) and tighter budgets have hampered the country’s fight against such abuses. Mistreated workers are now turning to the international community for help.

Dozens of victims of degrading labor conditions at coffee farms formally accused McDonald’s, Dunkin’ Donuts and Nestlé in late August of failing to ensure that their coffee is sourced from Brazilian farms that are free of slave labor.

In a complaint to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) — a group of 36 countries that promotes global trade — the workers accused the companies of lax oversight of their supply chains in violation of the organization’s binding [human rights and sustainability guidelines](#), which Brazil has signed.

The complaint is based in part on findings from a [2016 investigation](#) conducted by the Danish watchdog group Danwatch, which found that major coffee companies were unable to verify the sources of their beans and that some, including Nestlé, had purchased coffee from Brazilian farms that had used slave labor.

[\[Brazil’s largest gang is enticing recruits with a big-brother program\]](#)

Asked for a response to the OECD complaint, Nestlé and Dunkin’ Donuts said they do not tolerate violations of workers’ rights and are striving to identify the farms that produce their coffee beans. McDonald’s did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

If the OECD accepts the complaint, it will mediate between the coffee companies and farmers for resolutions, including financial compensation, changes to labor practices to prevent future violations and greater transparency in the supply chain.

Brazil has one of the world's broadest definitions of slave labor, including debt bondage, degrading conditions and long work hours.

But tighter budgets brought on by a stagnant economy have weakened the Labor Ministry's ability to investigate allegations of abuse. Inspections in 2017 were half of what they were in 2013, according to Brazilian government figures. Last year, 341 people were rescued from degrading working conditions, compared with nearly 6,000 in 2007.

Brazil's slave history

Brazil is the world's [largest coffee producer](#), responsible for one-third of the world's beans. But farm owners have always depended upon cheap labor, first from more than 1.5 million [African slaves](#) who worked on the plantations in the 19th century and later from Italian immigrants. Today, most laborers come from impoverished Bahia state in Brazil, and they are often lured to the plantations with fake promises of high wages and decent working conditions.

"People have no idea this is happening. There has to be a better way," said Liordino Soares, 44, one of the rescued workers who signed the complaint to the OECD.

Soares said that the economic stagnation in his hometown of Tanhacu meant that his wife, Joana, and two children sometimes went hungry while he searched for a job. Twenty years ago, he convinced Joana that they should spend three months a year picking coffee in southern Brazil.

"We had to leave," he said. "I was the sole supporter. If we didn't go, the family would starve."

Every June, they take a 28-hour bus ride from his home in dry, desert-like Bahia to the lush mountains of Minas Gerais state, where half of Brazil's coffee is produced.

At the time of their rescue in 2015, the couple worked 14-hour days picking coffee — their only respite from the sun being the muddy water from a well. They shared a two-bedroom house with three couples and two children. For privacy, the families erected walls made of coffee-filter rags.

Coffee produced at the plantation where the couple worked was purchased by Nestlé, according to the Danwatch investigation. Nestlé said its purchases were made before the investigation, and it has since cut ties with the plantation.

[\[Imprisonment of ex-president Lula seen as potential turning point for Brazil\]](#)

In their complaint, the workers appealing to the OECD demanded that coffee companies be held responsible for their suppliers' labor violations.

"They can no longer argue that they don't know what is happening," said Tamara Hojaij, a researcher at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a university in Sao Paulo that has helped the workers build their case.

Asked to respond to the workers' charge, Nestlé said in a statement that it encourages its suppliers to report any violations. Currently, the company said, it can confirm that 85 percent of its coffee is purchased responsibly.

Tracing the beans

The coffee workers are not the first to take Brazilian labor disputes to international organizations. Last year, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights [ordered Brazil to pay \\$5 million](#) to workers formerly enslaved on a cattle ranch. Increasingly, multinational companies are having to answer for violations committed by their suppliers. Last year, Brazil's labor court held the clothing company Zara responsible when a subcontractor employed slave labor at a Brazilian factory.

But following a coffee bean from stalk to mug can be nearly impossible. Unlike a pair of jeans sourced from a specific sweatshop and tagged to a specific designer, commodities are often sold in bulk from cooperatives that buy from diverse sources.

Dunkin' Donuts said it is studying ways to trace coffee to individual producers and that it ceases relationships with coffee suppliers that do not comply with its code of conduct. The company reserves the right to periodically inspect supplier farms.

"Dunkin' Brands is committed to treating everyone with respect and fairness, from our employees and franchisees to the farmers and workers that provide our coffee and other ingredients," the company said in a statement.

Dunkin' Donuts said its coffee exporters in Brazil told the company that they do not sell beans from any farms included in this year's black list.

While coffee that is 100 percent traceable does exist in Brazil, it comes at a 30 percent markup, according to Vanusia Nogueira, director of the Brazilian Specialty Coffee Association, because of the high levels of oversight required. After the 2016 Danwatch investigation, companies came searching for coffee beans whose origins could be documented, but many were not willing to pay for it, Nogueira said.

"There was a wave of concern, but then it cooled," she said.

Amid growing concerns over labor conditions, coffee farmers are increasingly turning to automation. The rural workers' union estimates machines have cut farm labor by more than half in the past 10 years and shortened the harvesting season by two months.

While many are calling for stricter labor oversight, some migrants in Brazil's desolate northeast believe that any job is better than no job. Joana Soares, the woman rescued from slave labor with her husband in 2015, goes back to the coffee fields every year. She said government raids on coffee farms have spooked owners.

"The situation is worse," she said. "Now, fewer people want to take us."

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