

REPETITIVE STRAIN INJURIES

Silent Massacre



The invisible illness
at Nestlé Araras

Carlos Amorín



REPETITIVE STRAIN INJURIES

Silent Massacre

The invisible illness at
Nestlé Araras



www.rel-uita.org

Carlos Amorín

Silent Massacre

The invisible illness at Nestlé Araras

Author: Carlos Amorín

Editor: Enildo Iglesias

Design and Layout: Gabriel Balla

Illustrations: Álvaro Santos

© **Ediciones Rel-UITA**

(IUF Latin America Regional Secretariat)

CABICHUI Collection

Latin American Regional Secretariat of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel,
Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations.

Wilson Ferreira Aldunate 1229/201. C.P. 11.100. Montevideo, Uruguay.

Tel/fax: (5982) 9007473 / 9021048 / 9030905 / uita@rel-uita.org - www.rel-uita.org

First edition in English April 2006, 1000 copies

Table of contents

Presentation	9
Faces and masks of Nestlé	19
Testimonials	25
The rotten apple	27
Testimonial - Fátima de Moraes	
I was considered less than a machine	33
Testimonial - Tania Moreira	
Nestlé massacres its workers	37
Testimonial - Geraldo Freitas	
No one knows what to do with us	41
Testimonial - Marly Magri	
This is an epidemic	45
Testimonial - Cristiane Gomes de Melo	
The straw that breaks the camel's back	49
Testimonial - Claudio Pintos de Oliveira	
This has completely changed our lives	53
Testimonial - Sergio da Silva	
I was so traumatised that I avoid going near the factory	59
Testimonial - Neide Lombi	

**"The wheels of history are of
flesh and blood"**

Higinio Mena, Argentinian poet.





nder the banner of efficiency and with globalisation as an excuse, workers have become an increasingly disposable resource for transnational companies. *"Downsizing is good for stock prices and directors. It is very simple: Wall Street prefers a dollar saved in costs to a dollar earned in extraordinary profit."* However, in terms of employment, global business restructuring not only fuels a drastic reduction in jobs, it also focuses on diminishing the quality of the remaining jobs as much as possible. In turn, the lack of employment and unprecedented unemployment levels have provided a pretext for the business community to compromise rates of pay, demand higher productivity, extend the working day in a regime of "endless work" which declares war on "dead time," concentrating tasks onto one person and sacrificing all the workers in an atmosphere loaded with stress and pressure. While working conditions increasingly deteriorate, each worker is made to feel that "the company is at the core of their existence," ranking above everything else, including their health.

Every day 3,300 people lose their lives through work-related accidents or illness, but many more suffer the life-long effects of a mode of production where profit is the exclusive factor, in a society where the welfare of people has been out-ranked by the welfare of transnationals. In this climate, the working conditions generated by neoliberalism are characterised by insecurity, by the stress and suffering they cause. The new forms of work organisation, added to more intense production rates, generate conditions ripe for greater deterioration of worker health, leading to a de facto epidemic of ailments world-wide, including repetitive strain injuries (RSI). Also known as tendonitis or skeleto-muscular disorders, RSI has been around for a long time, however the epidemic proportions are a recent phenomenon. They are the tragic expression of a rate of work so intense and repetitive that the human organism simply rebels. In 2002 in Buenos Aires, arduous and degrading working conditions came to light on a production line at Yazaki - a Japanese transnational with subsidiaries in 64 countries - where ten young women workers repeated the same action 1,100 times over an 8-hour shift. If one of them slowed their rate on the production line, an

Silent Massacre

alarm sounded which disturbed the others, until the group recovered their initial speed whereupon the noise disappeared. Paula worked wrapping electrical harnesses for vans until she was diagnosed with carpal tunnel syndrome, one manifestation of RSI. Today her arms can bear no strain. At 25 years she was told she could no longer work. She has to lie down to breastfeed her baby daughter because her arms go numb. If she lifts her daughter during the day, she cannot sleep for the pain at night. "The pain goes from above your shoulders to your finger tips. It is the worst thing that has happened in my life. I'm angry."

An ILO report on working conditions in poultry farms in the United States tells how the infernal process begins: "A chicken hanger must grab the bird by both thighs and hang the legs in rings on a conveyor belt. Workers are normally expected to hang an average of 23 birds a minute. In general, the seven hangers per line hang 38,640 birds in four hours before they get a rest period." This means 5,520 birds per worker, nearly 10,500 kg. Need we ask more?

These working conditions lead to some "specific forms of trauma, which people suffer in increasing intensity but that they resist in silence, keeping quiet and not speaking of the pain." When the first symptoms of RSI appear, the fear of losing their jobs is even more traumatic, so they keep quiet, and the illness advances.

This book is dedicated to Patricia Rocha Vilela, former worker at the São Luiz (São Paulo) Nestlé plant, the first repetitive strain injury sufferer we came to know.

Gerardo Iglesias and Dr. Roberto Ruiz



While an ever-smaller handful of unscrupulous and irresponsible people take control of the planet's resources to exploit them for their own benefit, others, thousands and thousands of grassroots militants, like worker ants, unweave the spider's web of the transnationals, attempting to mend the hole with an alternative, more amorphous fabric, less predictable, more spontaneous and with greater participation. Some concentrate their resources to dominate, others scatter, like seeds on the wind, taking with them strength, skills and knowledge of life itself.

Unhurriedly, but ceaselessly, a vast multicolour and multifaceted network is being shaped from the lines traced by struggles, conquests and discoveries. Repetitive strain injuries (RSI), and the socio-economic context in which they are produced, are a clear example of the conflict between two groups of opposing interests: the companies –in this case, Nestlé, at its plant in Araras, São Paulo, Brazil– which do not hesitate to impose mentally enslaving and physically damaging working conditions, and the workers, victims of their belief in the social order, in a model where the wolf primes the lambs in order to "better eat them," betrayed, hurt, but finally organised to get their rights respected and to help prevent others from suffering what they have suffered.

Entering the world of RSI implies being prepared to widen the field of awareness, to rein in the anger and transform it with the help of others into a positive movement. It simply requires a decision as to whom to support: the spider or the ant.

This document contains the personal, private testimonials of eight workers from the Nestlé factory in Araras, São Paulo state. The experience reported by the victims is so eloquent that no other argument is necessary. Rel-UITA (IUF Latin America Office) and the author of this report wish to thank Fátima de Moraes, Tania Moreira, Geraldo Freitas, Marly Magri, Cristiane Gomes, Claudio Pinto, Sergio da Silva and Neide Lombi for their generosity, for the commitment and capacity for solidarity that they show: few things are harder than talking about yourself in this context.

Silent Massacre

This is possibly the first time many readers have come across RSI, and it is therefore necessary to provide answers to some of the questions we all ask when we discover this silent illness.

What are Repetitive Strain Injuries?

According to the definition given by Dr. Maria Maeno¹, these are a group of conditions which occur in the muscles, connective tissue, tendons, ligaments, joints, nerves and blood vessels. Related or isolated compression of peripheral nerves, teno-synovitis, myalgia and other painful syndromes can occur. Sufferers complain of pain, paraesthesia², heaviness, fatigue –generally appearing insidiously– in the arms and neck region, initially appearing in certain work situations, or at the end of the working day, but in time coming on weekends and holidays until they finally become constant. The symptoms can appear days, weeks, months or years after continual or frequent exposure to factors leading to and/or aggravating the illness.

How does RSI come about?

Dr. Maeno³ states that factors associated with the appearance of RSI are linked to the organisation of work in companies where high productivity and product quality targets take precedence over maintaining worker health. This form of work organisation includes marked inflexibility, a strong intense rate of work, pressure on productivity, the execution of large quantities of high-speed repetitive movements, the overuse of certain muscle groups, the absence of control over work methods and rates and the absence of breaks. Similarly –Maeno adds– the use of unsuitable furniture and equipment contribute to workers adopting inappropriate posture. Finally, the psychosocial characteristics of the workers must also be considered.

As can be seen, there is no single cause of RSI, it is rather the outcome of a concurrence of factors which together bring about the illness.

Who is likely to get RSI?

Any worker experiencing the aforementioned factors irrespective of which global socio-economic zone they are in. At the end of the 70's

¹ Specialist in labour medicine; coordinator of the Workers' Health Reference Centre (CEREST) in São Paulo Brazil, in "Un mundo sin LER es posible" (An RSI-free world is possible), published by Rel-UITA (IUF Latin America) in 2003.

² Sensation of pins and needles, numbness or burning.

³ Op.cit.

Japan's Employment Ministry had to set up a National Cervico-brachialgia⁴ Committee to draw up regulations on the issue. In Australia an epidemic of RSI in the 80's unleashed harsh debate on the origin and psychosocial aspects of the illness. In Scandinavian countries RSI has affected a large number of workers, and in the United States, between 1981 and 1994, the number of cases increased 14-fold to more than 300,000 RSI sufferers.

Does RSI affect women more than men?

No. However, the actual situation shows that most reported cases concern women. It would be a serious error, however, to infer that there is a gender-related predisposition to this illness. It would be just as wrong as comparing the number of men and women who suffer knee injuries whilst playing football, and to conclude that men have a greater tendency to have damaged knees than women. Until further evidence arises to the contrary, this fact can be considered a social consequence produced by various factors. These include the following: women often work in jobs most exposed to RSI, women also suffer greater pressure from their bosses in comparison to men and they must be more efficient than men to receive the same consideration - which implies making greater effort; for women there are fewer cultural barriers preventing them from admitting their health problems; women tend to contribute a "second income" to the economic structure of the family, or at least are considered to have "less economic responsibility," which allows them to open up about pain and weakness; women work a double shift –in the factory and at home– which worsens their work injuries.

Can RSI be prevented?

It is evident that RSI could be avoided if the work organisation puts worker health first. Here, professor Leny Sato⁵ asks: "Just because someone has devised certain functions and tasks, does this mean they can be executed and performed?" This key question raises the need to define, from both the instrumental and ethical points of view, how the work of human beings should be organised. Should it be from the standpoint of profit and all that machines make possible, or from that of respecting the human rights of workers including the right to a decent, healthy and productive life. When this does not happen, as in the present day, human beings are forced to adapt to

⁴ When the pain affects the neck, and the base of the cranium it is called cervicalgia, when the pain radiates down towards the arm, sometimes reaching the fingers, it is called cervico-brachialgia. Normally the cervical column (neck) is, along with the stomach, the frequent location of accumulated tension. People classed as "nervous," easily accumulate tension in these areas, thus they suffer stomach ulcers, or cervicalgia, which worsens on more stressful days.

⁵ Op.cit.

Silent Massacre

the potential of machines and to company ambitions. People "break" before the mechanical devices do, and there is a reserve army of unemployed millions world-wide ready to replace the "casualties".

When the productive structure is seen as war, the dead, as always, are provided by the people.

What is the relationship between RSI and mental health?

When tackling this point, Professor Sato proposes analysing the subjectivity of people taking into account another factor: the worker/work context relationship, and not these two as isolated elements. She then poses another question: are there any real people (and not mere hypothetical abstractions) who could carry out this type of work?

Sato gives the example of workers in chicken production plants, organised in such a way that, for example, one person must spend eight hours a day cutting the right wing off thousands of chickens which pass in front of him hanging from an elevated conveyor belt. And she asks how anyone in this context could possibly manage to avoid injury. One concrete explanation which helps us to understand the marked coincidence of RSI and mental health problems is to admit that the same working conditions that represent a risk of physical injury also present opportunities for mental stress and illness.

The interviews with workers suffering from RSI in the Nestlé Araras plant presented in this work clearly demonstrate this aspect. All those interviewed showed varying degrees of mental stress. Some used the word "depression," and others "trauma," but all directly or indirectly mention experiencing something that may be even greater: humiliation. The image corresponding to this concept has them with their heads down, looking at the floor in submission or defeat. RSI sufferers in Araras are humiliated by the work system they are submitted to; by abusive internal relations imposed by the bosses; by encouragement to inform on and/or blame other colleagues stimulated by the company; by the company evaluation structure which demands blind obedience, going even beyond being true to themselves (dignity); by the clear notion that the lead position in work organisation is held by machines and not human beings; by constant threats of job loss in the case of sickness; for the hidden policy of discrimination by gender, race or against the disabled; for the suspicious looks from colleagues, bosses, doctors and society in general when they can no longer stand the pain, being implicitly or explicitly accused of "faking"; they feel humiliated when the company to which they have "given everything," including their health, casts them off with a terse letter of dismissal not only from a job, but

from a future, from a life plan for themselves and their children. They are later repeatedly humiliated by a perverted, aberrant medical system which protects the interests of the company over the health of individuals. In turn, due to lack of information, society does not treat them as the victims of an injury which could have been avoided, of a violation of human rights, but rather as slackers afflicted only with laziness.

This combination of objective facts and subjective elements creates in many RSI sufferers a feeling of guilt, of uselessness, that there is something inherently wrong with them or that they did something wrong, running alongside the indignant conviction that they were "betrayed" by a company which used them, rendered them useless and then discarded them like a broken tool.

RSI sufferers feel humiliated because they know that in the future they will continue to be discriminated against by other employers who will not want to take on "problem workers," with work-related illnesses, otherwise known as: lazy, fakers, etc. The iron clamp of humiliation closes with economic difficulties, with very real disablement, with permanent pain, with the definitive loss of self-image and, perhaps, even self-esteem. It is no vain thing that some of those interviewed mention having toyed with the idea of suicide at some time.

The other side of the coin

Meanwhile, a group of individuals and institutions have begun to denounce this appalling situation, protecting and supporting the victims. The group includes a number of doctors, some of whom are mentioned in this report: especially Dr Roberto Ruiz, Rel-UITA (IUF Latin America Office) health and safety advisor, who faced a complaint presented to the Regional Medical Council of São Paulo by four doctors working for Brazil's Institute of National Social Security (INSS) in the town of Araras. He was accused of many cases of causing "confusion" between doctors and patients by diagnosing work-related injuries where these did not exist. The Regional Medical Council examined the complaint and closed the file, as they could find no evidence to show that Dr Ruiz had acted unprofessionally.

At the same time, the explosion in the number of cases of RSI in Brazil has caught the attention of human rights organisations. As a result, National Court Reporter, Eleonora Menicucci de Oliveira, recently held a meeting in Sorocaba with workers from various companies who had suffered from RSI. At a meeting of more than 300 people, Menicucci collected testimonials from many sufferers, especially those from the Mapol paper plant in Sorocaba, as the

Silent Massacre

company is responsible for almost 300 cases of RSI amongst its workers. In an open forum, furthermore, testimonials were taken from workers in other sectors such as cleaning companies, industrial blueprint makers, middle-ranking employees of computer companies and, especially, a group of employees and former employees from the Nestlé plant in Araras. The accounts offered by the Nestlé workers were particularly moving due to their dramatic nature, and they illustrated the insensitivity of the company and the medical system it keeps in its pay or under pressure. Most of these workers were almost completely abandoned to their fate, whereby several of them have started legal action against Nestlé in order to gain recognition of their rights.

When consulted by the IUF Latin America Office, Menicucci said "This will be the first case of RSI I will include in the report which will be presented to the United Nations. What I have heard here leaves a dreadful impression."

As to the relation between RSI and human rights, Menicucci explained: "This illness affects the daily life of people, which impedes the exercising of their independence and personal dignity. RSI's are a death sentence, because workers who undertake a task knowing that in six, eight or ten months this will cause them irreversible injury live under a pending sentence. I draw a direct parallel between RSI and maternal mortality: they are avoidable, predictable deaths and illnesses. In this respect these injuries become a human rights issue."

Finally, the United Nations court reporter said "I will present the Brazilian RSI epidemic to the UN as a test case for human rights violations and I will request that responsibility be attributed to the employers."

Menicucci's health report will be presented to the United Nations Human Rights Commission along with those of other Brazilian court reporters dealing with economic, social and cultural human rights, working within the areas of the right to work, the right to food, water and land, environmental rights, the right to adequate housing and rural land, and the right to education.

One of the most emphatic expressions of increasing public awareness of this illness comes from the "Movimento por um Brasil sem LER" (Movement for an RSI-Free Brazil) which has recently been founded and already involves two leading unions, the paper workers of Sorocaba and the Unified Chemical Unions of Sorocaba, a non-governmental organisation, and the Union of Telemarketing Workers in the south of the country, along with the Brasil-Telecom sufferers – a special-interest group.

The invisible illness at Nestlé Araras

The Movement recently gained the support of the Brazilian Platform for Human, Economic, Social and Cultural Human Rights (DhESC Brasil), which is a broad network of civil-society organisations spread across the country.

It would be desirable for other civil-society organisations and unions, federations and national centres to take up this campaign, to defend the victims of the foretold massacre and to prevent thousands of workers from losing their futures and their hopes for productive, full and happy lives.

FACES and masks of Nestlé



Silent Massacre



Nestlé is the world's leading food producer. In early 2002 it had 468 factories distributed across 81 countries and nearly 230,000 employees, a third of whom are in factories in the Americas. In 2001 sales totalled 84 thousand million Swiss francs, and profits stood at 6 thousand million.*

The company set up in Brazil in 1921, when it opened a condensed milk and cream factory in Araras, in inland São Paulo state.

In 1953 the company expanded, adding a factory for Nescafé production. During the 80's it established various plants in the country and several processing units, but it fundamentally grew through the acquisition of traditional firms, taking over their trademarks and markets. In 1967 Nestlé took over the San Luiz biscuit plant, and in 1993 it added Confiança - a cracker company. Through other international take-overs Nestlé gained control of other subsidiaries in Brazil, like Chambourcy (dairy produce), with a factory in Barra Mansa, and Ralston Purina, with factories in Riberão Preto (São Paulo) and Canoas (Rio Grande do Sul).

In Brazil, Nestlé owns 25 factories mostly located in cities of less than 150,000 inhabitants, it employs 150,000 workers and its production together amounts to a million tons made up of 430 different products.

In addition to food companies, the transnational controls pharmaceutical laboratories (Galderma and Darrow –both Brazilian– and Alcon Laboratories) and L'Oreal (cosmetics) –which has factories in Brazil.

* This part is based on a report by Observatorio Social, a non-profit organisation created on an initiative by the Unified Workers Confederation (CUT) of Brazil and Escola Sul, in cooperation with the Centre for Studies on Contemporary Culture (CEDEC), the Inter Trade Union Department of Statistics and Socio-Economic Studies (DIEESE) and the Inter University Labour Study and Research Network (Unitrabalho). Its mission is to study the application of social, labour and environmental regulations by companies, organisations and governments in the national and international ambit.

It plays an extremely large role in the lower levels of the agricultural chain, which gives it extensive dominion over the production and commercialisation of agricultural products. It is the largest milk buyer in Brazil and in 2002 it was the leading instant coffee exporter, whilst also strongly dominating sales on the domestic market.

Nestlé is a signatory of the United Nations Global Compact presented at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 1999 by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. He called on the leaders of multinationals there present to adopt the "nine principles" which covered support and respect for human rights within the company ambit, and the assurance that they would not be complicit in human rights abuses (Principles 1 and 2).

Based on the definition of RSI provided by Professor Menicucci in the previous chapter, these injuries are a flagrant violation of human rights, and this violation will be perpetuated through time until measures are taken to change working conditions in Nestlé.

In Nestlé's Sustainability Review (March 2002), the company proclaims having "*safe working environments*"; and in order to do this "*We... regularly audit the safety of our working conditions, which must meet Nestlé corporate standards. Our companies' Safety and Health Committees typically meet at least once a month to develop and maintain a safe working environment.*"

It is strange, then, that the Araras plant Health and Safety Committee has not noticed that increasing numbers of workers are falling prey to the effects of frenetic, mechanical work at an inhuman pace. Perhaps this Committee is working for the health and safety of the machines and not the human beings.

The Nestlé policy cites the following "*mandatory elements for all Nestlé sites*"

- strict compliance with local laws or internationally recognised standards;
- clear accountability and active management leadership to promote a safe working environment and the professional management of hazards on our sites;
- continuous improvement in managing operational health and safety.

None of these conditions are fulfilled in the case of Araras, where doctors are manipulated into refusing rest periods for the injured and denying the existence of RSI. All because the factory managers push employees to reach productivity goals, even when jeopardising their physical safety and health, because concern for the integral health and safety of the workers is not a day-to-day matter here. **In Araras, Nestlé is not respecting its own principles.**

Silent Massacre

And why is this? Obviously this is not a case of simple cruelty, of evil in the biblical sense. But a careful reading of the company reports gives some indication of the motives for this massacre.

"This year –reads the Observatorio Social report for 2001– Nestlé closed its instant coffee factories in Argentina and Chile transferring production to Araras. Nestlé had previously given indications of this intention: in 2000 it started investing 18 million reals in modernising its two factories in the Araras Industrial Complex. Nearly two-thirds of this amount was used in the oldest factory, which produces instant coffee, but also Nescau, condensed milk, cream, etc. This is the biggest Nestlé factory in Brazil and the corporation's fourth largest in the world (...). Part of this development was used to increase instant coffee production for export to Chile and Argentina."

This means the company made planned investments of millions of reals in order to combine three plants' worth of production into one - Araras - whilst reducing the number of staff employed. It is hence probable, that each worker at Nestlé Araras is doing the work of three, for the pay of one. The fact that the product of the labours of these over-exploited workers ends up returning to where it was previously made, where it is surely consumed by the workers laid-off by Nestlé Argentina and Chile, adds a cynical twist to the real face of the corporation.

But even so, this does not explain everything. Over the same few years Nestlé launched Project **Globe** (*Global Business Excellence*) which aimed to benchmark company plants in order to dominate growing parts of the market by making their products cheaper. In order to achieve this objective, amongst other measures, the transnational has proposed to "reduce costs and capital expenditure increasing capacity utilisation of the existing production plants (...)", according to then head of Zone Americas, Carlos Represas.

This was expressly stated in the chapter on Zone Americas in the *Nestlé Management Report 2001*: "One of the main pan-zone initiatives is to accelerate the realisation of supply chain synergies and increase the benefits from a more centralised procurement. **This runs in conjunction with our continuous efforts to concentrate production in a smaller number of focused and highly efficient factories. Those initiatives are reducing the cost of goods sold (...)**"

Reducing costs... and the arms of the workers, jeopardising their lives, their futures, their hopes, but what does all this matter, there are thousands of unemployed waiting their turn –blissfully ignorant– to ruin their health working for Nestlé.

The Observatorio Social report notes firmly that *"This strategy clearly stated by the company exerts great pressure on the workforce, which must be structured to achieve high productivity, whilst withstanding the increasing threat of more insecure working conditions and possible job loss."*

Similarly, the aforementioned report states *"As in all companies with continuous production and accelerated speed, the existence of many cases of RSI and other disabling conditions were noted. There will be more than a thousand lawsuits for reinstatement, pensions and compensation for workers who suffered lost or reduced working capacity. This high number of injured parties is more serious still because the National Institute for Social Security (INSS) and the company try to deny the causal link between illness and loss of capacity and work in the factory (...). In 1997 Nestlé United Kingdom officially recognised the existence of RSI amongst its workers and announced it was developing a programme to reduce the incidence of the ailment. During this period - continues the Observatorio Social report - the Latin America Secretariat of the IUF denounced Nestlé for systematically dismissing injured workers (especially young women) instead of addressing the cause of the problem (...). It also circulated a letter from a doctor stating surprise at corporate denial of the illness. In this letter, Dr. Roberto Ruiz, of the IUF Latin America Health and Safety Department, said: 'In April 2001, I treated Maria Alice, a Nestlé worker, who was suffering progressively worsening pain in her shoulders, hands and elbows which was negatively affecting her productivity at work. Maria had the results of an electroneuro-myographic test which clearly showed carpal tunnel syndrome in the left and right hands, and another that showed tendonitis in the wrist extensors. She told me she had seen the company doctor who had not taken much notice of her complaints, telling her this was normal and recommending she return to work (...). After examining her medical and occupational history, including the tests mentioned above, I had no doubt: these were repetitive strain injuries and, in accordance with the law, I asked the company to evaluate her for due diagnosis. To my surprise, some days later I received a letter from the company doctor - also signed by the factory human resources manager, which showed there had been clinical discussion of the case with non-medical personnel - disagreeing with my diagnosis and maintaining that the worker had possibly led me to make a misdiagnosis."*

The following pages contain testimonials by the victims. They speak for themselves and explain the true situation in Nestlé Araras better than any argument.

Silent Massacre

Testimonials



The rotten apple



Fátima de Moraes, 46 years-old, separated, one daughter,
president of the Araras RSI sufferers association.

Silent Massacre



started work at Nestlé in April 1987. At first it was really pleasant working there, they made us feel like we were a family. That time was very good. But in recent years the company underwent radical change in its relationship with workers: we started to be treated like numbers, like disposable objects of practically no value.

The machines in the section I worked in moved fast and demanded repetitive movements; well most of the Nestlé machines are like that, but "the printing section" is more risky. When someone from other sections was asked to work in the printing section they always said they were scared, because the regime was different, we had no breaks to go to the toilet or have a drink of water, there was a coffee dispenser but we could only use it when a machine broke down. My work station was five or six metres from the water, but I worked thirsty because I could not get to it. The pace is very fast, you can't stop. At first it wasn't bad, I even started to think that working like this made time go faster, but my arms began to be affected.

I was on good terms with the bosses because I worked hard. I even remember in 1995 during the dinner with company pensioners Mr Arnoni, one of the bosses, introduced me to a guest, José María, saying that if everyone in the printing department was like me, they would not need to have bosses. But in 1997, when my productivity began to fall as a consequence of the pain I was feeling, everything changed. At the time I didn't know it was RSI. I know some people in the refrigeration department had been given sick leave by a doctor who sent them to the National Institute of Social Security (INSS). But this section was across the road from us and we had little contact with them.

October 1999 was the first time someone from the Ministry of Employment made a visit to Nestlé in Araras, exactly because of the number of work-related accidents reported. On this occasion they went first to "refrigeration" which was where most of the injuries took place. In our part of the factory they only dealt with the three or four current cases, but in reality there were far more hidden ones, like

mine. For months I had been putting up with pains, pins and needles in my arms at night. But under the "army-style" regime we endured in "printing" –some called the section "the Vietnam of Nestlé"– we were afraid of going to the doctor. We were threatened with losing our jobs. We were mere numbers, and when a number stops being profitable it can be disposed of. Many, like me, were the main or only wage-earner in the family - we couldn't take the risk. Then in 2000 I reached my physical and psychological limit. On April 24 I was working and I felt something explode in my left wrist, it burned, and in a second a lump the size of a pigeon's egg grew and quickly turned black. It hurt badly, but I kept on working and when I finished my shift I went to the company nurse. She told me the doctors had already gone home and that I should see a private doctor. I went to see Dr. Zuntini who had already seen me for a knee problem. The treatment I had been following for some time to heal my knee meant I had been taking medicine daily that masked the pain in my arms. When I came off the medicine the pains began. The doctor said I should rest for two days, although he knew it was not good for my service record, but my wrist was really bad. After these two days I went to see Dr. Elder, in the company, who looked at my arm and told me I could not return to work. He sent me back to Zuntini for him to give me more days of rest, whilst assuring me that he would take responsibility for the recommendation so that there would be no problem at work. But I thought that something was wrong: Why couldn't a private doctor give me more sick leave without authorisation from the company doctor? Zuntini told me we would have to do a good treatment for my wrist and arms, and he confessed he was afraid of doing sick certificates for Nestlé employees as doctors who did this were accused by the company of being slackers who gave certificates to idlers who didn't want to work. From that moment I lost confidence in everything done by those doctors, as their attitude seemed to me to go against professional ethics, and so I kept a copy of all the papers they gave me.

Shortly after this, under pressure from the Ministry, the company created its own physiotherapy service and announced in a meeting that only five cases of RSI had been reported in a staff of two thousand. In reality, I think there must have been five cases per shift, per sector, because there had already been many people on sick leave because of it. I kept working because I didn't dare ask for leave. I took tablets and had injections, I did physiotherapy and worked eight hours a day at intense speed without rest.

When the company contracted physiotherapist arrived –with an air of the "doctor" to cure all ills– we all thought this was a positive move for us, but we soon understood she was there to help the doctors justify the discharges they ordered. She simply sent people with

Silent Massacre

wrecked arms back to work, though they were under treatment outside the company.

Part of my job was to fill in a form with production data within a company programme. This spreadsheet was placed on a fixed support alongside the machine, in a position which was unsuitable, uncomfortable and dangerous to the worker. One day, after several colleagues had cut themselves on these, I called someone from safety and asked if they had evaluated this arrangement in relation to our physical safety. This person did not know the answer so they went to Arnoni, the boss, who called me into his office five minutes later. The same person who had praised me before submitted me to the worst humiliation of my life, because he said so many outrageous things that I cannot even repeat them to you, although I have not forgotten anything. He accused me of wanting to take decisions in place of the company. I tried to explain the objective facts, taking into account the real context of any person working on that machine, whose movements are totally co-ordinated with and predetermined by keeping up with the rhythm of production, and that adding an obstacle to this process was very risky. This argument was a traumatic experience for me.

Shortly after that the company made some small changes to the work system which meant perhaps a 1 percent reduction in the effort we had to make, no more. On the other hand, they reduced free passes for doctors' appointments from twelve to five per year. On suggestions from the company doctor, I asked my specialist Dr. Zuntini for a letter justifying my need for a greater number of doctor's appointments per year, due to my chronic complaint, and he mentioned "strain-induced lumbago" in the letter. But the company's auditing doctor, who had never even seen my face, did not authorise the extra appointments. It seemed absurd to me that she could make this decision without seeing the patient.

I couldn't take any more. I knew I had RSI and I paid privately for a series of tests which proved this.

Like all those affected by RSI in Nestlé Araras, Fátima had to unleash a true bureaucratic war against the medical structure directly or indirectly dependent on the company. This battle for health, for life, submits people to an exhaustion that cannot be told, because – as in other circumstances of human rights violations– the victim is relegated to the position of the accused by the dense power structure of the victimising entity. Thus, domestic violence is "justified" where the woman has supposedly provoked it, sexual abuse of women is excused because women mean "yes" when they say "no," and international wars are even unleashed on the basis of the exist-

ence of weapons of mass destruction which, in the end, are never found. The victim is always guilty, and Nestlé places employees suffering RSI in this humiliating and undignified position.

When the doctors finally admitted I should change job, Arnoni, angry, replied that the job was over, that it was only women who made problems and that they would be better off employing robots than women, because robots don't get pain in their arms, suffer menstrual cramps or get pregnant. In fact, some sections of Nestlé Araras have not taken on women for years. When they knew I could no longer even clean my own house they put me on sweeping up in the section - a task I found impossible. This hurt me even further because I never thought they would stoop to cruelty. Then I decided to see a doctor outside Araras, and in April 2001 I met Dr. Roberto Ruiz who examined me, saw my records and told me there was no doubt I was suffering from RSI. He wrote me a letter recommending sick leave and a pass to the INSS. The company doctors overrode Dr. Ruiz's authorisation and did not pass me on to the INSS. They argued that my illness was not work-related, they said Dr. Ruiz was mad and that he knew nothing. After going through numerous incidents, suffering pressure and manipulation, I tried to go back to work, and when I saw Dr. Ruiz again, two days later, I knew the company had sent him a letter stating that I was a faker who had tricked him into making a mistake, and they invited him to visit the factory. The doctor, used to this sort of thing, gave me the letter signed by several company doctors and the physiotherapist, and I have kept it.

In May 2001 I went before an INSS medical council who ruled that I should have sick leave, after they had shown the link between my work in Nestlé and my injuries.

When my case became known to my colleagues, many of them came to see me in order to know what they could do. Since then some 40 employees of Nestlé Araras have said they are RSI sufferers. For several months the INSS have been calling for Nestlé to give me a job suited to my situation, but the company won't accept me, they won't even allow me on to company premises to get to the bank where I collect my salary. Security personnel stop me on the threshold and the bank manager comes to give me the money. I am still a Nestlé employee, but I can't work. They treat me as though I am the rotten apple which will spoil the rest. I even lodged a police complaint about this discriminatory treatment.

All this –the way they have treated me– the fact that I know I will never get another job, affects me deeply psychologically. The pressure of discrimination and, in my case, the persecution of being treated like

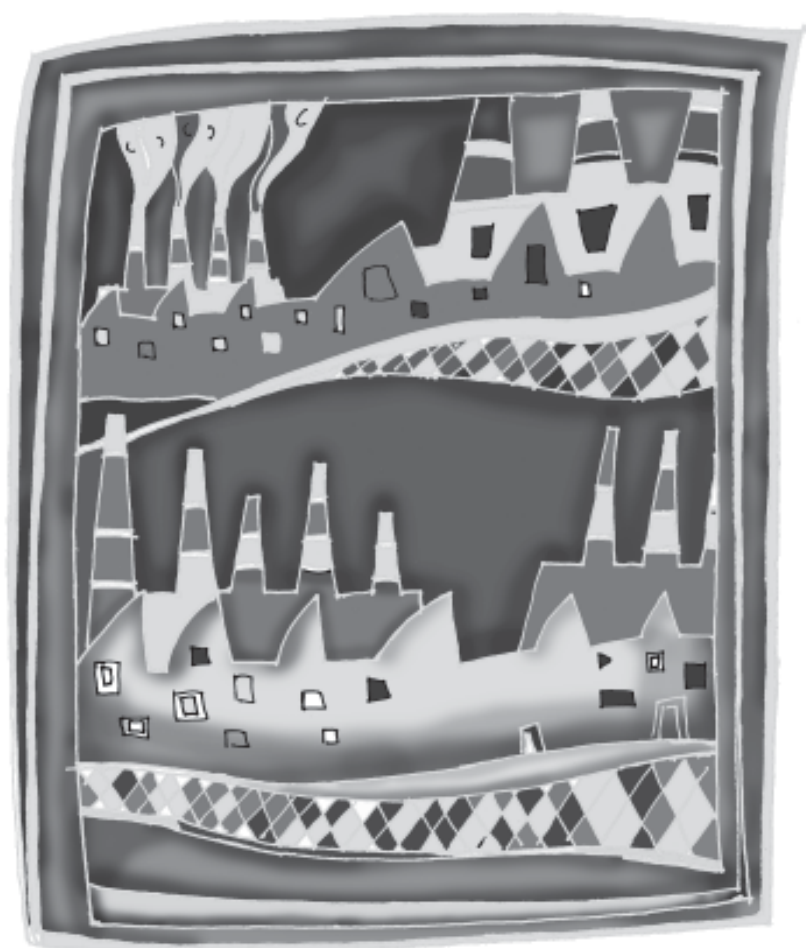
Silent Massacre

the rotten apple that spoils the whole box, is too strong. I often don't sleep at night for worrying about what I will do, what will become of my life.

Now we have founded an association for the Araras RSI sufferers and 99.9% of members are Nestlé employees. Dozens of people call me at home to tell me what is happening to them, they cry because they are scared, the same fear I had until I could stand no more. The company has put the word out that anyone joining our association will be sacked.

I hope the authorities will recognise this situation, and that Nestlé will change its treatment of RSI sufferers, establishing working methods which do not injure people.

I was
considered
less than a
machine



Tania Moreira, 29 years-old,
separated, one seven year-old daughter

Silent Massacre



joined Nestlé in 1995. For the first six months I was a general helper, which is the least specialised post. Then I became a gluing operator where I did packaging and checked the quality of the "bottoms." For some time I worked on three alternating shifts: from 5 a.m. to 1 p.m., from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m. and from then to 5 a.m. I always got to work ten minutes early to check on the machine. We had a 15 minute meal break. Then the schedules changed and then they couldn't stop for 15 minutes. It was heavy, demanding and very fast work. I started to change jobs, one day in one place, one day in another, but all with the machines. I had been suffering pain before, but the doctor told me it must be due to a spinal abnormality. When I started at Nestlé I had no idea what RSI was. After working there for two years I started to feel all sorts of discomfort, and when I was in a lot of pain they gave me an injection of an anti-inflammatory until it improved.

There was a lot of pressure within the factory. At least once a week we had meetings where the managers pushed us hard. They said they needed people with strong arms to work and to meet factory targets. They demanded that daily productivity remain above the 95% defined for each task. There was even a productivity monitoring document: the speedometer on the machine had to be checked every hour and the figures noted down. The machine I worked on for the longest could do up to 300 pieces per minute. I had to check the quality, make packages of 240 items weighing 3.5 kilos and put them on a pallet. In one of these meetings one of the bosses thought I was falling asleep and in front of dozens of colleagues he said if I wasn't interested in what he was talking about I could go, that the factory doors opened both inwards and outwards and that outside there were thousands of people who would be happy to take my place. I felt completely humiliated.

For a long time I worked back to back with another operator who, in turn, did the same as me on the machine next to mine. In the last three years they implemented a "continuous improvement programme" whereby one operator was left to handle the two machines, that is, we had to deal with twice the production in the same

timeframe. It was then that my arms gave out, the pains started to get worse. I went to the doctor one day when I had a completely swollen arm and pins and needles in my hand. I remember it was the 26th of July, 2002. I went to Dr. Zontini, and he said I had tendonitis, but he did not give me sick leave, he told me to talk to my boss and ask for lighter work. They changed me, and with the medicine the doctor ordered I got a bit better, but a month later I had to go back to my old job, but on machines producing 350 pieces per minute and I had to work on two of them. A week later I had such unbearable pain that I asked to speak to the boss, and he called me at 11 a.m. on the 9th September 2002 to tell me I was fired. After he discovered I was ill he waited a little more than a month and then threw me out. His name is Luiz Antonio Arnoni.

All this affected my life very deeply. Just after I was sacked I suffered serious depression because I thought that while I was healthy they accepted me, but when I got ill they threw me away. When he told me I was sacked my boss told me I was no longer producing what the company expected of me. I felt they considered me less than a machine, and it hurt me deeply. I also know it will not be easy for me to find another job, because this illness is extraordinary, it stops me from doing many things. I am still a young person, I have my life ahead of me, but I am prevented from doing most of the jobs which would be within my reach. Moreover, any employer would ask Nestlé for references, and I am sure the company would do me no favours. It is hard for all of those who are sacked from there to find another job.

I find it had to hug my daughter, to clean my house, cook, to go anywhere by car I have to get someone to drive, because I can't. My life has changed a lot. Before I could do everything, but now...

There were differences in how women were treated, because most of the RSI cases in Araras are women. The boss said we were faking, that men are stronger and don't complain, that they don't have this illness. They said employing women was plainly detrimental. Women in Nestlé Araras received discriminatory treatment. The truth is that the men suffer as much as we do, but they keep quiet until they leave the company. They are scared of losing their jobs, they work until they can't do it any more. At present Nestlé doesn't take women on for these jobs.

I didn't know RSI existed, no one spoke about it. The company doctors, for obvious reasons, and the private ones in Araras generally work under an agreement with Nestlé, hence they don't speak of RSI, they don't mention them. They attribute the pains to "psychological problems," to spinal abnormalities... I had X-rays made of

Silent Massacre

my whole spine unnecessarily, because it is completely normal. I slowly found out what was wrong with me, not initially from the doctors but from colleagues who told me. I was very scared; I am separated and I have a daughter to bring up. I lived under that constant pressure, under the threat of losing my job and feeling constant pain. I was too slow to react. There are still some people who don't believe this exists, they have a preconception because the ailment cannot be seen. Pain doesn't bleed, and something can only be seen when my arm swells up.

When I got home in the morning -I almost always did night shift- I would have a hot bath, my mother would give me a massage, I would take an anti-inflammatory and go to bed because I couldn't take the pain any more. Still today, it is in the night that I feel the most pain, when I try to rest, I can't find a way of lying down without pain. I don't sleep well. I ended up with insomnia which I have had to overcome with medication.

My life has changed so much. I can't do my housework, I can't be hugged by my daughter because it hurts, I feel discriminated against by people who don't believe what's happening to me. I remember that when I joined Nestlé I thought my life would change, but not for the worse. All I managed to do was lose my health. I can't imagine how it will be in the future, what work I will be able to do. That is what most hurts me inside, because I want to work, to be productive, but I don't know what I could do.

I am following treatment in Campinas that relieves me a little. Physiotherapy twice a week and I am covered by the INSS. I want my rights to be respected so I have started legal proceedings. I now know I will not recover the health I had before, this illness is already chronic in my case.

I am in the RSI sufferers association because I am sure that we will now be able to change this situation. Almost everyone believes Nestlé is a marvellous company, which supports the "Zero Hunger" Plan, but you have to be inside to know it properly. I hope the association will manage to unveil the truth so that Nestlé cannot continue to crucify so many people. It depends on us, on us staying united and getting more members.

Nestlé massacres its workers



Geraldo Freitas,
46 years old, single.

Silent Massacre



worked at Nestlé for eight and a half years, until June 2003, always in jobs with repetitive movements. They sacked me when they found I had an RSI. I was being treated with physiotherapy as recommended by the company doctor; when the treatment ended they threw me out with no coherent explanation.

I was a machine operator where I monitored the quality and cleanliness of the pieces, then I packaged them and put them on a pallet. I did an average of 85 packages of 248 pieces per hour. That is 350 pieces per minute, more than five a second for seven and a half hours.

In Nestlé Araras no one wants to take sick leave, because they know that any one who takes it has their card marked for dismissal. The pressure from the bosses is enormous, and the reason is profit, produce more by spending less. The changes made while I was there aimed to up productivity by increasing the work rate.

I knew before I was sacked that other colleagues were having problems, but I was one of those who joked and said RSI only happened to lazy people, I thought it was something stupid because for a while the pain happens when you are resting at home, but after that it snowballs getting bigger and bigger. There is constant pain, you sleep in pain, with pins and needles in your arms and shoulders. Your hands lose their strength and their grip. The doctors force us to keep working and you are treated like an animal. The company boasts about having a nursery -something all the workers contribute what they can to- but on the other hand it massacres its employees submitting them to hellish production rates. Nestlé shows a kind face to the outside, but inside it is very hard.

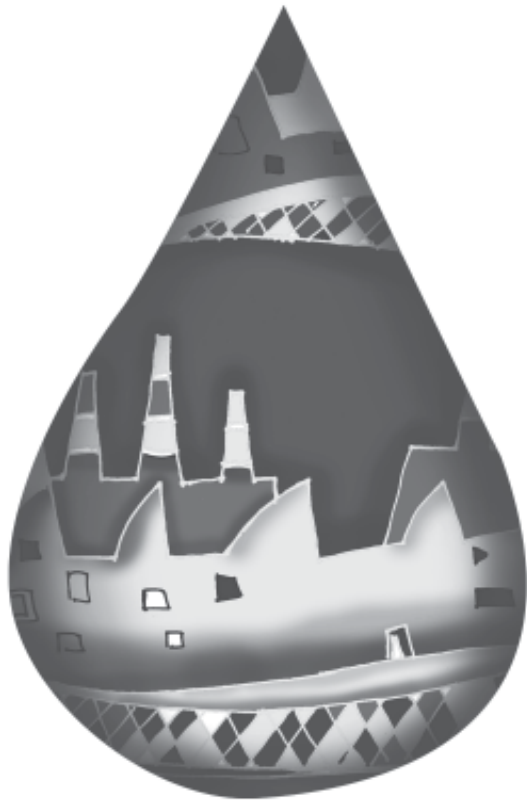
In 2003 I had to start using the company health programme because I had a very painful shoulder and was losing strength in my left hand and arm. They examined me and found an injury, but the doctor played it down, wrote me a prescription for pain relief and sent me back to work. That way the pain disappeared only while the medicine was working, but reappeared after, and as I carried on

making the repetitive movements... My injury got worse, I went back to the same doctor who sent me to the area doctor. He sent me for 10 physiotherapy sessions. After the fifth session the physiotherapist cancelled my treatment and the following day the company told me I was dismissed. Eight workers were sacked for the same reason that day, all suffering health problems and undergoing treatment for RSI, some with worse injuries than I had.

Now I am covered by the INSS where I went as soon as I was dismissed. They examined me and proved I had RSI and it was clear they should not have sacked me while I was undergoing treatment. I know I will face great difficulties in finding work, because my work record states that I had an accident at work, and what company will take me on with health problems?

You are left very limited in simple things like brushing your teeth, combing your hair, sweeping up, driving, well, in everything really. It is very hard to accept that even your closest friends and family see you as disabled. I want to defend the right of all workers, not only my own, to have our health and our rights respected. I started legal action against the company and decided to join the Araras RSI sufferer's association.

No one knows
what to do
with us



Marly Magri,
38 years-old, single.

Silent Massacre



worked at Nestlé for 14 years from 1988, as a machine operator. When I started to feel pains in my shoulders and arms I didn't imagine it would be something serious. It slowly became more serious because the company started reducing the number of staff but maintained productivity levels, or, in some cases, increased them. When my arms began to swell up –in 1997– I went to the doctor and he ordered some tests. When he saw the results he said nothing and took me off the machine for 30 days. At the end of this period I went back to the machine job, and a week later the swelling returned. Only then, when talking to colleagues about my problem, I heard of RSI from Fátima who was the first to be aware of the situation. She warned me not to leave my test results with the doctor. When I got them back the doctor did not tell me what they said, but Fátima already had experience, and explained that I had tendonitis which was an RSI.

I got them to send me for physiotherapy in the company. This helped a little but my arm started to swell up again, and then they changed my job again and I spent four months in personnel. I got a little better, but then they sent me back to the machines. I spoke to the boss explaining that I could not go back to work there because I had RSI, and there was no room for me in the personnel service. Then they sacked me. I tried to see a labour doctor in Araras, but there isn't even one there, and that in a city of thousands of industrial workers. I went to Sorocaba where I met Roberto Ruiz who wrote me a letter for the company doctors diagnosing RSI and asking them to grant me an INSS pass. But the company doctors refused to sign, so I went back to Dr. Ruiz to get the INSS form signed. The INSS finally diagnosed me with a work-related illness. Now I am having physiotherapy and when I have pain or swelling I take an anti-inflammatory. Every two to three months I go back to the INSS for tests and they renew my benefits. I have been on sick benefit for three years. This will continue until I am discharged, but as this is a chronic illness no one really knows what to do with us. You cannot be pensioned off for this.

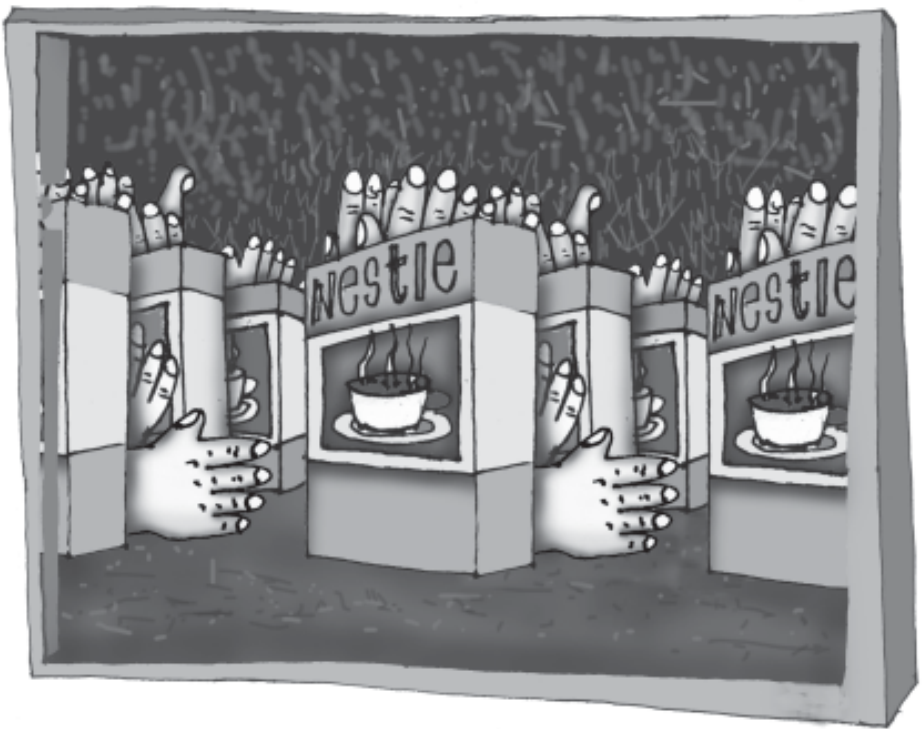
Almost nobody believed those who were complaining of pain. But all of this began to get worse when they reduced the staff and increased

demands on yield. It was a massacre. I want to make it clear that we weren't given any bonus for producing the amount they demanded, we were simply pressurised, threatened, humiliated if we did not achieve what they asked. Everyone was scared to make it known that they were feeling ill, because they knew they would quickly lose their job. Men put off reporting the pain longer than women because maybe theirs was the only income in the family, because it is traditional for the man to be the main breadwinner, or even because of some kind of macho competition with other colleagues. But I am willing to state that 90 percent of the men who worked with me were experiencing pain.

This is not a visible illness, and people tend to think that there is nothing wrong with you, that you are faking, and you suffer discrimination. For example, I go each month to collect my insurance payment from the bank, and some bank staff make me feel they don't believe I am disabled, they ask me time and again what my problem is. You get so depressed from experiencing this. I can't write. They say they are going to send me on some course, but how can I do that if I can't write? I can't do my hair, hold the telephone, sleep normally. I can't go to the gym like I used to and do sport, I don't want to go out, to expose myself to discrimination. I can't clean my house, or help my mother who is already old. I have to pay someone to help with the housework. The atmosphere at home is more difficult because I'm often in a bad mood, depressed, maybe I've had a bad night or I've been thinking more than usual about how difficult my future seems at 38. The only thing I can think is that I could work in a shop where I only have to talk to the customers. But who would give me work with such a disabling illness?

I hope the work of the association I have joined can help stop this massacre, so that others do not become ill like us and end up in our situation, sick and unemployed, limited.

This is an
epidemic



Cristiane Gomes de Melo,
27 years-old, married.

Silent Massacre



I joined Nestlé in 1996. I worked on a machine which packaged Nescafé in a box. There were several different tasks there, all with repetitive movements: the first was to make the boxes and put them on a conveyor belt, then there are three people filling the boxes, another one closes them and pushes them onto another belt where a machine seals them and finally another person puts the boxes on pallets. Every half hour you rotate round the tasks and you continue changing throughout the shift. After three years of working on this machine I started having pain in my right arm. The first doctor I saw told me I had RSI, an incurable illness. He even warned me that within three to four years there would be an epidemic of RSI in Nestlé Araras. He explained the only thing he could do was send me for physiotherapy, although as my RSI was already chronic this only gave me partial relief.

I continued to see this doctor for six months, I had 50 physiotherapy sessions, but I went for a second opinion as there was no change. Another doctor saw me and confirmed the RSI, he gave me a letter for the company and they changed my job: I went to the cleaning department for a month. But at the end of this time they put me back on the machine and then both of my arms hurt. I went back to the doctor who then requested sick leave for me. I spent 15 months in treatment with physiotherapy and anti-inflammatory drugs. They discharged me and I went back to work for two and a half years. I started in the laboratory sector where I had to grade raw coffee, toast it, taste it, wash the cup and start over again. The task of classification demanded I adopt a very painful posture, given the RSI I already suffered I couldn't do what others could. There is air conditioning in there and I had to work in long sleeves because the air made my arms ache. Also, I had to go from the coffee production section, where it is very warm, to the laboratory which is much colder; and this thermal shock made the pains feel even worse. I went back to the doctor who told me this time that however strong the pain I was suffering might get, he could not give me sick leave because Nestlé would remove him from their recommended list of doctors and he would lose half his patients. He could prescribe me any medicine whatsoever, but no sick leave. I changed doctor again, and this one

was outraged by my previous experience, and that of other workers he had seen recently. He gave me three weeks' leave and physiotherapy, after which I was to return to see him. When I went back he told me he had been to see Nestlé and he now knew things were not as he had been told by the people who were suffering from pains. He discharged me.

Christiane then began an exhausting tour of company doctors, public institutions, Nestlé bosses, private doctors, various specialists, attending every meeting with a growing file of tests, letters, evidence of the increasing humiliation she was submitted to while coming to terms with the fact that she was now unable to do many tasks. They called her an "opportunist," "lazy," a "liar," and the INSS did not accept her case. She moved city to try and escape the wall of influence erected by Nestlé, and just when it seemed everything was in place to get her rights validated, the INSS doctors and staff went on strike for three months. Doctors in her new city (Leme) did not know about RSI and refused her the protection that was her right. One of them advised her to come back when she had proof of her illness.

She moved again, this time starting action with the INSS in Sorocaba, arguing that the doctors in Araras worked for Nestlé and not for the health of the workers, and that those in Leme did not know about RSI. She received a sympathetic reception from a doctor there who gave her a month's leave. No one knew what her situation would be then. At the time of this interview Cristiane was still awaiting the outcome.

I don't know what will happen. My future is uncertain. Not only am I affected by this illness but I must also confront an insensitive bureaucracy. My economic situation is completely off balance, I am in debt and I don't know how I'm going to pay the loans. I am in pain when I brush my teeth, comb my hair, when I want to cook, pick up a pan or hug my husband, I drop things all the time, I can't use a computer keyboard. But what hurts most is the preconceptions of other people, of many of my work colleagues who don't believe what is happening to me. The company turned its back on me. The doctors scorned and humiliated me.

I don't like to talk about what happened, I do it to help others. All these are wounds that are left and healing them is painful. I am 27 years-old, but I can't think of having children in this situation, I am psychologically fragile and I wonder how I would be able to look after them if I had them, what I could give them that is any good. I want to have children because I think a couple without children is not a good thing, but I don't know when I would be able to, I don't know what my future will be. All this has affected my relationship with

Silent Massacre

my husband, and, in fact, with everyone. I am not the same as I was before. I am harder, colder. If it weren't for the support of my husband and parents I don't know what I would do.

I joined the association of RSI sufferers because I believe they have to know that this is an epidemic, and that if we don't do something many more will become ill.

The straw that breaks the camel's back



Claudio Pintos de Oliveira,
46 years-old, married, two children.

Silent Massacre



I started working at the Nestlé factory in September 1977, and I retired in October 2003 having worked enough years to do so. I worked from when I was 14 years-old, when I started helping my father on the estates. As work at Nestlé is considered unhealthy, when I had been working for 20 years this unhealthiness added a further eight years. I was very happy to have got into Nestlé, a company of world renown. I hoped to grow with the company, although this did not happen, because the company grew a lot and we always remained the same. Anyway the salaries were the best in Araras for industrial workers. For many years we were treated respectfully by the company which took care of its employees, but from 1990 the managers started changing and pressure from competition grew a lot. They worked on the theory that if you put so much straw on the camel that you break its back, then you get a new camel. Production doubled in 25 years and staff numbers dropped from 2,100 to the present 1,300. There were technological changes, but with fewer workers. When I came there were two people on each machine. When I left there were two machines for each person. Internal politics were very unpleasant, the company manipulates workers into conflict between themselves, so they report each other. The work atmosphere became almost unbearable. I think there is discrimination against women and older people, the company employs no disabled people and very few blacks.

For many years I felt some pain that I could control with medication, this allowed me to work. But in late 2000 the company changed my job, and from operating a machine that had been stopped for a while they had me stacking pallets. My job was to stack pallets of 18 tons of pieces in 8 hours work on the night shift, from nine at night to six in the morning with an hour for a meal break. That was when I started to make more repetitive movements at an intense rate. It was very heavy work that the young ones in their twenties found hard to do. There was a team of five people per pallet, four took the production from the machines and one stacked the pallet. We took turns to take our meal break, which meant the four remaining workers had to do the work of five, and that happened over four hours. The same happened if someone had to go to the toilet. No spare staff were

available to replace us. The same happened with the water: you were only a few metres from a fridge with cold water, but you went thirsty for hours because you could not leave the machine and lose production. This was a humiliating situation.

Another job I was given was to package Nescafé for export. I had to make two 20-kilo boxes per minute, stack them, weigh them, and push a loaded trolley. It was really very hard. These tasks made me much worse. My arm started to ache, my right hand had pins and needles and I had pain in my ribs.

I had a scan that came up normal. I was losing sensation in my hand and I couldn't straighten my arm. That is when I saw Dr. Roberto Ruiz in Sorocaba and he diagnosed me with RSI. He wrote me a letter requesting I be given a different job in view of my illness and my upcoming retirement, but the company doctor did not even want to touch the letter and he asked me to give it straight to my boss José Antonio Pasqualini, head of manufacturing. He read the letter and asked me what exactly would be "a job compatible with my health." There was no possibility of change and so I went on sick pay for a year and then I retired.

We Nestlé pensioners continue to get company health cover. For a time I did physiotherapy, but the company decided to cut sessions to 20 per person per year, so I could no longer continue in treatment. Nestlé started its own physiotherapy service within the company with a doctor leading it, and they wanted me to undergo treatment there. I turned them down because what had happened with other colleagues who had used this service was that the doctor wrote a report stating that the person had been cured. As a consequence, the INSS received this information and people were left totally unprotected. I preferred to avoid this manipulation and I sought help from the University of Araras where final year physiotherapy students train under the advice of their teachers. At present I am doing massage therapy and there are times when I have to take analgesics because the pain stops me from sleeping.

In November 2003, a man who had worked alongside me for ten years was sacked - they blamed him for a loss in production - and he was practically thrown out of the factory by the security guards. He started legal action and asked me to be a witness to describe the industrial process which I know very well. I did not exaggerate or invent anything, and I said this sort of loss of production is fairly common in the factory and is due to a chronic technological inadequacy of Nestlé Araras in this particular process. A week later I went to pick up some medicine at the pharmacy and they had removed me from the list of people covered by the Nestlé agreement.

Silent Massacre

I wanted to know why and the company sent me a letter where it stated that the "attitude" I had taken had forced them to suspend my optional benefits. At that time my wife had a hospital appointment for an important operation the cost of which was partly covered by the agreement. I went to court and they ordered the company to immediately restore my coverage under the health agreement. My wife missed her operation. Shortly afterwards they offered me an agreement whereby they would respect the health agreement if I would promise not to take any further legal action against Nestlé. The same offer was made to 70 other pensioners who had been in the same situation as I had. When I read the details of what they were offering me, I realized several of the benefits covered in the original agreement were not in the new proposal.

My pain is irregular, I am very susceptible to dampness. I find it very hard to drive, I can't lift my arms right up. I was planning to keep on working, at least until I was 60, but what company would give me work now? I can no longer do what I learned in my working life, nor many other things either. I am 46 years-old...

Claudio cannot even speak about how this illness affects his family life, his self-esteem, as he is silenced by an anguish that knots up his throat.

This has
completely
changed our
lives



Sergio da Silva,
34 years-old, married, 3 children, born in Araras.

Silent Massacre



worked for Nestlé from May 1989 to June 2003. When I started I was 19 years old and it was like a dream come true, because I had heard such good things about the company, a serious, solid multinational. I fought to get in there. I started as a helper doing quantity control on long-life products. I also had to put all of this into boxes and stack the boxes on pallets. Then I was promoted to the packaging section where I stayed for a year and then I went to the packing room. There I had to feed the machine with packaging materials like reels and tapes. At that time all of this was done manually with no mechanical aid. I don't remember how much the reels weighed, but they had 4,500 laminated packets on them. I also put various products into boxes manually. Both tasks implied repetitive movements. Several years later I became a machine operator, but by then I almost never had an assistant to help me and I had to do both functions at the same time. Defective packages had to be taken off the line and emptied into 50 litre drums so that the contents could be recycled. To do this you had to bang the package on the edge of the drum and squeeze it so the contents would come out fast. You had to keep an eye on the machine at the same time or the work got disorganised and the bosses would come and ask for explanations. Between 1,200 and 1,500 packages would break each day. These accounted for so many jolts on the hand, wrist, arm and shoulder. There were other things that had to be dealt with on the machine, one of those was going up a small staircase to make a check, but this had to be done in fractions of a second. You could not drop below 97% of production standards because the bosses bullied and threatened. They had reduced the staffing on other machines so much that some colleagues couldn't cope, and we tended to help each other out when we could.

About six years ago I started feeling pain in my arms and ribs, but due to pressures both within in the factory and outside -due to high unemployment- I avoided going to the doctor because I knew the company did not accept any illness that had no visible symptoms. Only you are aware of how much pain you are in. I took painkillers and shortly after the pain would ease off for the rest of the shift, but it would start over again the next day. In my section we had almost

daily meetings, some during working hours and some not. Not attending them was seen as a sign of disinterest from the staff, by the company. In the meetings there was great pressure on productivity, competitiveness in the market, quality, and it always came back to the same point: "If you are not prepared to make the effort, the streets are full of people who would kill to work for Nestlé." This gets into your head, you think of your family, your children, and you say you will do anything to keep your job, even working on with the pain. And the days kept on passing, until the time came that I found the pain impossible to bear. I went to a doctor outside of working hours and took along the x-rays of my back. I told him the back pain ran up to my shoulders, and that when I went to the reading room at break time I couldn't hold the newspaper because my arms hurt so much. I asked him to do a scan because I had never had such severe pain. But the doctor had already seen Nestlé workers with the same problem, and as with all of them, instead of doing a scan he ordered another x-ray and a blood test for uric acid. I did everything he said and he prescribed me two drugs to take daily. One of these had something that upset my stomach, but I carried on working all the same. One Thursday I decided to go to the doctor instead of going to work. I told him what was happening to me and he told me to reduce the dosage, but nothing about a scan nor physiotherapy. He gave me a sick certificate for two days, Thursday and Friday, but I also asked for the Saturday because I didn't feel well and I really wanted to get better. Also, I had holiday booked from the Monday of the following week and it seemed better to give my body a long rest. He answered that due to a company request, neither he nor any other doctor in Araras working under agreement with Nestlé could give more than two days' sick leave. He passed me on to a Nestlé doctor for him to decide. The following day I went to the company, saw the doctor who could not give me an extra day either and he sent me back to the first doctor. He explained to me that one of the bosses, called Leandro had called all the doctors together to give them the instruction: no more than two days' sick leave. I decided to speak to the boss of my section and I explained the situation to him, and he agreed with me that I could stay home. During the holidays I saw another doctor who ordered 10 physiotherapy sessions for me which led to only partial improvement. On my return I was assigned to another section where I spent a week unloading sugar wagons. I was in a lot of pain but I managed to finish the week. Then I returned to my normal section, but barely two days later I was called into the office of one of the bosses and he asked me about the trouble I was causing because even the personnel department had heard about it. I answered that there had been no trouble and told him what had happened just like I am now, and I added that I had done everything according to the rules, as I always had done in the company. It was he who had authorised me to take the Saturday off. He said nothing,

Silent Massacre

he just opened a drawer in his desk, took out an envelope and gave it to me saying: "Look, now you have got yourself the sack."

I could not accept that we had to work ill, that we could only bow our heads and keep quiet. I refused to sign my dismissal, he called two witnesses who signed in my place and that was the end of it.

I thought I would work in that company until retirement, or that I would at least get to be someone in there, I always did everything right, but in the blink of an eye they had sacked me.

Before I went home I visited the doctor who had prescribed the physiotherapy and I asked him for a scan, and by the end of the day I had the diagnosis of tendonopathy in the shoulders. I took this result back to the previous doctor to show him that they had given me the sack because he had refused to give one day extra sick leave. He unhappily told me that he too is a Nestlé employee because he depends on the agreement with the company.

Then I found out about doctors in Sorocaba who treated us with respect. I was quickly given a diagnosis of RSI, and they gave me a letter for the INSS where another doctor authorised sick benefits for me.

At present I am still on sick benefits, doing physiotherapy, and right now as we speak I am in quite a lot of pain because on damp days like today, the pain is more intense.

I know I am going to have great difficulty finding a new job, because I have to get through a three-month trial period in any company, and you have to kill yourself to get the job. But the problem is I can't do that, because I am not physically able, and if I do it by using drugs, then I will make my illness worse. I have put this problem to everyone I know, and no one can resolve it. In fact, I think I will never be able to work again.

I often feel like going out for a walk with my youngest son, who is one and a half, but we can't carry him because my wife, a former Nestlé employee, also has RSI. And if we make an effort and do it, there are people who accuse us of faking the illness, and of shamelessness. All this has had a great emotional impact, you tend to remain isolated, talk less, we are more sensitive and confrontational. We stay at home, but we can't even do much there, I can't mend a curtain, clean or do the garden... we have to pay for everything. So economic difficulties build up. Living together becomes problematic. There are even times when you consider doing something stupid.

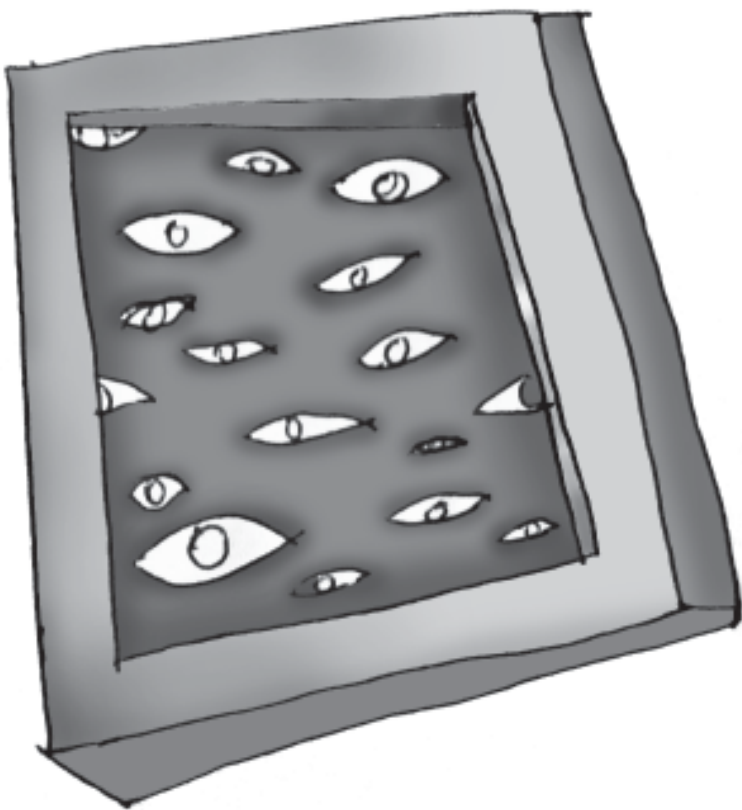
At this point Sergio couldn't talk about himself any more. Twenty minutes later we were able to start discussing his wife's case.

María was also a Nestlé employee from 1986, where she always worked in the printing section, which is a madhouse because of the intensity of the work. She always came home tired, anxious, obsessed by reaching productivity targets. In mid-1996 she was in so much pain that she could no longer work. She had some tests and found she had RSI. At that time no one yet knew what that illness was. Elder, the company doctor, prescribed her several drugs and told her she could continue to work. There were nights that María cried with the pain in her arms and shoulders. Time passed like that until she couldn't stand any more, she was moved to office work on the doctor's recommendation. But after a time they wanted to send her back to the machine, also because of pressure from some colleagues who were envious of her situation as they believed she was not sick. For a long time she suffered persecution from some of the bosses, until she was sacked without notice in February 2001. But she had an appointment with a gynaecologist around then as her period was overdue. The doctor confirmed the pregnancy. María went back to the company and told them she was pregnant, and when they saw they had committed a double error, dismissing her while she was being treated for RSI and, moreover, pregnant, they reinstated her. From then she was on maternity leave and then leave for RSI. In December 2003 she should have gone for evaluation at the INSS, but the doctors are still on strike now. So we don't know what will happen with her either.

All this has caused María to change completely. She was a woman who was always happy, and now...

Shaken, deeply moved, Sergio could not say any more about his life, his wife and his children.

I was so
traumatised
that I avoid
going near
the factory



Neide Lombi,
40 years-old, divorced, one son.

Silent Massacre



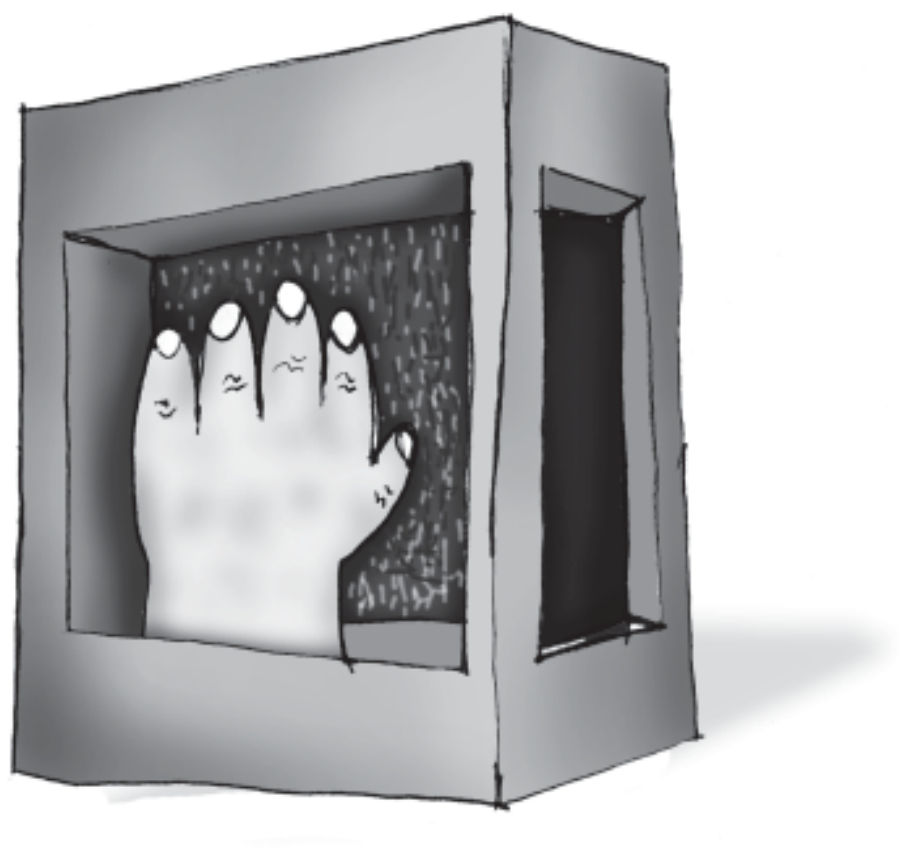
In February 1986 I joined Nestlé, but a while later I resigned because my husband didn't want me to work. A year and a half later, however, after I separated from my husband, I returned to the company where I worked in the printing section for 12 years. Over that time there were many changes in management, in the way of working, in the work environment. When I left the company in 2001, I felt a lot of pain in my arms and shoulders, but no one mentioned tendonitis or RSI.

From a certain point I could no longer put up with the night shift, I couldn't eat or sleep, and I also suffered a lot of pressure from the boss. I fell into a deep depression, I lost the will to live, I felt a lot of pain but I went to work all the same. My colleagues advised me to speak to the boss to change shifts. That's what I did. I was waiting for four hours in the hallway, and when I went in he greeted me rudely, shouting and protesting. I explained what I needed, that I felt bad, ill. He told me he could not change my shift, and that it was a problem, and he threatened me telling me that if they gave me sick leave I would lose my job. I left even more disappointed than before, crying. I don't know how I managed to work that night, and the following day I went to the doctor who signed me off for eleven days. I took some tablets that made me sleep all day, I never saw the sun. I returned to work thinking only that I had to support my son. For three months I suffered all sorts of humiliation from the boss, until he gave me the sack. I went through a very difficult time, I suffered a lot, and even now I avoid going near the factory because I was left with a kind of trauma, of impotence and anger. I suffered too much humiliation. I remember the company doctor ordered me to go back to work as though I was faking the pain, the boss calling us all donkeys, brutes or throwing me out of a meeting simply to bully me.

I had some therapy with a psychologist and now I've improved a lot, with medication and relaxation. The pains continued even though I wasn't working, and I didn't know they would not get better. All my right side went to sleep, from my head down to my hand, I couldn't peel an orange, wash a pan, sweep up. A friend advised me to do some tests in Sorocaba, because when people did them in Araras they showed nothing. Then I knew I had RSI in both arms. I started

treatment but didn't improve much. I am very limited, I can't even water my plants. It's hard. Now I can only hope my son never has to go through a situation like this. You feel useless. Fortunately my family support me. My boyfriend also helps, and sometimes our love life is affected by my pains, my mood changes when I am in a lot of pain.

I started legal action in order to get my rights recognised. I joined the Araras RSI sufferers' association, and as I believe one swallow does not make a summer, when we unite and fight for the same thing we have more chance of stopping this happening to others. The feedback we give each other is also important, the human contact and sharing of experiences.



Repetitive Strain Injuries (RSIs) and the socio-economic context in which they are produced, clearly demonstrate the clash between two opposed interest groups: the companies - in this case the Nestlé factory in Araras, São Paulo State, Brazil, with its morally enslaving and physically devastating working conditions - and the workers - victims of their own belief in the social order, where "a wolf" uses its influence "to eat them better," betrayed, damaged, but finally pulling together and fighting to get their rights recognised and to help prevent others suffering as they have.

To enter the world of RSIs we must extend our field of sensitivity, we must control our anger and work together using the power of this indignation to fuel a positive movement.



www.rel-uita.org