

WRITERS AT RISK: Leonardo Sakamoto

by Cathal Sheerin

When it was revealed in 2014 that the Brazilian company JBS, one of the biggest meat processing businesses in the world, had been feeding maggot-infested meat to its employees, the media reacted with a string of lurid headlines and images that seemed to be designed to test the gag reflexes of readers. But the gruesome emphasis on tiny wriggling creatures on dinner plates also focused attention on a much nastier truth about the working conditions of many in Brazil.



Illustration by Maxine Young

Leonardo Sakamoto

The maggots came to light after Brazil's Minister of Work initiated a court case that resulted in JBS being fined R\$2.3 million. The court found that a JBS plant in Mato Grosso (a large, central state in the Amazonian rain forest) had violated labor laws and employed abusive working practices. The company had exposed its workers to ammonia gas, which in low doses causes skin and breathing problems, and in high doses can result in death; some of JBS's employees were working twenty-hour days. The most poignant detail of the investigation—and testimony to the poverty in which some of Brazil's workers live—came from a federal inspector's report: “[When] they found maggots in the meat some stopped eating; others continued because they just had no other option.”

Not everyone was shocked by these revelations. Among those least surprised were the reporters and social scientists at Repórter Brasil, a workers' rights NGO founded and directed by the outspoken and prolific journalist Leonardo Sakamoto.

Sakamoto, forty, has covered conflicts and human rights abuses in East Timor, Pakistan, and Angola, but his special interest is in improving the conditions of Brazil's workers and in ridding the country of slave labor. His work with Repórter Brasil saw him awarded the Combating Slave Labor Prize in 2006; he is currently the organization's representative on Brazil's National Commission for the Eradication of Slave Labor.

Brazil has long had a problem with slave labor (defined as forced work in degrading conditions with little or no financial compensation). Since 1995, when the country recognized that it was a national problem, approximately 50,000 people have been rescued from working in such conditions. In 2003, Brazil began keeping an official "dirty list" of Brazilian companies fined for making employees work in slave labor conditions; these companies stayed on the list for two years, during which time banks could not offer them loans and sales of their products were restricted. It was an extremely effective measure in the fight against slave labor, but—following a lawsuit filed by the Real Estate Developers' Association—it was suspended in 2014. In order to make up for this loss, Repórter Brasil began compiling its own list.

Sakamoto's work exposing abusive practices by large companies has made him enemies among the rich and powerful. Their responses have gone far beyond the usual threats and intimidation experienced by truth-telling journalists in Brazil. In 2016, a court order revealed that JBS was behind a digital advertising campaign that sought to blacken Sakamoto's reputation by accusing him of dishonesty and of being in the pay of former President Rousseff. Also in 2016, the newspaper *Edição do Brasil* published a completely fabricated interview with Sakamoto in which it quoted him as saying, "The retired are useless to society." This led to a barrage of abuse, including death threats, which can never be taken lightly in Brazil, where according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, thirty-seven reporters have been murdered because of their work since 1992.

Sakamoto has also been harassed through the courts. In 2015, he faced a criminal defamation lawsuit brought against him by Pinuscam, a Brazilian timber company that Sakamoto revealed had been

targeted in a federal government operation to rescue workers from slave labor conditions.

Corruption is endemic in Brazil, largely due to the money that changes hands between politicians and the business sector. In this climate, the free press is under threat. As Sakamoto wrote in October 2015:

We're living in a period of worrying attacks on freedom of expression, which are carried out by businesses, the government, and politicians, all of whom resort to the courts to prevent us from publishing information that is in the public interest. Some want us to be censored. Others demand millions in damages... This affects everyone: the right, the left, the center, independent bloggers, the traditional media, me, you. A person who feels unjustly slandered has the right to turn to the law. However, there's a world of difference between this and actions that are clearly intended to discourage the journalist from reporting information that political or economic powers want kept secret.

Calls for the investigation of death threats against Leonardo Sakamoto, and for him to receive appropriate protection, may be sent to:

Roderigo Janot
Procurador-Geral da República do Brasil
SAF Sul, Quadra 04, Conjunto C
Bloco A, Sala C-15 - Procuradoria-Geral da República
Brasília, Brasil Email: pge-atendimento@mpf.mp.br

You may want to use this [sample letter](#). Please also send a copy of your letter to your nearest Brazilian diplomatic representative. In Washington, D.C., it is:

The Honorable Luiz Alberto Figueiredo Machado
Ambassador of Brazil
3006 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington DC 20008
Fax 202-238-2827 email: pd.washington@itamaraty.gov.br

Cathal Sheerin is a journalist, editor, and free-expression consultant.