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# AT WHAT COST

HUMAN TRAFFICKING |

| FORCED LABOR |

| CHILD LABOR

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## AT WHAT COST \_ Wasson: A Day in Cane

The bus comes to the batey at six a.m. It's an old yellow school bus, now full of men who ride back and forth between the growing sugar cane and the cacophony of their makeshift shanties and derelict company housing. Sometimes they are of school age but no one is learning anything except how to cut cane - and you're an expert in that after two days. Some of the cutters are quite young - and all are strong - but it's hard and you can't do it forever. Injury or exhaustion will find you eventually

The fields are about thirty minutes away but it's often dark in the morning and then again twelve hours later in the night - so you don't see the rest of the bateyes stretched along the road, the unfiltered water trenches which do double duty for sewage and cleaning in the flickering light of undependable electricity. The only other vehicles are the old buses which take women into town to look for work as domestic help or the fast moving, highly polished SUVs of the sugar company supervisors.

The cane is ready to be cut every day of the week during the season; a clean swipe at the bottom to set it free and then a smooth movement across the top to remove the leafy ends. Some mornings the fires needed to dry the cane out are still burning around the cutters - smoke clouding around the men and small red flames licking in the stalks.

By the end of the day piles of cane marked by sticks indicating each man's number are laid out for loading onto the ancient trains which run back and forth to the mill. In a good, twelve hour day a strong man can cut ten piles - maybe three tons of cane. For this he will receive approximately \$7.50.

Wasson is one of those young men. He is twenty-one, tall, strong and handsome, and tells his story in a soft voice belying years of pain. He was born in Haiti but when his parents died his brothers and sisters needed someone to provide for them. Unable to find a job in Haiti, where unemployment is currently at 70%, he followed the path of many before him and came over the border to the Dominican Republic and found a sugar plantation in Barahona. This journey is a complicated one - because it serves the purposes of many companies for the legality of working in the Dominican Republic to be unclear. A labor agent can promise you a job but not provide a contract - and without a contract you have no right to be in the country. But everyone says that Haitians work incredibly hard - so no one wants the flow of labor to stop.

With an unpredictable salary of less than eight dollars a day it's impossible for Wasson to do much more than feed himself and buy clean drinking water, which isn't provided. His clothes are worn and dirty and his feet are covered with old sandals - though he uses a sharp machete which could remove a limb in a moment's slip. There is no field hospital and often the workers are far from someone with a radio should an accident happen.

As difficult as the situation in the fields is, Wasson is trapped. Friends who stay in Haiti have even fewer options - staying in a village means almost no

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employment. Heading into Port au Prince, the capital, to live in the slums and perhaps work on roads for the government might provide only \$1.75 per day - and in a city where a can of rice is .70 cents this doesn't go far. Others crossing the border have gone to construction jobs in Santo Domingo to work on fast rising residential towers or tourist hotels on the beautiful beaches, but these jobs often end with immigration buses being called before final payments are made to illegal workers - and the living conditions in the urban slums are even worse than in the fields.

While Wasson continues to work impossibly long days and balance a difficult existence a legal struggle is being fought. Internationally and locally led organizations like Solidarity Center, and CEAJURI are supporting negotiations for acceptable payment amounts while others, MUHDA and CEDAIL, have focused on creating a clear, legal right to work for those coming over the border and citizenship for those born of Haitian descent. Additionally, the construction union, which represents a new migration away from sugar cane towards construction, is working to train and organize workers of Haitian descent to help them get better working conditions in both countries.

These efforts are undertaken against a historical backdrop of aggression between the countries which has led to entrenched misunderstanding and racism. Some members of the government have made steps towards solving these problems while others have exacerbated the issues. Currently, the children of parents of Haitian ancestry are routinely denied birth certificates and access to education. Under current migration law, undocumented Haitian migrants remain "in transit" in the Dominican Republic, forcing hundreds of thousands of migrant workers and their children to live in continuing statelessness.

There are bright spots - CEDAIL's win of a class action suit for Haitian sugar cane workers was a major milestone and the organizing of construction workers has a strong momentum. Additionally, a Barahona mining cooperative has recently, after a long struggle, was able to purchase a chalk mine. Though the cost of equipment and lack of investment capital make turning a profit a serious challenge, their example is one that may be followed.

Ultimately, without the resolution to the working conditions and a response to the migratory status of Haitian workers and their families, neither the Dominican Republic nor Haiti can develop the beauty and richness of their land into sustainable economic societies - and Wasson can neither stay nor go home - creating an existence in limbo, marked only by endless work.

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