

**RESPONSE OF CENTRAL ROMANA CORPORATION**

**To the Article by**

**Mother Jones**

***The High Human Cost of America's Sugar Habit***

**of September 17, 2021**

**and**

**the Podcast by Reveal**

***The Bitter Work Behind Sugar***

**of September 18, 2021**

**Stated Purpose of the Author:**

- The piece published in *Mother Jones* on September 17, 2021 (largely repeated as a podcast on *Reveal* on September 18), as the opening paragraphs state, was motivated by the author's interest in reconnecting with a trafficked Haitian child worker he met in 1991, three decades ago, at a "state-run sugar camp."
- The original meeting was near the Dominican-Haitian border and the piece opens with the author driving near the border unsuccessfully looking for this former child worker, who he refers to as Lulu-Pierre.
- The author then decided his story was not about what happened to this child working in the state sugar cane sector near the border, rather:
  - "It was about the 68,000-some Haitian *cañeros* still in the fields, and their living and working conditions, especially under the island's biggest plantation holder: Central Romana."

**Central Romana Corporation Continuous Improvement Process:**

- Central Romana Corporation's sugar mill operations -- which have always been private -- and never part of the state-run sugar operations -- are almost 400 kilometers from the Haitian border where the author met Lulu-Pierre and employs under 8,000 Haitian workers.
- It is notable that the author acknowledges overall improvements in the Dominican sugar sector since 1991 -- albeit he suggests that may not be as true for the workers associated with Central Romana Corporation:

- “There’s no doubt Dominican sugar production has improved since I met Lulu. But according to government sources and human rights and labor advocates, Central Romana is most resistant to changing the deplorable conditions that have long plagued the industry.”
- Apparently, the author discounted the information that was provided to him by Central Romana Corporation in a series of email responses to his questions related to this story, nor the information transparently posted over the last decade on the Dominican Sugar Industry website by the Central Romana Corporation and the two other privately operated sugar mill operations in the Dominican Republic. As the author knows, this information is available at <http://www.dominicansugar.org>.
- The privately held sugar industry of the Dominican Republic has long acknowledged on-going efforts to improve various issues within the sector. These include the use of up-dated technology to track hours and assure accurate weights and payments, the scheduling of required rest periods, the adequate provision of potable water and personal protective equipment, and training on health and safety measures including pesticides.
- Central Romana Corporation has implemented these types of changes in collaboration with the Dominican Republic’s largest trade union representing the workers of Central Romana Corporation, and in cooperative programs with the Ministry of Labor of the Dominican Republic.

#### **Living Conditions in the *Bateys* of Central Romana Corporation:**

- The focus of the article’s critique about Central Romana Corporation includes the living conditions in the “*bateys*,” or the small villages established in the sugar cane holdings of Central Romana Corporation.
- Most of these villages were established on an impromptu basis decades ago, without access to electrification and water and sewer lines, and many still have housing in need of upgrades.
- But, as the article acknowledges, there are improvements being implemented at Central Romana Corporation for housing and utility access – and these communities are being improved on a phased basis with such work on-going over a number of years. In the last five years, Central Romana Corporation has invested \$12 million in the upgrade plan.
- Indeed, it is not only rural sugar communities that have challenges. Similar unsatisfactory conditions can be found elsewhere in the Dominican Republic, especially in rural areas, impacting working people – whether of Haitian or Dominican origin.

- While the percentage of Dominican households with water, sanitation and electricity access has increased significantly in the last two decades, gaps remain, especially in the rural areas of the country.

### **Access to Drinking Water in the Dominican Republic:**

- Looking at drinking water, for example, across the Dominican Republic *access* -- does not necessarily mean 24/7 in-house running potable water.
- There are various published resources related to drinking water data, most of which is based on household surveys completed by the Dominican statistical office. These reports include the National Infrastructure Plan 2020-2030 put out by the Inter-American Development Bank and the Dominican Ministry of Economy, Planning and Development.<sup>1</sup>
- Another is a report issued in April by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, *The Dominican Republic Water Resource Report 2021*, relying upon the same data. This report states the following with regard to water resources:<sup>2</sup>
  - “Investment in tourism, agriculture, urban areas, mining, and trade, have boosted the development of water infrastructure projects. At the same time, *the DR water sector faces severe challenges related to the coverage and quality of drinking water and sanitation services, extremely limited urban wastewater treatment, wide gaps in coverage between urban and rural areas, insufficient monitoring of quantity and quality of water, deforestation, and watershed degradation.*” (emphasis added)
- The water challenges remain so significant in the country that President Abinader established a Water Cabinet in September 2020 to address the issues.
- The data contained in the National Infrastructure Plan indicates that between 2000 and 2017 water access coverage increased from 90% to 97% -- equivalent to 98% urban access and 90% rural access. The very latest data is provided by the WHO/UNICEF *Joint Monitoring Report for Water Supply, Sanitation Hygiene (JMP) – Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000-2020*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://mepyd.gob.do/publicaciones/Plan-nacional-de-infraestructura-2020-2030>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.netherlandswaterpartnership.com/sites/nwp\\_corp/files/2021-08/Dominican\\_Republic\\_Water\\_Sector\\_Report.pdf](https://www.netherlandswaterpartnership.com/sites/nwp_corp/files/2021-08/Dominican_Republic_Water_Sector_Report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unwater.org/publications/who-unicef-joint-monitoring-program-for-water-supply-sanitation-and-hygiene-jmp-progress-on-household-drinking-water-sanitation-and-hygiene-2000-2020/>

- The details beneath this data, however, are also important – the 97% statistic is for “basic” access defined as drinking water from an improved source (protected from contamination), with round trip collection time not exceeding 30 minutes.
- According to the article published on September 19, 2021, in the online news outlet *acento.com.do* regarding a tax reform proposal by the Dominican government, it was reported that the Household Survey (ENHOGAR) released by the Dominican National Statistical Office in 2018 found only 54% of homes in the country had access to potable water inside the house and 45% received potable water service two to three times a week.<sup>4</sup>
- In reviewing the data, the Dutch report points out only 35% of the population receives water service 24/7.<sup>5</sup> The data also shows that only 33% of rural households have water piped into the dwellings, with another 20% having pipe access into their yards. That means that almost half of the rural population still relies on wells, cisterns, surface water or trucked water.
- Similar challenges remain nation-wide for electrification and sanitation, with larger discrepancies in rural areas. That is not to say that the Central Romana Corporation should not be working on upgrading access for the people living in its communities – and as even the author acknowledges the company is doing so – rather it is to say that these challenges are not limited to Central Romana or the sugar industry – but remain throughout the country.
- Central Romana Corporation also provided information to the author that all of the *bateys* on company property have access to potable water through taps that are reinforced with high-capacity chlorine/bromine water purification systems – just one of many facts omitted from the story.

#### **Author Found No Child or Trafficked Labor:**

- It is notable and reassuring that the author acknowledges that his sources told him the situation he wrote about with regard to the state sugar sector in 1991 is no longer evident -- including with regard to child labor and trafficking:

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://acento.com.do/el-financiero/la-propuesta-de-gobierno-a-la-reforma-fiscal-que-los-ricos-paguen-mas-8986917.html>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.netherlandswaterpartnership.com/sites/nwp\\_corp/files/2021-08/Dominican\\_Republic\\_Water\\_Sector\\_Report.pdf](https://www.netherlandswaterpartnership.com/sites/nwp_corp/files/2021-08/Dominican_Republic_Water_Sector_Report.pdf)

- “Much of that chaos is in the past, they told us. Because of international pressure, few if any children still work the fields. The brutal trafficking rings, run in large part by the Dominican military, have been disbanded.”
- At least his article can be considered confirmation of what the Dominican Sugar Industry has been saying for years – there is no child or forced labor in our operations – and the state sugar council operations have been largely done away with, including by privatization, for the last 20 years.

#### **Four Specific Allegations and Responses:**

- In addition to generally pointing out that further improvements need to be made to communities within our lands, an effort that Central Romana Corporation is engaged in on an on-going basis and is spending millions of dollars on each year, the author raises four examples of workers he suggests are indicative of problems suffered by the company’s workforce. These allegations generally relate to a lack of medical coverage for workers – a claim which is baseless.

#### *Cane Workers: Underpaid, Wrongful Deductions and No Medical Care*

- First, he claims he found two elderly Haitian men, near 80, living in the Central Romana Corporation *batey* of Cacata who continue to cut sugar cane and are only able to cut one ton of cane and earn about \$3 per day. He states they also have deductions made from their wages for pension contributions, which they have never seen, and they must pay for their medical treatment.
- Unfortunately, the author identifies these workers only as “Julio” and “Cardenas” using pseudonyms because of what he describes as a fear of retaliation. Under these circumstances it is not possible to verify the circumstances of these workers. What Central Romana Corporation can clearly state is that no worker is allowed to make less than the legal daily minimum wage – and most cutting cane make several times the minimum wage level.
- It is actually highly unlikely that older workers would be cutting cane, rather than performing lighter agricultural or maintenance work. Central Romana Corporation does not impose a mandatory retirement age, and for older persons who want to earn money, efforts are made to allow them to do age-appropriate tasks. Since the names given by the author for the two workers profiled are fictitious and no identifying information is provided it is not possible to confirm any details.

- On the issue of payroll deductions, Central Romana Corporation only makes deductions for workers who are enrolled in the Government's TSS system, which covers pensions, health care and worker's compensation. Central Romana Corporation would have no interest, ability, or incentive to apply payroll withholding contribution requirements on workers not enrollable and enrolled in the TSS and does not do so.
- Central Romana Corporation workers do not pay for their health care. The company provides health care at no cost to its workers at its high-quality hospital facilities in the city of La Romana and at two medical clinics located in the agricultural communities of Lechugas and Baiguá. The company also has five mobile units staffed by medical professionals that provide preventive and urgent care through periodic visits to different communities. It is regrettable that the author tries to present the care the company's medical professionals provide as something disreputable and dishonest.
- Workers who are enrolled in the TSS would also, of course, have access to Government operated medical facilities should they choose to use them.

#### *Lack of Safety Protocols for Chemical Applications*

- The second example of a case of concern in the article is that of a worker presented as having suffered from pesticide exposure due to a lack of personal protective equipment and improper application protocols. The author states the worker reportedly also was HIV positive and had tuberculosis, and subsequently died – and received no health care from the company.
- The author uses the tragic example of Raoul Hervil to allege Central Romana Corporation is not implementing the necessary occupational health and safety protocols or providing adequate personal protective equipment to workers involved in the application of herbicides or pesticides.
- This is simply false. The company has a highly trained and professional health and safety unit, and all workers are given detailed training on the proper and safe handling of chemicals and the use of personal protective equipment.
- According to the employment records of Central Romana Corporation, there was no worker with the name Raoul Hervil employed by the company. The company does have records of an employee named Herbil Jean Rael who was evaluated by Central Romana Corporation medical staff as part of an induction protocol before beginning work in June 2017. Such records do not record any evidence of any illness.
- Mr. Rael went through the training process on the risks and proper handling of pesticides and was provided the personal protective equipment for such work, as

confirmed in the records of Central Romana Corporation's Industrial Hygiene Department. He left employment in November 2017. There is no record of him informing his supervisors or any personnel at the company of any health problems, or of him seeking medical attention. According to the available records, the cause of his death was cardiopulmonary failure.

- It is noteworthy that Raoul Hervil is the only name of a worker that the author offers with regard to a claim of dangerous working conditions related to fumigation activities, and there are no other workers confirming the claims of dangerous chemical use – and that is because Central Romana Corporation uses the appropriate protective protocols and equipment.
- The tragedy of the death of Raoul Hervil (Herbil Jean Rael) is compounded by the story the author tells of driving an ill Raoul Hervil to a medical facility – he does not indicate whether it is a company facility or a government facility – and then not being able to connect Hervil to his doctor and then leaving him to catch a scooter ride back to his *batey*.
- Perhaps the outcome would have been different, and something could have been done for Raoul Hervil, if the author had contacted the company and explained the worker's situation and asked if he could receive medical treatment.

#### *Lack of Health Coverage and Indebtedness*

- A third example of concern offered by the author is a claim that Central Romana Corporation fails to provide health care to workers, and the high cost of such health care pushes workers into debt that prevents them from freely leaving the employment of Central Romana Corporation – and on this basis the author suggests Central Romana Corporation could be engaged in forced labor.
- Here again, the author gives the two workers allegedly making these claims the pseudonyms of Efrain and Noni. Thus, Central Romana Corporation has no way to confirm their situation. As stated, workers have free access to primary medical care in the two medical clinics and the mobile medical units. More complicated issues are treated at no cost at the Central Romana Medical Center.
- There is simply no credibility to any allegation that a worker must take out loans to pay for their health care needs. They either were misinformed or uninformed about their access to company health care, which is highly unlikely, or they took loans for other reasons.
- Workers could take loans for all sorts of personal reasons that are not controlled or controllable by the company. People using poor judgment and taking loans from loan sharks at criminal rates of interest happens all over the world – and to people at all

levels of income. This has nothing to do with company policy and any company official that would be involved in such lending activity would be terminated.

#### *Medical Care for Workplace Accident*

- The fourth case concerns Myrthos Pierre Louis, a worker who lost the use of his legs after a cart accident. This situation is only referenced through a picture of the worker's tragic disability. The article does not mention Central Romana Corporation covered all of the worker's medical expenses at the Central Romana Hospital and will continue to do so. Central Romana Corporation provided the worker 18 months of salary compensation, and is donating a plot of land, the building materials, and the labor to construct a new home for this worker to live in permanently.

#### **Points of Convergence:**

- Having expressed our disappointment in much of what the author has presented with regard to Central Romana Corporation, we do want to say we concur on several points raised in the article.
- First, as the author stated the conditions that the author saw in the state-run sugar operations three decades ago, including child labor and trafficking, no longer exist in the sugar sector. As Central Romana Corporation has always been a private producer and not part of the state-sugar operations, these conditions never applied to the company.
- Second, that there have been improvements in the working and living conditions of the Haitian sugar sector workforce. Those improvements have been implemented by Central Romana Corporation and the other private sector producers that make up the Dominican Sugar Industry.
- In this regard, Central Romana Corporation always welcomes constructive input on how the company can make further improvements and accepts the challenge posed by advocates such as the author that we should do more and do it faster. The company is always open to hearing about individual circumstances of concern to see if they can be addressed constructively and in good faith.
- Third, Central Romana Corporation and the Dominican Sugar Industry continue to encourage both Dominican and Haitian authorities to make the documents and procedures available for Haitian workers in the sugar sector to maintain legal work status and to be able to enroll in the TSS social security system and receive such benefits. This is a source of frustration for the companies who continue to encourage the governments to provide the necessary mechanisms. Central Romana Corporation remains in full support of sustainable solutions on these points.



- Overall, Central Romana Corporation regrets the author decided to present some anonymous allegations and combine them with some inaccuracies and other issues taken out of context and ask his readers to accept that material as the truth. To be fair, the author's stated intent is to "hold the powerful accountable" and he has every right to do so. But it would perhaps be more transparent if the author's work product was presented as an advocacy and opinion piece rather than as investigative journalism.