

ELEVEN COLOMBIAN VOICES

Colombian Interviews done in 1964 during research for a
Columbia University Doctoral Thesis
Sugar Plantations and Labor Patterns in the Cauca Valley, Colombia (1968)

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Prologue as Epilogue

These interviews were done some 50 years ago while I was in the field in Colombia doing research for my Ph.D. thesis revolving around certain technological and economic factors which increased the degree of labor instability in Colombian sugar plantations. At the time I found no way to integrate such personal accounts as appear here into my thesis.

It may be that these accounts refer to a world no longer existent, but I doubt it. Most of the accounts which claim that Colombia has gradually entered a world of greater social justice seem to be simply pipe dreams. Most of those speaking here must now be dead or very ancient indeed, so there is no need now to disguise their voices.

For a number of years in the late 1970s and 1980s it seemed that some sort of military stand off between the ruling government and the growing guerrilla forces had been established, but this soon turned out to be a murderous trap for those guerrilla who went into the truce talks. Many thousands of them, plus thousands more of alleged civilian supporters were murdered by military-police death squads, including those elected to the national assembly. While Colombia is not a military dictatorship it might as well be one for all the difference it makes to those fighting for a more just society--now also opposed by American Special Forces troops fighting on the side of a viciously reactionary government. The killing has now been going on since 1948--a virtually endless civil war. I could never understand where the phenomenal courage came from on the left to sustain it.

A few of these interviews are transcribed from taped accounts but most relied upon my short term memory of talks which circulated among friends around cooking fires. I would dash off to my cabin soon afterward and begin scribbling out my remembrance of what I'd heard until late at night, remembering passage after passage and then trying to place them all in the proper order. I was fairly good at it then and my understanding of Spanish was adequate, but even immediate memory is a poor substitute for a tape recording. However, attempting to tape many of these impromptu accounts would have stopped them very quickly.

For a long while private armies of right wing killers acted as death squads in both the cities and in the countryside of Colombia, often with sub rosa support of the Colombian military and police. Many of the gun thugs they spawned are simply pathological sadists who would torture and murder anyone they are told to. Fascism with a fascist face; every

society steeped in abysmal poverty and bestial violence turns out people like that.

Although it may not appear so in these notes, I hereby tender my deepest support and my incredulous wonder of those who sustained the fight that some semblance of justice may yet prevail in Colombia.

Rolf Knight

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Colombian Labor Law: Legality and Reality

The following statement is by a man involved in labor law and labor economics. It represents a progressive but moderate stance. To judge from his house and personal life, the speaker is a fairly successful member of the upper middle class, in his late thirties. The statement is a professional intellectual's statement. Its generality and apparent detachment makes it a fitting prologue to the succeeding interviews. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the statement stems from a definite social position and is not merely an analysis or description of the topic.

The most important view here is that the structure and operation of the Colombian labor and social security legislation is to create a relatively advantaged labor force around the more modern, highly capitalized industries and regions--especially in city industries. Of interest is an estimation of that sector of the national labor force to which the laws do not apply and of those sectors where it is not applied.

The Latifundia-minifundia dichotomy as used by the speaker is strongly idealistic-- allegedly it is the semi-feudal *mentality* of employers or workers in various regions that disallow implementation of legal rights. This is a species of "cultural" explanation, or 'values' used as the ultimate factor in explanation. Yet the employers in low capitalized, more marginal concerns, are the strongest opponents of implementation of legal rights and are most successful where workers' unions and political power is weakest.

Also of note is the description of how the onus of enforcement of legal labor rights rests upon the worker and his organizations and the discussion of the obstacles in time, costs, knowledge, and security entailed in such actions. This applies in organized actions, such as a strike, as well as in the action of an individual worker. Some of the inherent weaknesses in present unionization--high labor turnover, open shop and right to work laws, lack of administrative or police protection, no control over hiring or advancement--are discussed.

Another important view is that the more highly capitalized, more 'modern' industries (where even a broken strike can be costly) now prefer to rely on company unions rather than openly anti-union policies. Other evidence, to be mentioned later, tends to support this view. Furthermore, it makes the development of a relatively advantaged but

controlled labor "elite" in the more capitalized industries more understandable.

In considering the solution posed here, of wide spread decentralized industries and funded land reform, I might note that a strong implication was that such economic actions somehow circumvented and superseded political questions. This is hardly a good assumption to make, especially with the continued evidence of interlocking political and industrial interests in Colombia working to block developments that might be injurious to such interests. But, their hopes of circumventing the political sphere are broadly illusions in the face of obstacles created by the operation of true labor unions.. Similarly, the speaker's understanding that continued underdevelopment of the countryside will act as a brake on urban working conditions is hard to square with the separation of town and country implied in relegating labor demands to advanced sectors at some future time

Actual interview material

"Colombia has undoubtedly one of the most advanced labor laws and social security benefits in Latin America. But there is a considerable difference between what is on the books and how widely and effectively it applies. First of all, these laws do not cover family enterprises or shops employing less than twenty persons. This immediately lets out all campesino families, the majority of commercial stores and small service shops, independent tradesmen and ambulant vendors, and the people working for the host of small contractors and sub-contractors that have sprung up. People so employed, let us estimate that they make up sixty percent of the actively employed persons in Colombia.

Of the remaining forty percent, we can suppose that a half are in regions where historic social conditions and present political-government arrangements create situations in which only an insignificant part of the labor and social security guarantees are implemented. Even in firms where they should apply. In these areas there is not only intransigence on the part of the employers but also the employees have no idea of their rights and not press for them. This is the case in Nariño, most of Cauca, the Pacific coast zones, and generally the areas of Latifundia concentration--areas with only slightly developed industries. These are areas of primary resource industries operating with little capital, backward technology, and under primitive conditions.

One shouldn't forget that many of the Colombian regions were virtually geared to a semi-slave, serf labor until the end of the last century. This has affected the mentality of many regions up 'till and including the present.

The patronos feel that those who work for them are their charges--that they themselves (the patronos) should set the conditions, grant the privileges to those they think merit them, etc. They feel that any rights laid down by the government on behalf of their workers is an invasion of their property, an encroachment on the principle of private property. In these regions officials are more than usually lax and unresponsive in making inspections or processing claims or encouraging and demanding compliance with national laws (pertaining to labor law and social security). In many cases the government officials are appointees drawn from the local and Department power circles. If not, they soon become closely linked with them.

In other regions, for example here in the Valle and around other big cities in Colombia--Medellin, Barranquilla, Bogota--the mentality of the owners and administrators is more advanced. After all, industrial, social and intellectual development all go together. These regions are more advanced in every way. The owners take it for granted that they have to pay the prestaciones sociales (social security payments and benefits), or at least, they don't fight it to the extent that the patronos in the backward areas do.

Then there is the case of the operation of the labor law in the minifundia areas. In regions such as Caldas, much of Antioquia, Tolima, Huila, the vast majority of the people live in small holdings of subsistence and small cash crops, particularly coffee. In those areas, even where there is a larger hacienda or industry, the generally low income and conditions of the campesinos drag down the wages and the prestaciones of those firms. Unions, union rights, rights to prestaciones sociales are generally alien to the people in these areas.

We are then left with what we might say is twenty percent of the active labor force, employed in areas and industries where the Ley de Trabajo ((labor law) applies to some extent. Like in Cali and generally throughout the larger industries and haciendas of the Valle. Of course, even here a large proportion of the labor law is a dead letter to many workers in firms where it is operative to some extent.

Let's take an example. A worker employed on a Trapiche has contracted to do a certain work for a stipulated amount. When he is finished the patrono only pays a certain proportion--let's say there are

three hundred pesos missing. What recourse does the worker or contractor have? Well he can go to the office of the Department of Labor here in Cali and file a complaint. This first of all costs him a day of work, it not more. Sometimes he may not get any more in the first day, and in many cases he may not be able to leave work easily for a day. He then has to swear out a petition of claim against the patrono and sign it. Then follows a usually long period before the Department of Labor office takes action. This action consists of an inspector going out to the patrono and presenting him with the worker's claims. The Department of Labor offices in each city and the directors and inspectors are different, but generally they don't work very hard or very fast. Indeed, at times they almost seem purposefully slow. As far as I know there is not much graft or bribe taking but in many areas the people in the Labor office are friends with many of the local patronos (owners, bosses). Maybe they went to school together, or their fathers or relatives or know each other.

Well, so the inspector presents the claim to the patrono. But the patrono says, 'Oh well, I contracted for such and such and he only performed this and this--I can't pay for what he didn't do.' Then the worker or contractor is called and the inspector tries, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, to effect a settlement between the two. If they cannot agree or if one party is adamant in its demands or refusals, the inspector has no other recourse but to declare the case non negotiable and advises the claimant that his next step is to take the case to the civil courts.

Now, all of this lays a worker open to being discharged. It is of course illegal to discharge a worker for making a claim but there are always available other reasons which a patrono can give.

As the great majority of the haciendas and fincas are not unionized, the patrono usually has no direct opposition in firing someone for whatever reasons.

There is also the question of the time involved in the (above) procedure. It may well be that the worker who made the complaint has left the firm and the area for other work before the inspector gets around to beginning the negotiation.

But let us say that the case proceeds as far as the civil courts. First the worker has to procure a lawyer, he can't and isn't allowed to plead his case himself in the courts. Let's say this person comes to me. I'd tell him, 'Look all these various six or seven or eight forms have to be filled out and processed. Furthermore, the dockets are always full and it may take eight

months or more before your case comes up. It means going down to the court not only for the case but a number of times before, to push things through. Also, I have to prepare the case. Finally, there is no assurance that you'll win. Now, who's going to pay me for all that time?' And that's what most lawyers will tell him. There are very few who will take cases with claims of three, four, and five hundred pesos. And it is exactly claims of this size, or less, which are relevant for most workers' claims.

Occasionally I will take a client of this sort, if I consider it to be a particularly flagrant violation of rights. But I can't afford to do that often. The fees are usually more than claim, unless on worked for nothing.

Quite beside all the time and trouble involved for the worker, there is the possibility that he will become known to local employers as a troublemaker.

What I've just said is the case of a pay claim, but approximately the same applies to claims for holiday pay, paid vacations, sick pay, Sunday pay, settlements for accidents or injury received on the job, and of course, overtime pay. Most of the smaller trapiches and haciendas have only the most rudimentary system of bookkeeping. If the worker says to the inspector, 'I didn't get any other pay for the overtime I worked for two weeks, I didn't get any sick pay when I was ill for three weeks, I didn't get any holiday pay for such and such a national holiday, and we never get any Sunday or vacation pay', the patrono just calls over the mayordomo and his assistant. They say something like 'Well, for those two weeks you started later in the day and therefore there wasn't any overtime. We have no proof that you were sick for those three weeks, all we know is that you didn't come to work. You did get paid for that holiday (or maybe they'll say, 'but there was another day that you missed that week). The vacation and Sunday pay is calculated into your basic wage.' If the worker says he injured his hand at work and claims benefits they say it didn't happen at work. If they refused to pay he can only take it to the courts.

Of course, this sort of refusal to pay any of the prestaciones sociales (social security payments) and such chicanery does not apply across the board. Here in the Valle most of the larger agricultural enterprises usually pay at least some of the prestaciones. Only the smallest and most hard pressed try to get away with paying none. On the other hand, nearly all of the medium sized and larger industries and manufacturing concerns here in the Valle generally pay all of the prestaciones sociales stipulated by law. This is true despite the fact that their unions are younger than those that have existed with some of the

larger agricultural enterprises. But let's discuss the situation in the agricultural areas of the Valle.

The important thing is not that many companies do and others do not circumvent the regulations of the labor law, but that these avenues of maneuver are open to the patronos and the scales are tipped in their favor. To a considerable extent, the payment of the prestaciones sociales depends upon the good will and attitude of the patrono.

The intent and stipulations of the labor law are good, considering the level of development of the country, but the provisions made for enforcement are quite inadequate. But in considering this we have to consider the mentality of the workers as well. Many in the Valle come from areas where unions or prestaciones or labor are virtually unknown. They just don't really believe that such rights exist and will not press for them. They generally, the members of the countryside, even those from the Valle, seem to think of the prestaciones sociales as options, payable by firms rich enough to afford them.

As for health and safety measures and accident prevention, here again it is more or less the same thing. For instance, a special Article of the Ley de Trabajo applies to mines and miners--an Article which prescribes even higher prestaciones, fuller and more tightly controlled health and safety standards than are generally applicable. But as you know, the mining areas of Nariño, much of the Cauca, and most of the Choco are hardly touched by any of these legal requirements. In other industries and in other areas the extent to which safety and accident prevention is implemented varies considerably from company to company, depending upon its degree of capitalization, size, modernity and the policies of the owners and administrators. There is some governmental inspection but it is sporadic and spotty and generally ineffective.

In matters of union organization, labor rights, strikes and so forth, Colombian law, despite considerable flaws, is also relatively advanced. But again, the actualities are different from legality.

Legally, no worker can be discharged or in any way penalized for either joining a union or helping found one. Any company employing more than twenty-five persons must allow a union if one is formed in the establishment. Neither can an employer, legally, discharge workers who are in the process of founding a union--at least, he cannot discharge them for that activity. This right and state of affairs is called "Fuero Sindical". Once a general assembly of workers has been called and has taken place, with the objectives of forming a union, all persons who have signed

petitions of organization, as well as the Junta Directive of assembly, cannot be discharged or transferred to another work place except by special order of a judge and then only for some extraordinary reason.

In reality, nearly all the employers whose shops and fincas are unorganized have mayordomos (supervisors) and other employees who have confidants among the workers of the concern. These collaborators keep their ears and eyes open. In organizing a union of course it's necessary to start somewhere. At first there will only be a few persons who will be discussing unionization. At this stage it is relatively easy for the employer to discharge whoever they consider to be the ringleaders-- or possibly all involved--for any number of reasons. This will probably be sufficient to intimidate the others who were considering a general assembly. Even if a general assembly is held, the leaders and active people may be discharged. This of course is illegal, since Fuero Sindical (legal protection during unionization) applies. But recourse to the Department of Labor and the courts is tedious and a difficult path for these workers-- especially since they will not at that stage have the support of an already founded union.

Still, things are changing somewhat. It is becoming more and more difficult for employers to use such flagrant violations of the labor law without the intervention of the regional offices of the Department of Labor, particularly in the bigger cities and in the more advanced regions.

Once a union has been established it is illegal to discriminate against workers in any way for their union activity. Nevertheless, there is no clause referring to seniority and advancement. (A few unions have attempted to introduce such stipulations in their contracts, but with little success.) Advancement to better and higher paying jobs is solely at the discretion of mayordomos, administrative employees, and the owners. There is a fairly high turnover of workers in the agricultural industries, especially the sugar mills and ingenios.(older mills) A man who is active in organizing, canvassing, and other union activity may well find it exceedingly difficult to get a better job within the company or another job in other of the ingenios in the neighborhood if he leaves. Hiring is also completely at the discretion of the company and a great deal depends on having a set of good work recommendations. Black lists are illegal but are widely circulated here in the Valle among various companies and haciendas.

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The right to organize and the right to strike is guaranteed, but so is the right to work. This is one of the weakest points of the Ley de Trabajo. The union cannot demand membership or union dues from any person working, even in a unionized shop. The company usually favors those who are not union members. On the other hand, the unions are legally proscribed from coercing workers in any way to join the union. But of course there are all sorts of pressures an organized group can use to influence a new worker to join. Still, in many unionized companies there are a fairly large proportion of persons who do not belong to any union. It is possible, at times, that in a unionized concern the number of persons with no union affiliation exceeds the union membership.

As I said, the right to strike is guaranteed by the Ley de Trabajo. But so is the right to work. While the employer cannot legally employ new workers during the strike--except for the maintenance of buildings and equipment if the strikers do not provide watchmen. But employers do often hire new personnel after the strike has been going on for a long time and the strike camps are weaker and with fewer members. The employers may have agents convincing union members to work. He may bring in a patronal (company) union and have a sufficient number of members shift affiliation to have the striking union disenfranchised. Or he may bring a mass of strikebreakers to crack the picket line. These tactics are usually applied after a long siege of strike. The technique of weakening the union by starvation is not unusual. This, of course, is only feasible where the employer is in such an industry, like sugar cane or some of the overextended manufacturing concerns with other plants operative or with extensive stocks, where no extensive capital or business loss accrues from an extended strike.

The employers' answer to strikes in costly industries is to rely on fomenting internal division in the union, and, most basically, to rely upon company unions that won't go out on strike in the first place. For those industries, compromise and working arrangements with the union leaders are more the order of the day. Strikebreaking tactics and long drawn out sieges are becoming less feasible for patronos in the bigger cities and in the bigger industrial plants.

But in the countryside--the case of the Hacienda San Jose, you know--strikes are still being starved out. Most of these unions don't have strike funds and usually the financial support that they got from other unions or the federation to which they belong is inadequate.

Despite what some union leaders claim, for obvious reasons, there is no law against union members on strike working elsewhere for the duration of the strike. In any case, they certainly could get away with it. But this is of negligible importance. Firstly, there is not enough work around anyway and most strikers wouldn't be able to find a job for the two or three month duration of a strike. More important, the strike remains operative only so long as the union can hold the majority of the strikers together. If they drift off into other work or other areas they are lost to the union and the strike. If too many of the members leave, the company brings in new workers, and the union cannot muster enough men to stop them. It is only by massing their membership on the entrances to the fields or the mill and effectively barring the way to strikebreakers that the unions protect their legal right. While it is illegal for the company to employ strikebreakers, they will if they think they can get away with it. There is no question of the police protecting this union right. Indeed, more usually, if the union tries to bar the way to strikebreakers the police will disperse and arrest the union members and leaders for violence.

The union leaders themselves are often targets of violence from pajaros (gunmen). In most cases, some that I know of personally, the police just refuse to protect union members and leaders, even if they have already been assaulted and attacked.

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In overview, I would say that the Ley de Trabajo and the prestaciones sociales are most fully applied in the industries in the large cities, in the industrial centers and in sugar mills or other factory-like industries in the countryside. Even in this sector there is considerable differences from region and one company to another. It's my belief, but there are many who think similarly, that these laws were written with the limitations and realities plainly in mind. They were written and are applied to foster relatively advanced conditions in larger industry and foster something like a labor elite--a labor elite speaking relatively again. It is probably accepted by most government circles that the stipulations of this law will only be made to apply for certain sections of the working population.

For my part, and again, many others feel as I do, the really pressing problem is not to extend this law, to see that the regulations stipulating that overalls and work boots be supplied to workers in certain sized industries. No, these sorts of gains can afford to wait. The most pressing

problem is to extend to the masses of Colombian campesinos income and social security (prestaciones sociales) at least roughly comparable to those obtaining in industry today. Possibly some of this can be gained by passing laws parallel to the Ley de Trabajo, but applicable to the campesinos. But I feel that such law can only be a very partial answer at most. The most necessary, the most basic need, is for economic development throughout the Valle, and more evenly throughout the country. This demands a much more active and much better planned program of private and investment in smaller, more decentralized industries and in public utilities. Often the infrastructure for more rapid development is lacking in the most needy areas.

Hand in hand with this must go a meaningful land reform--in this sphere almost nothing has happened here in Colombia in the last few years. Of course, even with these developments it will not be possible to accommodate all of the people now on the land at an acceptable level of living. But if industrial development continues we hope that the absorptive capacity of the cities will be able to take care of the rest. All this cannot be done just by issuing new directives. What is most needed is to increase the efficiency of production in the industries and a land reform to create fincas of economic size, credit for machinery and fertilizers, schooling in how to use the land.

With things as they are now, with these masses of campesinos impoverished, any advance in labor gains elsewhere must necessarily be more difficult and slow."

Interview With a Leader of a Militant Labor Federation

(I began by saying that while Colombian labor law was not the most advanced in the world it struck me as sufficiently advanced to allow for considerable progress if the law actually applied to all the workers it was intended to cover. I said that I was particularly surprised and impressed by the prestaciones sociales, at least as they existed on paper. I asked whether the Federation considered it a major aspect of their program to increase the number of people covered under the statutes of the labor laws. I wondered what they were doing to assure that the statutes were implemented as written.)

The president of the Federation replied that it considered the Ley de Trabajo to be a paternalistic, company-oriented piece of legislation. Imposed from above and in no manner a contract between the workers and the bosses. I then asked if he considered a labor law and a labor contract as essentially the same. He replied that a phrase in the preamble of the law's introduction speaks of 'the submission of workers to the orders of the patrono', saying that the wording was indicative of the law's semi-feudal tone. I then said, "Well let's not talk about phrases, these are always open to wide personal interpretation. Let's rather talk about the gap between the statutes on paper and their application. It seems to me that the greater number of Colombian workers, at least in the small region I know, are working under much lower standards than those provided by the labor laws." The interview then ran as follows:

"That's true, these workers have to be brought in under the benefits of the laws--such as they are. But at the same time we feel it is absolutely necessary to modify and extend certain aspects of the Ley de Trabajo. For instance, Article 48, a 'Clausula Reserva' (reserve clause) that allows the patrono to discharge a worker without giving any or needing any reasons--after a supposed forty-five day notice. We feel this goes directly counter to the rights proclaimed by our Constitution (Colombian Constitution). The right to work is clearly laid down by our Constitution. We can't accept the intent and operation of many key statutes of labor law but we do support the Constitution without hesitation.

Article 48 of the Ley de Trabajo completely wipes out the legal protection laid down by the same law against being discharged for union activity. If the patrono doesn't have to give any reason--even legally--for discharging a worker, the most basic rights of association and organization are in danger. The patronos are constantly using this article

to make sure that a union or organization doesn't take hold in their company. If they hear that some people are talking about a union or even if they only know that some people are strongly sympathetic to one union, they discharge them all. Or maybe they will expel a person just because he's a Seventh Day Adventist or Jehovah's Witness -you know, we have religious discrimination to contend with in this country as well. Maybe a worker supports politics that the patrono doesn't like. Or maybe he's a Rosacruzian, or who knows what. Maybe they just don't like the way he walks, the way he talks, or they just don't like his face. With this *clausula reserva*, with Article 48, there is no protection against being fired because of the personal wishes of the patrono.

Right now this is one of our major concerns for the revision of the present *Ley de Trabajo*. We are putting our position before the people in the form of pamphlets and to sympathetic representatives in the national legislature. The U.T.C. and the C.T.C. and their regional organizations, and their locally affiliated *sindicatos*, (unions) accept as quite natural that the patronos should have the right to discharge anyone he likes for whatever reason he likes. Unfortunately, large numbers of the workers in Cali and throughout the Valle came from regions much more backward, industrially, socially, culturally, in every way. They have lived most of their lives in regions where the local patronos control everything, the land, the local government, the police, whatever organizations there are. In these regions they support whatever the patronos say, on politics, on religion, on pay and working conditions--whatever. while pushing for the development of the countryside.

That is what is done. Such people just can't conceive of making demands and taking positions opposed to the patronos. This, of course, is a very great problem for us. Nevertheless, many of these people after some years in the Valley, under the conditions that exist here, can be brought around to our way of thinking. But it needs continual explanation, patience--a work mate carefully explaining the necessity and importance of each position. And if many of these people coming to the Valle from more backward regions are too old and too set in their ways to be influenced by explanations, their sons, who grow up in the Valle, can often be made to understand."

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But there are other struggles about the Ley de Trabajo as well. There are now attempts to push through a change in the labor law. If this change does go through the national legislature the labor law will be set back twenty-five years. This change will in effect rule out any political activity not in support of the government. It will make it illegal for sindicatos, regional federations, and national labor federations to allow any of its directors to be communist. Of course, we know that 'communist' will be applied to any militant union leader that doesn't follow a pro-patrono, pro-government line.

We are the only labor organization which in its entirety is working to defend and extend the guarantees of the Ley de Trabajo and the Constitution. In a few regions, local sections of U.T.C. and C.T.C. and some sindicatos unaffiliated to any confederation support us in this action. But by and large the other two big confederations (centrals), the U.T.C. and C.T.C., are willing to go along with whatever the patronos or government dictate. Which is what one would expect. The directors of these two organizations are almost all placed in their positions from above, either directly by the patronos or by the intervention of the confederation directors. Many of the affiliated sindicatos are purely branches of the companies' personnel office.

These confederation and regional directors are very generally maintained by fraudulent union elections, manipulation of the voting strength of the sindicatos, by buying off delegates--all that and more. In those confederations, even at the regional level, being a union leader is strictly a business. All of these people live like the middle class--in middle class barrios, in fine houses, with a car. They're all paid off by the various companies. Now, we here get a worker's quota--you can see that from the clothes we wear. You won't find that with the directors of other confederations.

It's true, in some cases the presidents of some sindicatos affiliated with U.T.C. and C.T.C. or unaffiliated to any confederation, are real union leaders. Put there by the support of the membership. They represent the workers in that sindicato but unfortunately, through ignorance and lack of education and lack of political consciousness these workers are deluded into an empty anti-communist platform.

There are plenty of problems here in Colombia; hunger--enough people here go to sleep hungry--lack of education, insufficient school, unemployment, problems of low wages and the ever-rising prices of food, clothing and other necessities. There is the lack of housing. There are

plenty of problems. But when you go and talk to the leaders of the other confederations the only thing that you hear is, "The most important problem we have to fight in Colombia is communism." That's the only thing they are fighting against, but what are they struggling for? They'll tell you that they're for "Democratic Capitalism"--you know, the thesis of profit sharing by the workers. The thesis created in the propaganda circles of the American capitalists. Well, I'm all for profit sharing by the workers. We're all for that here, at this office. But here in Colombia I have yet to see any real workers who were shareholders.

There are some 400,000 to 500,000 workers in sindicatos affiliated to the U.T.C. and the C.T.C. One might expect some movement amongst those numbers for more militant union action. There is none--or at least, hardly noticeable. But then, one must remember that any militancy on the part of the rank and file is dealt with not only by company firings but also by active suppression on the part of the union directors themselves. Not only will these union directors not protect their members if they advocate increased militancy, instead they will cooperate with the patronos in ferreting such members out--by passing information, spying on the members, and more. After all, it is a threat to their own position. With this sort of combination there are very few workers who will dare oppose the company or the union leaders.

Well, one thing is certain. The membership of such unions aren't going to get fat on that diet.

But, as I was saying, Article 48 of the Ley de Trabajo: this article isn't the only one that the patronos use to crush real unionization. Take Article 62 for example, this is a real slave law. A codification of the ideas they had at the time of the Conquistadores, when they hauled off the aborigines in chains to work in mines and haciendas. This article says that a worker can be discharged not only for poor work and for not following work orders but also for insubordination and lack of respect to his superiors--the patrono, his family, his representatives, his associates, the foreman, the watchman. In short, everybody. But even that's not all. This article is applicable not only in the work place, during time for work but anywhere and anytime that the patrono or one of his employees ('emplendos', white collar staff) might meet you.

Let's say that the son of the administrator and you are in the same bar and maybe you both have your eyes on the same girl. One asks her to dance. Then the other asks. With a few drinks the spirits rise and for one reason or another you get into a fight, or just an argument. Well, the son

goes to his father and says, "Imagine, that Don Fulano was in such and such a place last night, drunk, and started fighting with me." And the patrono or his administrator says, "Aha, well I'll see to that", and he fires you.

.....

"You ask why none of the trapiches or fincas are organized, why there have been no attempts to organize them? Well let me tell you--in just the last two years alone we organized fifteen, yes fifteen and more. Not in the region you know but up around Buga and Tulua. Some of them were organizations of campesinos, of people who have one, two, three plazas. We sent the applications of the incorporation for these organizations to Bogota and after a long wait were told that these were not legal organizations. They said that they were neither cultural organizations nor sindicatos of persons working for a patrono. Furthermore, the local authorities were making all sorts of propaganda that these were subversive organizations.

Alright. As for the trapiches we unionized--well. We had the vast major of the workers on each one signed up. We brought in the papers of incorporation to Bogota, in person, through out local staff. One month passed, two and three months passed--our lawyers kept going to the Labor Ministry offices. But with no results. Then after six months, a year--in one case after almost two years--the papers of union incorporation arrived. So the regional Labor Ministry comes out to the trapiche and asks, "Well, here are the papers. Where is the president junta directors of the union?" But of course they're not there. They've been discharged, or replaced, or the company has found some way to edge them out. They've had to go to other parts to look for work. So the government official says, "The sindicato appears to no longer be in existence." He files away the papers of incorporation and goes home to supper. And that's the end of that.

There are some important differences between the various patronos and companies. On the one hand you have the Caicedos and the administrators of Castilla and Rio Paila. They will use every trick and lever to oppose the rights of the workers, to smash any true union organization. You know how the present sindicato they have got in. On the other hand you have a few progressive patronos like the present directors of Manuelita, who accept the spirit of the Ley de Trabajo and the

union rights of the workers. Unfortunately, the directors of Castilla have gained great influence among the other ingenio directors.

But all this is only one stage that we are in. You mentioned that many of the union sympathizers in Chicharro are without hope, that they cannot see any way out of the present situation. Well there are those people, and convincing them is part of our work. But these are people without any sense of history, without any wider understanding of what is happening in the world. But as for me, if you ask me, I can tell you that I have complete confidence that these conditions will be overcome."

"Possibly the people can achieve enough representation, exercise enough influence and pressure through their allies and representatives in the National Legislature so that even if they don't take power by elections we will be able to see that a just government implements the guarantees of our Constitution. Not a government like now which merely serves as an arm of the oligarchy, of the patronos. But of course, there is a very good possibility that if the people gain enough strength in the National Legislature (Camara) the oligarchy will return to an open dictatorship.

There is a newly formed party, maybe you've heard of it--it's called something like Christian-Social Party, it has close connections with similar parties in Venezuela and elsewhere in Latin America. If they gain sufficient strength they will undoubtedly try to take control through a golpe--they are closely connected to the national military and oligarchy as well as to the inter-American ruling circles. Of course, if that happens all this, this federation and all progressive and democratic organizations, will go. They will be dissolved, there'll be lots of people jailed and not a few shot--as under Rojas Pinilla. But you know, as they say, "If they cut off one leg, then one goes on a crutch, if they cut off both legs, one goes on a cart." If progressive and democratic organizations are persecuted more than they are now they will have to find other ways to work. But I have confidence that we will overcome all these difficulties."

"As you say, there are people who see these things but who see no hope of a solution. They think in terms of great men, like Gaitan. As if these leaders were a gift of God, as if they dropped from the heavens like Jesus Christ to save the nation. Naturally, when these leaders are assassinated or fail or prove to be opportunists those people who think in terms of personalities, who fail to realize that these leaders are generated by real conditions, cannot conceive that it is not the leaders but the conditions, more specifically the conditions of the masses, that forge the solutions.

As for me, I know that the situation may well become worse. But I have absolute faith that a more just state of affairs will come to prevail in Colombia as in every other nation in the world."

Visit With a Colono

This set of field notes touches topics outside the sphere of social conditions and labor organizations and raises some broader questions. As I had relatively little contact with larger landowners I have no way of knowing how representative many of the views expressed here are. During this conversation I more than once had the feeling of speaking to a stereotype landowner in a second rate play. Nevertheless, some points are worth noting.

Firstly, medium-sized land holdings with three hundred and more acres under cash crops are *not*, in the Colombian situation, a farm yeomanry--as they are so often described. They are large land owners. Secondly, certain shopkeepers and rural managerial and higher technical staff frequently aspire to such colono status. In this they often tend to gloss over the very real status differences between managers and owners. Very often the descriptions they employ are Brechtian--the use of 'progressive' in this conversation and 'revolutionary' to describe the ultra traditional relationship between the colono and the labor contractor. Thirdly, it seems that many colonos retain as much of the traditional hacendado outlook as is feasible under present conditions.

We see some of the common myths served up; that many Colombian workers have little interest in advancing themselves materially, that such advancement is possible by individual hard work under the contract system, that rural Colombians like to float from one job to another for no reason other than boredom, that militant unionism is due to outside agitation and tantamount to revolution.

Don Alfredo tries to evoke the aura of supporting progressive patron-client relationships, of noblesse oblige, of 'taking care of' his people, of 'finding work' for his cane cutters around the finca when they are not needed in harvesting. Nevertheless, while he may prefer having many personally 'loyal' workers he apparently feels he has to justify the use of labor saving devices, he is under pressure of labor costs and workers'

demands. These have led him to an increased use of herbicides and mechanical cultivation and to interpose a labor contractor between himself and now largely unknown workers, in an effort to circumvent social security payments and workers' demands.

Finally, note Don Alfredo's view that the Frente Nacional (National Front) was 'too oriented to the interests of the industrial, urban, and national elite'. Or, as he said, "Sometimes I wonder whose government this is anyway..."

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During my stay on the Castilla compound I was taken to visit some of the colonos (large farmers) who supply Central Castilla with a large part of its sugar cane. The Central has a high placed staff member whose job it is to see that the colonos get their harvests in a approximately the correct time and to expedite relations between the Central and the colonos.

Finca Palace is about 250 plazas in sugar cane plus about 25 to 35 acres given over to garden around the main house, to work yards, pastures, and workers' quarters. A fair sized panela (non centrifuge sugar) mill, in relatively good condition, adjoins the work yard. The owner of the finca formerly used his own cane in the production of panela, but closed down operation three or four years ago because of high production costs and lower panela prices. He now sells all his cane to central Castilla under an eight year contract.

Under such a contract the finca owner bears all the expenses and planning of the planting, cultivation and harvest. The central transports the cane to the mill. Payment is either in species, portion of cane delivered, or in kind. A quite common arrangement is to return one hundred pound (approximately) sack of sulfite sugar to the colono per ton of cane delivered. This is approximately half the sugar extracted from a ton of cane.

Apparently nearly all of the colonos delivering cane to the centrales are within twenty kilometers of the mill. They are scattered about, interlaced with mixed farms, with smallholdings, and with colonos that deliver to other centrales. Rationalization of contracts and delivery points is becoming increasingly important but is a very touchy subject.

The central agent said that Castilla, in expanding production, had been forced to sign contracts of delivery with colonos up to forty kilometers from the mill. It would be handling delivery of this forty kilometer cane in

1965. The area under cane per colono ranged from 40 to 1,500 plazas, with the mode appearing to be 250 or 300 plazas per colono.

Colonos are given a monthly quota which seems to entail a simple and regular flow of 1/11 to 1/12 of their yearly crop. The central agent complained that the bookkeeping and flow control was difficult for even many of the 'progressive' colonos. Many of them left this accounting to their mayordomos who, he claimed, were remiss about filling out the flow and maturity data sheets required by the central.

Don Alfredo, the owner of Finca Palace, is a man in his late fifties or early sixties. Educated in France and England, travelling often in Europe, he speaks English fluently, with a manner of giving commands and only incidentally listening to responses. He feels that the United States is to Colombians today what England and the Continent were to people of his generation. He himself visits the U.S. now as frequently as Europe.

Besides the finca, Don Alfredo has a substantial house in Cali and a small ranch in the hills behind the city, which he uses as a summer retreat. Apart from unspecified investments, he owns no other commercial or productive enterprises. He is a medium sized colono. Don Alfredo was introduced to me as 'one of the more progressive colonos.' This meant, to the central, that he was exclusively engaged in cane growing and was improving his production methods (which seemed to be the only respectable meaning of 'progressive').

The position taken by the central agent was that the colonos were a sort of Colombian yeomanry, supposedly a rural middle class. It should be noted, emphatically, that most of the higher level administrators and virtually all of the technical staff on the central were of a middle class background. They frequently expounded the belief that a middle class was the greatest stabilizer of any nation. At the same time they seemed to impute similar beliefs to persons far above them in wealth and position but frequently longed for entry into the role of large landholder.

Some of the following fragments of the conversation we had were spontaneous. Others probably were at least partially for my benefit.

Agent: "Yes, when I was with the Experimental Station at Palmira I worked on some of the new Hawaiian varieties of cane. There was one that yielded 134 tons per acre in Hawaii. We had some similar strains at the station. I tried to get farmers to try it here in the Valle but hardly anyone was interested, they just wanted to keep on using one or two reliable P.O.J. varieties." (Surely the larger centrales would have seized such opportunities?)

Don Alfredo: "Does the station have any varieties like that still? Would I be able to get enough for planting next year, say nine tons? Probably not, but I'll lay in seed beds for propagation. I'd have enough for after the planting. Alright, let's do that then. You know I'm planting 115 plazas for Don Julio. We'll put in enough of the two best varieties, a good sized seed bed. We can discuss that more at some other time. I won't be planting in the next few months anyway."

Agent: "See, I told you that Don Alfredo was one of the most progressive colonos in the region."

Don Alfredo (to me): "Yes, we're supposed to make a monthly delivery of a certain size. But the way the mill is running now they wouldn't mind taking much more than that. They're very short of cane. They don't have enough to keep them as busy as they want to be. Isn't that right Senor Villanueva? (It is interesting that as efficient a central as Castilla continues to have difficulties in controlling its flow of cane, a crucial factor in determining profitable operation costs for mills. It may be important that some colonos feel that they have considerable leeway in cane delivery and therefore some measure of independence from mill requirements.) I expect to get about seventy tons of cane per plaza from retoño (cane root), on an average. About four harvests of retoño is all that one can expect to take, economically. After that, here in the Valle, with the techniques and costs we have to deal with, the loss of sucrose in retoño becomes greater than the costs of replanting. The price of fertilizer and herbicides and agricultural equipment is just criminal in Colombia. It's this crazy government--everything is done to help the industries and nothing for the farmer. We could buy fertilizer so much more cheaply directly from America. These fertilizer companies here are robbers, but terrific. The same for everything else that applies to agriculture. It's this game of tariffs and tax aids and manipulation of trade that the government is engaged in. I thought we were supposed to be for free enterprise, so why is it that we don't allow free trade to work here? After all, agriculture still produces the bulk of the national product. Most Colombians by far are still engaged in agriculture. (To the agent): Aren't I correct on that? Sometimes I wonder whose government this is anyway, what sort of system we are living under. And I'm not the only one that feels like that. Something will have to be done or this government will dominate us completely."

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Don Alfredo: "But harvest time isn't the only time when one has to spend a lot of money. With the way we operate now, cultivation is very expensive. You have to cultivate the cane up to eight months after it has been replanted--at least in poor years. For the first six weeks to two months, while you can still drive a tractor through it, you give it maybe two weedings. This is when weeding is most important because the young cane is just growing and needs the nutrients in the soil most. Later, when the cane is too high to drive a tractor over it, you can go between the rows with a mule and a small plough--or you can do the weeding by hand with hoes. This is maybe two months after the last time you can use a tractor. Then, after another three or four months you give the cane a final weeding and clearing. It is already so dense and close together that you can't get very far into the rows. So you just do a little cleaning, maybe ten to fifteen meters into each row. Of course, there are rewards for taking good care of the cane fields. For a newly replanted field, taken care of that well, one should get ninety to a hundred tons per plaza."

(The theme that followed was that the colonos, with their management and entrepreneurship, and the central with its capital and organization, were a leading factor in the development of the economy of the Valle and the nation. The colonos and the central should therefore be the major beneficiaries of this development. The part to fall to the workers should be contingent upon higher profits but should rest upon the beneficence of the central or colono, so the argument went.)

(When I asked if they thought that the increased yield of the new strain of cane they were hypothetically planting would also make a higher wage possible for the labor force the reaction was):

Agent: "But what would they have done to deserve that? The increase would be due to Don Alfredo's enterprise. What remains, what increased profit there is goes to him; it should certainly be his."

Don Alfredo: "Of course, that's the way it is in the United States, too. You will find that most of the people that work in the cane fields here are paid on a rate basis. If they want to advance themselves, if they want to increase their pay they have only to work harder. If they are lazy or want to take it easy their pay is accordingly lower. It's completely up to them. But really, you will find, very generally here in Colombia, that many people are not so concerned about doing better. They will work just so much and just so hard as to provide a modest living for themselves and their families. They are not so materially inclined."

(I asked if a higher yielding cane crop would require more laborers for the harvesting than for the other operations and if this would lend to a greater seasonality in labor demand.)

Don Alfredo: "No, I usually have to find other work for my people to do when the harvesting is finished anyway. You can't fire them you know. Anyway, if the cutting requires more men, then there are always enough people around looking for work. Besides, you know that cutters don't like to do anything except cut cane. It's really an economic loss to employ cutters on any other kind of work--they just don't do anything. You can ask Senor Villaneuva if that isn't the case. But in all truth, the labor costs have become prohibitive. Mostly it is due to the high wages one has to pay here. Wages have really gone up here in the Valle in the last few years; it's quite fantastic. Of course one can't really blame the workers for demanding more, the costs of food have gone up something terrific. It's just another aspect of the complete lack of leadership that the government has shown. If the government hadn't been so inept Colombia could have been exporting sugar. I understand that the price of sugar on the London market last week was almost twice what we are getting for it here."

"But when labor costs go up to what they are now one is forced to look for another solution. Weed killer is extremely expensive here but I'm forced to use it more and more. I just can't afford to pay the costs of manual weeding. At present I use two portable hand sprayers for herbicides. As costs go up you have to use these things."

(When I asked Don Alfredo how many temporary and permanent workers he had working for him he said, without hesitation, 'fourteen'. But, before Don Alfredo arrived from Cali I had asked the mayordomo the same question. He told me that on average, throughout the year, there were fifteen permanent workers and eighteen temporary ones. The permanent workers (agregados?) live in three shed-like blocks behind the big house, beside the now inoperative panela mill. The mayordomo runs the small finca store. The temporary workers live in the small veredas (hamlets) scattered about the countryside and come to work each morning by foot or one bicycle. Most of these temporary workers buy their main mid-day meal from a kitchen operated by the family of one of the permanent workers.

After Don Alfredo had told me that there were only fourteen people working his finca there was a rapid exchange between him and the central agent, after which he said:

Don Alfredo: "I also have some people that work here but live outside. But I don't have anything to do with them. I have a contractor who takes care of hiring, firing, supervising and paying them. If they have any difficulties they have them with him.

If there is anything that I want done I say to him, 'How much for this job?' And he says, 'Oh that bit of cane is pretty dirty, pretty tangled--8,000 pesos'. 'That's too much--6,000 pesos'. We talk a bit and probably we agree upon 7,000 pesos for that bit of work. Of course, sometimes he loses on a certain job. Then he comes to me and says, 'Look, such and such a job cost me more to do such and such than I thought.' I often make up what he lost, because he is an honest man and I have confidence in him. It's worth it to pay a little extra sometimes for a man that you can trust.

My contractor lives here on the finca. He'll look around and say to me, 'Don Alfredo, this and this field needs another weeding. I can do it for so much--the weeds are to get at.' Then I say, 'Alright, go ahead.' He then goes to some of the small towns, the villages of the farms, around here and gets people to work. He hires them, tells them what to do, and pays them. I advance him so much and pay him the remainder when the job is finished. Anything that passes between him and the people he gets to work is between them. It saves me a lot of bother with those people."

Apart from short term and fluctuating labor requirements stemming from technological features of smaller scale cane production, there is perhaps another set of reasons why labor contractors are being more and more used by finqueros. For Don Alfredo, this arrangement keeps the size of his permanent labor force below the legal minimum for the formation of a union local, although, there is no such likelihood of that anyway. Also, labor contractors and the colono can avoid payment of virtually all the prestaciones sociales, for all of the 'temporary' labor and most of the permanent labor force.)

Don Alfredo: "No, I don't give my contractor a wage but in the long run he will get the same benefits as the people that work for me (apparently meaning the mayordomo and an assistant). Naturally, he only works for me. He lives right here on the finca. Having a man with divided loyalties is just no good.'

Agent: 'See, I told you that Don Alfredo is one of the most progressive colonos in the region. I have never heard where the labor contractor would be given a house on the finca and looked after like that. It is very revolutionary.'

.....

(At one point Don Alfredo and the agent launched into a discussion of the purported plans--rather, their fears--of a federation of sugar can unions to organize and incorporate all sugar workers in the region into an industry-wide union. This would be an undertaking completely beyond the capabilities of any or all of the unions in the Valle combined, at least at present. I would be unimaginable for the agricultural locals in the federation they mentioned, which is fighting a desperate holding position.)

Agent: "Those communists in that new union are going to make trouble here now. They've just taken over Oriente (central) and some of the fincas, too. That's why Don XXX sold his part of Mayaquez--he doesn't want anything to do with that."

Don Alfredo: "But they're smart, they've learned a lot. They tried to make revolution and failed, but they know how to organize."

Agent: "Oh they're smart alright. They've learned a lot from Cuba--now they want to the same thing here."

Don Alfredo: "Yes, but they're not quite the same anymore. They're not as savage anymore. I don't think they'll try that again here."

As Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman

The following fragment captures the apocalyptic, anarchistic, component of peasant risings and slave revolts. Personally, I can imagine this fulmination being called down by peasant levies from the time of Florian Geyer to Zapata.

The conversation developed slowly one night in a backwater finca in a caserio (neighborhood) some distance from Chiharro. Three neighbors and myself were sitting around a smudge fire drinking aguardiente. For obvious reasons, no notes were taken during the conversation. But I am confident that I have faithfully reconstructed both the tone and phrasing of the conversation. Needless to say, such opportunities rarely arise during a summer field trip.

One must remember that the words are spoken in hopeless anger (but not in drunkenness) and should not be taken to indicate what the person will actually do. The very man that is here praying for a world revolution will, at other times, tell you with pride that he will be taken care of by his patrono--a colono who is an exact duplicate of the one who is forcing his staff off his land. A similar contradiction is that after having proclaimed his hopes for a world revolution the speaker then quickly shifted to what was a more probable course of action to him--a complete escape from the system, a move to a jungle subsistence plot.

Certain views revealed in this damnation may distinguish such campesinos from true rural proletariat--the pitiless striving for a plot of land, the personalization of crops per se as oppressive or sustaining, the semi-mythical heritage of slavery and peonage.

Despite ambiguities, despite the fact that the speaker or others like him probably never will act out what they say, one should remember that such feelings are smoldering below the surface for at least some people. It is important to remember this when the Don Alfredo's take you on a tour of their loyal workers in their fields. (Parenthetically, I should note that the speaker's patrono has very successfully maintained the image of a beneficent, personally involved Don--a role which apparently still can be used to obscure class conflict.) Finally, it is important to remember that this is not the time of Geyer or Zapata. That of the peasants who describe themselves as 'poor illiterates' to authorities and outsiders, some painstakingly go through hidden literature and discuss other countries and conditions.

.....

Person 1: "Don X only bought the parcela (small plot) a few weeks, a month ago. And already he was somebody knocking down the cane. This one guy has been working all yesterday and all today, chopping. Somebody must be poor indeed to work from morning to night, on Sunday, hardly stopping for lunch, to knock down a finca. What sort of person is it anyway that takes work cutting down poor people's fincas?"

Person 2: "Yeah, I know. But if your family is hungry, if you can't get work--what can you do? Indeed, what can one say to that?"

Person 1: "... Look at Z here. He's got his house and his one and a half plazas. Not much, but it's his only support for his daughter and the children. At least here, with some work for his neighbors, they can live. But one person after another sells off--cane spreads on one side, on the second side, on the third side. He'll be isolated and surrounded, access will be difficult. So he has to sell out and move into a pueblo, maybe Florida. What is he going to do there? If he buys a small casita it will take most of the money he will get for this place. And then how will he live? He's too old to get a job in the towns. If he rents a pieza (a room) in one or two years the money will be eaten up--and then what?"

As for you Don Y, you can sell your land and buy a small house down in the urbanization. You could probably afford one of those small new houses they are building there for the price of your land. And you could make a living working. But with the way prices are going up you'd never be able to get any land back here again--here or in any other place in the Valle. Even for twice as much. We can say that your land would be just plain lost.

It takes twenty years to get a plaza or two of land--if you work and live like an animal. And even then you don't get it. These people here who got this land inheritance just let it slip away. They don't even sell it to you or me. Just because the ricos, the cane lords, can give them the money immediately they sell it to them. They'd rather see the land go under cane and have their money quickly than take payments and have the land remain a poor man's finca. They don't even get any more for it. L.Z. sold that land to Don X without even thinking of the value of the firewood that would be realized by cutting down the finca.

In a week from now everything around my little house will be knocked down. I've got a month; when they bring in the bulldozer to level (the land for cane planting) my house will be knocked down too.

They and their mayordomos and their empleados treat us like dogs at work. We live in a state of semi slavery as it is. Now they want to make the slavery complete. Like in the years when they brought people chained together in ships, bought and sold them like cattle, chained out hands together at night, like this, so we couldn't run away.

They want to drive us off the land into the caserios (settlements), into their houses and barracks in the caserios. Then if you say anything against them, if you don't grovel in front of them, when you ask for your wage, if you don't accept what they throw to you, or maybe if they just don't like your face, they can tell you to get out and you'll have to get out.

This is all going to be a sea of cane, the whole Valle. They're going to knock down all the parcelas (small plots of land), cut down all the coffee and plantanos (plantains), plough under all the maiz and beans. We'll have to learn to eat cane, like the cattle. There'll only be the rich, their empleados, and their slaves who work in the fields. We'll be living again like my grandfather--complete slavery. (Bond slavery, of course, did not exist legally in Colombia during what must have been the lifetime of this man's grandfather.)

There's only one thing I hope for, only one thing that I pray to God for, every night. Yes, in truth. And that's a world war. A third and final world war. A war in which the whole world will be brought down. A world war of the poor against the rich. A war in which we'll clean them out and cut them down once and for all. By God, I'm ready now--right here, right now. By God I am. I may not have anything but I've got a big heart. I've got spirit. I'm not a dog that they can kick and it comes back to lick their boots. But I don't have arms, not a rifle, not even a shotgun. And I'm alone. But if it should start, if a cuadrilla (band) should pass, I'll be with it. What we lack is a leader, a man with education who knows what's what. To tell us, 'Look, this has to be done, and this, and this.'

By Christ, that's the only thing, the only thing that can save us--a revolution, a world revolution. I don't care if they kill me. By God I don't. I'm not afraid. I'm old, I don't have any wife. Maria (his companera) can find someone else like me. I don't have any children to worry about. I have nothing, only my dignity. And before they take that they'll have to kill me. I'll be better off than anyway. But by God, before they kill me some of them will die too. If I have nothing else I still have my machete."

Person 2: "But look, Colombia has had sixteen years of that--more. And what did it serve? One poor guy slaughtering another. Liberal, Conservative, for politics, for vengeance, or for no reason at all. Most of

those people, those who went on from that are now just plain pajaros, pistoleros--no matter what they call themselves. There were enough campesinos in the mountains who grouped together to resist the military and the police, but they were cut down like cane. I never heard of any rich people who were killed during that time. The oligarchy is more powerful now than it was before. What's the purpose of dying like an ox?"

Person 1: "Well, what do you say then Don Y? What about going off into the jungles, or deep into the mountains, and make ourselves fincas? We can grow everything we need. I've had just about enough of this Valle. Just wait a bit, pretty soon now I'm going to leave this place for good. I'll go back home. (He still has strong emotional ties to the place of his birth despite the fact that he hasn't been there for close to thirty years.) In my pueblo, we are poor but at least there are no patronos to order us around. Everybody has his finca, even if it is small. And things grow there--oohee. Maiz, yuca, cocos, bananas, not like those scraggy things they call bananas here. And pigs--but they really are pigs, not fattened dogs.

If you can't do anything else you can go into the forests and clear a finca for yourself. Maybe sickness or the animals will get you, that's happened to enough people. But while you live you can at least be free. There aren't any patronos there, they don't dare come in there, no sir."

Interview With the President of the Local Junta Comunal

"I'm sorry that you didn't come to us when you first arrived here. We could have given you facts. I could have introduced you to some very pleasant people here who would be able to tell you everything that you wanted to know. As it was none of us who have some position here knew who you were and what you were doing. I myself didn't know till Doctor Villanueva of Castilla told me about you. If you had come to us, all sorts of suspicion and difficulties could have been avoided. But never mind that. I'm happy to put myself at your service and to explain to you the workings of the Junta and difficulties we have here in San Antonio."

.....

"The first junta we had here was organized in 1960 by government representatives from Cali. While the president and the councilors of that first junta were well meaning men, they didn't know to get anything done. They didn't know how to get people to cooperate or how to run a junta. When one of the members of this junta used up the funds for personal benefit the junta collapsed.

In 1961 I and a number of other responsible people were able to reform the junta. It was difficult. I'd been in this region less than seven years then. I tried to build up a group of people who were friendly to each other and who trusted each other. Men with initiative, so that we could get a junta-operated casino built--for additional funds. And strong enough so that we could get our petitions listened to in Florida (the municipio seat) and Cali (the departmental seat).

The first main action was to create a potable water system. Till then the only water in San Anton came from small wells that were unsanitary, difficult, and unreliable. The municipio government donated 900 meters of old piping that they had torn out of Florida. Castilla mill was very generous, they gave us a water tank worth ten thousand American dollars. The Department of Agriculture (national) paid for the pump while the department government paid for the drilling of the well." (As of July 1964 the water supply served only the central section of the main street, very irregularly. Users had to provide their own installation and connections and many were complaining over what they considered the high monthly water rates.)

"In 1962 we started work on the casino and actually finished the building. But another junta took over, elected you might say, and nothing was done. I'm not going to mention any names but this junta was only concerned to stir people up, it didn't do anything." (This junta was led by what is now the M.R.L., Linea Dura supporters in Chicharro. It has elected one of the two Chicharro representatives on the municipio council.)

"In 1963 the earlier junta was returned. Also, we finally got the health post--which was finished in 1961--staffed. We now have a nurse that comes three mornings a week and a doctor who visits about once a week. One can get injections, minor treatment, and some examination of infants and pregnant women here now. You would be surprised how much soliciting and visits to the Department of Public Health office in Cali this took.

The next things that we want to accomplish are getting a purification system for the water. That's to cost a thousand two hundred U.S. dollars. And we want to get electrification. The power line has run past San Anton for over two years now and we still have no electricity here. Looking further into the future, we have great hopes for the Alliance for Progress. The municipio council has plans for a second school here to finish the primary years. Also, if the Alliance for Progress helps provide enough houses for those who are a bit better off, one might say for our smaller middle class people, their older holdings can be opened to the mass of people packed in the ranchos." (In this case the president was thinking mainly of a movement from the parcelas around San Anton into the village proper.) "At present, the aid that Castilla has been giving to its workers to build their own houses has been very hopeful.

But there are some structural difficulties I want to explain to you. One of the greatest inequalities in the Colombian countryside is the centralization of taxes in the Cabecera. This is especially bad here--the present council, and particularly the Alcalde, in Florida are notorious. Nearly all the taxes collected from the municipio are spent on the Cabecera (municipal seat), largely in pay for municipio officials or purely for the benefit of that town. They take but they give nothing in return.

In addition, Florida, the municipio council and the merchants, like to dominate all the coegimentos (outlying villages) For example, in 1956 the market we used to have here in San Antonio was prohibited by the Conservative Alcalde of Florida--because he owned stores in the town. He promulgated an edict that disallowed markets closer than seven kilometers from the Cabecera (municipal seat). This was supposed to

promote better market facilities, but where? We used to slaughter fifteen cows per market day here; often fifteen hundred to two thousand people would come.

Now, we are trying to have the police station here upgraded from a second to a first grade level, to an inspection station. This status would allow us to have full legal rights of an incorporated coregimient--the right to have a market, the right to have a slaughter shed, to have a transit office, to transact cost legal matters here. Everything in the Valle is growing--the population, the sugar industry, mixed farming. It may be that in the future the area around San Anton will have enough people to become a municipio itself.

One of the reasons why we have so much difficulty in getting just returns for our municipio is that this area didn't follow the direction of the major party. It elected grupistas, divisionists, splitters. The people here are not very intelligent politically. They elected M.R.L. people. These people aren't Liberals, they're revolutionaries. They're not interested in helping the people, the nation, they just want to agitate. Now, I'm a Liberal myself. But I know that the Frente National is absolutely necessary. Naturally, if one takes petitions to the government offices in Cali they say, 'If you can't help us why should we help you.' "

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"The junta is composed of nine members: a president, a vice president, a treasurer-bookkeeper, secretary, and five representatives. A new junta can be elected or thrown out at any town meeting. Legally, there has to be a town meeting at least every three months. Usually it is held more frequently. It is open to every adult who lives in San Anton. Normally, we re-elect a junta every year. As many lists of candidates can be proposed as wanted--the votes are by secret ballot. Once a junta is set up it cannot be liquidated by anyone outside the community. It doesn't depend upon any sort of government appointment.

An entire list is elected as a body. There was some attempt at first to have individuals run separately. But this led to such divergent personalities and programs in the junta that decisions were impossible.

But you know, being president of the junta is a thankless job. There is no pay of personal advantage of any sort involved. And there are a lot of ignorant, boorish people one is forced to deal with. For example, when we cut off the water to some house that wouldn't pay the dues, the owners

threatened me with machetes and said they'd come to my house and get me some night. But they never tried it." (Later, the president of the junta asked if I could send him a pistol when I returned to Canada.)

I was in the army for eight years; I left a sergeant. There I learned to appreciate order and duty to our country, to Colombia. When I first came to San Anton there was strife and confusion and people here just wouldn't do anything for themselves. I helped set up the junta here and I've been president three times. But I like to make way for other people that have capacity. After all, that is part of the Junta Council--to give people practice in how to serve their coregimientos correctly.

I'm just a transient here, a traveller. I've been here ten years now; we've gotten water, we've gotten the junta running. But I've been working at one job at Castilla steadily, without change, since I arrived. In another two years, when we've gotten electricity, another school, water purification, I'm going to leave here for the city. They know me in all the government and Secretariat offices, at the Department of Agriculture, at the offices of Public Health, even at the office of the Governor of the Department--all over. They know I'm dynamic, always on the go. If I'm not working for one thing it's for another--tonight a reunion, talk to some people the next day, always fixing up some things here and there.

Legacy of Violence

The following conversation took place in a crowded sector of Chicharro, quite late at night and in low tones. It developed from a longer discussion of friends and relatives and is more or less self-explanatory. It should be considered in comparison to and in conjunction with the conflicts and maneuvers among local politicians and shopkeepers indicated in the preceding interview. It underlines the very basic, and sometimes bloody nature of the conflicts that most adults have experienced directly or through friends, relatives and neighbors.

While this section of the Valle was, during the violence, one of the more stable Colombian regions, during my two and a half month stay at least seven persons were reported killed in the general vicinity of Florida-Pradera. Despite strict laws, there seems to be a considerable number of firearms floating about. One might profitably ponder the description of the pajaros (gunmen) and passing caudrillas(bands) and the actions of some community members to each other when considering community development programs or theses based on the assumption of community solidarity. Chicharro looks much like other tranquil, serene, veredas (small settlement) in the Valle.

Yet, equally important is the complete fear and disgust that most people feel toward the violence, whatever banner it moves under. As one speaker here says,

Whether they are Liberals or Conservatives, they are damaged, rotten, twisted. They started in that life to revenge a father or brother killed, a sister raped, or for political reasons, or for self defense. But after awhile they just became animals, whatever they call themselves.

Even those who feel badly oppressed want peace. But conditions are still such that they can appreciate the heft of a Smith and Wesson.

Person 1: "So Don Tulio told you that everyone is equal in his eyes, how he strictly avoids politics? Well I know him from away back--he's an old pajaro (hired gunman). A good friend of mine knew of him when he was in Pradera, seven or eight years ago. He was a pistolero for the patronos thee. Who knows how many people he knocked off in his days. He's quite friendly, and I'm always friendly to him--but I keep away from him. He's still got close connections with the police and with pajaros who are on the go."

Person 2: "Oh, I know him quite well. He likes to drink and chase women. Last January, one Saturday night, I was in Florida with some of the boys, drinking in a bar. Don Tulio came in drunk. After a little while which I had to go to the urinal, and he came over to piss too. When he opened up his jacket to piss, I could see a revolver stuck in the side of his belt. I looked straight ahead, finished, and went over to the table and said to the boys, 'Let's get out of here.' "

Person 1: "Oh sure--whenever he goes to Florida or Pradera or Cali he has a pistol. They'd kill him otherwise. I can tell you, there are lots of people that are waiting for him. That store, all those cattle, the truck, the land--and he has money--he didn't get those on a truck driver's wages. (In a whisper) Listen, about a year ago there was a small caudrilla here, of X.Z. (supposedly a 'Liberal' pistolero). What, you don't know of him? Well, they were waiting here to get him, right near Chicharro, for three days and nights.

Don Tulio was shackled up in that black bitch's house, drunk, and they thought to get him when he left. But he must have known that somebody was out there. He didn't leave that place for five days--not even to piss. After three days they had to leave. But one of these days somebody is going to kill him."

Person 2 (to me): "See, it's like I told you. You have to know who you're talking to, otherwise it's 'Good Afternoon', 'How's it going', and nothing more. This isn't like your country. There are all sorts of types like this around here."

Person 1: "Yes sir, that Don Tulio is a tough guy alright. (To me) Look, these are the types that have the say so around here. And it's the same everywhere in the Valle. He's a conservative, the police inspectors are all conservative, they are friends of the local conservative chiefs. And these in turn are connected with the agents of the oligarchy. They all meet together, they all support each other.

Let's say that you are doing something that one local conservative chief or an important patrono doesn't like. Maybe you got into a fight with him, or maybe you are finding out some things about him that he doesn't want anybody to know. Or maybe you're an important worker in the opposition to the Frente Nacional. Well, some day when he's having a drink he meets one of these types (pajaros). They are old friends anyway. They have a drink or two and the chief tells this guy, 'Don Fulano is doing such and such, what do you think of that? Can you do me a favor and see what you can do about it.' Maybe he mentions some profitable business deal that he

can get for him, or maybe he mentions a loan--a loan that is never paid back. So maybe this type, this pajaro, or one of his companions, comes to beat you. If you defend yourself he shoots you, or maybe he'll shoot you anyway. Then he goes to the police and says, 'So and so attacked me with a machete and I had to kill him.' The police come and look, go back to the police stations and write up a report saying that you were killed while trying to rob. But, let's say that someone else saw everything and says to the police, 'No, that's not the way it was--it was this way.' They'll more than likely arrest him and charge him as an accomplice. As all of the judges take the word of the police, no matter what political party they say there were from, he'll likely get sent to jail unless he has an expensive lawyer or someone powerful to support him. That's the way it goes here in Colombia."

Person 2: "Listen, you know who had that Muncho shot--that was Don Tulio himself. He was making things too difficult for Don Tulio. That guy didn't have any fear. He told everybody just what was what. Well, Don Tulio had those two police that used to be here shoot him. Remember those two police that were here until about six months ago? The Indian one said that Muncho attacked him, but that's a lie. He never would have done that--alone, on the street, at night, and with two police."

Person 1: "No, no. I went down to give him some money, to help him out a bit. He said that the police were waiting for him, that he couldn't get away. (To me) They shot him in the leg--he lost the leg below the knee."

Person 2: "He's in Cali now, I saw him there just a few weeks ago. He's selling newspapers and periodicals. He has a nice room on Carrera. He seems to be living quite well, he has a lot of friends in Cali."

Person 1: "But listen, those two police, the ones that did it, they were killed here in Florida just a little while ago. Yes, both of them. Up there just outside of Pedregal a bit, just as you go up the mountains from Florida. They found both of them naked beside the road one morning, shot. Whoever killed them took not only their rifles but also their uniforms and everything. Yes, yes--they were the very same ones that were here, those very two police. I've forgotten their names now but it was in the paper and they were the same ones."

Person 2 (to me): "See, I told you that was highly dangerous in the mountains around here. That was just in Pedregal--you wanted to go to Herrera, that's even further--no sir."

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Person 1: "That Don Tulio has got a real arsenal in his house. Not only does he have a revolver, a shotgun and a rifle, he also has an automatic carbine, the kind that the army has--one can say a machine gun, that's more or less what it is. X.Z., he was worked on Don Tulio's truck and he saw it in the garage.

But I have some friends like that, too. (Directly to Person 2) You remember that big guy that was visiting with me on Sunday about two months ago. A real innocent, with the face of a boy. He was carrying around a briefcase all the time. Well, he's an old Liberal pistolero. The day you met him he was coming from Florida, trying to sell a revolver. He had this really beautiful little revolver for me, short barrel and everything. A Smith and Wesson, point thirty-eight caliber--but really beautiful. All he wanted for it was two hundred and fifty (pesos) and fool that I am I didn't take it. And I had the money, too. How stupid one is sometimes. I didn't want to take the risk, and I always wanted one like that.

But that guy is pretty dangerous, friend or not. He stabbed a police in Puerto Tejada who was about to arrest him for something. He says that at that point he didn't really care if the police killed him or not. No sir, there are some people like that I know, one can say that they are friends. But if they come and ask me for ten or twenty (pesos) I give it to them without any questions about when I'm going to get it back. Because if you don't give it to them, friend or not, they may just kill you and take the money."

Person 2: "No, no--there are too many people like that in Colombia. Whether they call themselves Liberals or Conservatives, they are damaged, rotten, twisted. They started in that life to revenge a father or brother killed, or for political reasons, or in self-defense. But after awhile they just become animals, whatever they call themselves."

Person 1 (to me): "Listen, do you know what the corte de franela is? Here, they cut your throat while you're still alive. Or the corte de corbate? Imagine, just imagine what sort of person it must be to cut open someone's gullet and reach in and pull through the dying person's tongue--ugh, poor Colombia.

A Continuation of the Above Account

I had a cousin who came to stay with me for awhile, down from Caldas. He had to leave or they would have killed him. He's in Cali now. Although it's been years since he left home he was still afraid that someone from

there will find him. Why? Well, one night when he was going to a dance, some people that he knew from work stopped him. They said, 'You go to that dance and do what we say or you aren't going anywhere.'

He was supposed to go to the dance and wait until certain people arrived. When they arrived and were dancing he was to open and close the window to give a signal and then leave. Well, that's what he did--he had to or they would have killed him. A few minutes after he left those men entered, and with machetes they killed not a few there that night. And it wasn't even anything to do with politics. One group was of Liberals and the other of Conservatives, but it was over personal matters.

My cousin, when he left that dance, just kept right on going until he got to the Valle."

Person 2: "That's the way it was many times. A cuadrilla would come from some other place to kill someone, let's say your neighbor. Let's say he's a Conservative and you are a Liberal, but you get along very well together--you greet each other, you help each other. Well, this cuadrilla might come to your house and tell you to kill your neighbor, and maybe his whole family. And if you don't they kill you as philo-Conservative--and kill your neighbor themselves. I know people who have seen something like that."

Person 1: "This one type I worked with in Cali told me that during the height of the violence he had a finca up in the mountains behind Miranda. Yes, in truth, that part is till a battleground. It's worth your life to go in there. Well, this guy told me, 'One day I was going along the road, taking some things to the market, and all of a sudden this group of men on horses came down the hill.' The leader was O.L.; he was killed there not too long afterward. He was leading a Liberal chusma (band) to wipeout a band of Conservative guerrilleros that were operating in that region then. This Conservative band had killed a lot of people, and scared even more off their fincas.

Well, this O.L. said, 'Liberal or Conservative'. My friend said he looked at them and decided that they were probably a Liberal caudrilla, so he said 'I'm a Liberal sir.' Which he was. So the leader told him that they were looking for this Conservative band and asked him if he knew where they were. My friend said, 'Yes sir, I know where they are at night', and he led them over back trails till they came to a mesita (plateau) where they could look down on the rancho where this Conservative band were quartered. The whole band was inside or near the house. They were lucky, there weren't even any sentries.

Although most of the boys wanted to attack right away O.L. said, 'We'll wait till their chief comes out of the house. When he comes, you point him out to me', because he didn't know what this Conservative chief looked like. Well, after a little bit the chief came out. One shot hit him in the chest, another in the head, and many in other parts of his body. After that they rode down and wiped the place out. Everybody in that place was killed. Not only the persons in the Conservative band but everybody--there were women and children there. But they killed everybody--with machetes, shots, and they burned them in the house."

That's Why We Live Like This

This final account constitutes one of the most moving and sagacious views from the bottom that I heard during my stay in Colombia. The speaker has had no formal education and came from one of the most backward departments in Colombia. Yet he had a driving desire to know as much about the world as he could through reading small journals, and through continual probing conversations.

His grasp of some underlying principles of Colombian social conditions is both basic and crucial, and radical. He began one of our conversations by saying the following

"But the most basic reason for all of this is that there is no solidarity between the workers of Colombia. We live divided one against the other. One can't trust anyone, a few friends and no more. One worker will sell out his workmate for the boss's favor. It's not just that there are patronal unions but rather that the attitude of the workers allows them to continue."

The history of the Castilla strike, as described here, was being duplicated at Hacienda San Jose when I visited their strike camp. But some of the conclusions reached by the speaker should be held in reserve. A four month strike by impoverished cane workers, without strike funds, against the largest central in the Valle (Hacienda San Jose was a subsidiary of Manuelita), supported by the odd pesos collected from bus passengers, other union members, friends and sympathizers demonstrates that solidarity is not always lacking. But strikes supported by the odd pesos and panela and plantanos donated by regional campesinos, are often not enough.

Despite his other insights, the speaker seems to focus his hatred on the labor contractors as a major source of exploitation--its immediate face. This is, of course, a major *raison d'etre* for the use of labor contractors.

The near impossibility of organizing trapiches, or industry-wide unions, the difficulty of maintaining unionized centrales, the destruction of independent peasant communities, the failure of revolution, politics and great leaders are all mentioned here in connection to personal experience. In a very real way, this statement is the experience of the conditions talked about in "Colombian Labor Law: Legality and Reality".

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"It's very simple. I'll tell you in one sentence why we live like this, broken, crushed, in poverty and misery. Because we are divided, one worker against the other. If you try to do something or say the wrong things your own workmates will often betray you."

"If you talk with four or five of the people you work with and you say 'Look, things aren't right here. We need decent wages, we're not getting the prestaciones that we're entitled to. What we need is a union, and not a patronal union.' Well, the next day the mayordomo comes up to you and says, 'I hear that you were talking against the company and that you don't like it here. Well, you can leave as of now.' You have to leave and you'll be lucky if you get all of your pay, let alone any severance pay or liquidation payment of your prestaciones."

"Even if some of the workers get together quietly, in someone's house, at night, to discuss what should be done, there'll always be someone there who will disagree with you. Maybe he will agree fully with you to your face but that same night he'll go to the mayordomo and tell him, 'These persons were in that house discussing such and such.' Even if not all of those involved are fired they and the others are too scared to do anymore after the mayordomo comes around to them and tells them he knows what's up. But then, this Chicharro is particularly bad. I've never seen such a spineless, servile bunch of people any place, especially now."

"Let me tell you what happened here, at Castilla. A little over two years ago I and a lot of us were working there. There was a sindicato there which was no more than a marriage of the patronos and the priests. Well, some of us decided that what was needed was a union that worked for the workers. So we talked to our friends and workmates, making sure that no one said anything to the known stooges (esquiroles). Before the company knew it we had the majority of the workers signed up. We held the first assembly. All the paperwork and legal steps were completed and we received official recognition from Bogota as representing the workers at Castilla. Right after that we affiliated with Fedetav."

"At the same time this was going on other people were organizing in Ingenio Maria Luisa and at about the same time a sindicato affiliated with Fedetav was recognized for Maria Luisa."

"But not long after that there was a new contract to sign and we asked for a two peso increase in the basis rate and a forty centavo increase in the rate per ton of cane (cut). Castilla refused to negotiate so, after all the due processes, we went on strike. The same thing happened at Maria Luisa. But they never had a union there before."

"At that point we had more than 1,200 of the 1,700 people working in Castilla in our union and all except forty or fifty were for the strike. In Maria Luisa, which was smaller, there were about six hundred men there then--an even higher percentage of the workers were in the union. Like I said, Maria Luisa didn't have any sort of a union before that, like it doesn't have one now, not even a false one, a patronal one."

"We set up blockades on the main entrance ways to Castilla and Maria Luisa, with tents and banners and enough people at every entrance so they could stop the companies from bringing in strikebreakers. One month passed, two months passed, and we knew that they would try to conquer us with hunger. The men couldn't get any work, except for a few days here and there. The families of each man, or his friends who were working elsewhere, helped each one to the extent they could. Other unions and public collections brought in some money to buy food. The thing was very tough but still the bulk of the workers were determined to carry on the strike."

"About the third month the company started telling everybody that they could work if they came to Castilla and signed up with another union that the patronos had brought in--the one they have now. They even offered them a higher rate than they paid before--but they wouldn't negotiate with us. One by one the workers started going back to work in Castilla, living in the campamentos there. Castilla is so big and has so many entrance roads that we couldn't be everywhere. The police would escort them in over some back road at night. "

" After that they started bringing in new strikebreakers by the truckload. The police would arrive in force, open up our lines and let the strikebreakers in. It was like a fortress in there--armed guards continually patrolling the fences. But still the strike went on. We still had the majority of the original workers on Castilla and they were firmly behind the leaders. In the fifth month of the strike, that was when our leaders sold us out. (He feels) They were paid off by Castilla and carried the membership lists to the patronos. They sent of a letter to Bogota saying that the majority of the workers had left our sindicato and that it no longer represented the workers there. An official arrived from Bogota, declared the strike illegal, and registered the new sindicato as representing the workers at Castilla. Of course, I don't have to tell you that this Festralva sindicato is pure patronal."

" But even in the fifth month, with all those difficulties, the majority of the original workers were with the sindicato. But when the leaders of the

sindicato sold out everything collapsed. With that the strike a Maria Luisa collapsed, too. Those boys over there had it even tougher--there was continual persecution and not a little shooting, too. They had been counting on us at Castilla winning. Maria Luisa never did start milling again. They shut down and now they sell all their cane to Castilla and some other ingenios and trapiches."

" After they had broken our strike Castilla circulated black lists of all the active members of our Fedetav union. They sent these to all the companies and haciendas and ingenios in the Valle. These people either had to pack up and leave this area or take work in places where they don't pay anything. These people lost everything and they can't get a job in any of the ingenios around here. Even now, after all this time, they still persecute us. I know a number of boys from the strike who have managed to get jobs at, with half-way decent pay. But they have to be secretive about their past and if the company finds out that they're there they'll find some way to discharge them. The same thing will happen to that happened to me. "

" Last Friday the mayordomo where I'm working came up to me and said, 'Listen X.Z., the owner got a letter about you from Castilla. It says that you're a communist and a dangerous revolutionary. For my part you've done good hard work here, and I'll put that on your work card, but I have to let you go. And it's no use going to Don Jaime's finca because they wrote him the same letter."

" Look at me, I can't even work in that shit trapiche for a lousy twelve pesos a day. By God, if they push me any further I'll make them remember me. I'm still a man, I've got balls. If they don't let me earn a living then I'll take what I'll need--I'll steal. I don't care if they kill me for it. Before I let them starve me to death I'll fight. And all that just because we tried to organize a union that would stand for the workers. I'm not a communist, I've never had any schooling, I don't even know what communism is. I'm just a poor illiterate. A Liberal I am, yes, and an M.R.L. Liberal, that yes."

A Further Conversation by the Same Individual

" Since the strike, Castilla, and especially the sugar cane fincas around here that deliver cane to Castills--and other trapiches and ingenios--have started using labor contractors more and more. These contractors are the most despicable, degraded people on the face of the earth. They are dragged up from the human refuse--pimps ad semi-pistoleros and people

who live from the misery of others. They will go around to the various patronos, or maybe they work for just one, and say, 'I'll contract to do such and such work for these circos (plots) of cane for 800 pesos.' And that's probably cheap so the owners say alright. Well, the contractor gets together let's say ten men and pays them maybe half of that money. So much for the piece of work done. He doesn't care, he doesn't take any chances--you get the money when you've done, or whatever portion that you've done. And of course the contractors always say, 'Well, that's all I got for that job, I'm not making anything on it.' But people have to take the work, even if you only make ten pesos for nine and ten hours work. Even if they don't get Sunday pay, or vacation pay or if they don't get paid anything for accidents and have to use up their savings for food when they're sick. Even if there are absolutely no prestaciones, which there aren't. They have to take the contractors offer because if they don't take it someone else will. They don't have any money, the wife is hungry, their children are crying because they're hungry, and they can't find another job. There are always enough to take the contractor's price."

" But the most basic reason for all of this is that there is no solidarity between the workers of Colombia. We live divided one against the other. One can't trust anyone--a few friends and no more. One worker will sell out his workmate for the boss's favor. It's not just that there are patronal unions but rather that the attitude of the workers, that what I've just told you, allows them to continue."

"Some talk about organizing all the workers in one region, on all the fincas and trapiches and ingenios, all at one time, all under one workers' central. But I'd like to know who's going to do this. We tried to organize just two ingenios and we failed. The trapiche where I work has two hundred and forty men, more or less, plenty for a union. But not the slightest activity. The sindicato at Manuelita is old and has a long history and is strong, but most of the other sindicatos of ingenios affiliated with Fedetav are having enough difficulty now just maintaining their positions."

"I've been for workers' unions for half of my life, and that's why I'm living like this--broken, suffering. I've heard people talk of sabotage, but that will only land you in jail or face down in the fields. I've heard people talk of revolution, but we've already tried that and it failed."

"Here in Colombia the oligarchy commands. They control the government, the police, everything. Those that they don't control they buy off, those who they can't buy off they persecute, imprison or assassinate."

If it looks like the popular forces might win an election--we thought that the people would finally have some say with Gaitan--they don't hesitate to liquidate them. Gaitan's assassination--that cost Colombia who knows how many hundreds of thousands of lives. People died by the wagonload, by the ton. Thousands and thousands, for more than seven years it went on, fierce and bloody slaughter--men, women, children. We'll never know how many, nor do I want to know. Dumped into rivers--how many Colombians; food for the fishes, fertilizer for the countryside. Colombians were food for the fishes, fertilizer for the countryside. Colombians were food for the birds of prey, food for the dogs. And it's not over yet. You heard about that young guy found dead near the center of Pradera last Friday. Well, my friend saw his body before they took it away. His right arm had deep machete slashes where he was trying to ward off the blows, another machetazo clove open his shoulder and another split open his head. Who knows who did it, someone out of personal vengeance, pajaros? But he wasn't robbed. Maybe persons in the employ of the police themselves. When they found him his thumbs were tied together. It happened not far from the center of Pradera, but of course nobody saw or heard anything."

" But that's nothing compared to what it was like before. During the violence people were continually being shot down on the streets in Pradera, in Florida, in Corinto, even in Palmira--in the broad daylight. The killers never were arrested. In Caldas and Tolima where almost all of the people are poor campesinos, where the people fought back against the assassinations, the army went in and massacred them. Many, many people had to flee their homes and land and go into refuge high in the mountains. The old Liberal guerrillas maintained peace in many of these areas when murder and bloodshed was going on all around. Naturally, many people--those who weren't killed trying--fled to these zones. Many of these areas never have been a real part of the nation. They were unoccupied, unworked areas, part of the great haciendas that were ruled like petty kingdoms by some hacendados. Their word was law in those areas and the national law and rights were unknown."

"When the guerrillas and refugees arrived these hacendados fled. Well, local self defense committees were established because the old landowners or newly arisen jefes were always trying to attack and rob the people of their land and animals. This is the reason that we now have so many pajaros now, many started in the employ of large landowners and the local jefes that wanted to take back the campesinos' land, drive them

off or scare them into working for the jefes. But with these self defense groups, in many campesino areas there have been very few murders or major acts of robbery for many years."

"Schools were built and teachers, of some sort anyway, paid from the local treasury. That was where there had never been schools before. Health posts were set up by the local committees themselves. Not much, with just a few drugs and medicines that they could buy in the neighboring towns. They didn't have much money and they didn't have any trained people but still it was more than had ever existed before. Roads and trails were opened up to the markets in towns so that the people could get their goods to town. That was before the military started blockading them. "

" Now they are calling these people bandits--you know what's going on in Marquetalia. The big press, the government, the army, the oligarchy have mounted an offensive of lies and bullets against these campesino areas and are trying to convince the people that the campesinos are bandits. It's true enough, there are enough bandits in Colombia, but it isn't these campesinos."

All that they really want is to steal the land that these campesinos have made valuable by their work. Besides, they're afraid of the people having any power in their own hands. That's what they're really afraid of. You'll see, in a few years all of these lands will be back in the hands of the latifundists and the people will be working like serfs for them.

" I don't see any solution. Organizing for a workers' central is becoming more and more difficult around here as the companies get smarter. We had seven years, more than seven years, of real fighting and it only served to pit one poor man against the other. In politics, Gaitan was assassinated and when it looked like Lopez would lead the people against the Frente Nacional, they bought him off. The leaders sell you out each time. But still, if one is a man and not a slave or an animal he has to go on fighting. But you see what it has gotten me, and many people like me--poverty and misery."

Three Migrants on the Move

"Me? I'm not afraid to talk to you. I'll tell you something. Why not? That was my brother-in-law that you were talking to yesterday, you know.

I'm living down in the barracks on Hacienda X, of the La Quinta Panelero, near Candelaria. I come up there pretty often to visit my sister and her husband. I'm from San Jose, a little pueblo high up in the mountains in Nariño. I'm thirty-two now but I've already been in the Valle for fourteen years. Our father had a small finca. We grow some wheat, but mainly potatoes. There were just too many of us to make a living from that little piece of land so when I was eighteen I left home and came directly to the Valle. Why? Because everyone in Nariño knows that things are better here in the Valle. The pay in Nariño, and the Cauca too for that matter, is indecently low and jobs are scarce--one could say that there are no jobs. It's a wonder that anyone stays there. Anyway, I came directly to the Valle. No, nobody works their way up from Nariño. It just doesn't pay. It would take too much time, and would spend most of it looking for work. After all, it's less than two days by bus from any point in Nariño to the Valle."

(R.K.: Are there people in Nariño who would like to come up to the Valle to work but can't because they haven't the money for fare and expenses?)

"No, that's not really so difficult. If the father or brothers can't help, a man has friends who lend him the money to come up here. After he has a job he pays it back a little at a time. That's the way we poor people do it here in Colombia. We really have to help each other--a man's friends are his friends. Actually, that's how I came up to the Valle."

"My first job here was in San Jose trapiche, near Palmira. Maybe you've heard of it. The owners are trying to crush the union there now but in those days there was nothing like that--there wasn't anything to crush. Well, I worked there for a year, was laid off during slow season for two months, and returned to the same trapiche for one and a half years more. I began working in the cane fields planting and cultivating cane. That was a good thing because it takes a few years to acclimatize oneself and cutting cane is dangerous if one hasn't cut cane before. Sure I was afraid of cane cutting at first, lots of people cut themselves. It's not hard to make yourself a cripple, especially if you haven't done the work before. But one begins by cutting the outside rows on the circos (plots). There's much less

danger that you'll get in the way of somebody's machete and you have more room to swing and work in."

"After I was let out of San Jose trapiche I went to Cali. I was going to go to Nariño for a visit but I only got as far as Cali. There I was drinking and with women and in a few weeks I didn't have any more money. I had to go looking for work again."

" After that I passed to Casilla for two years as a general field hand--planting, weeding, clearing ditches. It wasn't anywhere near so big then, not like today. After those two years I had had enough of cane fields--truly I did. I thought that I'd try to see if I could get a job where I could learn to be a mechanic, or drive a truck, or anything like that. I tried to get a job as a helper for one of these trades. But the companies always asked for experience. Don't talk to me about SENA. That's only for colegio students. It doesn't help people who can't pay the tuition or who have to earn a living."

"Yes, I've got some family here in the Valle, you might say. I've got two brothers here. They're both a good deal younger than me--one is twenty-five and the other is twenty-three, or about that. The older one has been in the Valle, at Mayaguez (central) for three years now. After his military service he went home for a little while but then came directly here to the Valle. The other one just finished his military service in Ibague. He was back in Nariño for a little while and then came up here. He got a job right away in Mayaguez as a cart tender. But in truth I really don't know too much about them. We haven't visited each other. No, we didn't help each other out either--we have our own friends. In fact, I only knew that my younger brother was in Mayaguez now because a friend told me. (Mayaguez is less than five miles from the Hacienda on which this man was working and less than a half the distance to the place he was visiting when I talked to him.) I've got another brother who was in the Valle too. He's just a year younger than me. He was working for three years near Cerrito and also in Mayaguez but now's he's returned to work on our father's finca. I think that he was the one that got my other two brothers to come to Mayaguez. It probably helped them that the company liked him. "(The later brother appears to be the one who will take over the biggest share of the father's finca.)

" After I left Castilla I thought I'd try other parts of the Valle. At least it would be interesting to change around a bit. I kept trying different companies--but it's more or less all about the same sort of work. I kept looking around, trying different places, but it was all about the same. I

was in Igenio Melendez for a couple of months, at Rio Paila for five months, back again at Trapiche San Jose for a month, at Providencia for two or three months, and finally at Popayal for fifteen months."

(The informant said he left the trapiches and haciendas he worked on because the wages were consistently lower than on centrales and because the prestaciones sociales were less, or non-existent. But he returned to the same or similar trapiches and haciendas because it was easier to get jobs on them when he needed work badly. He took these jobs because he had used up his grubstake that he needed in looking for work. As for the ingenios and centrales, he said that the only way to get a vacation or look for other employment was to quit.)

One is always looking for a company and a job where there is better pay and conditions, and some chance of getting a better position. One always thinks and hopes that one will find one.

The only job out of the fields that I ever had was in a coal mine in the Cauca, not far from Cali. But I was only there for a few weeks. There was so much dust in the air, it was very unhealthy and dangerous. I didn't like working underground either. Besides that, with all these difficulties, the pay was low and they didn't give many prestaciones. It was a small mine and one couldn't even do as well as one can in the cane fields. I took the job in that mine because I thought I would get sick pay, accident insurance, paid holidays, some opportunities to learn something, but they didn't give anything. And they only paid ten pesos a day in those days. After that I went back to Nariño for ten months. I thought I would stay there but I got fed up and came back to the Valle.

When I came back to the Valle I got a job at Mayaguez cutting cane. I was there for about two years, but the company finally forced me to leave because I was helping to build the union. I was very active."

(I asked why it was necessary to organize at Mayaguez since Fedetav already had the place under contract. But there is a high turnover) "people leave, others get sick, some die, new people are hired."

"The sindicato at Mayaguez is affiliated with Fedetav, but it is weak. A large number of the people working there don't belong to the union. It is constantly necessary to organize the new people and retain those that are already in the union. Many of the people that are in the union don't understand the importance of it. It is always a big job to get members to pay their dues, at least many people. Many people feel that they don't get anything for the money that they give to the union. One has to explain the situation to such people."

"After I left Mayaguez I went up to Palmira and pretty soon I got a job in Manuelita, as a cane cutter. I had worked eight days--let's say one week, when one of the foremen told me 'We don't need you here anymore.' In the week between handing my papers and job recommendations the office at Manuelita had written a letter to my last job. And Mayaguez had phoned back and told them that I had been organizing for Fedetav.

The sindicato at Manuelita couldn't do anything. Each company has its own rules. At Manuelita there is a two month proof period before one is permanently hired and its only after that when you are protected by the union. It's written into the contract that the sindicato signed. In that time the company checks your papers--to see if you've been in any trouble with the police or if you have a bad work record and also if you've been working for a union. This period is supposed to be to see if you are healthy and can work well. Anyway, during that proof period one can't join the union and the company can fire you when they like for whatever they like."

"There are two types of unions here in the Valle. One is of the workers--the Fedetav--and the other is patronal--U.T.C. and Festrálva. Bloque Independiente, they have a few companies in Cali, but they don't amount to much. The patronos have a central of their own too; it's in Cali, called Asocaña. They have meetings there and plan and coordinate strategy. They're all united and work together. If one patrono faces a strong union they help him. They also circulate black lists and make propaganda against the worker's unions, call them communist. That's the way it is here in Colombia. If one is for unions run by the workers they call him communist and revolutionary and won't give him a job."

(I said that as a foreigner, it was easy for me to meet these people. That indeed, I had been to Asocaña to talk to the director. My informant's reply was) 'Yes, that's alright, but when you go there you have to be careful not to say too much and to understand the real meaning of what they are saying."

"After I left Manuelita I thought I'd see a little more of the country a bit more. It's good to see other parts. If I could, I wouldn't even mind trying another country. Besides, I was pretty fed up with this Valle then and I thought things might be better elsewhere. First I went to Pasto. I wasn't looking for work there, it would be senseless to from here to there in search of better conditions. I just went to see some friends. I didn't even bother going to my family's house because I was in Pasto only three days.

Then I took buses all the way down to Baranquilla, near the coast. I had a job on a banana plantation there for about two weeks but the housing and feeding were something unbelievable. People there lived like animals. The wages were nothing--one thought that one was back in slavery again. I had so little pay coming after two weeks that I didn't even stop to pick it up."

"From Barranquilla I went up to Bogota. I spent an awful lot of time looking for work there. I liked the place, but I just couldn't get any job. Of the month that I spent there I only got a few individual days of work helping to build some houses. By that time my money was almost gone so I came back down to the Valle again where I knew that I could at least get some sort of job in the cane fields. I wound up on centrale San Fernando, they are still building it. It's just over the border in the Cauca--I was doing general construction work on it for about five weeks for a small contractor."

"One should have about four hundred pesos, more or less, if one is setting out on a search for a better job. That's for bus fare, for rooms and food--these things are much more expensive when one is travelling around. If you're really economical you can make four hundred pesos last for a month of looking around. Of course, you might also wind up in a town with some of the boys you know and spend it all in a few days. Sometimes it's easy to fall into situations like that."

"You may work on a trapiche or hacienda for two or three months and not save enough to go and look for work elsewhere. Often when you get let out of a place you have to take the first job that you find, nearby, anything, because you don't have enough money to say no."

"Yes, I was married for awhile--not a church marriage, but I had a wife. What went wrong? Well, nothing really. But a man and a woman have to understand each other; if they can't do that after awhile they just can't live in the same house. Although we didn't have a house, just one room--that makes it worse. It happens very often. A man and a woman begin to live together and after awhile they can't understand each other, and they fight. It gets worse and worse. They fight every day, all the time they are together. Finally, the man leaves."

"Now with my sister and Ruiz here it is different, they never fight. One doesn't do what the other doesn't like. They are very happy together--they're more like sister and brother than man and wife. Always helping each other, considerate of each other. I come up here every second week and we spend a pleasant day together. If one lives with a woman like this

then everything is alright. Sometimes I go into Palmira or Cali, and I usually drink up the money I've earned that week."

(I asked if he had children.) "Well, of course. If a man and woman live together there are children. I have two, one is six and the other is almost four. They're with my parents in Nariño now. They're big and don't need their mother now. I don't even know where she is now."

Enganche

"People get jobs sometimes by enganche. In the towns around here, Florida, Pradera, Candelaria, but especially Palmira, Tulua, and Buga, contratistas (labor contractors) come and look for people to work on some hacienda or finca.

The owner or administrator of a finca needs some more men to work--maybe to pick beans. Or maybe for the maize harvest. Or maybe for work in the cane fields, cutting, loading, cleaning the plots, whatever. So if there are not enough ready people to work--men and women coming to the finca--of if for some reason he wants men from another area, he will get his mayordomo or an assistant to go to some of the neighboring pueblos to bring back workers. Sometimes just an ordinary truck driver from the finca is sent to do this.

Well, that person, the contratista, he's not really a labor contractor. Often he is employed by the owner; goes to one of the pueblos, most usually on Saturday or Sunday. Although you can see them in some of the more important towns almost every day. Maybe he'll go to the padre, because the padre will know of people looking for work or the padre will advise people in the pueblo that there is somebody looking for so many workers for such and such work. In Florida and many of the surrounding smaller towns they use a public address system.

Maybe the man making the enganche will go to the city hall where they also know of people looking for work. Then again, maybe he'll just go to the plaza and pass the word around, through people he knows, that he is looking for workers.

Well, the men come to him and he tells them a little more about the job--where it is, what it is. Those who want to take the job go and pick up their baggage--it's almost always single men who find work this way. They'll return to the person taking the enganche. He'll always have a truck. When he has enough men--maybe he has to pass to a number of towns to get them--he takes them out to the place where the work is. The owner or the mayordomo talks to them (supposedly, it is only then that the actual wage rates and conditions of the job are given). Those that don't like what they hear leave and have to pay their return fare. Real labor contractors do this, too, although most people want to know the wages and conditions of the job before they leave. Most people won't go on an enganche very far from where they are unless they know a good deal about the wages--unless they need the job desperately.

Most of the fincas and haciendas around here only go, let's say, thirty or forty kilometers to look for workers. But in Florida, Pradera and Palmira I've seen quite a few contractors from concerns throughout the Cauca and from as far north in the Valle as Cartago. In fact, there was even an employee (empleado) of the new sugar mill they have established up on San Antonio, from Cundinamarca. (At that time) the Palmira market was looking for men. He took lots of men, truckloads. The patronos and contractors from other parts come here because they say that there are plenty of good workers there who know how to work in cane, and in other crops."

"Four, five, and more years ago Castilla took people on enganche from Guapi, Barbasco (in the Pacific lowlands)--from throughout the Cauca. They sent down labor contractors who would find workers and bring them back here in their trucks. They didn't sign any contract to work or give any advance payment. I've never heard of that being done here. They brought the people right to the ingenio and everyone who came could work. There was much less red tape (papeleo) and documents needed then."

" Castilla doesn't get men that way anymore. There's an overabundance of people who come up from the Cauca now, and from even south of that. There's always more men, from everywhere, looking for jobs at Castilla than there are jobs vacant. They come forward themselves. Castilla doesn't have to send contractors down to find people."

" Around here, for the harvests of cotton, beans, soya, maize, that use many youths and women, the enganche is taken in the caserios (villages) like Chicharro. Probably you didn't notice, but there was a contractor here last Sunday. He was only a truck driver of the cotton finca down the road. Now everybody here knows that he will come with a truck at a certain time in the morning for the next ten to fifteen days to pick up people who want to harvest cotton. I'd be doing that now if I didn't have other work."

One Does the Best One Can

"My father was a miner in the Pacifico mine, in the Choco. The owner was a gringo, like you. My family didn't have a finca, not a parcela--nothing like that. (There was a certain uneasiness when I asked about his father. First he said that there weren't many parcelas around Condoto, later he said that there were numerous small fincas on which people grew food for themselves but that his mother had never received one.)

"I left the house when I was seventeen, to do service. We have obligatory military service here. Do you have that in your country, too? I went to Armenia, high up in the mountains, in Caldas. We were living in the cuartel (army barracks) there, for eighteen months. I didn't like it at all. It was impossibly cold for me, very unhealthy, and the discipline was something terrible. The junior officers were very despotic."

When that was finished I went directly back to Choco. There is a road into the Choco by way of Medellin and Antioquia. I passed that way because I thought it would be interesting to see those places. But I didn't look for a job during that time. When I reached Condoto I stayed with my family and after a while got a job in the Pacifico mine--my brother was working there and talked to one of the administrators for me. There were about a hundred men working in the mine. Some had been working there for a long time, some since I had been a little boy. Well, I worked there for about a year--general labor and mucking. But after a while I got tired of working in the mine and looked around for a change. I ended up taking a job in another mine."

" In all the mines around Condoto they pay the miners by the amount of ore each person extracts and by the gold percentage of that ore. Although, there are a number of workers that are employed by the day. The team of miners that works together is paid each week on their output and on a percentage basis. The overall amount earned by the team is often unjustly divided among the members--not in proportion to what they have done. (My informant could give me no clear idea of how the individual workers kept track of their output or what check they had on the gold percentage analysis of the ore.) Some weeks the pay is half that of other weeks. I can't remember exactly now but I think I made anywhere from ten to twenty pesos a day. There were some prestaciones sociales but they didn't pay as much as in the Valle--many of the prestaciones I get now just weren't given at all."

" Well, I worked in two other mines for another year and a half, doing the same kind of work. But finally I got tired of it. What do I mean by 'get tired of it'? Well clearly--one works at the same job all the time, the same place, day after day, one gets fed up with it. One wants to do something different--it's the same with cutting cane, loading, working in the mines.

Well, I got a letter from my uncle. He's the president of the Sindicato at Rio Paila (a large central in northern Valle owned by the same family that runs central Castilla). He said that there was work in the Valle, that the pay was better than in the mines, and that I should come to Rio Paila and I would get work there."

"You ask me why others from the Choco come here? It's this way--jobs are not at all easy to find, even here in the Valle, but it is common knowledge that it is easier to get a job that pays a little bit here than anywhere else. Everyone I've talked to says the same thing. As for Medellin--well yes, there are plenty of factories in Medellin. But still, I've heard that it's harder to get a job there and besides the wages are generally lower. And if you don't get a job in Medellin itself there is no work nearby. There's nothing like you have here in the Valle, there's no work in the countryside. As for Caldas or Tolima, there is no work at all there. Wages are lower there than in the Choco. One doesn't even try to go to these places. As for Bogota, there may be more work there than in the Valle. They have lots of companies there. But it is very cold in Bogota. We people from the warmer parts suffer terribly there. Besides, the companies there are very big and demand all sorts of documents and records and prefer people with more schooling. I've never been to Bogota, but that's what I've heard. (People often say that they left a region or do not look for employment in certain sectors because of neutral reasons--like inclement weather. Yet, if one pursues the reasons given further they soon introduce a host of quite complex, highly charged, social factors.)

"Well, I came to Rio Paila directly and started to work right away, as a cane cutter."

(I said that other people had told me that their first job in the cane fields was a paleros (hoe worker), because they didn't know how to cut cane and thought it too dangerous.)

"Maybe so, but now all the ingenios want cane cutters and loaders--almost nothing else. If you want to work you take the job that the company needs men for."

"How do you get ahead, how do you get a better job? Well, after you've been working in a company for some time, a year sometimes more, and

the mayordomo likes your work, he will say, 'You go and begin this and this work.' But all that isn't really too important in the fields because cane cutters earn more than most of the others and you can begin that right away."

"After about a year at Rio Paila, cutting cane every day, six days a week, I got tired of it. It bored me. What do I mean by 'it bored me'? Well, the same as I explained for the work in the mines. Doing the same thing, every day, it just begins to bore one, any one. So I left and moved around the Valle for a few months. I did some odd jobs in the city and occasional construction around Yumbo. After I'd been travelling around like for six months I went up to Remolino (in Valle del Cauca) and worked for another six months in the cultivation and harvest of maize, beans, cotton, and so forth. No, but never in the coffee harvest. I've never worked in coffee--around here only women and children do that. In Caldas there are mainly men working in coffee, but I don't like to do that. Anyway, these other crops are not so boring as cane."

(Why?) "Well in maize and beans and cotton you are working with different crops. Then there are different jobs with each crop. Besides that, you work on a rate--it's not important to the boss if you work four or twelve hours, if you work one or seven days a week. If you don't feel like working one day you stay at home, if you feel like working at five in the morning and quitting at two in the afternoon you can. You are freer.

"But after six months of that work I left, because the wage is low and there are no prestaciones if you are sick, no Sunday pay, nothing.

After about a week of waiting I got on at Castilla as a cane cutter again. I've been here eleven months now. Here one can earn a decent wage, pay for all that one needs--clothes, food, rent. I don't have any thoughts about changing jobs just now but maybe one of these days I'll try to get a job in Cali.

As for advancement, there is none in the fields. I'd like to learn to be a mechanic. It's interesting work--and I would really like to have some work that is interesting. Besides, mechanics get fairly good pay. How would I like to be an electrician or technician in the mill? Fine, then I could really live like a big shot. (He laughs) I'd like to get a job in a Taller, either in a town or a mill. But it's almost impossible to get an apprenticeship in a big firm. In a small shop one works as an aid. You help people who know what to do. The foreman comes along and tells you how to do things--you learn and earn at the same time.

"So you're interested in what the rates for field work are here at Castilla. Do you want to take a job here as a cane cutter? I can put in a good word for you. Well, a poor cutter, a bad one, cuts about twenty tons of cane a week, on average. Some days are better and some days are worse. Some days one doesn't feel much like working. A good cutter, on an average, cuts about thirty tons per week. I cut about eighteen tons last week, in six days. The usual working hours are from seven in the morning to three-thirty in the afternoon, with a half hour off for lunch. Others work faster, start earlier, and work longer. The Antioquenos often start at five in the morning and work until five in the afternoon--they work hard and fast. They earn a good deal but they are always eating it up.

Maybe when I'm older I'd like to return to my pueblo. My mother and three of my sisters are still in the Choco. Two of my brothers work in the mines there. I suppose that I'd try to buy a house there, maybe a plaza or two to grow my own food on--although I don't know about that. Still, much of my family is in the Valle now. My oldest brother works in the ALCAN factory in Yumbo, he's been here for almost fourteen years now. And a younger brother of mine just came here. He works in a restaurant in Cali. There are also a couple of sisters of mine who are in Cali now. One of them is still looking for work."

A Man From Nariño

"I left the house of my father to work when I was twelve--yes, twelve. I left my father's house--he has a small finca--and went to work in a gold mine. He used to punish me a great deal, all the time. One night I was still out at eight in the evening, away from the house, and my father came back. I decided I'd go back and if he beat me I'd leave--good enough. If he didn't punish me, good enough too. Well, I went back and he punished me. But I didn't say anything. I went to sleep and waited. At about twelve o'clock at night, when everybody was deep asleep, I got up and left. I didn't have any money or food or clothes except those I was wearing."

"Well, I walked all that night and the next day before I came down to the road. It was high up in the mountains. The only way of getting about was by foot or on horseback. I got down to the road but I didn't have

anything to eat--not even a cup of coffee in all that time. That night I slept a few hours in the fields and then continued marching. It was too cold to sleep outside without a jacket or blanket. I walked all the next day and at about six in the evening I came to the casino of this mine. It was the campamento of the Porvenir mine, the place where they feed the men who work there."

"I went up to the woman who was in charge of the kitchen and said, 'I'm hungry. I haven't eaten in two days.' Well, she gave me a cup of coffee. I couldn't pay so she gave it to me as a gift. That cup of coffee was all I had that whole night. The next morning, early, I went to the part of the campamento where the workers were shaping up. And I asked the foreman--he's like the mayordomo in a mine--for work. They weren't hiring any men at that time but the foreman took pity on me. 'All right, you work with this group of men, they're putting in timber', he said. We went into the mine a good way. I was working with some others shoring up the roof in a drift. But the work was very hard for me since I was so small. Although I was pretty strong for my age."

"Besides the difficulty of the work I didn't have a change of clothes. No rubber boots or stockings or a jacket. And there was a lot of water in some the drifts up to here in some places (points to his calf). It was very cold water because it was seeping through the walls from some of the mountain streams."

"We started work at six in the morning. Lunch was at eleven-thirty. By the time lunch came I nearly collapsed. The only thing I had taken in over two and a half days was a cup of coffee. And I was wet and numb from the water. When we came to the surface I wrung out my clothes. But I didn't have a change of clothes so I had to put them on again. Well, so it went. But I continued working at that for a year. I lived in the campamento--we bought food at the casino. There were mainly single men living there, but there were some families as well."

"After a year at that mine I returned to my father's house. I didn't work there, except on the finca. But after another two months of staying there, with all of the quarrels we had, I had enough and left for another mine. I went to the Albanero mine. There the conditions were about the same as those at Porvenir. But I had another job--working on tunnel drainage."

"There were about a hundred to a hundred and forty men working on both these mines. But the people were always changing. Some would work for a few weeks, some for a month or two, some for only a few days. The company paid every two weeks. The administrator said, 'Those who

want to continue working here can, those who don't can leave.' All the mines there are about the same. They don't recognize any prestaciones sociales. Even now, today, the basic wage in the mines there is only four or five pesos a day. There are a lot of old mines that people have reopened--an owner with four or five workers.'

" Well, after six months I got tired of working in that mine. We worked from six in the morning till six in the evening, with about three hours off in the middle of the day. Most of what we got paid went to buy the food. So I left and returned to my father's finca again, even though I didn't want to. I was working on his finca and sometimes for other fincas in the neighborhood. But again, I couldn't stand it. We were always fighting and arguing at home, and my father would often hit me. So after a few months I went back to the first mine I had worked in, El Porvenir."

"There I got a job right away. This time I was working above ground, shoveling the ore dumped by the carts into other carts, and moving the tailings away from the mill. After a few months I was shifted into the mill itself, working around the crusher and on the sorting belt. After about four months on that job, eight months in the mine in all, I was working near a transmission belt and got caught. The belt caught my arm and tore off the skin all the way up my arm and off part of my right shoulder. It was only by the will of God that I didn't lose my arm or my life."

" Well, then, for over fifteen days I couldn't leave the bed and I couldn't write. So I got no help from my father or family. And of course I couldn't travel in that condition. But some friends at the mine took me into their house and cured me. It was more than a month before I could work again. There, in Nariño at that time--even now--the companies don't recognize any responsibility to the workers. These companies are what we call "fly-by-night affairs", although some have been operating for decades. They don't recognize sick pay, loss of limbs in accidents--much less unemployment and severance pay. What you can read of in the government labor laws are unheard of there. They don't even pay for hospitalization. There, the 'law' is 'if you're sick cure yourself, and if you can't cure yourself and haven't the money for doctors and medicine, then die.' National laws hardly enter into Nariño, certainly not those affecting work."

"The companies are small and poor and don't contribute to any social security scheme. But the administrator of El Porvenir not only didn't pay me for that accident or the time I lost, but he even robbed me of the pay I had coming."

" I had been working in the mill from two in the afternoon till two in the morning, six days a week. I was supposed to get one and a half days pay for each shift. But when I came to take the money he didn't pay me for all this extra time at all. He just paid me for the straight days worked, and not even all of those. I needed the money, I couldn't wait. Besides, there is nothing one can do anyway. If you don't want to work in a place someone else will take the job the next day."

" Here in the Valle there are both federations of company unions and federations of workers unions. In Nariño there are neither. Some people there are interested in unionization, but one person alone can't do anything. The majority of people working in mines there just come to work for a short time--then they leave. They have their own fincas but some times they need extra money. They work for a few days, two weeks, a month or two, and then they go back to their fincas. I never heard of a strike or even union organization in those mines. The boss or the foreman says what he wants and the workers do it. Anybody who doesn't like it can leave--there are always more who are looking for work."

"There is much unemployment and the companies are small and irresponsible. A man relies upon the help of his friends or on nothing.

When I was better I left El Porvenir. I didn't want to work in a mine anymore. But I had no money. So I returned to Albanero gold mine and worked in the mills there for six months. About the closest thing to a strike that I heard of was what happened at Albanero just before I came there. The owner, a Don X.Z., owed the workers on his mine one month's pay. He just stalled and legalized and refused to give the people their back pay. By this time he was no longer living near the mine but in a town in another department. Well, one day the owner came back to the mine with some engineers. He wanted to survey the mine. But the workers gathered together and wouldn't let him enter the site. Shortly after that he sold it. These mines are always passing from hand to hand, with the foremen and administrators as intermediaries and the labor department inspectors never interested. One never knows exactly who the owner is."

" After I left Albanero I drifted around doing odd jobs for a while until I finally wound up working in a diamond mine. There I was working with water--operating the sluices and flumes for the hydraulic operations. Later on I was engaged in general labor, transporting timber by mules, drainage work, all sorts of things. One day after about three months I and some others were transporting timber to the workings when we met some friends. Well, we went to this one house and started drinking. Along

came some others who knew these friends of mine, and because of vengeance started to attack us. One came at me and before I could defend myself he stabbed me in the wrist. The second blow caught me in the thigh and the third was to my stomach. Well, with that I almost died but my present wife took me into her house and nursed and cured me. It was then that I decided to marry her."

" I was ill for more than two months and couldn't get out of bed. But when I was better and could work again I asked her to marry me. She said, 'Well you better talk to my father.' So I did, and he said alright.

We got married and started to work privately. I was transporting firewood with horses. I used to get up at four in the morning and care for the horses. Then I'd leave for high up in the mountains. Often I would get back only after it was dark. I was doing that for about eight months, and we were expecting him (pointing to his son). Well, one day one of the horses got sick and within a month, of the five horses we had, only one remained."

" So I started working on the fincas around there (Nariño) taking whatever job I could get. I did that for about a half a year. But after that time I said to myself, 'This isn't resulting in anything.' I'd heard from people who had been up in the Valle that there were jobs here and that they paid something. We already had the boy then and I said to my wife, 'I'll go up to the Valle and try to find a job. If I do find one I'll send for you, if I don't I'll return.' (There was a long pause.)"

"Well, after not too long I got a job here (in Valle del Cauca). While the wage was pretty good I didn't like being a cane cutter. On the other hand, I didn't like working on the basic rate for field labor that they were paying at Mayaguez. I heard that there were jobs available at Castilla. Besides, the prestaciones were more here. They have bonuses for each child, hospitalization, payment if you are injured. It may be that these things are part of national legislation but still, their application by different companies is very different. For instance, prestaciones for Christmas and Easter are better at Castilla then elsewhere. Of course, like I said, none of these things exist in Nariño."

"Well, I left Mayaguez on Friday, at four in the afternoon. At six in the afternoon I was handing in my papers at Castilla. Next morning, at nine in the morning, I was hired. "

(In fact he was hired during the bitter Castilla strike and was known as a strikebreaker.)

"It's not that jobs are easy to get, it's just a matter of looking and luck. It's the personal luck of each person."

"After that, my wife came up to stay with me. One suffers alone. That is to say, when one has friends and a family with him things are easier. Things don't affect one so much."

" Anyway, now I am thinking that one of these days I'm going to leave Castilla, when I have a little money. One day I'm going to go to Cali and try to find something, some job--it doesn't matter what--where I can learn something. I would like to learn to be a mechanic. I don't want to spend the rest of my days working in the fields. But here in the cane fields or on the haciendas it's almost impossible to improve one's lot. Even most tractor drivers don't earn more than a cane cutter. As for getting into the mill and learning something there, that's very difficult. SENA? Maybe they are training people here but I never heard anything about it."

"The only way an ordinary person can improve his position there in Colombia is with the help of somebody of importance. Otherwise I would say that it is impossible for a worker to make a better life for himself. One has to live from day to day. I personally have no expectations or illusions. The only thing that I will plan for is to save enough money in the Valle to return home, to my pueblo, where my friends and family are, and after a while buy a plaza of land or maybe two. Nothing more. To do this one works and saves here all the time and every few years returns home for a visit. Maybe he invests some money there. Here he works with his hands, there he works with his savings and his head. Others who hope for more wind up with nothing."

" In Colombia everything requires lots of recommendation, lots of paper documents. Everyone has to look out for themselves. I would either like to learn a trade, on the job or through a home study course, or return to my own finca in Nariño. I can live there--with some part-time work. Not well, but better than here. I wouldn't have the same money to spend but we'd have enough to eat and there would be more independence. I have a small part of my father's finca--we are four brothers. With a plaza or two more I can live there. But in any case, I don't want to spend the rest of my life working in the fields of some ingenio."

Rolf Knight
August 2014 (Original 1964)