

Hard work for your

Peter Bengsten, of Danish organisation DanWatch, travelled to Brazil to investigate working conditions at the bottom of the sweets supply chain.

Pearls of sweat are running down Pedro's forehead. The dark, slim 19-year-old with disproportionately large hands bends over and puts palm leaves out to dry in the scorching sun. Here on the palm tree plantation 50 kilometers west of Fortaleza in north eastern Brazil, the temperature in the sun at midday easily passes 40°C.

Pedro is one of the 100,000 to 200,000 agricultural workers in the carnauba wax industry in the dry season, from August to December.

"I work when there is light. From five in the morning to five in the evening", says Pedro. "This has been my job since I was 14".

The carnauba palm grows only in the semi-arid climate of north eastern Brazil, amongst the poorest regions of the country. Around 15,000 tonnes are exported annually to the USA, Europe and Asia, where it is used primarily in cosmetics, polishes - and confectionary. In 2008 exports were worth €68.4m.

In its homeland the wax protects the carnauba palm leaves from drying out in the strong sun. Sweets manufacturers exploit carnauba wax's unique properties as a coating - to prevent sweets like M&Ms and fruit gums sticking together, but it is also found in chewing gums and chocolates.

Working conditions

First the leaves are cut off from the top of the tall palm trees with a curved knife fastened to the end of a ten to twelve meter long bamboo stick. Workers must avoid being hit by the pointy palm leaves falling towards the ground. Far from everyone has protection for eyes, head and legs.

After this the leaves are stacked, and the agricultural workers - or donkeys if

they can afford them - drag the leaves up to several kilometers to a clearing. Here the leaves are spread out to dry in the sun. To extract the wax, the palm leaves are beaten. Until last decade

"In the dry season the carnauba wax workers of north eastern Brazil toil 10 to 12 hours a day in extreme heat for marginal pay. But there is no other work in the drought season"

this was a job for women. Today, usually, it is done by machines mounted on trucks. Fine wax powder is flung into the air. Few workers wear masks and get it in their lungs. The powder is then boiled. According to the workers there is only one way to remove boiling wax from the body - by also removing the skin.

And yet, says Johannes Maehlmann, a carnauba wax trader who sells to Europe's largest importer, German Kahl & Co: "You rarely find helmets, protective glasses or equipment that is more advanced than what was used a century ago". Johannes has been in the business most of his life. He has not seen much development in working methods, he says.

This is the general view amongst exporters, trade organisations, landowners and the agricultural workers themselves.



Collecting carnauba leaves



Worker bags dusty wax powder without mask



Worker melting wax without protection

Photographs © DanWatch

sweet tooth



The tough conditions are no secret. It has simply always been like that.

Less than the minimum wage

Pedro with the big hands earns €1.2 Euro an hour, for 12 hours each day, five days a week. He does not complain. "I am happy for my job. There is no other work in the countryside in the dry season" Pedro says.

Deeper into the countryside wages are even lower. 100 kilometers south-east of Fortaleza, where the sun burns relentlessly, I meet Flavio, a landowner whose family has worked with carnauba for three generations.

Flavio's agricultural workers

earn as little as 100 Reais per week – not unusual in the business. That is €0.8 an hour and well below the Brazilian minimum wage of 510 Reais per month.

According to Jackson Dantas Coêlho, research co-ordinator for the Brazilian development bank Banco do Nordeste: "Only God knows how a Brazilian family can survive on a minimum wage or less".

In the wax industry capital

Fortaleza, the biggest city in northern Brazil, is the capital city of the wax industry, where factories process the wax for export.

In the industrial area on the outskirts of the city, I am received by Director of the Pontes Group, Lara Pontes, in her air conditioned office. Pontes is one of the four major companies responsible for half of Brazil's exports of carnauba wax.

"We have set up a fund that aids children living in the vicinity of the factory", says Lara Pontes. However, the Pontes group does not have social responsibility initiatives that reach the agricultural workers who supply wax to the factory.

I was told the same when speaking to CEO Ana Carolina Fontelene from Foncepi, the biggest wax exporter: "We do not make control visits of working conditions in the countryside. Our customers only ask for information about the working conditions in the company," she says. "But it is interesting. We will consider doing it in the future."

Today there are no organisations in Fortaleza promoting improvements in working conditions in the countryside. Until a few years ago, Instituto Sertão was a persistent advocate for improving the working conditions of agricultural workers.

According to Oscar d'Alva, a former employee: "None of the major exporters were interested in making initiatives to improve working conditions in the countryside or to raise the wage level of the agricultural workers."

"Very simple initiatives can make a difference," says Oscar: "In order to increase safety, one could give masks to those working with powder and lightweight rods for those cutting leaves off palms. That way productivity could also be increased."

Social responsibility

Social responsibility is not unknown in the wax industry – but it has not reached working conditions in rural areas.

"It is the first time that I have heard a European journalist asking about the workers in rural areas", says Edgar



Worker pressing wax

Gadelha, president of Sindicarnauba, the trade organisation of wax exporters in the state of Ceara.

However, when it comes to quality control, organic farming and projects for children, Brazilian companies are on the way. Several of the major exporters in Brazil have ISO certified quality systems. Both Foncepi and Carnauba do Brasil, another of the four major wax exporters, now sell organic wax. Furthermore, Carnauba do Brasil are examining what to do in order to become certified for CO2 emissions, says head of exports Marina Azevedo.

Edgar Gadelha of the trade organisation Sindicarnauba, happily talks about social responsibility and has, for several years, collaborated with the American wax company SC Johnson, which he praises for social responsibility. Gadelha owns a small company, Natural Wax, and is dedicated to preserving endangered natural areas and developing sustainable factory production.

"Maybe the exporters are ready to take more social responsibility now," says Oscar d'Alva. "If changes are to happen... the major importers and end-users have to come into play. They have to demand social responsibility."

This is an edited version of an article first published in Danish in Politiken (Nov. 2010), translated by the author. More background material will appear later in this pdf.

DanWatch is an independent research centre based in Denmark that researches corporate social responsibility of companies with interests in the developing world.

See www.danwatch.dk.