

## Catering for the Coal Industry

### Introduction

Colombia is the sixth largest exporter of coal and the largest coal producer in South America. Production has increased by 80% in the past ten years. Drummond, a US based corporation, own and manage the Drummond open cast coal mine in La Loma, Cesar in the north of Colombia. In 2007 they exported nearly 23million tons of coal to the US and Europe. Approximately 3000 people are employed to work in the mine, 400 of which work in the catering section.



I am with *La Loma* branch of Sinaltrainal, the national union of food and drinks workers, listening and documenting the conditions in which they work.<sup>1</sup> This report is focused on the lives of those who prepare and serve the food necessary for the mine to function. They want people outside of La Loma to hear of their inhumane, dangerous and humiliating working conditions. Reading and sharing this report helps to break the invisibility of the exploitation within the global coal infrastructure.

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<sup>1</sup> I work in Colombia with the [Red de Hermandad](#), a network of social organisation, unions, small scale farming organisations, students groups, woman's' groups who campaign and work together for a socially just peace in Colombia.

## Drummond and Subcontraction

Drummond is a privately owned US Corporation who principally engages in mining. In the late 1980s, Drummond acquiring the mining rights to La Loma coal and a Caribbean port, taking advantage of the neoliberal deregulation that was occurring.

Coal exports from La Loma grew from 1 million tons in 1995 when production began to 22.9 million tons in 2007 and profits reached \$1.15 billion in 2007. They are legally obliged to pay 10% royalties for this 25000 acre mine but on occasions they have had to be taken to court to force them to pay. The money has not arrived into the communities most affected by the mining operations.



Drummond also owns the mining rights to El Descanso (55000 acres) due to open in February 2009, Rincon Hondo and Similoa reserves. According to their website they "controls reserves totalling over 2 billion tons" and that "Drummond has an 5% share of the global coal export trade, making it the equal fifth largest coal exporter in the world"<sup>2</sup>. The majority of Colombia's coal exports are shipped to European markets.

In December 2005 Caves GHL, an Ecuadorian company, won the contract to provide catering and hospitality for La Loma, Drummond. I as told that this contract was worth £13.75 million annually. In the last month Drummond renewed this contract with Caves. The value is unknown but the union reasonably assume it is much larger as the workforce and costs have grown.

All of the catering and hospitality workers, except for the administration who are employed directly by Caves GHL, have permanent contracts with Servicooptel. Servicooptel is a supposed workers' cooperative, common in Colombia as a way for Companies avoiding meeting the necessary legal requirement for their employees. In the case of Caves GHL, the union has discovered that Servicooptel is not registered in the Chamber of Commerce. They have falsified documents and created a façade of a Cooperative that does not exist.

*"We have contracts with Servicooptel but we are employees of Caves. There is no separate administration. Caves pays us and writes Servicooptel on the payslip."<sup>3</sup>*

At the time of conducting these interviews there are rumours that mass sackings are coming. Despite the permanent contracts, Caves could achieve this by ending their

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<sup>2</sup> [www.drummondco.com/operations/coal/Colombia.aspx](http://www.drummondco.com/operations/coal/Colombia.aspx)

<sup>3</sup> All quotes are from interviews conducted by the author between 14/01/08 and 17/01/08. Names are omitted where requested by the person.

supposed contract with Servicooptel. Caves claims that the union does not exist, as they are members of a cooperative and thus cannot unionise. Yet the evidence shows clearly that they are employees of Caves and that Servicooptel does not exist.

Caves GHL carry out the events and actions documented in this report. However it is important to recognize that Drummond is responsible for the well being of all workers within their mine, whether or not they are directly contracted or subcontracted.

*“We are workers of Drummond, through the company Caves, as we work inside Drummond’s private mine preparing food for Drummond”*

The Caves employees fulfil a variety of jobs; Cooks, kitchen assistants, cleaners, laundry, drivers, waitresses, servers. Twelve cooks and kitchen assistants work from 7pm to 5am every night cooking and washing up the pots for 3300 meals; 1500 breakfasts and 1800 lunches. During the 5am – 3pm shift and the 9am to 7pm shift people load the food into vehicles and the drivers transport the prepared food from the



main kitchen to the 20+ canteens across the mine where canteen staff serve it to the miners. Their basic shift is nine hours with one hour unpaid break, with frequent overtime. The workers produce, serve and clean up after 5720 meals a day, two million meals a year.

#### **Money: “It doesn’t last the month”**

They all receive the national minimum salary; £147 a month with overtime on top. They receive £8.30 a month from the government for transport and a £22 bonus that they won in their June 2008 strike.

They do not receive a pension or financial support with accommodation or transport, necessary as the majority of employees travel to La Loma for their 12day work stint and return home to their families in surrounding cities. £18.75 is deducted from their basic salary monthly to pay for their social security, a further £3 is deducted to pay for the food they eat on shift. At the end of each month they take home £155.50, meaning that they and the families they support live on £5.00 a day.

Leni has an eight-year-old daughter who lives with Leni’s mum in Valledupar as she is unable to care for her and work shifts at the same time. This is the same situation for many of the women. Leni sees her in the holidays and sometimes on her rest days when she has the money. Her room in La Loma costs her £50 and she gives her mum £70 a month. Two return trips to Valledupar costs her £25 Leaving her with £10 for her own food daily calls to her daughter, clothes and savings.

Under the old contract Caves GHL received approximately £37000 a day of which just £2000 goes towards salaries. While the employees struggle to make the money last the month, Caves makes profits beyond the imagination for those who do the physical hard work.

## Discrimination

The majority of the women in Caves are the sole providers for their families: access to employment is necessary for them if they are to feed and house their children. Claves have directly said they no longer want women working for them as they get injured easier, get pregnant and cannot carry as much weight, not as cheap or as efficient. The workforce is gradually being replaced with men. Up until 2007 70% of the workers were women but by the end of 2008 it had reduced to 40%.

Those who do become pregnant endure constant harassment. Duvi (right) is six months pregnant. She has a high-risk pregnancy and her gynaecologist has advised her to work three hours a day. Caves refused and she is being forced to continue working her normal job or else resign. Supervisors put her to work in high risk uncomfortable areas; wet areas where she could slip and lose the baby and her own life; cleaning areas where she must use dangerous chemicals; areas where she has to bend down uncomfortably. Instead of taking measure to make it easier for her, the supervisors are doing all they can to bully her into resigning, and thus avoid paying the three months of maternity leave she will be entitled to.



Jennis Hernandez told me a similar story She was put to work in the canteen near the geology buildings that has the highest level of chemicals hazardous for babies. She was also sent to work in the largest canteens with not enough staff so had to work even harder than normal. Her supervisor ordered one of her colleagues to make life difficult for her and he let her know that he was orchestrating this.

*“I would go to get the salad to carry it out and it wouldn’t be there... my timesheets would disappear and I would almost miss being paid. I confronted my supervisor with this and we argued. Later I went to the toilet and discovered I was bleeding.”*

The bleeding continued and at 6 months she was signed off sick from stress related illnesses and was ordered to rest by doctor. The baby was born a month premature but is now 4months old and healthy.

Another example of discrimination is the lack of opportunity to be promoted.

*“In this kitchen there are 8 women that I consider capable of being supervisors but they are never promoted. Instead they bring in new people who don’t know how to do the job and we end up teaching them. There is no future for us, no chance of being promoted or of studying”*

In total there are twenty-seven supervisors, managers and bosses. Twenty-one are male, twenty-five are white, and all come from middle or upper class families. For however hard they work and extra studies they do in their own time many doors are closed to them because of their skin colour, gender and class.

## **Bodies under assault**

### **Swallowing coal dust**

The people I interviewed stressed the difficulty to live on the salary they receive but what they consider more unjust is that the salary does not reflect the damage to their health from the contamination.

*“Some of the dining halls are just 15m away from where they are physically working. And yet Caves gives us the cheapest dust masks which aren’t as effective as those the miners and supervisors wear. ... We even have to wear the masks on the bus as they are not suitable for transporting people in a coal mine ”*



The impact of particulate matter, produced by activities associated with opencast mining including earth moving, excavation, coal extraction and diesel emissions from vehicles and machinery necessary for the open-casting operation. Both short-term and long-term exposure to particulate matter is consistently associated with respiratory and cardio-vascular illness, including asthma, emphysema and chronic bronchitis as well as mortality and other ill health effects.

*“We have a superficial medical examination every year. We have to walk back and forth and breathe in and out. What does that tell them or us about the state of our lungs? We are swallowing the same coal dust as the miners, as the gringos that come to visit and who have specialist treatment on their lungs when they return to the US I worry for my health in ten fifteen years, will I still be able to work? How will I feed my children? I am sadly sure that Caves will not take any responsibility for our illnesses later in life.”*

### **Injured bodies**

Those who work in catering are prone to accidents; sharp knives, heavy weights, wet floors, hot ovens and food, repetitive movements. Accidents do happen but from what I was told, there is little attempt at either prevention or cure.

- Biances Lopez was severely cut in 2008 when a supervisor was playing with knives and lacerated her hand as she came through the door. She was given nine days of sick leave after which she had to return to work or lose her job. The constant movement in her hand gave her ongoing pain and meant that the scar did not heal properly.
- On 24th December 2007 Saul Chacon fell while at work. He was carrying two large thermos filled with juices across a wet floor. He hurt his back and removed

a chunk of flesh from his hand. Despite the pain, the local doctor said that nothing was wrong. He believes the doctor has an agreement with Caves, as it is common for the doctor to ignore health problems that they have. He has had to return to work but the day after I spoke with him he was taking himself to Valledupar to see another doctor as had been unable to sleep for the pain he was in.

- Beti Mejia Gamara was carrying a 25kg tub filled with onions when she felt a sudden pain in the back and shooting pains in her legs. She kept working for the rest of her shift, working gently to try to mitigate pain. As she waited for the bus to carry her out the mine, she couldn't bear the pain anymore and started crying. A supervisor walked passed and ignored her.

She went to the local health centre and was given three days sick leave after which, despite continued pain, Beti was refused more sick leave. She requested pain relief so she could tolerate working. The pain continued so she went to see a specialist and was diagnosed as having three slipped discs. She had an operation but pain has continued. She was in and out of hospital for 6 months. She had to see private doctors, as the National Insurance (EPS initials in Spanish) would only pay for her operation and time in hospital. They would not pay for the necessary drugs or the consultations. To date she has had to pay £530 for consultancies and medicines yet her incapacity benefits is £94 a month. *"If it wasn't for the rooms that I sublet to miners in my house me and my children would be in serious trouble"*. She wants to return to work as doesn't like not being useful. But more than a year later she is still in frequent pain.

- Yeni Murillo lost strength in her right hand in May 2008 and was diagnosed with Carpal Tunnel Syndrome. She suffered severe pain and was unable to write, eat with her right hand and do her shoelaces up. The doctor diagnosed that it had been caused by extreme changes in temperature. She would spend an hour serving food with her right arm over a hot counter that has a temperature of 130°C and then would have to enter into a freezer at -10°C. Caves understands the risks but refuses to take measures to protect their employees. She has had laser surgery with a private clinic and is now better but has had to return to work in the same conditions.

The limited and often absent service of the EPS is a serious problem and many workers complained to me about this as it does not cover medicines or appointments. They could get private insurance for £15 a month, £3 less than what they have to pay to the EPS, which would pay all medical costs.

Kitchens are hazardous working locations, yet routinely people who have had accidents at work are threatened with the sack if they do not continue working despite ongoing pain. Saul told me *"Caves does not care for the health of workers, they only care about making us work under harder and harder time pressures and they certainly do not want to employ more people to cover us when we are ill"*.

Furthermore, Caves GHL fails to take actions to protect the health of the workers:

- There are not enough gloves for handling hot dishes.
- Request for broken boots to be repaired or replaced are ignored. This is an accident waiting to happen that could be serious if carrying hot pans.
- Beti, before her accident requested a support belt for lifting the weights but was refused it.
- Men are expected to lift 50kg and women 25kg. No training is given on how to do lift heavy weights without damaging the back. Beti was shown how to by her private doctor but a little too late.
- Made to work with extreme changes in temperatures. In thirteen of the canteens they have to wash up in an area where there is no shelter from the sun and then enter into freezers.



Occupational health concerns seems of little importance to Caves or of the Supervisors of Drummond who oversee the canteens to monitor the conditions.

*“We deserve that they take responsibility for our health and that they care of illnesses that we suffer as a result of our work”*

### **Emotional well-being**

The damage to their health is not just to the material health, but also to their mental well being. Shifts are controlled by overzealous supervisors and by rules that limit their actions they do.

In June 2008 twelve people *“who fought for what was fair”* were sacked. The colleagues responded and a weeklong spontaneous strike hit Caves and consequently the entire operations at Drummond. They won the £22 bonus, an extra day of rest and formed La Loma branch of Sinaltrainal.

However after the strike Caves has increased the harassment, interpreted by the Union treasurer as collective punishment for having the audacity to demand better conditions as well as part of their drive to increase profits through greater productivity.

If they are given a drink by one of the miners they must hand it over to a supervisor, they are not allowed to even eat leftovers. Leftovers are thrown away despite the daily gathering of children outside the canteen in the village begging for food.



Left over rice and black bean stew



Children outside canteen in the village

A shift in the canteen in La Loma starts at 2am and the women should be picked up from their home by a car. If it doesn't show up they don't get paid; yet the village is unsafe at night to walk alone. Women are forced to choose between the risk of sexual and physical violence or losing a days' wage.

Punishment is handed out to those who break the rules; three women were suspended early in January 2008 for drinking a bottle of water and in the last few days the punishments have increased. In this week, supervisors are now threatening suspension in terms of months not days; one month if you arrive late, two months of suspension if you turn up for the wrong shift, one month if arrive late.

'Errors' in payslips have become more widespread and many women told me that they were ignored if they complained. Rules are broken that benefit the company. For example, the 9am – 7pm shift should stop work at 6.30 so they can eat dinner before they catch the bus. They are not paid for this half an hour yet they are often made to keep working until 6.40, sometimes 6.45 leaving them little time to eat before the bus and Caves getting free overtime from them. There is never any slack in favour of the worker.

### **La Loma Sinaltrainal**

The employees are humiliated and harassed and work as through under a military regime. The majority of the staff lack the confidence and skills to confront this situation. The work of the union committee is vital as they are constantly challenging unjust practices, demanding that their colleagues are treated as human beings. I have sat in on many meetings of the Union committee and perceive them as being dedicated and courageous in their defence against the workplace tyranny. The end of Servicooptel would mean the end to the new union branch and the removal of the people who refuse to be silenced in their defence of their colleagues.



In Colombia, union activity in general faces a special situation whereby the most basic of actions, like union organizing, are often met with threats and assassinations. In 2001 the President and Vice-President of the local branch of Sintraminergética, the union representing the miners in Drummond, were taken off the private bus on their way to work and executed. Seven months later the new President was killed in the same way.

A former government intelligence officer, Rafael Garcia, testified under oath that:

*"I saw Drummond's top man in Colombia, Augusto Jimenez, pass a briefcase full of about \$200,000 to the right wing paramilitary headed by Jorge 40 (Rodrigo Tovar Pupo) with the orders to kill the two workers"*

*"I know the relation of Drummond with the Bloque Norte paramilitary. Drummond paid the Bloque Norte to supposedly guard its transportation of coal from the mine to its Caribbean port. Drummond paid a terrorist group for safe passage for protection! .... Drummond also hires private security who are members of the paramilitary and Drummond knows they are part of the paramilitary."<sup>4</sup>*

Paramilitary groups continue to operate in La Loma, as they do around the country, despite supposed demobilisation. The organising work of Sinaltrainal La Loma is risky work but as Rafael Polo from the union tells me *"We have no reason to be scared. We are doing nothing wrong only demanding what is just"*

### **Life in La Loma**

*"Our streets should be paved with gold, the wealth this village has produced. Instead it is covered in dust"*

The majority of workers in the Drummond mine do not live permanently in La Loma, but rent a bed in the village. The permanent residents of La Loma live in adobe or bricks houses. The village has a water infrastructure but the water is not treated. Most houses have a well, as the public water does not have sufficient pressure to meet peoples' needs. I was told by one resident that when he arrived in the village eight years ago a well of 6m was sufficient but now they are dug to a depth of 40m. Drummond uses water in a vain attempt to control the dust. An electric pump is used to get the water out though electricity is turned off once or twice a week as a form of collective punishment for those who have not, or cannot, pay.



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<sup>4</sup> Paramilitaries and Mining Companies in Colombia (Jackson S.)  
<http://www.counterpunch.org/jackson05052007.html>

The only paved roads are those that run in to the main plaza, filled with coaches carrying workers in and out of the mine. The streets are filled with signs offering mobile minutes, laundry services to the miners and rooms for rent. Other services are offered, including child prostitution.

The dust generated by the open-pit mine covers everything in La Loma. The dust permeates in to peoples' homes, clothes and lungs and the long-term consequences are little understood by the village residents.



**The daily repeated task of getting the pump to draw water.**

### **Conclusion**

Despite working in a coal mine that produces £1.15billion profits every year, Caves employees' work under slave like conditions with little prospect of life improving. Drummond participates in this exploitation by action, omission or permission.

Deregulation has enabled both Colombia's natural resources and the wealth generated to be owned and exported by foreign companies. The lives of the employees who cater for the Colombian coal industry is a struggle to survive, financially and emotionally. Their struggle deserves our attention and our support.