

The Banana Workers of Urabá: From “Subjects” to “Citizens”?

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The banana workers of Urabá, a region close to the Panamanian border,² have mobilized one of the most significant campaigns for political, civil, and labor rights that Colombia has experienced in the last three decades. They have organized a trade union that includes all the workers of the banana industry, which is unique in the Colombian agricultural sector. Close to 15,000 members are affiliated to Sintrainagro,³ including workers on plantations located in other regions of the country. This organization achieved a common framework for collective bargaining at the end of the 1980s, thus superseding the previous process, which involved nearly 310 contracts negotiated per company.

Following the decentralization policies that began at the end of the 1980s, Sintrainagro worked to increase workers' possibilities of accessing local political power. Likewise, it led an important drive to improve the workers' living conditions during the 1990s. Furthermore, this trade union is in the forefront of the organization of a Latin American federation of agricultural workers that already unites a large number of the wagedworkers in the continent's banana industry. How have they achieved this in the midst of such a ferocious and ruthless armed conflict as the Colombian one, in which Urabá has been one of the most affected areas? Can this new situation, as the current leaders argue, be considered as the beginning of a movement toward citizenship?

The extension of citizenship rights to a specific group is no guarantee of a democratic regime—as the authoritarian governments of Mussolini, Hitler, Franco, and Salazar demonstrate. However, during the life of these regimes, bonds of citizenship were created with the population that, according to these leaders, made up their respective nations. Seen in this light, citizenship is a social relation that unites a specific human group with a state. This bond implies mutual obligations and a sense of individual dignity associated with

a degree of social inclusion and a sense of belonging to a political community, usually a national one (Tilly, 1995; Pécaut, 2000). In the case of Urabá, this relationship has meant bartering for protection, security and a level of regional political participation for the workers and their allies unequalled in other parts of the country. This has been achieved in exchange for loyalty to a politico-economic order, even though this order required the elimination of one of the most important political forces of the region, the Patriotic Union or UP, and related movements (Cuartas, interview, 26 October 2000).

It is also important to underline the fact that this loyalty is not to the national state centered in the capital Bogotá, but rather to a regional order that arose out of the consolidation of a non-state military apparatus that defines itself as counterinsurgent. Although the outcome is still uncertain, if the pattern that has predominated over the last decade continues, the military and political control that AUC⁴ has achieved in the banana-growing region could grow, and particularly that of ACCU,⁵ the strongest organization within the alliance. Should this occur, the consolidation of anticommunist political identities can be predicted, although it is not easy to say what other features will define them. Nevertheless, while the possibility of a successful peace process between the central government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) exists, this particular order is threatened. Likewise, the outcome of a prolongation of the existing situation, with blockades on the highways that connect Urabá to the center of the country and the sabotage of electricity supplied to the zone causing interruptions of economic activity, is unpredictable.

In any event, questions about this regional order in Urabá continue to arise. As an anti-revolutionary force and renovator of regional security and order, AUC had usually established alliances with economic and political elites threatened by the insurgents and with sectors of the state security forces. This was the way they consolidated their advance in other areas of the country, to the detriment of the influence and control that guerrilla groups had maintained for decades. In Urabá, however, the coalitions included Sintrainagro, the most important and well-established workers' organization in the region. They also included Esperanza, Paz y Libertad (Hope, Peace and Liberty), a former guerrilla organization that began in the mid-1960s as a Maoist-influenced splinter group of the Communist Party and operated as the EPL (Popular Liberation Army) until they accepted the government's peace proposal in 1991 and disarmed. The banana workers have made significant gains within this regional political configuration—an outcome of the armed conflict in Colombia and of the regional political and military rivalry between the different insurgent forces. How should their social and political advances be viewed when they have been obtained in such circumstances, and especially if their advances came at a cost to other workers or urban dwellers, negating their political, civil, and labor rights?

Strategic interactions and unexpected alliances

The current conditions of banana workers in Colombia contrast with the situation of their counterparts elsewhere in Latin America, who are organized in company-based trade unions (when any union organization exists), have relatively low salaries and limited access to institutional political power. What road led to this unusual situation for the Colombian banana workers when only 20 years ago their meetings were clandestine, their living conditions miserable, and unionizing was, if not illegal, highly frowned upon by the authorities and businessmen? How did they get these prerogatives in the midst of the fierce armed conflict that has been waged in Urabá over the last two decades? It is even more difficult to understand how they achieved it when one of the sectors most affected by the political violence was precisely that of the banana workers.

To answer these questions is even more significant given the political changes that occurred in the region. The largest electoral force in the late 1980s and early 1990s—the Patriotic Union or UP, a coalition of leftist and social democratic groups, including the pro-Soviet Communist Party—was wiped from the political map as a result of violence against its militants and supporters. The UP was an attempt to create a legal political movement with the participation of the FARC. It was the outcome of the peace talks held between Belisario Betancur's Conservative government (1982–1986) and the guerrillas in 1983. The electoral field they had gained in the late 1980s was seized again by the Liberal Party, the UP's main political rival in Urabá (CINEP, 1995).

Two additional circumstances have further complicated this scenario. The first is the growing military and political influence that counterinsurgent paramilitary groups supported by banana producers, ranchers, drug lords and security forces organized under the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia have gained in the zone. The second is the apparent alliance between these paramilitary groups and the political movement Esperanza, Paz y Libertad, previously mentioned, which operated under the name of Popular Liberation Army (EPL) until 1991. This organization had an important influence, from the late 1970s onwards, among the banana workers and landless peasants in Urabá, as did the FARC (García, 1996). How did the EPL end up allied with their former enemies for the purpose of confronting the FARC instead of continuing to build the alliance that these two organizations had formed in 1987? How did the banana workers come to terms with this “pact with the devil” between the former EPL militants and the paramilitaries?

Any attempt to answer these questions reveals the “accommodation” strategies of vulnerable groups that are facing adverse situations or more powerful rivals. One interpretation, although tentative given the instability

of the situation, would suggest that we examine how radical identities and projects were assimilated in the new order established by paramilitaries, banana producers and the Liberal Party, with the support of the armed forces, from the mid-1990s, and how it transformed their utopias and their projects. Likewise, an examination of recent union developments enables us to understand the international activism recently begun by this trade union and its responses to the changes in the world banana market.

I argue here that the “assimilation” of the workers and their allies in a regional political arrangement has come at a cost for the different sectors involved in the agreement operating today in Urabá. The workers and the political sector that finally prevailed have not been merely “victims” of this developing order, but have also achieved a position that offers them social, political and economic advantages in addition to the opportunity to sway the nature of this concurrence of forces. That is, these workers have acted in accordance with a memory, an idea of their own utopias and projects, modified by the circumstances they confronted, but they have done so as active agents and subjects of rights, capable of making decisions. This was facilitated by the strategic alliance with both legal and illegal business, sectors of the central state, such as the armed forces, and regional politicians linked to the Liberal Party.

Banana producers have had to accept the presence of a strong and self-reliant union; the liberal politicians a party-based organization linked to the union that competes for power at the local level; and the security forces a political organization made up of ex-guerrillas holding institutional power. In the same vein, by uniting with the former guerrilla members and workers, traditional politicians, banana producers, and the army blocked another possible direction the armed conflict could take in this region—an alliance between the insurgents still in arms, the FARC, and the banana workers and poor urban dwellers. This trajectory would have been still more risky to the interests and projects of traditional politicians, businessmen and the military. The fact that the central government of the day and the local politicians all belonged to the Liberal Party was critical to opening the coalition of regional power to a new associate, one previously considered “foreign to the Colombian nation” by the privileged sectors. The advocacy role of the Presidential Advisory Board for Peace and its advisers, who facilitated the agreements, was also important.

My argument relies on two main analytical tools. The first is the strategic interactions among social actors, their alliances, conflicts and transformations, and the second is the interactions between political identities and broader networks. The changes in the dynamic between identities and networks propitiate transformations in these identities. These two elements allow us to understand variations in actors' strategies as a result of political interaction, rather than as a result of behaviors attributed *a priori*. In

fact, this work does not impute to individual or collective actors attributes or behaviors derived from the level of development (modern/industrial or traditional/pre-industrial) or from the social category to which they belong (artisans, peasants or workers' wives). Rather, it relies on a situated account of actors immersed in their relational setting (Somers, 1993).

Thus, a fierce competition was unleashed between guerrilla forces—EPL and FARC—in the banana belt in the context of the EPL's negotiations with the government in 1990–91. The decision of the EPL to disarm and to take advantage of the opportunity to enter the political arena legally, instead of continuing with their insurrection and conspiracy, led to contention between these two groups, each vying for the support of the workers. Each needed to defend and justify their chosen path—revolutionary or legal. This struggle degenerated to the point of armed attack on the social bases of the other group's followers, killing close to three hundred banana workers in 1995 alone (Sandoval, 1997). The clash between these two groups was also used to advantage by paramilitaries and security forces to eliminate those whom they considered “guerrilla collaborators,” without differentiating between the groups.

The intensification of the struggle led to a rapprochement between the EPL, now the political movement Esperanza, Paz y Libertad, and their former antagonists—the army, banana producers, and paramilitaries—and converged into an alliance to confront the FARC and their armed and civilian supporters. For the private sector, regional politicians, and counter-insurgent forces, the coalition with the workers neutralized the possibility of a more serious loss of public order at the local level. This would result from an alliance of workers and the guerrilla group still in arms, or from a successful peace process that would mean the legalization and association in a single project of the different tendencies of the revolutionary left.

For this reason, this study emphasizes the changing character of the political identities of both the elites and the subaltern groups. From this perspective, identities are considered to be constructed in a process that is more the outcome of collective action than its cause and basis (Calhoun, 1991). That is, identity is not a static or pre-existing condition that exercises a causal influence on mobilization, but rather an outcome of political interaction (Tilly, 1998). This analysis also explores the role of collective mobilization, state intervention and the armed conflict in the struggle to give new meanings to the received notions about citizenship, representation, and participation (Dagnino, 1998; Warren, 1993). Therefore, public identities, including citizenship, are understood to be social relations that are always open to new interpretations and to negotiation (Tilly, 1996).

This text has four sections. The section that follows presents the historical background, centered on the decade of the 1980s, the competition between the militants of the EPL and the FARC, and the strengthening of the trade union movement during the peace talks of this period. The text

continues with an analysis of the regional political restructuring at the beginning of the 1990s and the repositioning of the banana workers in this new field of political and military forces. Finally, it takes up the subject of the new labor internationalism and the possible areas of agreement between workers and entrepreneurs to confront the changing conditions of the world market. In the conclusion the argument is recapitulated and three points are emphasized: the unpredictability of the historical development of the armed conflict in Urabá, the relative incorporation of the banana workers into the new local order, and the role that alliances with more powerful groups play in this incorporation.

Revolutionaries, workers, and peace talks in the 1980s

The living and working conditions of the banana workers in the 1970s and the early 1980s were deplorable. “They gave you a cardboard box to sleep in right in the packing plant. [...] [W]e slept like dogs, to be blunt, but that is the way it was. The workday was up to 18 hours long. We had to work from 6 a.m. to midnight at times, only to start again the next day at six” (García, 1996: 105). The growth in production required the organization of camps or “tambos” on the plantations, although the housing conditions were precarious and the possibilities of family life slight. There was no electricity, drinking water or toilets.

That place was one big humiliation. I worked until 10 at night; the next day beginning at 5 in the morning I was up again, they rang a bell. You don't even see your family because you work up to two months without any rest, even on Sunday. [...] There was never a time when I said, “I'm going to stay home Sunday with my family.” (García, 1996: 106)

The life in the camps was sad—“the men lived alone with their wives and families far away and no source of distraction; this lasted well into the 1980s. ‘Lonely males’ [*machosolos*], they called them” (Sandoval, 1997: 180).

Banana production was the first labor relation for most of the workers and for many owners, who initially arrived in the region as colonists. Two-thirds of the workers were black and had been peasants, miners, or fisherfolk:

In the first phase of the industry—the 1960s and 1970s—the workers worked up to 20 hours a day; they didn't know that they had to be paid for overtime. They didn't know that after two months they had the right to compensation for unfair dismissal, they didn't even know if they had been fired with cause or not. They didn't know that Sundays were paid differently from other days [...] people had no idea that they had the legal right to unionize. (García, 1996: 105)

This lack of knowledge of the law extended to a significant number of the investors and owners themselves, who either did not know the labor law or thought it contrary to their interests or ideologies. So, from the beginning labor relations were open to arbitrariness, to individual retaliation, and even to the use of force between workers and producers.

In this context, the right to organize reached the social and political agenda. However, it was not debated in public because of the political monopoly of the Liberal and Conservative parties—a legacy of the power-sharing agreement of 1958 between these two dominant parties, which over time developed a markedly anti-union stance. To social injustice and political exclusion, the proposals of the different Marxist groups added their anti-capitalist utopias, which took hold in Urabá from the beginning of banana production in the 1960s. For their part, the seditious projects of the guerrilla groups promised a democratic redistribution of agrarian property. These four elements made up a conflictive social and political atmosphere in the region, to which must be added the authoritarianism of the investors in the area. Supporters of the Communist Party founded the first trade union in 1964 (Sintrabanano) among the workers employed by the Frutera de Sevilla (United Fruit Company). When the company learned about the union, they fired the workers, then convinced the authorities to jail them, and finally the same fate met the Communist leaders in the area. The general guideline was to fire first, and if this was not enough to quell the problems, to then turn to the military authorities or the police (García, 1996: 112–15).

Blacklisting workers, pre-emptive firings, and the promotion of parallel company unions were the employers' responses in the 1970s to the organizing efforts initiated by the workers in the 1960s. The composition of the national political regime did not allow the existence of local authorities that enforced the law and defended rights, so that these remained at the whim of local elites, mostly Liberals in Urabá. Nevertheless, the hope of legal redress was always present. From the first records of worker movements one constant was the petition to central powers. These petitions called for the establishment of offices to resolve labor conflicts according to the law (García, 1996: 109), something that only occurred at the end of the 1980s after widespread and violent strikes supported by guerrilla groups had taken place.

The relationship of social movements and armed actors has persisted in Urabá from the late 1970s to date, although little is known of the character of these links. Furthermore, there has been a tendency to victimize the social organizations without recognizing the opportunities to promote their agendas that the actions of armed groups opened up for them. The use of force by the guerrillas not only attracted the expected state repression, it also gained concrete improvements for the region's inhabitants. To all intents and purposes, the guerrillas imposed trade union organization and collective bargaining on employers in the region (Madarriaga, interview, 11 July 2000),

an occurrence that was propitiated by the opportunity for democratization opened up by the Conservative government of Belisario Betancur in 1982. Direct negotiations between the presidency and the guerrillas, without demanding that they first surrender, which had been the position of the preceding Liberal government, represented the first steps to this opening.

This recognition as political actors had significant consequences in the regions influenced by insurgent movements, the case of Urabá. The presidential initiative to offer guerrilla groups negotiating room coincided with a change of strategy on the part of the guerrillas, who, beginning in the early 1980s, decided to seek a larger presence in economically important regions, and also to try to influence the workers who produced this wealth. In Urabá, the EPL began to move beyond their earlier focus on an agrarian agenda in 1980, and to join the struggle for unionization among the banana workers, the urban movements for housing and public services, and the invasions of vacant land in the center of the banana belt (García, 1996: 122–3; M. T. Uribe, 1992: 164–214). Sintagro, a union founded in 1972 by activists close to the Conservative Party but penetrated by the EPL, was the main instrument of labor activism.

In December 1984, four months after the EPL and the government signed the peace agreements in Medellín, the first massive and coordinated strike in the history of Urabá took place. Fifteen hundred workers on 18 banana plantations that covered 2,000 hectares declared an indefinite strike to pressure for the negotiation of collective contracts. Likewise, it was the first time that the banana producers' association Augura initiated a joint campaign to oppose union action (García, 1996: 125). To end the strike, the government, producers and unions signed a tripartite agreement, the first of its type in the history of the region. In this agreement, the Ministry of Labor was appointed to hear complaints on violations of labor law, state-owned social insurance was established in the zone to replace the undependable medical service offered by private producers on the farms, and Sintagro was guaranteed the opportunity to hold an assembly of workers. The workers' petitions were remarkable for their modesty in contrast to the disproportionate means used to achieve them, which demonstrates the degree of labor and union repression.

In 1985, 127 collective agreements were signed that covered 60 per cent of the banana-growing area. Union membership rose abruptly and reached almost 60 per cent of the workers, 43 per cent organized in Sintagro and 14 per cent in Sintrabanano (Villarraga and Plaza, 1994: 205). The truce between the government and the guerrilla groups allowed the unions to act publicly for the first time. The armed forces took a tolerant line and did not get involved in the strikes or movement during the first months. Then, "everything began to break open [...] people came from the farms to tell us that there they had so many to join [...] and we got to know the future leaders

that way. It was no longer like at first, when we had to go to the plantations at night to convince our fellow workers. No! Now people began to come to the union office to say to us, look, go to this or that farm where we have organized such and such a number of workers," says Mario Agudelo, a political leader of the EPL (García, 1996: 126–7).

Although the peace talks made room for the guerrilla groups, it was also an opportunity for different social sectors to speak out publicly about their demands and mobilize for their rights, and their only allies in this undertaking were the armed groups. This was the case of the banana workers. Their organizational development found support in the Presidency's democratization policies, which provided political instruments to neutralize the local elites and the security forces for a time, opening possibilities to broaden the elitist local order (Ortíz, 1999).

Nevertheless, with the change of government from the Conservative Betancur to the Liberal Virgilio Barco (1986–90) and the hardening of the presidential position, the peace negotiations stalled and the situation in Urabá became even more polarized. Following a fierce competition for worker support, Sintagro and Sintrabanano agreed to work together. The same thing occurred with the FARC and the EPL, which now jointly used the name Simón Bolívar Guerrilla Coordination (Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar) in association with other armed groups.

The year 1986 passed with threats and assassinations, fires in the packing houses, destruction of cable trolleys, petitions, strikes on the plantations over workplace issues, strikes on 120 farms to 'protect life and on another 130 as a protest over the assassination of a union leader,' suspension of loading and shipping, and work-to-rule campaigns to pressure for the payment of salaries lost during strike days or as a result of sabotage. (Ortíz, 1999: 134–5)

Obviously this was not a situation in the best interests of the business community.

Labor modernization and new directions for social mobilization

All the same, 1987 was an important year for the modernization of labor relations in Urabá. The creation of the United Workers Federation, CUT (Central Unitaria de Trabajadores), in 1986, in which conservatives, liberals, communists and other leftist groups converged after more than forty years of division, contributed to this advance. Sintrabanano and Sintagro presented a joint negotiating package for more than 200 agreements in an equal number of plantations that consisted of a single list of demands for the sector. This put on the table the *de facto* recognition of bargaining by an industrial sector, a situation never before seen in the private sector in Colombia (Villarraga

and Plazas, 1994: 205). The banana producers, through Augura, also had a unified front for the negotiations, and they accepted the collective bargaining but complemented it with farm-by-farm bargaining according to farm productivity, in order to "establish a relationship of cause and effect between the work and its payment" (García, 1996: 136).

The presence of Ministry of Labor and CUT delegates revived the tripartite commission of 1984. The outcome was an important advance in the recognition of workers' rights: acceptance of the union as the legitimate representative of the workers at the bargaining table and entitled to speak on their behalf to employers and the government; labor stability; an eight-hour day; union privileges; improved salaries. Also agreed was the beginning of the dismantling of the system of plantation camps and the financing of urban housing. The latter, changing the workers' housing from the plantations to the towns, was key to the future changes of strategy and objectives on the part of the EPL in the 1990s, by then operating under the name of Esperanza, Paz y Libertad. The change tended to stabilize families and to broaden the concerns of the workers to include public services, education, health and recreation, with which the state was directly involved, whether at the national, departmental, or local level. No longer did the workers limit themselves only to labor issues in a confrontation with the business sector (Mario Agudelo, interview, 12 July 2000).

Despite the rapprochement described above, the assassination of labor leaders and negotiators did not stop in 1987. From the beginning of the negotiations in the first week of February until the signing of the first agreement in April, 24 union leaders were murdered by hired assassins, and the headquarters of Sintagro was destroyed by a bomb for the second time. By September the number of unionists who had been assassinated had reached 40, and the focus of the discussions between the workers and the government and business shifted to the subject of human rights and the responsibility of the state for these acts of violence (García, 1996: 136–7). While at the national level the positions of the guerrillas and the government were polarized, in Urabá, the calls to "partial insurrection" or to a "popular uprising" made by the national leadership of the guerrillas were not well received by some of the region's militants and activists. These wanted to consolidate the gains made since 1984 and to contribute to a climate of political guarantees that would encourage respect for life, social welfare, and the stimulation of regional development (Villarraga and Plazas, 1994: 205–6).

The consequences of union participation in the uprisings were the suspension of their legal license to act on behalf of their members and an increased militarization of the region. A new military command was established in Urabá in 1987, and its commander had not only military but also political and civil powers (Botero, 1990: 180–9; M. T. Uribe, 1992: 251–6). Despite this, the union leaders came up with a resourceful legal mechanism

to restore their legal standing and their power to represent the workers in the renegotiation of almost 300 collective agreements on an equal number of plantations in 1989. Sintragro and Sintrabanano fused into a new entity called Sintrainagro, following the example of CUT at the national level, which also formalized the alliance of the former regional antagonists represented by the two great tendencies in international communism: Soviet and Chinese-Albanian (Ramírez, 1997: 97).

The outcome of the new round of negotiations consolidated the union role, and collective bargaining by sector was firmly established. Nevertheless, this was not easy and did not mean the absence of mobilization, although there was a change in the use of armed pressure and, with this, of the revolutionary objectives. Mario Agudelo, one of the political leaders of the EPL, states that:

when the strike of 1989 came, we saw that to combine guerrilla action with the social conflict was not the best strategy. So we worked in reverse: we tried to profile the labor conflict and give space to the social movement. Our interest was to prevent other external factors, such as guerrilla action, from latching onto the movement. We thought this was a good strategy because it avoided tensions; it avoided the acquisition of new enemies or new factors against the movement. (Villarraga and Plazas, 1994: 389-90)

Before the union negotiations of the second semester of 1989, the leadership of the new Sintrainagro wanted to ease tensions. The state, banana producers, and local elites had directed a fierce repression against the region in response to the challenges of the guerrillas, the workers, and the urban and rural land invaders.

We tried to manage the conflict differently, and we were able to convince some authorities to begin to pressure Augura to come to the table. [...] We knew that there was a clear intention from Augura to resist the union, to strike a blow at it and to attempt claw-backs. [...] Experience was teaching us to change the approach: to smooth ruffled feathers, to open spaces for negotiation and dialogue, to begin a dialogue and the possibility of a unilateral truce. (Villarraga and Plazas, 1994: 389-90)

The possibilities of a regional crisis caused by the flight of capital from the zone and its movement to Central America and other areas of Colombia created a noticeable impact on the regional leadership of the EPL and the workers. Mario Agudelo indicates that "we saw the real danger of the disappearance of the banana belt, the weakening of the workers' power and retaliation against us, should this occur" (Villarraga and Plazas, 1994: 389-90). The idea of "salvation of the region and the defense of banana

production" was added to the search for an agreement with authorities and business leaders and the elimination of armed pressure on the labor negotiations. This changed everything, because it implied making common cause with producers and investors, the archenemies of the workers, according to the revolutionary ideas of the EPL. As Agudelo points out,

we made the proposal of an alliance with banana producers around the themes of economic development, problems of a social nature and threats to human rights [...]. It was our decision [...]. It was not preceded by a decision from the national directorate. (Villarraga and Plazas, 1994: 391)

The dynamic described in the change of strategy and objectives of the EPL revolutionaries in Urabá clarifies many of the questions that later arose about the demobilization of this guerrilla group and the way that the banana workers participated in the regional political restructuring of the 1990s in Urabá. One point worth highlighting is the difference in the positioning of the EPL and the FARC in the region. Despite being an organization with a national presence, the EPL had its main front and its general staff headquarters in Urabá and nearby regions. The FARC, on the other hand, had its Fifth Front in the region, but its leadership and most important forces were located in the southern part of the country (Ortíz, 1999). When making significant decisions, the feelings and opinion of the local population were decisive for the EPL, while for the FARC's Fifth Front the determinations of the national leadership, located outside the region, carried more weight than the opinions of the different regional social sectors. This difference strongly influenced the divergent paths followed by these insurgent organizations.

No to the revolution, yes to citizenship

The demobilization of the EPL in March 1991, their reintegration into civilian life as the movement Esperanza, Paz y Libertad, and the role of the banana workers in this process was the object of a bloody confrontation with the FARC in Urabá. The legalization of the former insurgent group set off reactions from its rivals, both its revolutionary rivals and legal political competitors. The situation became even more complex as a result of the growing influence of counter-insurgent paramilitary groups in the region throughout the 1990s, and the "dirty war" that accompanied it. The lethal consequences of this confrontation are well documented (CINEP, 1995; Comisión Andina de Juristas, 1994; Defensoria del Pueblo, 1992; Fundación Progresar, 1996), as are some reflections on the early years of the reinsertion (Uribe, 1994). However, little is known about the analysis of the members of Esperanza, Paz y Libertad about the way in which this reintegration into civilian life occurred and its results. Nor is there work about

their explanations for their relative electoral success in the local elections of October 2000 or about the effects of these alliances on the banana workers' trade union practices.

One of the first doubts or questions that arises concerns the EPL's relationship with different armed forces, especially with the constitutionally mandated Army and with the paramilitary groups. In the case of the army, Mario Agudelo, one of the strategists of the reinsertion, indicates that the demobilization opened the political scene to them "for the democratic struggle and the search for social justice." However, this implied an acceptance of the authority of the national institutions, hence the army, and the monopoly on the use of force by the state. So, when the aggressions (presumably from the FARC against the leaders, activists and workers that supported the EPL) began, "the first thing that was done was to approach the army and design a security plan for the population, in particular for those communities sympathetic to the EPL. To this end we proposed the creation of military posts in the high risk communities" (Mario Agudelo, interview, 12 July 2000).

The most widespread complaint of the reinserted guerrillas was that "the massacres were announced ahead of time and the security forces paid no attention." According to Agudelo, this was the case of the massacres at the Bajo del Oso, Osaka and Las Cunas plantations in 1995. On these farms, unknown persons assassinated close to fifty workers who supported Esperanza, Paz y Libertad. Las Cunas was located ten kilometers from a military base in the municipality of Carepa. For Agudelo, the armed forces "were more interested in taking care of the roads, especially the highway to Medellín, than protecting the population." Agudelo comments that "the relationship between the communities and the army was strengthened" with the arrival of General Rito Alejo del Río as the commander of the army brigade in Urabá in 1995. "The relationship became more spontaneous, while it was more complicated with the DAS (Administrative Department of Security), the Ministry of Defense, the Reinsertion Program, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs" (Mario Agudelo, interview, 12 July 2000). The rapprochement between the organization's supporters and the army was favored by the decision of General del Río to protect the areas where the former guerrilla members were living from attacks by the other armed groups.

As for the paramilitaries, Agudelo says that "when the proposal of a pact was made to the business sector in 1988–89, there were no paramilitaries in the region and the context of the proposal was peace-building, not armed conflict like we have now." Moreover, Agudelo argues that the proposal that they made implicitly acknowledged that labor conflicts would be defined at the bargaining table between labor and management without interference from armed actors:

The social pact with business meant that labor issues were no longer in the hands of the guerrillas, the army, and the paramilitaries, because it was no longer necessary to resort to them. This shows that the construction of democratic opportunities, negotiating spaces, contributes to the reconstruction of the country's institutions. Moreover, when we signed the social pact with Augura in 1991, there were no self-defense groups in Urabá. (Mario Agudelo, interview, 12 July 2000)

Although it is clear that a negotiated agreement between workers and business does not mean a formal agreement with the paramilitaries, it is good to remember that General del Río was withdrawn from command in Urabá in 1998 and discharged in 1999 on suspicion of tolerating paramilitary groups.⁶ Guillermo Rivera, president of Sintrainagro, was one of the speakers in a ceremony of redress prepared for General del Río and organized by Augura and Fuerza Colombia, the political organization of the former Army commander General Harold Bedoya.⁷ The event was held in the Hotel Tequendama, one of the capital's most prestigious establishments, in May 1999. The slogan of the meeting was "For a Colombia That Doesn't Surrender," suggesting that peace talks with the guerrillas were a capitulation.

All the same, it should be underlined how difficult the agreement with the armed apparatuses actually was. Agudelo maintains that when the paramilitaries arrived in the banana zone around 1997, they wanted to referee labor relations as the guerrilla groups had done before them. "We opposed this and the producers did as well, and we managed to make them respect the agreements to eradicate armed involvement in labor disputes" (Mario Agudelo, interview, 12 July 2000). Likewise, in the collective bargaining in the first semester of 2000 there were threats of a strike from the workers who were accused of attempting to disturb the peace in the region. To this, Sintrainagro responded that there could be no talk of democracy in Urabá if the right to strike was prohibited (Madarriaga, interview, 11 July 2000). Finally, a consensus was reached and there was no necessity to test forces, but the tension made it evident that there were potential cracks in the alliance. And although violence against labor leaders has diminished drastically in Urabá, the same has not occurred in Magdalena, the other banana-growing zone in Colombia. In January 2001, the president of the Sintrainagro affiliate in this department was murdered. Including this case, there have been twenty leaders assassinated in the Magdalena branch since its creation in 1991 (*El Tiempo*, 26 January 2001). In this region, to be a trade unionist still means to walk with death daily.

Nevertheless, for the members of Esperanza, Paz y Libertad and the labor leaders the most significant occurrence has been "the change in the way of thinking about things." For the trade unionists, the former model was polarized and rebellious and led to violence between workers and producers, and

between them and administrators. Guillermo Rivera, president of Sintrainagro, says, "this culture of rebellion, of anarchy, leads to failure to follow the rules, to looking for a paycheck without working, attitudes that gained some currency among workers" (Rivera, interview, 12 October 2000). In this context, the social referent of the workers was the guerrillas, because there was no sense of future, and without this there was no sense of social and institutional belonging, explains Agudelo.

Moreover, "the worker was reduced to a salary, to a stable labor supply, without taking into account the human dimension, that is, his or her housing, family, region" (Mario Agudelo, interview, 12 July 2000). A fund for social security was included in the social pact, and in 1993 social security, as a state institution, opened in Urabá. This ended the medical service offered by the plantations and with it the conflicts over diagnoses and the assignment of sick days (time off) and medications. Likewise, a surcharge was levied on each box exported for the financing of urban housing and the elimination of the camps. With this "the worker's dignity was restored, and especially that of the worker's family. This helped the workers to feel that they had rights as persons, as individuals, and not only as a factor of production." In María de Agudelo's view, "what we are building is another standpoint, one that is closer to citizenship. The true revolution in Urabá is the construction of citizenship. We have moved from being subjects to feeling like citizens" (María de Agudelo, interview, 12 July 2000).

Social unionism and labor internationalism

The banana workers have not acted alone for this purpose of improving their living conditions—or of becoming citizens, as one of their leaders put it. In this unfavorable context for collective mobilization, they have received an extraordinary expression of international solidarity from Danish, Finnish and Spanish unions, as well as the advice of the International Union of Food and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF-UITA). This alliance, based in Geneva, Switzerland, seeks to unite the agribusiness workers on plantations and in the food industry into an international federation. In concrete terms, the Federation of Danish Workers, in association with the Danish government, renewed the financing of a training program for union leaders for a further six years. The initial grant ran for three years, until 2000. Finland's Centre for Union Solidarity is doing something similar through the National Trade Union School at Antioquia. Education is one of the most outstanding benefits won by Sintrainagro over the last decade. Every month they have between forty and fifty permits for two-day paid leave for courses in labor capacitation (Ríos, interview, 12 July 2000). For their part, the Spanish Unión Sindical is financing part of the construction costs of a 450-seat school in the La Chinita neighborhood of Apartadó, for children of workers and

residents. Some European currents call this approach "social unionism." Traditionally, union organizations have turned their backs on the problems of the communities where they live if these are not directly related to labor issues. "The need is for unions to go beyond labor problems and confront social necessities," says Guillermo Rivera.

Worker-leaders are being encouraged to be political leaders as well. That is how the candidates associated with Sintrainagro or with Esperanza, Paz y Libertad won two of the four mayoralities in the banana belt in the October 2000 elections, and in Apartadó they obtained five of the twelve seats on the municipal council (Ríos, interview, 12 July 2000). International activities are also commonplace for the hardened leaders of Sintrainagro. They led the organizing process of a Latin American coordinator of banana workers' trade unions from its first meeting in Costa Rica in 1993, attended by workers from the host country, Colombia and Honduras. One year later, these countries formally established the coordinating body in a meeting held in Guatemala; the 1994 meeting was also attended by representatives from trade unions in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Panama, Ecuador, and Belize. The objectives that have been defined are respect for human rights, labor rights and the ILO conventions. The experience of the unions is that when a crisis occurs in the banana industry—generally a saturation of the market—national producers tend to violate the conventions in response to the low prices being paid (Rivera, interview, 12 October 2000).

This is the risk of the abolition of the European Union's quota system and the imposition of a first come, first served system. In practice, it favors countries such as Ecuador, where trade union freedoms are virtually nil and labor costs are lower. A worker earns between two and three dollars a day on average in Ecuador, while in Colombia or Costa Rica a worker earns five dollars, according to *El Tiempo* (13 October 2000). Up to now Ecuador has been the only Latin American country to accept the new rules of the game as laid out by the EU, which eliminate country quotas and allow supply and demand to set the price of a box of bananas.

In talks with the three largest banana merchants—Chiquita, Delmonte, and Dole—the coordinating body of the banana workers' unions has tried to get an agreement on respect for labor and union rights in the producing countries. Recently, an agreement was signed with Chiquita to end union persecution in Panama, and another is being negotiated to stimulate unionization and collective bargaining in Ecuador. There is an additional difficulty in implementing the ILO conventions in Ecuador, because parts of their banana plantations are state-owned. State and private sectors see it to be in their interest not to stick to international treaties. If the subject of labor and union rights is examined from a regional perspective, the producers in the countries with the most advanced national legislation—Colombia and Costa Rica—are interested in making standards uniform. Then all the producing

countries would have a similar cost structure with respect to labor, and there would be no comparative advantage for the countries with weak unions. This could explain the support of Colombian business for the labor internationalism promoted by Sintrainagro.

Finally, the banana workers' unions are planning to broaden their scope to include the producers of sugar cane and African palm oil and, with the support of the ILO and the IUF, to begin organizing as they did in the banana industry, although this proposal is still in the planning stage. Up to now, the union organizations in Latin American countries exporting agricultural raw materials or produce have usually been grassroots unions. These are small, dispersed, and weak, and what are needed are industry unions, says Rivera. On this point "the Colombian banana workers are the most advanced, and we have paid a very high price for that," the president of Sintrainagro concludes.

These international alliances between Sintrainagro and progressive European unions, and the labor activism of Sintrainagro beyond the regional borders of Urabá, seem to contrast with the local public agendas, focused on order and security. This is the context in which the union has to operate, though it appears contradictory. Knowing the strategic capabilities of the Sintrainagro leadership and their allies, the possibility cannot be dismissed that this international activism is being used to counteract the relative isolation of Sintrainagro on the national union scene, and to construct alliances and supports *vis-à-vis* eventual changes in the national political arena as a result of the peace process with the FARC. Likewise, these international links can give Sintrainagro autonomy in relation to dominant local powers. International solidarity is backing the workers of Urabá. Evaluation reports of Finnish solidarity indicate that these organizations are forewarned of the situation and the political risks (Teivainen, 2000). The violence to which these workers have been subjected, their history of struggle and their project of abandoning armed insurrection, in favor of a more conciliatory strategy, have obtained support, although with a vigilant eye to the evolution of their local alliances.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to present a more complex portrait of a regional reality that has tended to be discredited and portrayed in black and white. The fact that a paramilitary force such as the AUC has gained military and political dominance in the region of Urabá should not inhibit the analysis of the forms of integration or "accommodation" of the different social sectors to these new realities. The argument developed here tries to rescue the historical agency of groups such as the banana workers and the supporters of Esperanza, Paz y Libertad. These actors are not just "victims" of a

historical process or a more powerful force, but also builders and beneficiaries of a social order that is still undergoing transformation. What is interesting is to analyze how these radical projects and identities are consorting with groups considered to be foes only twelve years ago, and to examine the dynamic that brought them to this point.

This leads us to reflect on the impossibility of attributing behaviors to specific groups according to *a priori* classifications, without analyzing the relational settings in which they are acting. This is clear in the case of the banana workers of Urabá: in a single decade they moved from being considered as inhabitants of the "red zone" of Latin America and the vanguard of the Colombian insurrection, to participants in the project of restoring "law and order" in the region, a project that has an authoritarian character. Probably, they were not as revolutionary as they were once accused of being by the authorities and today they are not as reactionary as their opponents claim. Rather, they have had to move according to the changes in the relational contexts.

It is still surprising that the revolutionaries of a decade ago have today opted for citizenship, and that this is the way they now understand and narrate their experience. The respect for the law and the social solidarity associated with this concept cannot be separated from the violence and death to which the inhabitants of a region like Urabá have been subjected for the last 25 years. Besides, it must also be remembered that citizen rights make reference to a democratic struggle, and this is what the workers of Urabá appear to be attempting. Recently, their relative electoral success has shown this. How emancipatory their participation and that of their allies in this type of undertaking will be is yet to be seen, as well as the type of leadership that the new mayors and the councilmen elected with their support will exert. For the moment, being part of this coalition has allowed the workers to attain positions that until a decade ago were forbidden to them, at the risk of death.

The possibility that this group of workers, activists, and radical politicians ends up being co-opted by the coalition of power in Urabá is high; nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that they have led one of the most notable mobilizations for rights and recognition of recent decades in Colombia. Its history cannot be discredited with a stroke of the pen. It is true that in a context of armed conflict such as Urabá, the gains of the EPL represented the negation of rights and even life for the UP and groups close to it. However, it cannot be forgotten that the FARC front operating in Urabá has tried to force this region into submission at gunpoint, exposing it to the strategic ploys of a national leadership far away from its immediate needs. The EPL better understood the expectations of the region's inhabitants. It is worth remembering that in a context of war, initiatives that seem liberating can also be converted into forms of oppression and negation. The attempt here is not to endorse the political project underway in Urabá, far from it,

but to call attention to the facile way in which an experience of social emancipation has been defamed in an environment where there have been more enemies than friends.

This text has shown the dilemmas confronted by labor and political activists in their struggles for emancipation in an authoritarian and violent environment. The first thing that has to be underlined is the loss of the monopoly over the means of coercion by the Colombian government, and the consequent collapse of the rule of law. In these circumstances, the logic of protection is imposed, and alignments are obligatory under pain of exposure to retaliation. The trajectory followed by the regional conflict was not inevitable in Urabá and could have taken another route. However, the national context of failed peace talks with the strongest guerrilla group, the FARC, the political and military rivalry between the FARC and the EPL, and the more regional character of the latter as opposed to the more national character of the FARC, converged to delineate a direction and an alignment of forces that unfortunately have prolonged the war.

Something that does indeed represent a truly new state of affairs, at least for Colombian unionism, is the new labor internationalism in the banana sector and the protagonism of the workers of Urabá. This new direction also represents a response to the new ways in which the commercial fruit empires function, as well as a result of the advice of and coordination with international organizations concerning the application of the minimum standards of labor legislation at the national level, as outlined by the ILO. Although the results of this new type of collaboration are yet to be seen, it is quite possible that it will bring benefits to the workers of countries with less developed labor and union legislation. However, as the lengthy, conflictive and bloody mobilization of Sintrainagro shows, these gains will not come by themselves.

Notes

- 1 This work received financial support from COLCIENCIAS, as part of the project "Regional Elites, Security and the Contemporary Crisis of the State in Colombia."
- 2 The banana belt generates approximately 18,000 direct and 5,000 indirect jobs in a region of about 30,000 hectares, divided among 409 plantations and 310 owners. The annual exports produce approximately 350 million dollars (CINEP, 1995) and place Colombia third among exporting countries, behind Ecuador and Costa Rica. The zone includes the municipalities of Chigorodó, Carepa, Apartadó, and Turbo.
- 3 Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Industria Agropecuaria (National Union of Workers of the Farming Industry).
- 4 Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia).

- 5 Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá (Peasant Self-Defense Groups of Córdoba and Urabá).
- 6 See the weekly newsmagazine *Cambio*, 311, May 31–7 June 1999.
- 7 Following public criticism about the peace policies of his government, President Samper forced Bedoya to resign in 1997.

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