

CAMPEÑAS, CAMPEÑOS Y COMPAÑEROS: LIFE AND WORK IN THE
BANANA FINCAS OF THE NORTH COAST OF HONDURAS, 1944-1957

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On May 1st, 1954 banana workers on the North Coast of Honduras brought the regional economy to a standstill in the biggest labor strike ever to influence Honduras, which invigorated the labor movement and reverberated throughout the country.

This dissertation examines the experiences of *campeños* and *campeñas*, men and women who lived and worked in the banana *fincas* (plantations) of the Tela Railroad Company, a subsidiary of the United Fruit Company, and the Standard Fruit Company in the period leading up to the strike of 1954. It describes the lives, work, and relationships of agricultural workers in the North Coast during the period, traces the development of the labor movement, and explores the formation of a banana worker identity and culture that influenced labor and politics at the national level.

This study focuses on the years 1944-1957, a period of political reform, growing dissent against the Tiburcio Carías Andino dictatorship, and worker agency and resistance against companies' control over workers and the North Coast banana regions dominated by U.S. companies. Actions and organizing among many unheralded banana *fincas* workers consolidated the powerful general strike and brought about national outcomes in its aftermath, including the state's institution of the labor code and Ministry of Labor.

This dissertation explores gender, ethno-racial, and class constructions in the North Coast, which created the context for the strike. This history of life, work and labor organizing in the *fincas* and *campos* (living areas) analyzes how workers created community and adapted to conditions of the *fincas*, resisted company control, and organized, setting the scene for the 1954 strike.

The culture and history of the North Coast, including the strike, are products of complex negotiations among different identities and actors in a dynamic environment. This dissertation suggests that the dominant male, *mestizo* character of the North Coast working class was only a part of the picture and existed in dialogue with the "other" (i.e., Garifuna, other black and women workers). The context and events of the North Coast can only be understood with an appreciation of the ways in which these identities collided.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Suyapa Gricelda Portillo Villeda was born in Florida, Copán, Honduras on July 6, 1974 but spent most of her childhood as an immigrant in Los Angeles, California. She received her B.A. in Psychology and Spanish (Latin American Literature) from Pitzer College in Claremont, California in 1996. The day after graduation she began working as an organizer for KIWA (then the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates), organizing garment workers. She continued on to work as a field organizer for unions such as the Service Employees International Union, Local 399, Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees, Local 11, American Federation of County and Municipal Employees and the Screen Actors Guild of America on campaigns with healthcare workers, childcare workers, college housekeepers and actors among others. Her organizing work also includes coalition building and community based organizing efforts to address issues such as health care access for immigrant families, Lesbian Gay Bisexual, Transgender and Queer rights, immigrant and labor rights for organizations such as the Latino Equality Alliance, the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, and the Coalition for Quality Health Care. She and her partner, Eileen Ma, live and organize in Los Angeles, California. She has traveled extensively through Central America, Mexico and Chile. She began her Ph.D. work at Cornell University in 2002.

To Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, Teresina Rossi and Juan B. Canales, QEPD.
To *the campeñas* and *campeños* of past and present laboring in the banana fields of the
North Coast of Honduras.
To the *Honduran Resistance* in all its shapes, sizes, colors, genders and gender
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On May 1st, 1954 banana workers on the North Coast of Honduras brought the regional economy to a standstill in a labor strike that invigorated the labor movement and reverberated throughout the country. These actions precipitated the largest labor strike ever to influence Honduran workers' movements and national politics and gave voice to a series of complaints and demands against the North Coast banana industry, embodied by the Standard Fruit Company and Tela Railroad Company, a subsidiary of the United Fruit Company giant. In total, over 25,000 workers flooded the streets of small North Coast towns. The strikers effectively paralyzed the trains, which sat idle in the absence of operators and mechanics. Ships remained empty and docked in the ports, and fruit hung from the trunks of banana trees waiting to be picked.

The traditional narrative of these events asserts that the strike began in the ports of Puerto Cortés when workers stopped loading ships to demand the rehiring of a co-worker they perceived to have been unjustly fired. The news of the work stoppage spread throughout the rest of the North Coast and to major cities, gaining sympathetic support from the public and local newspapers, eventually resulting in a general strike. Factory workers throughout the country first protested in solidarity and then made demands of their own employers; more work stoppages ensued when these were not met. In solidarity with the banana workers' bold actions, service workers, maids, cooks, and independent vendors joined the strike. Students, women's groups, teachers associations, and others in the capital city and elsewhere contributed to the strike. National sentiment in support of banana workers spread and even merchants showed sympathy by donating and giving credit to striking workers in need of assistance.

Accounts in historical literature present the strike as a prideful moment of national unity that changed the country, a moment when all Hondurans stood together. Marvin Barahona explains:

En el contexto de la huelga, el espíritu nacionalista se propagó hacia todas las capas sociales al proyectar la imagen de lucha desigual, entre una poderosa compañía extranjera y miles de indefensos trabajadores locales. Esta imagen solo podía generar gestos de solidaridad animados por el nacionalismo, sin los que la huelga de 1954 no habría podido resistir durante tanto tiempo, ni habría obtenido tanta simpatía y apoyo popular.¹

[In the context of the strike, the nationalist spirit was propagated to all social strata, projecting an image of an unequal struggle between a powerful foreign company and thousands of defenseless local workers. This image could only generate gestures of solidarity animated by nationalism, without which the 1954 strike could not have resisted so long, nor have garnered so much sympathy and popular support.]

The strike was transformative for workers and brought national attention to and highlighted workers' issues and lives in the North Coast. Ultimately, the strike dramatically challenged the export economy and resulted in desired improvements for workers. It brought respect from a previously recalcitrant Honduran government that was reluctant to challenge foreign domination and generated momentum for the labor movement and liberal reforms.

While many writers, historians, officials, labor activists, and others present varying perspectives on how it happened, what exactly happened, who did what, and why it matters, most Hondurans I interviewed for this project seem to agree on at least one thing: the strike of 1954 was the most important and monumental event ever to happen in Honduras--at least up until the time of our interviews.

This dissertation examines the stories and experiences of *campeños* and *campeñas*, the men and women who lived and worked in the banana *fincas* (plantations) of the Tela Railroad Company and Standard Fruit Company in the period leading up to the Great Banana Strike of 1954 in banana regions of the North Coast of Honduras.² In

¹ Marvin Barahona, *Honduras en el Siglo 20 una Síntesis Histórica* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 2005), 170. (Author's translation).

² *Campeño/a* refers to a banana worker who lived in the *campos bananeros*, banana *fincas* and living quarters.

addition to describing the lives, work, and relationships of both male and female agricultural workers in the North Coast during the period, this study traces the development of the labor movement and explores the formation of a banana worker identity and culture that would influence labor politics at the national level.

This study focuses on the years 1944-1957, a significant time when dissenters began to push back against the Tiburcio Carías Andino dictatorship and banana companies' control over workers and the North Coast territory. This period, culminating with the 1954 strike, provides a crucial time span in which to analyze worker agency in the North Coast and the banana regions dominated by U.S. companies. This period of political reform in Honduras is rarely analyzed from the point of view of workers and their actions.³ In fact, banana workers were essential in the efforts to challenge the companies. Actions and organizing among many unheralded *finca* workers leading up to the 1954 strike were significant in consolidating the powerful general strike effort and in bringing about national outcomes in its aftermath, namely the codification of the labor laws and the state's formation of the Ministry of Labor.

The North Coast has been acknowledged by many authors as an important site of economic and political development and transformation for the country.⁴ Often, the U.S.-owned banana companies are almost exclusively credited with defining the

³ Several scholars have noted these years as a reform period. James Mahoney, "Radical, Reformist and Aborted Liberalism: Origins of National Regimes in Central America," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 33, no. 2 (2001), 244.

⁴ Mario Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño* (Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana EDUCA, 1981); Marvin Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 2004); Dario Euraque, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic Region and State in Honduras, 1870-1972* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Mario R. Argueta, *La Gran Huelga Bananera 69 Días que Estremecieron a Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Universitaria, 1995); Elisavinda Echeverri-Gent, "Forgotten Workers: British West Indians and the Early Days of the Banana Industry in Costa Rica and Honduras," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 24, no. 2 (May 1992); Glenn A. Chambers, *Race, Nation, and West Indian Immigration to Honduras, 1890-1940* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010); John Soluri, *Banana Cultures Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2005); Victor Meza, *Historia del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Centro de Documentación de Honduras (CEDOH), 1991).

economic and political culture of the region, by building a lucrative export economy and representing a hope for modernity for Honduras. By focusing on the workers' historical experiences, this dissertation challenges the unilateral banana company-centered understanding of the North Coast and rescues from obscurity the collective story of the lives and labor of thousands of workers who also made the North Coast an important geographic, political, cultural, and economic region. Workers' daily labor, their organizing work leading up to the strike, and their participation in national organizing and reform efforts contributed to the significance of the area and influenced workers and the labor movement throughout the nation.

Perhaps most importantly, this dissertation explores the gender, ethno-racial, and class constructions in the North Coast of Honduras linked to the daily practice of work, which created the context in which the strike was possible. This study delves into the history of life in the *campos* and the nature of work and labor organizing in the *fincas*. In the labor camps workers—both men and women—negotiated relationships and tensions with each other, the banana companies, foreigners, immigrants, the natural and work environments, and the work itself. Their lives reveal the ways in which workers created community and adapted to work and conditions of the *fincas* and living areas, their resistance to company control, and their organizing efforts, which set the scene for the 1954 strike.

Within this narrative, I hope to tease out the gendered lives of workers. A particular contribution of this thesis is a close look at women workers and their significance as a part of an informal economy that supported the formal economy of the region, including their roles in the banana export economy and the strike. For men, the development of a particular kind of masculinity, one tied to ethno-racial identity, allowed their access to work and their survival, and ultimately helped create solidarity among the working class people of the region.

The original impetus for this study germinated with the question of how the strike of 1954 in Honduras consolidated a powerful labor movement in this period when previous efforts had not been successful. This question has been partially answered in numerous political analyses and literary works, but still missing is a better understanding of workers' day-to-day lives and experiences of the time. The thousands of workers who participated in the strike were the central actors during a monumental period in Honduran history, yet we know them as faceless symbols or archetypes more than as real and complex social agents/actors.

The purpose of this work is in part to deepen our understanding of the lives of banana agricultural workers. This picture of their lives and work, the ways they constructed a banana worker culture, and their negotiation of gender, ethnicity, and race in that context reflects an analysis of oral histories of workers of that period. Evidence of workers' lives also surfaced in worker newspapers and other documents. These written records, in addition to other traditional archival sources provide evidentiary ballast for this study.

This dissertation sets up a dialogue with the previous historiography of the Honduran North Coast by insisting on the inclusion of workers' stories of life and work and an acknowledgement of the diversity of the inhabitants of the region. The collection and analysis of oral histories makes possible a process of rescue and reintegration of alternative narratives of workers' and women's lives in the historical record, such as the *patronas* and *ayudantas* of the North Coast.⁵ This study also seeks to engage the Honduran historiography by straddling the space between labor history and social history. Drawing on oral history and archival sources, I analyze the strike from the point of view of agricultural workers, whose work and participation influenced the outcomes and the national political process.

⁵ *Patronas* were women cooks in the banana living quarters who ran eating establishments. *Ayudantas* were their young women helpers, very often family members.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters. *Chapter One* describes the historical context of the North Coast and the intersection of interests between the banana companies—the United Fruit Company and the Standard Fruit Company—and the Honduran liberal reformists. This chapter also considers the emergence of the labor movement. *Chapter Two* takes up the task of uncovering the history of the union organizing efforts leading up to the strike of 1954 and considers how it occurred despite the iron fist of the Nationalist party and U.S. company politics.⁶ *Chapter Three* “maps” the lives of *campeños* and the formal banana work in the *fincas* and other company departments. This section details the actual work in the *fincas* and explores the relationships among workers, particularly the ways in which men experienced life in a hierarchical organization and society. The chapter analyzes the conflict over workers' consumption of alcohol as a site of negotiation between company control and worker resistance. *Chapter Four* attempts to chart the informal economy by exploring the lives of women, including *patronas*, *ayudantas*, *vendedoras ambulantes* (street vendors) and particularly those who operated *comedores* (eating establishments), as well as other women workers. This analysis refers to the work of women during this period as the “informal economy” due to women’s perceived marginal role to the formal economy of the banana industry. The formal economy, however, could not function without them. The presence of women workers and *vendedoras/es* (vendors) created a contested space for gender relations in and around the *fincas*. In sum, I hope these chapters will suggest an approach for looking at the strike and the period that prioritizes typically muted workers' voices and that values their everyday experiences at least equally with traditional political, organizational, or national project analyses of the time period.

⁶ The Nationalist Party was founded between 1920 and 1923 by General Tiburcio Carías Andino and Paulino Valladares, then known as the Nationalist Democratic Party. Carías Andino and the party were linked to the United Fruit Company. In the mid-1950s the party divided into the original party and the National Reform Movement (*Movimiento Nacional Reformista* 1953-1957). The MNR was led by Carías Andino. Euraque, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic Region and State in Honduras, 1870-1972*, 44-45, 67-68.

The small but growing body of literature of the North Coast and its people builds on the initial work of Honduran sociologist Mario Posas and historians Victor Meza, Marvin Barahona, Mario Argueta, and Dario Euraque. These authors have traced the economic, political, geographic, and cultural importance of the North Coast in relation to the nation and foreign economic domination.

Posas's *Luchas del movimiento obrero hondureño* and his subsequent works on the labor movement—as well as Meza's *Historia del movimiento obrero hondureño*—are important studies of the labor movement in Honduras.⁷ Both published in the 1980s, these works provide a sweeping history of the labor movement beginning with the craft unions, the importance of land concessions, and the role of workers in unionizing efforts that were transformative to the nation. Posas's work is critical both in its documentation of previous strikes and land concessions and as a political history and analysis of the conditions leading up to the strike of 1954. Mario Argueta has also made essential contributions to Honduran historiography, in part because his books, *La gran huelga bananera: 69 días que estremecieron a Honduras* and *Bananos y política: Samuel Zemurray y la Cuyamel Fruit Company en Honduras*, both draw on U.S. state department records regarding the fruit companies' operations on the North Coast.⁸

More recent studies by historian Marvin Barahona—perhaps the first labor historian to use oral histories to explore labor issues and to uncover the role of worker organizers during the 1954 strike—provide more insight into workers' agency and their interactions with the state, as persecuted workers and as negotiators.⁹ In particular, he has written about the leadership of the 1954 strike, bringing to light the critical role played by leftists in the organizing efforts and problematizing the relationship between

⁷ Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*; Victor Meza, *Historia del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño* (Tegucigalpa: Editorial Guaymuras, 1981).

⁸ Argueta, *La Gran Huelga Bananera 69 Días que Estremecieron a Honduras*; Mario R. Argueta, *Bananos y Política: Samuel Zemurray y la Cuyamel Fruit Company en Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Universitaria, 1989).

⁹ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*.

the Liberal Party and other organizations—such as the Communist Party and the *Partido Democrático Revolucionario Hondureño* (Honduran Democratic Revolutionary Party, or PDRH)—launched to address the bipartisan system.¹⁰ In his subsequent work on national identity, *Evolución histórica de la identidad nacional*, Barahona reached back to the colonial period to elucidate the twentieth-century project of nation building, demonstrating the fissures inherent in the process and the fractured nature of national identity. A later Barahona work, *Honduras en el siglo XX: una síntesis histórica*, provides a broad history of Honduras in the twentieth century, in which he spotlights economic investment and foreign interests in the North Coast and traces the connections of more recent history to the construction of the liberal period of the 1880s.¹¹

Rina Villar's *Porque quiero seguir viviendo...habla Graciela García*, is an important biography that uncovers the life history and political organizing work of Graciela García, a labor activist in the 1920s in *Federación Sindical Hondureña* (Honduran Syndicates Federation, FSH), one of the more radical labor organizations that sought to build power for workers. García was exiled in Mexico for her labor activity during the Carías Andino dictatorship (and remained exiled until her death), but always supported the labor militancy in Honduras. This book raises questions about the fissures between liberals and more radical members of the FSH, who saw the North Coast as an important site for organizing.

Dario Euraque's works, both in English and in Spanish, look beyond nationhood and national political analysis. His book, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic*, focuses on the development of a political and economic class in the North Coast. According to

¹⁰ The Liberal Party was founded in 1894 and for most of the twentieth century has been the main opposition party to the Nationalist party. One of its most influential leaders and rival to Carías Andino was Ángel Zúñiga Huete. Dario Euraque considers the *Partido Democrático Revolucionario Hondureño* (PDRH) a 'wing of the Liberal Party.' The was formed in 1946 by a group of individuals with various political leanings, but the party itself was considered a social democratic party. Leftist organizers within the party were influential in organizing the 1954 strike in Honduras. Ibid., Fn.65, 56; Euraque, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic Region and State in Honduras, 1870-1972*, 39, 47, 51.

¹¹ Barahona, *Honduras en el Siglo 20 una Sintesis Histórica*.

Euraque, the North Coast is important because "it developed a liberal and defiant political culture that cut across class lines and that served as a basis for distinguishing Honduras from other Central American countries."¹² His most recent studies explore the history of race and ethnicity in Honduras, analyzing the perceived "threat of blackness" as one of the motives for the construction of national identity around indo-hispanicity.¹³ His study of *mestizaje* relies on the critical understanding of the construction of the nation and the marginalization of the community of Garifuna (or Gariganu) people and other indigenous and black communities through the prioritization of indo-hispanicity.¹⁴ Euraque has also conducted oral histories especially in his work on the Garifuna community and their involvement in the labor movement in the North Coast.

Both Elisavinda Echeverri-Gent's dissertation, *Labor, Class, and Political Representation: A Comparative Analysis of Honduras and Costa Rica* and Glen Chambers's recent book, *Race, Nation, and West Indian Immigration to Honduras, 1890-1940*, have sought to uncover the complicated role of West Indians in the banana industry and their relations to Garifuna and other black populations in the North Coast.¹⁵ Other recent studies, such as John Soluri's *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States*, have exposed an additional dimension of the North Coast banana industry—that of

¹² Euraque, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic Region and State in Honduras, 1870-1972*, xix.

¹³ Dario Euraque, *Conversaciones Historicas Con el Mestizaje y su Identidad Nacional en Honduras* (San Pedro Sula, Honduras: Centro Editoria, 2004); Dario A. Euraque, Jeffrey L. Gould, Charles R. Hale, *Memorias del Mestizaje Cultura Política en Centroamérica de 1920 Al Presente* (Guatemala CIRMA 2005).

¹⁴ The Garifuna people in Honduras are of *Arauco*-Caribbean (Arawak and Carib) origins, they trace their roots and traditions to both West Africa and Northern South America. Garifuna communities settled in beachfront villages in close proximity to the ports of Tela, Puerto Cortés and La Ceiba since their arrival in 1797 from the Island of Saint Vincent. While the communities are sedentary, the need for survival led Garifuna males to seek work as seamen, in fishing boats and finally in United Fruit Company or Standard Fruit Company banana export ships. There are 47 Garifuna towns in Honduras and two major neighborhoods in Tela and La Ceiba. Francesca Gargallo, *Garifuna Garinagu Caribe Historia de una Nación Libertaria* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 2002), 13.

¹⁵ Elisavinda Echeverri-Gent, "Labor, Class and Political Representation: A Comparative Analysis If Honduras and Costa Rica," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988); Echeverri-Gent, "Forgotten Workers: British West Indians and the Early Days of the Banana Industry in Costa Rica and Honduras," ; Chambers, *Race, Nation, and West Indian Immigration to Honduras, 1890-1940*.

environmental transformation.¹⁶ His ecological focus reveals the role of the *poquiteros*, small banana producers, who were the first to cultivate bananas and significantly alter the ecology of the North Coast.¹⁷

While these primarily Honduran authors have established a strong historiographical foundation for this study, the agricultural workers' lives--particularly working class women's lives and labor--have remained in the shadows. This is the departure point for my study, which I hope will be a welcome intervention to expand our view of North Coast historical actors.

My project is also influenced by several United States scholars, particularly those in the Central American and Latin American historiography who have written labor histories that are attentive to workers' experiences and the construction of gender as an integral part of the story of the working class. Emilia Viotti da Costa notes in her essay on labor historiography, "Experience [can be] methodologically imprecise," but the retelling of workers' histories affords workers agency and autonomy as historical actors.¹⁸ By looking closely at workers' experiences we can then craft a labor movement history that is textured by the contradictions, challenges and possibilities of the working class. Working class identity and culture are constructions of the workers themselves as much as workers themselves are products of their environment—in this case the enclave economy of the North Coast and the Honduran government.

My thesis is influenced by the historiography of labor movements, work, and gender in Latin America. The study of workers' experience does not necessarily negate structural analyses of labor; rather, Viotti da Costa notes that studies on worker

¹⁶ Soluri, *Banana Cultures Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States*; John Soluri, *A la Sombra del Bananal: Poquiteros y Transformaciones Ecológicas en la Costa Norte de Honduras 1870-1950*, ed. Colección Cuadernos Universitarios (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Universitaria de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, 2002).

¹⁷Soluri, *Banana Cultures Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States*, 8-9.

¹⁸Emilia Viotti da Costa, "Experience Versus Structures: New Tendencies in the History of Labor and the Working Class in Latin America: What Do We Gain? What Do We Lose?," *International Labor and Working-Class*, no. 36 (1989), 9.

experience enrich the larger structural analyses and encourage labor historians to build a bridge between the 'experience' and 'structural' tracks of study. But this construction, as powerful as it is, is constantly shifting based on circumstances and epochs. Viotti da Costa also calls for the true incorporation of gender in labor history. She states, "No serious working-class history can be written today without incorporating women, not only those that work in the industrial sector, but also in the 'informal' sector."¹⁹ A gendered analysis, one that encompasses men and women workers, is essential to an understanding of the North Coast. Women workers' roles in particular must be understood within a social reproduction framework—that is, one that analyzes their role in reproducing the working class and society with their work and labor.²⁰ Important works in Central American history have focused on the suffrage movement in order to understand the role of women in society.²¹ The suffrage movement, however, was dominated by middle class and elite women in the cities and company towns and rarely, if ever, infiltrated the lives of the women of the *campos*.

Labor historians and scholars are rethinking how to examine workers' roles and women's and men's gender roles in society.²² The efforts to *engender* history are

¹⁹Ibid.,18.

²⁰ Lara E. Putnam, "Work, Sex, and Power in a Central American Export Economy at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," in *Gender, Sexuality, and Power in Latin America since Independence*, ed. William E. and Katherine Elaine Bliss French (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, INC, 2007),134; Rosemarie Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 101-105.

²¹ Rina Villars, *Para la Casa Más que Para el Mundo: Sufragismo y Feminismo en la Historia de Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 2001); Eugenia Rodríguez Sáenz, *Un Siglo de Luchas Femeninas en América Latina* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial de la Universidad de Costa Rica, 2002); Leticia Oyuela, *Notas Sobre la Evolución Histórica de la Mujer en Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 1989).

²² Deborah Levenson-Estrada, *Trade Unionists against Terror: Guatemala City, 1954-1985* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994); ———, "The Loneliness of Working-Class Feminism: Women in the 'Male World' of Labor Unions, Guatemala City, 1970s," in *The Gendered World of Latin American Women Workers from the Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box*, ed. John D. French and Daniel James (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997); Thomas Miller Klubock, *Contested Communities Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Mine, 1904-1951* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998); Heidi Tinsman, *Partners in Conflict the Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Labor in the Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1950-1973* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Ann Farnsworth-Alvear, *Dulcinea in the Factory Myths, Morals, Men and Women in Colombia's Industrial Experiment, 1905-1960* (Durhama & London: Duke University Press, 2000); John D. French and Daniel James, ed. *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers from the*

predicated on the notion that “the ways in which societies perceive and reproduce sexual difference are a result of processes.”²³ These directions in labor history and endeavors to *engender* history influenced my approach for this study.²⁴ The untold stories of the male and female banana workers provide fertile ground for research to identify ways in which the workplace is gendered and to analyze workers’ lives and relations—gendered relations—to the larger societal constructions and macroeconomic structural formations.

In the traditional labor movement’s historical narrative, women are absent from the histories because they are largely unseen in the workplace, and therefore in organized labor. To explain their ‘absence,’ traditional analyses characterize their work and exploitation in the workplace as a relatively contemporary phenomenon resulting from the growth of industrialization. As Viotti da Costa notes, traditional scholars who write about the workplace and labor movements do not write about women, not even to note their absence.²⁵ More recent scholarship provides a different perspective, noting that women have been part of industrialization processes since the late 1800s.

Susie Porter’s work, for example, shows that Mexican industrialization was itself a gendered process. In her study of women workers, she explains that modern banking practices in Mexico led to commercial expansion and industrialization and that “women during this period not only entered into the factories in large numbers, but became a

Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Elizabeth Quay Hutchinson, *Labors Appropriate to Their Sex Gender, Labor, and Politics in Urban Chile, 1900-1930* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001); Lara Putnam, *The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica, 1870-1960* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Susie S. Porter, *Working Women in Mexico City: Public Discourses and Material Conditions, 1879-1931* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003).

²³ Elizabeth Dore, “The Holy Family: Imagined Households in Latin American History,” in *Gender Politics in Latin America Debates in Theory and Practice*, ed. Elizabeth Dore (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 103.

²⁴ Emilia Viotti da Costa proposes new directions in the study of labor history, proposing that we look at labor movements ‘from below.’ Viotti da Costa, “Experience versus Structures: New Tendencies in the History of Labor and the Working Class in Latin America: What do we Gain? What do we Lose?.”

²⁵ Viotti da Costa, “Experience Versus Structures: New Tendencies in the History of Labor and the Working Class in Latin America: What Do We Gain? What Do We Lose?,” 16-18.

more substantial presence in the informal economy.” She concludes that “women’s work experience was increasingly industrial in nature” during the period between the 1880s and the 1930s.²⁶ Porter’s work shows that, in fact, women in Mexico were active in the industrialization process. Although new technologies may have displaced women in the traditional labor market, women were also clearly present in the informal economy in Mexico City. Women were actively supporting textile mills with take-home work and piece work, which labor historians may have overlooked when writing about the formal economy and the building of unions. Porter’s work offers a labor history that demonstrates the gendered society in which women lived and worked.

Labor history and the overall field of history are similarly trying to make gender a critical tool of analysis along with race. As Joan Scott advises, the challenge to "de-ghettoize" the study of women "is, in the end, a theoretical one:"

It requires analysis not only of the relationship between male and female experience in the past but also of the connection between past history and current historical practice. How does gender work in human social relationships? How does gender give meaning to the organization and perception of historical knowledge? The answers depend on gender as an analytical category.²⁷

In the edited volume on gender and labor in Latin America, *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers*, John D. French and Daniel James refute the past practice of simply inserting women into the traditional framework of labor history, which has been traditionally focused on male workers. Their work refuses to “ghettoize and segregate” women from men’s labor history; rather, French and James claim that the study of labor history needs to be reconfigured to truly reflect women’s lives, not just add their participation as an afterthought:

²⁶ Susie Shannon Porter, "In the Shadows of Industrialization: The Entrance of Women into the Mexican Industrial Work Force, 1880-1940" (Dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 1997), 9.

²⁷ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986), 1055.

The challenge facing labor historians is to explore the articulation of gender and class in the lives of working-class subjects, both male and female. In this non-essentialist approach, gender is understood as a relationship rather than a thing; it is viewed as a verb rather than a noun. It must be seen as a social process of construction in which meaning is ascribed to sexual difference, which is reproduced by and within institutions (such as the family, factory, or polity) that generate and sustain gender hierarchies and patriarchal ideologies.²⁸

This framework allows us to look at women in history as well as to reconsider men and their gendered relationships within the workplace. More research in ‘micro-histories’ is needed to develop this approach within different Latin American countries as well as in different rural and urban industries.

It is equally important to explore masculinity in the context of work and progressive movements in history. Deborah Levenson-Estrada claims that the male-led union drive in a Guatemalan factory only included women in their union organizing when women exhibited ‘masculine’ qualities:

If men really conflated *class* and *male*, if *male* really “constituted” *class*, and if men workers did not on some level recognize the difference between their male coding of class and class reality, they would have excluded women from their unions. Instead, the women who were recognized as important to the labor movement... were masculinized.²⁹

Levenson-Estrada analyzes the particular behavior of male union members based on oral histories and explains that women were only accepted in the union leadership after exhibiting several characteristics that the men deemed necessary—she refers to this dynamic as ‘masculine,’ perhaps to be understood as a masculinization of women.

²⁸ John D. French and Daniel James, eds., *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers from the Household to the Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 4.

²⁹ Levenson-Estrada, “The Loneliness of Working-Class Feminism: Women in the ‘Male World’ of Labor Unions, Guatemala City, 1970s,” 224.

There may be useful application of this theory in Honduras, where leadership positions in the labor organizing were held mostly by men, although with some exceptions. Women like Graciela Garcia in the 1920s and Teresina Rossi Matamoros, a labor leader who was active in the 1954 strike committee, in the 1950s are remembered for their roles on mostly male committees. In Rossi Matamoros's process of *concientización* (consciousness-building) two factors predominated: one, the terrible working conditions she witnessed workers suffering in the *campos* and outside the offices of the company; and two, her inquisitiveness for further study and knowledge. At the time, her ability to take the initiative and join the ranks of the *Alianza de la Juventud Democrática Hondureña* (Alliance of Democratic Youth) was perhaps an indication of some privilege even among women at the time.³⁰ Only certain women, and perhaps women of a certain class status, penetrated this protected male space. She describes her interaction with working class women, wives of the workers in the study group:

*Puede parecer extraño que yo no mencione mujeres en todo este relato; sí conocí a las esposas de los compañeros, pero tal vez por mi dureza de carácter, y no es que no fuera femenina, si lo era y lo soy, me gustaba más el trato con los hombres. Me parecía que eran menos complicados, menos chismosos y menos dados a las intrigas. Eso fue lo que me motivó más a estar en sesiones; y había sesiones de los compañeros en las cuales sus esposas lo único que hacían era servirnos el café.*³¹

[It might seem strange that I don't mention women in this account. I did know the wives of my comrades, but perhaps because of my tough strong personality—and it's not that I wasn't feminine; I was, and I am—I preferred to interact with men. They seemed to me less complicated, less gossipy, less given to intrigue. This is what most motivated me to be in the committee meetings—and there were meetings in which the only thing the wives did was serve coffee.]

³⁰ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 326.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 332-33.

Later, Rossi Matamoros would find a role within the strike organizing committee and join a workers' study group, while most other women, wives of workers, were relegated to secondary status as supporters—making food, taking care of children, and leading food bank efforts during the strike. These varied contributions and important forms of labor performed by women, who I claim were crucial to the success of Honduras's 1954 strike, must be recognized and restored to labor histories and memory. The work of Levenson-Estrada and others suggest ways to do so.

Writing about Honduras, I have been challenged to consider how best to conceptualize the intersections of gender, class, and ethno-racial constructions in this particular time and place. Existing scholarship on the banana industry in Central America, such as the work of Lara Putnam and Aviva Chomsky in Costa Rica, has sought to chart these intersections between gender, class, and race in other contexts.³² In this work, I found myself coming back time and again to consider three factors that stood out as themes in workers' lives and social structure of the North Coast: masculinity, *mestizaje*, and working class identity. These were recurring concepts throughout the interviews I conducted with former workers, just as they do in existing narratives and histories of the period. Indeed, they were promoted as a part of a dominant/nation-building project. At the same time, these dominant themes by themselves felt inadequate to explain the actual lives and the unfolding of events in the period. Rather, this dissertation suggests that the undeniably male, *mestizo* character of the North Coast working class was only a part of the picture. This identity only existed because it was in dialogue with the "other" (i.e., Garifuna workers, other black workers, women workers) and was only powerful because of these others. The dissertation further suggests that the context and events of the North Coast can only be understood

³² Putnam, *The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica, 1870-1960* ; Aviva Chomsky, *West Indian Workers and the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica, 1870-1940* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

with an appreciation of the ways in which these identities collided. Ultimately, the culture and history of the North Coast, including the strike, must be understood as a result of the very complex negotiation of these different identities and actors in a dynamic environment. Thus, readers will note in the following chapters a recurrence of these dominant themes, as my sources and interviewees made fairly consistent reference to these ideas, which were required in the analysis, presenting male, *mestizo finca* workers at the center of most narratives.

Masculinity was a valued quality in male workers in the banana fields of the 1940s and 1950s, defined by an ability to endure extreme physical hardship in work and life, and to remain productive despite insalubrious conditions in order to fulfill the role of provider to a wife, children, or parents (even if these family members were not in the North Coast). Men defined as masculine their strength, skills, and knowledge of the work in the banana fields. Life in the *campos* was often fierce and physically brutal, but male workers also shared camaraderie through work and social time. When the labor organizing began in 1945-6, the men's perception of masculinity became intertwined with the notion and practice of making demands for improvements in the workplace. Masculinity was tied first to survival in a harsh environment in the *campos* and then to fair treatment and respect as workers.

The concept of masculinity was also informed by interactions with the local company towns, the Honduran store and brothel owners, whose enterprises relied on the banana workers' wages. Masculinity was identified with the narrative of "productive worker;" he who had money and was paid was seen as a *campeño*. Company town locals often derogatorily called banana workers *manchados* (stained ones), a slur used to denote their low and working class status. Workers wore shirts of *manta* (white cotton) which were stained by the tar released by the banana stems.³³ Workers preferred

³³ *Manta* was a common cloth used in *campesino* clothes and has been associated with indigenous, *campesinos* and the poorest communities in Honduras and other parts of Central America.

to be referred to as *campeño*, which reflected their life in the *campos*, and rejected the term *manchado*, which only defined them as subservient to the company and its policies. While work defined them, subservience to the Companies did not.

Mestizaje in Honduras

Even though descendants of afro-Hispanic origins have had a presence in Honduras since the colonial period and have been founders of many important North Coast towns, workers refer to themselves as *indios*.³⁴ *Indio* is used to denote that they are *mestizos*, without acknowledging indigeneity, African roots, or black identity, rather claiming an imagined indo-Hispanic background. The conflation of race and nationality by banana workers proved useful for them in finding work in a hierarchical company system. Furthermore, the Carías Andino regime policed difference and race in immigration. This xenophobia was felt so intensely that even in the negotiations with the company during the strike a clause was added requiring that work first be offered to Hondurans.³⁵ The practice of explicitly keeping out black populations surfaced in the Tela Railroad Company.³⁶ For male *finca* workers, being Honduran and *indio* meant the same thing; it was understood by workers and company supervisors that this group would receive priority in hiring.

By the 1940s, there was a system and understanding in place that was clear for workers, both men and women. Survival was easier for workers who identified as *indio*, or Honduran, a definition that devalued immigrants and black workers, both men and women. The *mestizo* identity became a currency that eased life within the enclave and

³⁴ Euraque, *Conversaciones Historicas Con el Mestizaje y su Identidad Nacional en Honduras*, 174-177. Marvin Barahona, *Evolución Histórica de la Identidad Nacional* (Tegucigalpa: Editorial Guaymuras, 2002), 114-117.

³⁵ "Observaciones del Comité Central de Huelga al Plan Propuesto por la Honorable Comisión Mediadora." Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." Reporte de la Comisión Mediadora. San Pedro Sula, 25 de Junio 1954. Documento del Archivo Privado del Dr. Mario Posas (APMP).

³⁶ Echeverri-Gent, "Forgotten Workers: British West Indians and the Early Days of the Banana Industry in Costa Rica and Honduras," 301.

invited participation in the organizing work of building the union and the nation. It enabled access to work, and also made *mestizo* workers visible in the company hierarchy. The story of the labor movement has then been naturally thought of as a story of *mestizo* men.

Race and racial identity are complicated issues that are just beginning to be explored in Honduras. A few complex questions require further study and analysis: how are individuals' self-identities related to the ways they are perceived?; how did and do Hondurans understand racial difference?; what are the historical roots of racism in Honduras?. Workers talked consistently about their own identities as *indio*, but seemed to resist explicitly talking about racism, perhaps reflecting the dominance of *Mestizaje*.

Working Class Identity

Most workers claimed an identity as *campesños*, *finca* workers employed by the banana companies in the plantations. These were the coveted and respected jobs which drew workers to the North Coast to become a part of the formal export economy created by the banana industry. Agricultural workers were and are seen as the prominent and central figures of the North Coast community. The term "workers" meant banana *finca* workers. Others, such as independent women workers, dock workers, townspeople, and any other workers who were not connected to the company were essentially marginalized, no matter what their role or contribution to the culture and community. This is particularly striking in the case of women workers who were an integral part of the sustenance of the primary workforce through a robust informal economy, but generally were not considered in the realm of banana workers.

Again, I would like to emphasize that while male *mestizo finca* workers are traditionally positioned at the center of the North Coast community and social structure, this dissertation suggests, in fact, that the history and events of the North Coast were the result of the tensions and dialectical engagement between the dominant group (i.e.,

mestizo finca workers) and other groups. It was the very negotiation between these that made the North Coast such a dynamic place, one in which the 1954 strike was possible.

Oral History, Working People's Lives and the Archives

This dissertation is informed by the memories of male and female workers who lived and worked in the North Coast and participated in the 1954 strike. I conducted in-depth interviews to gather an oral history of over 100 workers who shared details—sometimes intimate—about their lives and the social conditions of the North Coast in the 1940s and 1950s. The interviews also provided opportunities for these men and women to reflect on power, politics, and their role in the creation of the labor movement. In the process of telling their stories, workers articulated and constructed narratives and meanings about the strike, the North Coast, their work for the company and in the *campos*, and their daily lives during this period. As a group, the interviews suggested certain recurring themes that guided my thinking. Another source of information came from conversations with local organizations and Honduran scholars who gave time and energy to answer my sometimes difficult questions and to ask their own of me in turn.³⁷

My reliance, though not exclusive, on these oral sources requires an interrogation both of why these are appropriate, even necessary, sources for the recovery of this history and of the value and challenges of this approach. In constructing this history of the *finca* workers of the North Coast of Honduras, I have also reflected on the use of oral history as a method for this work. First, I would like to position oral history vis-à-vis the *Testimonio* (literally, "testimony") literature of Central America. Second, I want to think of the construction of history from oral histories as a departure,

³⁷ Marvin Barahona, Mario Posas, Iris Munguía, and Ingris Soriano spent significant amounts of time with me discussing the North Coast, the labor movement, the railroad system, and life in the banana company towns and *fincas*.

in some ways, from *Testimonio* literature. Third, I would like to reflect on the role of memory and to consider the ways in which this method is imprecise yet valuable at the same time.

The practice of oral history is crucial to the rescue of the historical record for Honduras and Central America, particularly for the twentieth century. Central American history and in particular Honduran history suffers from many holes in the historical record, especially when it comes to the story of the working class, women, and ethno-racial minorities. Oral histories supplement poor archives and scanty historical records.

Archival collections in Honduras are incomplete, and funding is limited for their conservation. The surviving documents are kept by the state in the capital, Tegucigalpa, and in various municipalities where authorities have prioritized work on the conservation of colonial records. Many of the early twentieth century documents are suffering from deterioration and are in need of rescue and conservation. Others simply no longer exist.

The process of rescue and conservation itself presented a challenge to my research. The judicial records I consulted in San Pedro Sula at the *Poder Judicial de Honduras, Centro de Documentación e Información de Justicia* (Judicial Authority of Honduras, Center of Documentation and Information of Justice, or CEDIJ) were in the process of being cleaned, cataloged, and archived. Given the immediate needs of the court system, archivists were beginning with the most recent records and working their way back to earlier years. The period of this study, the mid twentieth century, falls outside of the prioritized conservation efforts in Honduras, between the rescue of colonial and nineteenth century records and the contemporary or near-contemporary records. Most of the records I reviewed while at the CEDIJ archive were stored at random. I sorted through documents, finding only an occasional piece related to my period and topic. Still some records found at the CEDIJ were useful in documenting workers' lives, the discussion of alcohol and violence, the reliance on the train, and life

in the North Coast. Company records on workers were available neither in the U.S. nor in Honduras, where my requests were never attended and I often did not get past the reception desk at company headquarters.³⁸

My project focuses on workers and labor organizing during an era when the persecution of labor leaders and Communist Party leaders was commonplace. This has proved detrimental to retention of a complete record of clandestine newspapers and leaflets.³⁹ For instance, very little can be gleaned from Honduran archives about the important labor leader and Communist party founder Manuel Calix Herrera. Most of what we know has come from U.S. state department records or the recovery work of Philippe Bourgois with United Fruit Company records in Costa Rica.⁴⁰ In the CEDIJ archives two habeas corpus petitions were found demanding due process in the case of Calix Herrera, who in 1929 was arrested for protesting at the United States Consulate in the North Coast against U.S. anti-communist policies. Perhaps in the process of conservation and cataloguing more cases like this may surface, helping to piece together a lost history. Other archival holdings that could have informed the workers' perspective on this project have been destroyed by hurricanes and other natural disasters, including Hurricane Mitch in 1998.⁴¹

Finally, the largest preoccupation of archivists in Honduras is the lack of funding, equipment, and training for the processes of conservation. During my research, unfortunately, a common sight in any archive was a room full of papers, folders, and newspapers haphazardly stored, stacked, and not catalogued. Consulting such records

³⁸I attempted to contact Dole in the United States and Honduras and Chiquita Bananas. Both efforts were futile.

³⁹Pieces of these newspapers and leaflets can occasionally be found at the U.S. state department records in the United States National Archives in College Park, Maryland (NARA).

⁴⁰Philippe Bourgois, "One Hundred Years of United Fruit Company Letters," in *Banana Wars Power, Production, and History in the Americas*, ed. Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 138-140.

⁴¹Hurricane Mitch struck Honduras in 1998, flooding most of the North Coast territory for days. The SITRATERCO union lost most of its files and archives because the entire first floor was flooded. People I consulted for their private papers also reported losing newspapers and other records to flooding in their homes.

involved rolling up my sleeves to help clean, file, and/or at the very least put documents in a box—all the while consulting them for my own work.⁴² All of these ongoing archival challenges conspire to limit the available historical record for labor history in Honduras. It became crucial to collect oral histories and use them as primary sources in piecing together a picture of life in the North Coast and a worker history of the 1954 strike.⁴³ Oral histories are a recognized source, but debates exist in the field of history particularly about the imprecision of memory and the inequalities inherent in the gathering process.⁴⁴ Even as they provide an intimate portrait of events otherwise silenced or absent from the archival record—and present voices that may challenge dominant narratives—oral histories also raise questions about the construction of memory, who's speaking and for whom, relationships and power dynamics between interviewer and interviewee.⁴⁵ This "oral archive" of histories embodied in workers was imprecise and methodologically challenging.

Oral history within an oral historical practice

First and foremost, oral history collection in Honduras must be situated within the larger context of the Central American oral tradition and especially the history of *Testimonio* literature.⁴⁶ In Central America, *Testimonio* arises from an existing oral

⁴² I found archives in this condition in San Pedro Sula, Tegucigalpa, and Olanchito. The task of conservation and preservation in Honduras is gargantuan. The best efforts at the time were the work of both the CEDIJ and the *Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia* (Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History-IHAH).

⁴³ Oral history gathering is the process by which a historian uses the method of conducting in-depth interviews of people in order to record their personal history and memories. Susan H. Armitage, Patricia Hart and Karen Weathermon, ed. *Women's Oral History the Frontiers Reader* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), ix.

⁴⁴ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 1-2, 26, 31.

⁴⁵ Daniel James, *Doña María's Story Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 123-124.

⁴⁶ Ana Patricia Rodríguez notes that in El Salvador the prolific testimonial literature in the 1980s was important for Salvadorans' voices during the civil war, to "speak strategically and critically about power, although often under the threat of punishment and the cloak of secrecy." Ana Patricia Rodríguez, *Dividing the Isthmus Central American Transnational Histories Literatures & Cultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 79.

tradition, a history of labor and land struggles, and the urgency of articulating the demands central to these struggles. It has been an intentional collaboration among middle class and literate working class poets, writers, artists, and journalists working with people who want to retell an experience of coming together at a particular time and place determined by urgency and hope of survival. John Beverley, who has offered the most comprehensive definition of *Testimonio*, states:

By Testimonio I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a "life" or a significant life experience. Testimonio may include, but is not subsumed under, any of the following textual categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature, others not: autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, novella Testimonio, nonfiction novel, or "factographic" literature.⁴⁷

Beverley provides a succinct way to look at *Testimonio* but refuses to confine it as an established form of literature; rather, he sees it as a genre that exists at the crossroads of various disciplines.⁴⁸ The rise of *Testimonio* literature in Central America is political in nature and intimately attached to upholding the human and civil rights of the narrator and/or of a particular group. *Testimonio*'s propulsion into the international arena is commonly attributed to two significant events: the creation of a prize for the category of *Testimonio* by Cuba's famous publisher Casa de Las Americas, and the positive reception of both Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón*.⁴⁹ In Beverley's opinion, *Testimonios* drew on the idea of "direct participant

⁴⁷ John Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio (Testimonial Narrative)," *Modern Fiction Studies* 35, no. 1 (1989), 13.

⁴⁸ Beverly, John and Marc Zimmerman. *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*. (Austin: University of Texas, 1990), 173.

⁴⁹ Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio (Testimonial Narrative)," 13-14; Dora Schwarzstein, "Oral History in Latin America," in *Oral History an Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (Walnut Creek and London: Altamira Press, 1996), 420.

observation." Works such as Ernesto Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* "inspired in Cuba a series of direct participant *Testimonios* by combatants in the 26 of July Movement."⁵⁰ *Testimonio* highlighted the role of the women who participated in the armed struggle and in the later development of Cuba. Works such as Margaret Randall's testimonial compilation of women's experiences in *Cuban Women Now* were influenced by the oral history tradition of second wave feminists in the United States.⁵¹ Randall's work came at the behest of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista Front for National Liberation, FSLN), which asked her to conduct oral history workshops in Nicaragua—capitalizing on an oral tradition and a history of labor and land struggles—to bring international attention to the genre and thereby to the stories of so many working poor long ignored by political historians, literary canons, and the international community in general. These movements themselves promoted the genre, forming a dialogical relationship between literature of resistance and the articulation of politics. For the FSLN, the collaboration with Margaret Randall, was a way to document its struggles but also advance its goals of mass mobilization and *concientización*.⁵² *Testimonio* is rooted within a historical practice—which places texts like *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (Guatemala), *Sandino's Daughters* (Nicaragua) *Don't Be Afraid, Gringo* (Honduras), as well as earlier works such as *Porque quiero seguir viviendo...habla Graciela García* and *Páginas de lucha* (Honduras), within a

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Influenced by United States trends in oral history gathering, other Latin American countries such as Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, Costa Rica, and Ecuador undertook efforts in the 1970s to collect oral histories. Schwarzstein, "Oral History in Latin America," 413.

⁵² Margaret Randall, "Testimonios: A Guide to Oral History," (Toronto, Canada: The Participatory Research Group, 1985). This document was developed in workshops with Sandinistas and future *brigadistas* (literacy brigade workers) in literacy campaigns. It functions as a sort of primary document in that it was developed collectively and was used as a manual by many *brigadistas* who collected many oral histories as they worked on literacy campaigns in the countryside. See: Beverley, John and Marc Zimmerman. *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*. (Austin: University of Texas, 1990); Linda J. Craft, *Novels of Testimony and Resistance from Central America* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997); Also Latin American Perspectives Journal dedicated two Volumes to *Testimony: Voice of the Voiceless in Testimonial Literature Part I and Part II* can be found in Vol. 18: No.3 and No.4.

continuum that is constantly redefining and challenging the historical moment and the master narratives.⁵³

The question of veracity (i.e., "Is it true?") and audience (i.e., "To whom is this document speaking?") of *Testimonios* is a point of contention among North American scholars. When David Stoll, a North American scholar, challenged the veracity of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* by engaging in a fact-finding mission on the life events Rigoberta Menchú Tum described in her narrative, the ensuing international controversy was linked to the struggle for human rights and indigenous rights in Guatemala.⁵⁴ Stoll's work was perceived as an attack on the struggle for justice in Guatemala. Authors such as John Beverley, Arturo Arias, and Lourdes Martínez Echazábal, among others, defended the genre, concluding that the importance of Menchú Tum's contribution is her reliance on the collective memory of the Mayan Quiche people during the civil war period.⁵⁵ Menchú Tum, they claimed, speaks for and from within a collective, a communal practice for Mayas. The academic debate that ensued over the role of truth in testimony precipitated attempts to define and question *Testimonio* as a genre committed to the struggles out of which the protagonists/narrators emerged.⁵⁶ The discussion proved fruitful and the debate over the primacy of "truth" and "scientific fact" in collective memory remains ongoing.⁵⁷

⁵³Rigoberta Menchú Tum and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, ed. *I, Rigoberta Menchú Tum an Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London & New York: Verso, 1984); Margaret Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995); Medea Benjamin, *Don't Be Afraid, Gringo a Honduran Woman Speaks from the Heart* (Harper Perennial, 1987); Rina Villars, *Porque Quiero Seguir Viviendo...Habla Graciela Garcia* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 1991).

⁵⁴Rigoberta Menchú Tum and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, ed. *I, Rigoberta Menchú Tum an Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London & New York: Verso, 1984); David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997).

⁵⁵Rodríguez, *Dividing the Isthmus Central American Transnational Histories Literatures & Cultures* 117.; Arturo Arias, ed. *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

⁵⁶ See Latin American Perspectives two volumes entitled *Testimony: Voice of the Voiceless in Testimonial Literature Part I and Part II* can be found in Vol. 18: No.3.and No.4. Also see: Arias, ed. *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*.

⁵⁷ Rodríguez, *Dividing the Isthmus Central American Transnational Histories Literatures & Cultures*, 117.

Oral traditions inform both *Testimonio* literature and oral history, and these genres share methods and tools of the trade, but there are points of departure as well as convergence. Both *Testimonio* and oral history gathering, in the context of Honduras and Central America, are rooted in the effort to uncover a historical memory, privileging the voice of a sector of the population or a particular group that has been omitted by the "official" history and historical record. They are also rooted in the oral tradition, congruent with the cultural and political history of the alienated groups. Like *Testimonio*, oral history gathering in Honduras faces some challenges when considered as part of the historical record. In the context of Honduras, oral histories are testimonials of survival, but they differ from the literature of *Testimonio* in certain key places. While *Testimonios* have a preoccupation with political and social conditions, they are contemporary, often using the present conditions and struggles as the point of departure for the past. Oral histories document the past, as remembered by the narrators.

Contemporary historians' use of oral histories gathered from workers has been influenced by the literary tradition of the social realist novels set in the banana regions of Central America. Many of these books were the work of authors deeply committed to the working classes, who strove in their fiction to make connections between the living conditions of banana workers and a national reality.⁵⁸ Many also labeled the foreign owned companies as the culprit for the ills of the working class, favoring a story from below and inside. As Ana Patricia Rodríguez explains, "Banana social literature concerns itself with the extreme exploitation of laborers on the banana plantation"; the "U.S. 'gringo' characters in banana social realist literature are represented as villainous corporate heads, enclave foremen, plantation expatriates, and unscrupulous

⁵⁸ Examples are Ramon Amaya Amador, *Prisión Verde* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Universitaria, 1987); Carlos L. Fallas, *Mamita Yunai: El Infierno de las Bananeras* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Platina, 1956). For an analysis of this genre see: Rodríguez, *Dividing the Isthmus Central American Transnational Histories Literatures & Cultures*, 44-75.

adventurers."⁵⁹ Novels such as Ramón Amaya Amador's *Prisión verde*, and Carlos Fallas's *Mamita Yunai*, both with testimonial qualities, were written to tell the story from the point of view of the workers.⁶⁰ In these novels, banana agricultural workers are the protagonists and the writers themselves are former workers or organizers. The novels' overtly political context explained the power relations to the reader and functioned as a 'counter discourse' among other movements of the time.⁶¹ These works are differentiated from Miguel Asturias's *Men of Maize*—a novel *about*, not from within, the working poor and indigenous in Guatemala.⁶² The value of these works, which seem a bit dry, less stylized, and perhaps overly driven by a political message, is perhaps in that their largest readership was among the working classes involved in popular movements. Written for them and perhaps retold in oral form back to working people, these books present an interesting subversion to a canon of accepted literary works. Almost every worker I interviewed remembered and identified with the narrative of work and life in the North Coast as told in the story of *Prisión Verde*, the newspapers *Vanguardia Revolucionaria*, *Voz Obrera*, and the infamous "*La Carta Rolston*," which was published in *Vanguardia Revolucionaria* in 1949.⁶³

Orality and the oral tradition is important in Honduras, first because the elite and the banana companies have dominated the official record, and second, because schooling and literacy are twentieth century phenomena that had not reached most

⁵⁹ Rodríguez, *Dividing the Isthmus Central American Transnational Histories Literatures & Cultures*, 54, 55.

⁶⁰ Amaya Amador, *Prisión Verde*; Fallas, *Mamita Yunai: El Infierno de las Bananeras*.

⁶¹ Rodríguez, *Dividing the Isthmus Central American Transnational Histories Literatures & Cultures*, 46.

⁶² Miguel Angel Asturias, *Men of Maize*, trans. Gerald Martin (Pittsburgh and London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993).

⁶³ Dario Euraque's research has revealed that the *The Rolston Letter* may have been produced in 1940 and not in the 1920s and, as his research states, was produced for a 1940s audience and not reflective of the period of the 1920s. This piece may have been useful in mobilizing workers in the 1940s. Workers' own testimonies mention this letter as an example of company oppression. Because it was important in worker memories I mention it here. On the letter's veracity see: Euraque, *Conversaciones Historicas Con el Mestizaje y su Identidad Nacional en Honduras*, 112-115. For a copy of the letter see Richard Lapper & James Painter, *Honduras State for Sale*, ed. Latin American Bureau (London: Latin American Bureau, 1985), 23-24.

working peoples of Honduras. *Testimonio* is still practiced in Honduras today.

Examples include such lesser known works as Agapito Robleda's memoirs of the 1954 strike in *La verdad de la huelga de 1954 y de la formación del SITRATERCO*, and Mario Benítez's account of his life in the North Coast in *Nicómedes en los bananales y las tierras de Tío Sam*.⁶⁴

Oral history and its use as a primary source differs quite significantly from *Testimonio* literature. In *Testimonio*, as argued by John Beverly and others, the narrator can be the speaker and eye witness for a community or group, thereby speaking for the collective memory of a people. Oral history, as primary record, relies on a collection of memories from various narrators. It is a process of constructing a collective memory from individual memories of past events; it is an analysis of not merely what is said but rather the meanings and symbols constructed by people's own memories.⁶⁵ Oral histories written by scholars such as Marvin Barahona, Cindy Forster, Daniel James, Steve Stern and Jeffrey Gould rely on contested sources, yet these sources are crucial, as they, in Roque Ramirez's words, "can produce political texts able to question institutions, and make public records of stories not privileged in dominant narratives."⁶⁶ This is certainly a necessity in the history of Central America, where civil war, U.S. intervention, and military governments have not valued archival sources or prioritized their maintenance, but rather have often sought to destroy the historical record.⁶⁷

⁶⁴Agapito Robleda Castro, *La Verdad de la Huelga de 1954 y de la Formación del Sitraterco* (San Pedro Sula, Honduras: Impresora Litográfica San Felipe de Jesús S. de R. L., 1995).; Mario Benitez, *Nicomedes en los Bananales y las Tierras del Tío Sam* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guyamuras, 1991).

⁶⁵Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, 1-2.

⁶⁶Horacio N. Roque Ramirez, "A Living Archive of Desire Teresita La Campesina and the Embodiment of Queer Latino Community Histories," in *Archive Stories Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 119.; Cindy Forster, *The Time of Freedom Campesino Workers in Guatemala's October Revolution* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001); Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Lead as Equals Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).; James, *Doña María's Story Life History, Memory, and Political Identity*.; Steve J. Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile on the Eve of London 1998 Book One of the Trilogy: The Memory Box of Pinochet's Chile* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁶⁷James, *Doña María's Story Life History, Memory, and Political Identity*, 126.

Honduran historian Marvin Barahona provides examples of the use of oral histories as primary records. In *El silencio quedó atrás: testimonio de la huelga bananera de 1954*, which draws on (but keeps separate) both archival materials and oral history gathered from the surviving members of the 1954 strike committee, Barahona tells the story of the strike and the political persecution of its leaders. His subsequent book, *Memorias de un comunista Rigoberto Padilla Rush*, also draws on the oral tradition, recounting the life history of one individual, Rigoberto Padilla Rush, a founder of the Communist Party in 1954.⁶⁸ Here he interweaves both archival and oral sources in a dynamic story of a political movement told through the eyes of participant Padilla Rush.

The collection of oral histories allows not only for the corroboration of events by multiple narrators, but also a scrutiny of memory. An individual's collection of remembrances and the dialogue among various individuals' remembrances make for a 'meaty' narrative that allows historians to tell a fuller story and give more information about history than previously available. Oral history collection also challenges the historian to evaluate a collective memory—how an individual worker sees himself/herself within the aggregate of workers and how collective beliefs are formed to represent a period of great strife. For this study, the collection of oral history was perhaps the best way to capture everyday workers' memories and accounts of their roles, and not just those of union leadership or party leaders. Also, oral history collection was perhaps the only way to uncover the hidden history of gender relationships and women's work in the North Coast. While judicial records document the presence of women in the region, oral histories revealed the nuanced world of women workers.

Oral history as a primary source has been contested, primarily on the challenges of verifying the memories of narrators. Alessandro Portelli's book *The Death of Luigi*

⁶⁸ The Communist Party was officially founded in 1954, but it is believed that a Communist Party was founded in 1929, but did not survive the Carias Andino dictatorship.

Trastulli explores the gathering of oral history in Tierni, Italy and Harlan, Kentucky, providing insights into the phenomena of working class collective memory.⁶⁹ For Portelli, what makes oral history different from other primary sources is that "memory is not a passive repository of facts but an active process of creation of meanings."⁷⁰ Historians learn, not only from the collection of facts, but also from the "narrators' effort to make sense of the past and to give a form to their lives, and set the interview and the narrative in their historical context."⁷¹ In his research in Tierni, Italy, Portelli came across the story of the most-remembered event for the workers of Tierni: the death during a political protest in 1949 of a worker named Luigi Trastulli.⁷² It is *how* this event was remembered and the stories that workers told Portelli that are of use, as is the case for the history of workers in Honduras. First of all, in Tierni, there were police reports and newspapers accounts, based on oral testimony that revealed competing narratives as to what happened and how it happened. These "strategies of official memory" are based on oral sources that are taken for hard fact when effectively they are just as faulty—if not more so—than the workers' memories.⁷³ Portelli discovers that the movement leaders were very precise about dates and focused on large national issues connected to the political party rather than workplace issues. Rank and file testimonies departed from these larger claims and were much more spontaneous, colorful and even if imprecise, reflecting a collective memory of the death of Trastulli and conflating it with another important event that affected the workers—massive layoffs in 1953.⁷⁴ In his search for the root of this conflation, Portelli explains:

⁶⁹ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 2-7.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

The causes of this collective error must be sought, rather than in the event itself, in the meaning which it derived from the actors' state of mind at the time; from its relation to subsequent historical developments; and from the activity of memory and the imagination.⁷⁵

Portelli interrogates this event to uncover the ways in which people remember, how they reorganize chronology to fit a collective memory of a symbolic event, and how the narrator places events and experiences in time and context in the larger collective memory—one that avoids defeat and demonstrates collective power. Portelli determines that memory "manipulates factual details" in three modes: 1) symbolic, where an event comes to represent another event in the working class experience; 2) psychological, which allows the narrator to find healing; and 3) formal, where the oral histories shift the story to accommodate for time and space. Using this framework in thinking about the 1954 strike in the North Coast we can deduce the following: for the workers of the North Coast, the 1954 Strike in the North Coast has been the single most important event in the twentieth century. For average workers who lived and endured it, the strike was transformative and became etched in their memories perhaps in different ways than it was for organizers or activists. Workers who endured the 69 days striking against the Tela Railroad Company (11 days for those striking at the Standard Fruit Company plantations) remember the strike as a time of strife and suffering.

Initially there was excitement among workers, both men and women, when talking about the large number of workers on strike. The sheer excitement quickly gave way to memories of suffering and hunger when the company refused to cooperate. In the first days of the strike the workers were receiving donations of food and cattle from local Honduran merchants in company towns and San Pedro Sula. Toward the end of the strike, in the last weeks, workers waited in long lines to receive rations of boiled green bananas first with beans, and then later just boiled green bananas on banana

⁷⁵ Ibid., 15.

leaves, with coffee. In the early days of the strike, some male workers purchased food from *patronas* nearby, but toward the end they also ran out of money. This strife and sacrifice resulted in major changes in their wages and ultimately company policies. Workers won rights that had never before experienced and everything in the *fincas* changed. In the 'emblematic' narrative of the strike, the narrative is one of suffering and strife and change.⁷⁶ Rank-and-file workers and *patronas* remarked on the mass numbers of people who participated in the strike, how they slept outside, hanging from their *hamacas* (hammocks) in the Ramon Rosa Park (El Progreso) or Campo Chula Vista (La Lima). This narrative is the "symbolic" memory manipulation Portelli raises. This is the central theme in the memory of the strike for the everyday worker; it is part of the lore of the North Coast.

For strike organizers and PDRH leaders such as Juan B. Canales, Teresina Rossi Matamoros, Julio Rivera, and local *finsa* organizers such as Daniel Madrid Guevara, Agapito Robleda Castro, and Sylvia Robleda—as well as others within the union movement—their memories are of strife and struggle, fear and repression, but ultimately of wonder that they were able to pull off such a well-organized strike, which successfully changed their lives and Honduras. In their interviews, they were concerned with setting the record straight about the work that was done to build the movement of workers, the effort to get them out to strike, and the effort to sustain the first central strike committee as an independent entity.⁷⁷ They remark on how well workers observed the rules imposed by the central strike committee, that they did not drink or engage in violence, how the vigilance committee maintained the peace and kept workers out of the workplace making the strike a success.

⁷⁶ I take the notion of 'emblematic history' from Steve Sterns' discussion of post-dictatorship Chile and refer "not to a single remembrance of a specific content, not to a concrete or substantive 'thing,' but to a framework that organizes meaning, selectivity, and counter-memory." Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile on the Eve of London 1998 Book One of the Trilogy: The Memory Box of Pinochet's Chile*, 105.

⁷⁷ The first central strike committee was persecuted and incarcerated, accused of being Communists. The second strike committee was formed and negotiated for workers. Many workers did not know the internal details of this change, except for those close to the leadership or those who were organizers.

While these two sets of oral histories—those of the rank-and-file and those of the leadership and organizers—coincide on the event as monumental in their lives and for the North Coast, symbolically the strike represented different things to these two groups. People rationalized what happened differently according to their personal involvement, their role in the strike, and the violence they faced after the event. While rank and file workers not intimately connected to the leadership cadre may have gone back to work with some notable improvements in pay and company comportment, many of the leaders were persecuted, incarcerated or exiled, their role obscured from history.

The second point Portelli highlights in the manipulation of memory is the psychological aspect of workers' collective memory, which attempts to make sense of what happened and the differences "between the official motives of the protest and the initial motives of the workers that attended." This inconsistency in remembrances is evident in memories of the details of the organizing and leadership of the strike. Leaders of parties and strike committees shared a great deal about changes in who occupied the various leadership positions and how workers were led during the strike and in later days. Workers, on the other hand, conflated various entities and people and generally shared a relatively untainted and idyllic view of these details. Leaders' and organizers' interviews reflected an effort to deal with the complexities of these events but also an effort to set the record straight and challenge the emblematic narrative of the strike.⁷⁸

The last consideration Portelli offers in memory as history is what he calls *formal*, whereby a "horizontal shifting of the event endows it with an adequate time-marking function" upon which workers' memory hinges.⁷⁹ Important events and

⁷⁸ This is also the preoccupation of the narratives of oral histories collected by Marvin Barahona, also in Agapito Robleda's autobiography. Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*; Agapito Robleda Castro, *La Verdad de la Huelga de 1954 y de la Formacion del Sitratenco* (San Pedro Sula, Honduras: Impresora Litografica San Felipe de Jesus S. de R. L., 2008)

⁷⁹ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, 26.

memories become markers of time and chronology in peoples' memories--the moments that are vividly etched in people's minds and around which others are centered. In thinking about the 1954 strike in Honduras, all workers, including the PDRH organizers, arranged their memories, life stories, and narratives in two epochs—before the 1954 strike and after the strike. For instance, before the strike, work was inhumane and perilous; after the strike, conditions and wages improved. Gould found that in retelling the story of Nicaraguan *campesinos*, "the campesinos reconstructed their past by using two distinct sets of oppositions: before and after the agro-export boom and before and after the revolution."⁸⁰

As Portelli observes, it is not merely whether the recollections are fact or truth, but rather how the workers organize them, collectively, which tells us about not only the event but the tensions and negotiations within the event. Portelli reminds us:

The discrepancy between fact and memory ultimately enhances the value of the oral sources as historical documents. It is not caused by faulty recollections (some of the motifs and symbols found in oral narratives were already present in embryo in coeval written sources), but actively and creatively generated by memory and imagination in an effort to make sense of crucial events and of history in general.⁸¹

Without these narratives on the 1954 strike, sometimes contradictory ones, "we would know much less about it."⁸²

I conducted my oral history gathering effort using a snowball method. First I went to existing organizations, the unions (SITRATERCO, SUTRASFCO), non-profits such as *Coordinadora de Sindicatos Bananeros y Agroindustriales de Honduras* (Coordinator of Banana and Agro-Industrial Unions of Honduras), *Centro De Derechos de la Mujer* (Center of Women's Rights), *Comités de Jubilados* (Committee of Retirees)

⁸⁰ Gould, *To Lead as Equals Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979*, 10.

⁸¹ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, 26.

⁸² *Ibid.*

in La Lima and El Progreso, *Equipo de Reflexión e Investigación y Capacitación* (Team for Reflection, Investigation and Training), *Sociedad Jesuita* (Jesuit Society), as well as well-known scholars, such as Marvin Barahona and Mario Posas.⁸³ Once I introduced myself and my project, I was given some ideas of whom I might interview. Once I contacted or interviewed people, I asked them for other recommendations, people who might still be alive from that era. I also attended union meetings and convenings where I was able to gather names and addresses for potential interviewees. Sometimes I was able to find a place to sit and talk to the person; other times I made an appointment to visit them at home.

When I did make an appointment to visit their home I tried to set our appointments in between meal times; homes were poor, and I did not want to eat food that could have been for the interviewee's family. When they did offer food or drink I accepted gladly as is Honduran custom. When I knocked on workers' doors to ask if I could interview them about the strike and their lives, many said yes because they wanted to 'help me in my project.' Many of the workers did not interrupt their daily routine while they talked to me.

Olympia Figueroa, for instance, cooked an entire meal throughout our first interview, frying chicken and potatoes and cooking rice for her grandchildren's lunch. I interviewed Doña Lidia Aurora de Lezama on the last bus from El Progreso to her home in the *campo*, in the outlying regions in between El Progreso and Tela. We were interrupted periodically by the bus driver assistant asking us to pay our fee and by local acquaintances of Doña Lidia stopping to greet her. Interruptions were the norm during these interviews; daughters and sons wanted to share their stories, remembering how they originally learned them. Other interruptions were related to the work the

⁸³ Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Tela Railroad Company (SITRATERCO), Sindicato de la Standard Fruit Company (SUTRASFCO).

interviewees were doing, and for frequent pauses to have a drink, *un fresco*, to quench the thirst from the stale heat of the banana regions.

The interviews were long and emotionally charged. Our initial discussions were superficial, but courtesy and basic demographic questions eventually gave way to meaty and dense conversation. The stories my interlocutors told began with the usual local lore about the 1954 strike, recounted in general terms. Then our conversations went deep into their archived memories. Narrators lost track of what they were doing eventually, focusing more and more on the stories they were telling, stretching to remember dates but confident that the story they told was what they experienced. When I asked about something that they did not live or witness, they said they did not know.

The stories became more and more an act of "testifying," as Roque Ramirez observed in his work, "A Living Archive of Desire." Marginalized groups' "*testimonios* about their existence are critical acts of documentation" for them as much as for the recorder or historian.⁸⁴ In line with Daphne Patai's notes in her reflections on her fieldwork, most of the narrators that inform this dissertation *wanted* to speak to me; in fact, workers were eager to tell their stories and almost all chose to use their real names.⁸⁵ Workers told me their personal experiences as a form of proof that they had witnessed a great event. Many times they told their stories disjointedly and perhaps out of order, with distractions that took us through the more exciting parts first, leaving us to explore the rest of the details later, often with my prodding. Their testimonies, if one were to listen to them, may seem to be random conversations like any other, with no special narrative, starting point, or end. But careful scrutiny unveils the geography of memory logically attached to what they knew best: work and organizing for better wages.

⁸⁴Roque Ramirez, "A Living Archive of Desire Teresita La Campesina and the Embodiment of Queer Latino Community Histories," 112, 16.

⁸⁵ Daphne Patai, "U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?," in *Women's Words the Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 138.

These oral histories then surface as an important "living archive of evidence" that can be utilized to amplify the voices of the North Coast workers who may have fallen outside the margins of the official government, the elite and their official records.⁸⁶ Worker stories do not just fill in the blanks left by the absence of written records; instead, they actually shift the course of history-making and the interpretation of the archives that are in existence. As Roque Ramirez found in the story of Teresita, a transgender woman in San Francisco, the testimonies become "narratives of opposition," those that cannot be silenced and insist on being told.⁸⁷ As Roque Ramirez observed of his heroine, oral testimony became a "tool for telling history."⁸⁸ Maria Antonia Perla's oral testimony best exemplifies the need to construct history in this way, "Es la historia de mi vida...y mi hijos en el futuro, aunque no tenga [llevé] mi nombre, [la lean y] digan, se parece a la historia de mi mamá." (It is the story of my life...even if it does not bear my name, some day my children will [read it and say] it resembles my mother's story).⁸⁹

My exploration of workers' memories of the strike has contributed profoundly to my understanding of the strike, and this dissertation seeks to share what I found and what I believe banana workers wanted to share.

⁸⁶ Roque Ramirez, "A Living Archive of Desire Teresita La Campesina and the Embodiment of Queer Latino Community Histories," 113.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 120.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁸⁹ María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2006.

CHAPTER 2:
INTERSECTING PROJECTS, FOREIGN CAPITAL,
LIBERAL REFORMERS AND LABOR

This chapter provides an analysis of the principal actors and the power dynamics of the North Coast that set the stage for organizing among *finca* workers and the strike of 1954. The following paragraphs explore the importance of the North Coast of Honduras to liberal elites and U.S. investors and introduce the various stakeholders, their power, and influence in the North Coast, and the dynamic and evolving economic and political development in the region. The chapter also describes the origins of labor organizing among banana workers—who remain the most commonly overlooked yet important historical actors in the North Coast—and provides context for the years leading up to 1944-1957, when the working class of the North Coast challenged the Honduran elite and the banana companies' domination, ushering in nationwide political changes.

Traditional Honduran accounts of the North Coast have focused on the hegemony of the foreign banana companies while omitting the history of everyday workers in the construction of the labor movement and in the construction of a national identity. Drawing from historical analyses, this chapter explores the significance and evolution of the North Coast as a site where the projects of various interests and actors intersected. At one end of the spectrum, the interests of liberal reformers and the foreign investors converged in the North Coast to create conditions that were favorable to foreign-inspired agro-export development. At the other end of the spectrum, worker organizations, including the *Partido Democrático Revolucionario Hondureño* (PDRH) and Communist Party engaged in the construction of the labor movement. Between the two, small growers, elided by a government that favored big companies, found common

ground with agricultural, railroad, and port workers in the banana industry who sought to improve their working conditions.

By the 1940s, national political interests and the nascent labor movement were already responding to regional needs and poor labor conditions. In addition, organizers saw an opportunity to challenge the dictatorial rule of the Tiburcio Carías Andino regime (1933-1949) and the Nationalist Party, and to limit the hegemony of the foreign-owned banana companies. These new political dynamics created a space for the workers' movement during a time when, propelled by a 'modernizing' trend, politics shifted away from the traditional *caudillo* (regional strongman) in hopes of forming a new nation.¹ During this period, banana workers assumed an active role in national politics despite the efforts by foreign interests and conservative Honduran elites to marginalize them by favoring the companies. This chapter provides a sketch of the North Coast's evolution, in simple terms: from underdeveloped tropics, to U.S. frontier, to banana empire, to the nation's liberal dream, to contested political arena, and finally to the site and symbol of struggle for thousands of workers. Of course, the path was not linear; these projects overlapped and intersected. Together they provide the context for the strike of 1954.

Intersecting Projects

The attraction to the 735 square kilometers of coastal Caribbean lowlands has changed over time. The North Coast of Honduras has been the site of interest and negotiation among United States' investors, successive Honduran governments, national

¹Robert H. Holden's study of *caudillismo* in Central America, defines *caudillismo* as a "regional strong man rule, a feature of politics that persisted longer here than elsewhere in the continent." According to Holden's study of the literature, *caudillos* are "oligarchic dictators"; some of their defining features are "*personalism*, patronage and the use of violence...the post-1870 dictators worked in a more centralized environment and confronted more complex social forces." Robert H. Holden, "Constructing the Limits of State Violence in Central America: Towards a New Research Agenda," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 28, no. 2 (1996): 238 fn5.

elites, and migrant workers throughout the region. In the first half of the twentieth century, an emerging banana industry served as the main draw. *Poquiteros*—small producers, employing a handful of local workers—dominated banana production and sales to United States' owned schooners. By 1912, U.S. investors, businessmen, and Honduran elites had begun to transform the North Coast into a large banana export empire.² With easy access to Caribbean trade routes, in close proximity to the U.S. ports, the North Coast drew the attention of U.S. entrepreneurs, who traded with local banana producers to expand their profits by selling tropical fruits in the United States.

Following in the steps of their Guatemalan counterparts' attempts to seek national unity and reform, Hondurans liberal reformers also had plans for the North Coast. They saw the need for the construction of a railroad system that would end the region's isolation and integrate the country's disparate provinces. In the Honduran context, the liberal reformers expected that foreign investments would also instigate internal development and achieve the elusive goal of modernity.

This chapter's analysis of intersecting projects in the North Coast of Honduras at the turn of the century applies the approach of Ginetta Candelario in her study of the Dominican Republic during this same period. There, Candelario asserts, U.S. travel narratives framed social, economic, and political issues in such a way that U.S. interests overlapped with the interests of liberal reformers.³ She highlights the commonalities that reasonably existed between the economic and political liberal agenda in Latin America and emerging U.S. economic interests, thus minimizing opposition to foreign capital. Although tactics differed in each Central American country, U.S. foreign policy strategies were generally the same in each: to encourage economic expansion, open new markets, protect U.S. companies involved in tropical exports, and in the context of

² Charles David Kepner Jr., *Social Aspects of the Banana Industry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 54.

³ Ginetta E. B. Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 14, 36.

"unstable" governments, extract concessions that allowed lower labor and transportation costs.

The intersection of the projects of the U.S. economic expansionist agenda and the Honduran liberal dream during the early twentieth century enabled the development of the banana empire in the North Coast. The interplay of the various projects sets the context for understanding the relations between the Honduran state and labor. The need for an ample supply of workers to support the industry attracted significant labor migration both from other areas of Honduras as well as from other countries. Accompanying this worker migration was a rise in the number of merchants who set up shop in the North Coast. This migration of laborers forms the backdrop for the construction of the labor movement. With the population growth in the region, the experiences and struggles of banana workers became central to the discourse surrounding modernity and development in the North Coast as well as discussion of Honduran national identity.

Honduras in the U.S. Imagination

U.S. conceptions of 'the tropics' were useful in building and justifying the banana empire at the turn of the century. For U.S. private investors', portrayals of the North Coast as pristine, undeveloped, and available land justified the need to transform the territory into productive useful land. The U.S. travelers and the investors who read their accounts conceptualized Honduras as either a "primitive paradise" and "untapped and unclaimed wealth"⁴ or a dangerous and disease ridden, barbaric place. Central America and the banana fruit had entered the U.S. imagination long before the arrival of banana companies.⁵ The North Coast first caught the attention of U.S. business and

⁴ Ana Patricia Rodríguez, *Dividing the Isthmus Central American Transnational Histories Literatures & Cultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

political interests as a potential inter-oceanic route between the Caribbean and the Pacific in the 1850s, and subsequently as a potential investment for export companies in the 1880s. Portrayed as a potential trade route that would reduce distances between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans, the isthmus acquired notoriety. Ana Patricia Rodríguez's study of "transisthmian literature" asserts that

From the nineteenth century onward, the imperialist designs of the U.S. were played out in Central America through waves of military, economic, and political interventions and occupations.⁶

While U.S. and British investors vied for the inter-oceanic route in the 1850s, Central American nations were undergoing civil wars and political turmoil.⁷ The potential trade route attracted adventurers and transient entrepreneurs looking to make a quick fortune after the California Gold Rush and the failed exploits of westward expansion in the United States. The image of civil unrest on a barbaric frontier promoted the project of modernity through U.S. enlightenment, industry, and technology. Simultaneously, it justified the spread of the banana empire at whatever cost.⁸ The U.S. image of modernity coincided with that of local Honduran elites bent on propagating liberal economic and political reforms.

By the 1880s, descriptions of the people and terrain of Honduras prevalent in North American travel narratives were instrumental in creating a vision of the nation as a place ripe with 'unexplored' territory that could attract U.S. investments. The fact that

⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁷ The inter-oceanic canal and ideas of crossing the Central American have been around since the colonial period. Honduras was seen as a possible route by E.G. Squier, who in 1853 gained concessions from the Honduran government to begin this route. Huntington Library and Archives, Ephraim.G. Squier, *Honduras Interoceanic Railway: Preliminary Report* (New York : : Tubbs, Nesmith & Teall, 1854) Mario R. Argueta, *Bananos y Política: Samuel Zemurray y la Cuyamel Fruit Company en Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Universitaria, 1989) Rodríguez, *Dividing the Isthmus Central American Transnational Histories Literatures & Cultures*, 6, 9.

⁸ Alison Acker, *Honduras the Making of a Banana Republic* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 17.

Hondurans purportedly had not developed their own resources served as further justifications for U.S. presence. Travel narratives also justified the means by which the U.S. entered this territory and imposed poor labor conditions to combat the supposed inertia of local Hondurans.

Candelario's use of travel narratives in her study of Dominican race and ethnicity can also be applied to Honduras. Candelario states that the travel narratives about the Dominican Republic were a "geopolitically framed racial project of U.S. Imperialism that intersected unevenly but importantly with Dominican nation building projects through *anti-Haitianist* discourses and ideologies."⁹ The objective was to make the Dominican Republic more indo-hispanic, not black, making it more appealing to U.S. investors. Candelario makes the connection between U.S. "racial and imperialist" projects and the Dominican Republic liberal reformers, calling them "intersecting projects" that coincided in "uneven" ways.¹⁰

Analyzing the U.S. travel narratives about Honduras as "racial projects of U.S. imperialism" during the first half of the twentieth century, we see the existence of a similar ideological project that utilized the depictions of the languid "tropics" and its docile inhabitants to counteract fears about incidents of political instability and civil wars.¹¹ Such depictions in travel narratives served two purposes: they alerted U.S. investors to the possibility and feasibility of business investment and reinforced the elite's fear of the North Coast. These narratives intersected with the liberal elite's hopes for foreign investment that would kick-start the economic and political growth of the country.¹² The need for industry and development of these fertile lands, promoted in the travel narratives, also dovetailed with the ideals of liberal reformers of the period.

⁹ Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty* 14

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

¹¹ Candelario defines racial projects as "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines." *Ibid.* , 36.

¹² *Ibid.*

Honduran elites, who for the most part resided near the capital of Tegucigalpa, sought to profit by the development of industry and expected that the export economy of the North Coast would provide capital to industrialize the rest of the country.¹³ The travel narratives and U.S. travelers' portrayal of Honduras also functioned as important racial and ideological characterizations of the North Coast for the Honduran elite, who expected the export economy to not only develop the region economically but also culturally.

Ephraim George Squier, a New York businessman, was one of the first U.S. investors to write about Honduras. Squier had attempted to build an elaborate inter-oceanic route in Honduras between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans, devising an elaborate journey by land and water in 1854.¹⁴ Although Squier's proposal ultimately did not succeed, his vision helped to construct one of the earliest North American perceptions of Honduras.¹⁵ To promote his project he wrote persuasively in the 1850s about why Honduras would be an important location for an inter-oceanic canal. Honduras, he felt, “has artificial wants, and no winter to provide against or to interrupt [building] ...labors.”¹⁶ According to Alison Acker, Squier’s idealized descriptions of Honduras “led to a romantic tradition of viewing Honduras as a kind of Garden of Eden, with inhabitants as innocents.”¹⁷ His views of the people of Honduras as languid and

¹³ André-Marcel d'Ans, *Honduras Emergencia Dificil de una Nacion, de un Estado* (Paris: KARTHALA, 1997) 128-131, 144.; Leticia Oyuela, *Ramon Rosa Plenitudes y Desengaños* (Tegucigalpa: Editorial Guaymuras, 1994), 33.

¹⁴ d'Ans, *Honduras Emergencia Dificil de una Nacion, de un Estado*, 105-107

¹⁵ The first foreign investors to come to Honduras were the British mahogany companies in the 1840s and 1850s. Argueta, *Bananos y Politica: Samuel Zemurray y la Cuyamel Fruit Company en Honduras*, 10-11, 84-85; Robert McCameron, *Bananas Labor and Politics in Honduras: 1954-1963* (New York: Maxwell School of Citizenship, 1983), 8.; d'Ans, *Honduras Emergencia Dificil de una Nacion, de un Estado*, 105-107.

¹⁶ Squier, *Honduras Interoceanic Railway: Preliminary Report*.

¹⁷ Acker, *Honduras the Making of a Banana Republic*, 18-19.

“vacuous,” served to represent the “tropics” as open land ready for the taking by “industrious” and modern businessmen.¹⁸

The descriptions of Honduras found in travel narratives informed the views of North American travelers and investors. North Americans traveled south to the new-found “tropics,” many aboard the ships of the United Fruit Company, for adventure, to determine business possibilities, or to observe with fascination the efforts of U.S. companies extracting raw materials from the Honduran mines.¹⁹ The representation of this period is described by explorer Richard Harding Davis in his account of his adventures, *Three Gringos in Venezuela and Central America*.²⁰ Reports included a mesmerizing fascination with “the tropics” as a place of possibility, were it not for the “sleepiness” of its people, the lack of industry, and an unfortunate predisposition for war and revolution.²¹

Despite its wondrous depictions, Honduras still presented foreigners with many challenges. Richard Harding Davis claimed that Hondurans had a complete inability to understand republican government.²² Another writer, Frederick Upham Adams, cites political instability as the reason for the lack of exploitation of the “wonderful tropical resources” of the region.²³ Travel narratives in the early part of the twentieth century still depicted the North Coast as a dangerous and raw environment where malaria, yellow fever, and dysentery represented hazards to personal health.²⁴ Stephen Benz

¹⁸ Ibid., 19-20.

¹⁹ The United Fruit Company operated the White Fleet, ships painted white for visibility and noticeably distinguished from other Company ships. Phillip Cockrill, *United Fruit Company the History, Ships & Cancellations of the Great White Fleet*, Series Booklet No. 28 (Berkshire: Maritime Postmark Society, 1940); Frederick Upham Adams, *Conquest of the Tropics the Story of the Creative Enterprises Conducted by the United Fruit Company* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1914).

²⁰ Richard Harding Davis, *Three Gringos in Venezuela and Central America* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1896).

²¹ Ibid., 143.

²² Ibid., 143, 146.

²³ Upham Adams, *Conquest of the Tropics the Story of the Creative Enterprises Conducted by the United Fruit Company*, 9.

²⁴ Stacy May and Galo Plaza, *The United Fruit Company in Latin America*, ed. (Washington: National Planning Association Library of Congress, 1958), 8.; Kepner Jr., *Social Aspects of the Banana Industry*, 53; Charles Morrow Wilson, *Empire of Green and Gold the Story of the American Banana Trade* (New

suggests that the threats propagated in North American writings on Central America of potential exposure to the natural environmental hazards of "the tropics" allowed North Americans to retain a dominant position. "Tropicalization," he explains, is the process by which "the hidden axioms and assumptions of the 'temperate' North American culture have been tested in some way by exposure to a tropical environment, culture, and society."²⁵ Benz explains that the discourse of "perils" for whites was a warning of danger amidst an "apparently benign" environment, where the notion of frontier and tropic is not complete without the tragic disease: "Danger is so rampant that even the more peaceful aspects of the tropics conceal hazards, especially for gringo minds and souls."²⁶

Politically unstable governments and the threat of disease were major drawbacks to investing in Honduran territory, but investors believed U.S. ingenuity could conquer both. Modernity in "the tropics" was considered possible only by changing the terrain and incorporating "modern" practices brought by U.S. businessmen and steamship companies.²⁷ Davis and his friends, one of them an attaché to the U.S. Embassy in London, wondered about Honduran ingenuity in moving about these unnamed regions and untamed wild lands.²⁸ The country continued to be presented as backward, uncivilized, and therefore available for enterprising foreigners who could bring industrious elements that would make this land more productive:

There is no more interesting question of the present day than that of what is to be done with the world's land which is lying unimproved; whether

York: Henry Holt and Company, 1947), 4; Samuel Crowther, *The Romance and Rise of the American Tropics* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, INC., 1929), 246-247.

²⁵ Susana Chávez-Silverman and Frances Aparicio, ed. *Tropicalizations Transcultural Representations of Latinidad* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), 51.

²⁶ Stephen Benz, "Through the Tropical Looking Glass: The Motif of Resistance in U.S. Literature on Central America," in *Tropicalizations Transcultural Representations of Latinidad*, ed. Susana Chávez-Silverman and Frances Aparicio (Hanover: University Press of England, 1997), 55-56.

²⁷ John H. Melville, *The Great White Fleet* (New York: Vintage Press, 1976); Morrow Wilson, *Empire of Green and Gold the Story of the American Banana Trade*, 126-127.

²⁸ Davis, *Three Gringos in Venezuela and Central America*, 1-2; 73.

it shall go to the great power that is willing to turn it to account, or remain with its original owner, who fails to understand its value. The Central-Americans are like a gang of semi-barbarians in a beautifully furnished house, of which they can understand neither its possibilities of comfort nor its use. They are dogs in the manger among nations. Nature has given to their country great pasture-lands, wonderful forests of rare woods and fruits, treasures of silver and gold and iron, and soil rich enough to supply the world with coffee, and it only waits for the honest effort to make it the natural highways of traffic from every portion of the globe.²⁹

Even through 1947, perceptions of Honduras as a "tropic" had not changed significantly. The travel narrative writers presented a conflicted but ultimately attractive opportunity for enterprising people and companies.

Banana Agro-industry Enters North Coast

Through industry and hard work the banana companies tamed and transformed the North Coast. Marcelo Bucheli, who studies the United Fruit Company (UFCo) in Colombia, explains that, "In fashioning their 'banana empires' the fruit companies cleared jungles, filled in lowlands and swamps, and created population centers."³⁰ Similarly in Honduras, all activity around the banana industry concentrated in the northern region of the country. Another author, Charles Morrow Wilson, explains that the North Coast was also a testing ground for development and advances in a variety of research on disease and plant pathogens. The region was perfect despite its savagery for U.S. advances because of its constant and untamed condition of "tropic." He wrote in 1947:

But the Central American lowlands are today and will be tomorrow self perpetuating frontiers. The jungle is forever making forays into its

²⁹ Ibid., 147-148.

³⁰ Marcelo Bucheli, *Bananas and Business the United Fruit Company in Colombia, 1899-2000* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 14.

former possessions. Its growth is as inevitable as the death which lurks within its borders. Although it has lately become a proving ground for aviation, for socialized medicine, and for pathological research, the Central American jungle remains an eternal frontier.³¹

The frontier narrative of the North Coast justified U.S. development as a raw form of colonialism, without regard for its inhabitants. Furthermore, the uninhabited frontier was a crucial testing ground for the power of U.S. industry. Benz notes that

...in almost every text North Americans report an inclination, growing stronger with time, to reject the influence of both tropics and Central American culture, and to insist on Yankee virtues in the face of tropical decadence. For those unable to resist, degradation and demise are inevitable.³²

According to Benz, the imagined Honduras of travelers' writings "helped to deepen and harden the perceived distinctions between Yankee superiority and Central American inferiority."³³ If the earlier travel narratives described a country in need of industry, the later travel narratives—some of which were commissioned by UFCo—described the magnificent work of the U.S. companies upon the land. In both, the workers were either caricatures or invisible.

Edward Said's theory best describes these paradoxes where Orientalism is constructed by both the colonized and the colonizer, with obvious domination by the colonizer and western culture. Said applied in the context of Honduras, as the dominant culture "is able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively..."³⁴ The "tropics" have a

³¹ Morrow Wilson, *Empire of Green and Gold the Story of the American Banana Trade*, 6.

³² Benz, "Through the Tropical Looking Glass: The Motif of Resistance in U.S. Literature on Central America," 60.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 3, 1-28.

similar place in Western colonial imagination as the Orient in Said's study. North Americans came to "tame" the savage landscape of the jungle and the inhabitants, who were perceived to be inefficient, lazy, and unable to profit from their land. The natives' "inaction" granted the "civilized nation" passage to interfere and dominate.³⁵ But it was also the Honduran liberal reformers' notions of modernity and state reform that helped to create the conditions for the banana companies to construct their own elite narratives of "the tropics."

Foreign *Bananas*, and Liberal Reform

The U.S. businessmen who established companies in the North Coast and the investors who traveled there to purchase land in the 1890s acquired tremendous influence on the region. Two companies, the Cuyamel Fruit Company (Cuyamel) and the Vaccaro Brothers (Vaccaro), established in the North Coast, Honduras's economic heartland and wielded power over national political affairs. The companies negotiated unrelentingly with the Honduran government for access to land, control of labor, set import and export taxes, and their own railroads and ports.

Cuyamel and Vaccaro did not have a homogeneous agenda. As Marcelo Bucheli argues in his study of UFCo., there were certainly "complex internal dynamics" to each of the companies and their actions in Honduras.³⁶ In this early phase (1899-1910) each company sought to defend its own narrow interests, including access to land, products, and seaports. While the companies did not have a common agenda they all attempted to absorb Honduran land and acquire a competitive advantage, in the process beginning the displacement of *poquiteros*.

³⁵ Benz, "Through the Tropical Looking Glass: The Motif of Resistance in U.S. Literature on Central America," 56-61

³⁶ Bucheli, *Bananas and Business the United Fruit Company in Colombia, 1899-2000*, 187.

The merger of the Boston Fruit Company and the Tropical Trade and Transport in 1899 created the United Fruit Company. UFCo built a transnational business that was vertically integrated, including the domestic coordination of production, from the point of growing and cutting the product to the point of shipping and distribution in the United States. With its fleet of steamboats known as the White Fleet of the Caribbean, plantations throughout Central America and the Caribbean, and a distribution network in the United States, UFCo acquired unrivalled power.

Eventually UFCo's entrance into Honduras competed and clashed with Cuyamel and Vaccaro.³⁷ The rise of UFCo had an immediate impact in most of Central America, but the company did not expand into Honduras until 1911-12. Cuyamel owner Sam Zemurray, an investor from New Orleans, and a fierce competitor with UFCo's subsidiary, the Tela Railroad Company, had effectively established relationships with local elites and *caudillos*. By 1910-11, he had gained a foothold and some influence over President Manuel Bonilla to support his company. In 1923, Cuyamel merged with UFCo and Zemurray became their largest stockholder ending the rivalry between the Cuyamel and Tela Railroad Companies.

Unlike Zemurray, Vaccaro remained a competitor of the UFCo. Like most operators during this period, it relied on local planters to supply the bananas it exported.³⁸ Vaccaro eventually incorporated as the Standard Fruit Company and lobbied presidents in Tegucigalpa to support its operations. Despite their competition, the companies were aligned in seeking favorable government policies to benefit their businesses.³⁹

³⁷ The history of the Cuyamel Fruit Company and owner Sam Zemurray is subsumed in the overall company history of the United Fruit Company, but the merger between the two companies did not take place until 1923. Born in Kishinev, Bessarabia, Zemurray, a Jewish immigrant, arrived in the United States in 1892 and quickly became a banana reseller in New Orleans. Kepner Jr., *Social Aspects of the Banana Industry*, 54; Stephen J. Whitfield, "Strange Fruit: The Career of Samuel Zemurray," *American Jewish History* 73, no. 3 (1984) 309, 318.

³⁸ Thomas L. Karnes, *Tropical Enterprise the Standard Fruit and Steamship Company in Latin America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

The Derailing of Honduras's Liberal Dream and the Rise of Bananas

Prior to the 1870s Honduran political voices cautioned against foreign investors from the United States. President Santos Guardiola publicized his concerns in 1854 to alert the nation's legislators and representatives:

Ced [sic] cautos, en fin; y tened siempre presente lo que son nuestros vecinos de Méjico en Tejas y California; y si hay hondureños que lo ignoren, que se informen con los viajeros, a que soliciten los periódicos en que se refiere la suerte de aquellos desgraciados.⁴⁰
[Be careful, after all; keep in mind the example of Mexico, Texas and California; if there are Hondurans that ignore it, let them learn from travelers, and let them seek out information in the newspapers about the luck that befell those unfortunate peoples.]

The publication cautions against Squier's plan for complete control of the canal giving free passage to U.S. citizens and company employees.⁴¹ But these views gave way to the liberal reform era, during which liberal reformers engaged and promoted capitalist economic development. The era of the 'liberal dream' inadvertently gave rise to the banana export economy dominated by foreigners in what Mahoney calls an "aborted liberalism."⁴² The intentions of the liberal reformers were to develop an internal infrastructure and to end the warring among political factions through industry, transportation, and by modernizing and developing a strong economy. The reality, however, proved that the foreign-owned companies retained the advantage and carried out their own agenda for profits, which did not involve national development.

⁴⁰ Volante. 1854. 32 (Santos Guardiola). E.G. Squier Papers, Huntington Library and Archives. (Author's Translation).

⁴¹ Squier's preliminary report included worker provisions in hiring local labor who would be paid either \$15 dollars a month in rations such as flour, pork, and living quarters (in Manaca huts) or \$13 dollars in cash. Squier, *Honduras Interoceanic Railway: Preliminary Report*.

⁴² James Mahoney, "Radical, Reformist and Aborted Liberalism: Origins of National Regimes in Central America," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 33, no. 2 (2001): 222; Oyuela, *Ramon Rosa Plenitudes y Desengaños*, 39-40.

While liberal reforms had already taken place elsewhere in Central America, namely Guatemala and Costa Rica, Honduras languished under a system of regionalism and a leadership preoccupied with local *caudillo* infighting rather than with building national consensus and instituting reforms.⁴³ In the late 1800s, Honduras lacked a national railroad, and roads outside of the capital were virtually nonexistent. This lack of transportation infrastructure contributed to a lack of communication within and between regions. Poor communication fostered local and parochial political interests in three distinct regions in the country: the Western region, the Capital and Central-Southern territories, and a third area that would effectively become the North Coast banana regions and ports. This regionalism lent itself to the creation of *caudillo* nuclei within each of the regions, preventing the formation of a unified national identity, and hindering the consolidation of national political parties. These distinct regions might as well have been their own nations because they did not communicate with each other and their primary interests were regional, not national.⁴⁴ This tri-region division of *caudillos* (driven by their own local economic interests) continued into the twentieth century.

Reformers such as Marco Aurelio Soto (1876-1883) and his cousin Ramon Rosa (1876-1883), General Minister during Soto's presidency, were inspired by their experiences while living and serving in government during Guatemala's liberal reform period.⁴⁵ According to historian Leticia Oyuela, Soto focused on the economic reform agenda while Rosa developed the ideological and political philosophy platform that would expand their liberal reforms ideals.⁴⁶ In 1876, Soto's administration issued a set of legal reforms that mark the beginning of the Honduran "liberal dream," an

⁴³ Marvin Barahona, *La Hegemonía de los Estados Unidos en Honduras (1907-1932)* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Centro de Documentación de Honduras, 1989), 6.

⁴⁴ André-Marcel d'Ans, *Honduras Emergencia difícil de una nación, de un Estado*, (Paris:Karthala,1997), 105-115.

⁴⁵ Barahona, *La Hegemonía de los Estados Unidos en Honduras (1907-1932)*, 30-31.

⁴⁶ Oyuela, *Ramon Rosa Plenitudes y Desengaños*, 75-76.

experiment to advance national development.⁴⁷ Robert McCameron also notes this reform period was important because "Soto sponsored a legislative program" of far-reaching policies aimed toward building an economy that would compete in the emerging world market:

He revamped budgetary processes; secularized marriages and cemeteries; developed a system of free public primary education; formulated civil, penal, military, commercial, mining, legal, and customs codes; and attempted to centralize control of the military.⁴⁸

These reforms, Soto thought, would also bring "modernity," defined essentially as a rail and road system, as well as governmental reforms in primary and middle education for its citizens and an overall prioritization of free markets.⁴⁹ Honduran government officials believed that modernity in governing would accompany the development of an export economy.⁵⁰ Rosa, President Soto, and later President Luis Bográn (1883-1891) promoted liberal reforms and the task of pushing Honduras into the world market by supporting the politics of 'open doors' to foreign capital. During the late 1800s, Soto and Rosa saw the reforms as the only way to expand the Honduran national economy and enter into modern trade networks. At the same time, the development of chemical dyes in Europe led to a drop in sales of the country's main exports, cochineal and indigo, which only added urgency to the task of finding a new export crop to rescue the economy.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 39., 39; Kenneth V. Finney, "Rosario and the Election of 1887: The Political Economy of Mining in Honduras," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 59, no. 1 (1979): 81-83.

⁴⁸ McCameron, *Bananas Labor and Politics in Honduras: 1954-1963*, 7-8; Finney, "Rosario and the Election of 1887: The Political Economy of Mining in Honduras," 81; Oyuela, *Ramon Rosa Plenitudes y Desengaños*, 39.

⁴⁹ Marvin Barahona, *Honduras en el Siglo 20 una Sintesis Histórica* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 2005), 27-47.

⁵⁰ d'Ans, *Honduras Emergencia Difícil de una Nación, de un Estado*, 126; Barahona, *Honduras en el Siglo 20 una Sintesis Histórica*, 27-47.

For Honduran historian Marvin Barahona, the crux of the liberal reform rested on the big government theory that the “state was the only legitimate source of power and authority.”⁵¹ It was then the government’s responsibility to create communication systems like the telegraph, postal service, and roads—all activities of a modern society and fundamental to the building of the nation. The development of a primary education system was also required to strengthen and build the state.⁵² To accomplish these reforms the government looked to the development of trade, enticing foreign investors to do business in Honduras. According to Barahona, in 1899 Nicanor Bolet Peraza, a Honduran delegate to the International Business Congress in Philadelphia, encouraged attendees to do business in Honduras. Peraza explained that they should not fear the civil wars in the country; these scrimmages were the result of internal factions infighting amongst themselves and harmed their own business interests within the interior of the country “...leaving foreigners as exclusive owners of the industrial camp. The government," Bolet told the assembled businessmen, "respects and protects them and the revolutionaries do not attempt to bother them.”⁵³ The foreign capitalists were encouraged to invest and were invited to develop their businesses without reservation, and with access to control over national assets, including transportation, customs processes, and ports.

In 1901, Honduran delegates to the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo were impressed with U.S. forms of agriculture. Upon the delegates’ return to Honduras, both the Minister of the Interior and local elites concluded that an export economy with the foreign aid of the U.S. was important in developing infrastructure for agriculture in Honduras. This echoed what earlier liberal project reformers, Rosa and Soto, had suggested. The notion that exporting agricultural commodities would develop local

⁵¹ Barahona, *La Hegemonía de los Estados Unidos en Honduras (1907-1932)*, 28. (Author's translation).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁵³ ———, *Honduras en el Siglo 20 una Sintesis Histórica*, 32-33. (Author’s translation).

infrastructure was a reasonable plan, since at the time, in the early 1900s, most of the growers and producers of bananas were Hondurans and members of the local petit bourgeoisie. Thus, the liberal reform project intersected with the desires of foreign investors in the form of the development of the export banana industry.

Unfortunately, national government officials were disconnected from local and regional issues. For instance, the Honduran officials granted concessions, as mandates from the central government, in the form of public land to the banana companies without consulting regional or local leaders. Honduran government officials hoped that conceding public lands to the banana companies would result in economic development, which would eventually consolidate national economic and political interests. Capital investment from foreign companies, however, created considerable resentment between local and national interests, and ultimately hindered national consolidation and the economic development of the country.

This regionalism and disconnected leadership left Honduras without a national transportation system, since *caudillos* were reluctant to engage in the national party politics unless it pertained directly to or benefited their region. The tri-region geographical divide, the liberal quest for a capitalist economy, the void created by a lack of national groups to challenge a nation of oligarchs or impede the domination of international interests—these all contributed to a weak central government unable to enforce economic policy and protect its sovereignty and interests. Honduran government officials had in the past used foreign involvement to their advantage and they hoped that promising U.S. businessmen unhindered access to Honduran resources would serve them well again.

Businessmen like Sam Zemurray, although challenged by local planters and workers, had the support of presidential administrations and were often powerful political players in national politics. Zemurray regularly intervened in presidential elections, first aiding General Manuel Bonilla (1849–1913) in forcefully taking power

in 1911 and later trying to prevent Tiburcio Carías Andino from becoming president.⁵⁴ Bonilla, once in power, granted huge land concessions to Zemurray. Most importantly, Zemurray succeeded in gaining control of customs ensuring that the tariff and taxes on exports/imports would be favorable to his enterprise. At the time, Zemurray required machinery and tools for the development of his business.⁵⁵

Manuel Bonilla and Miguel Davila (1907-1911), both presidents during the largest concessionary periods and after the Pan American exposition in Buffalo, conceded much land for the building of the railroad and declared Vaccaro exempt from taxes in a privilege similar to that conferred on UFCo.⁵⁶ Scholars such as Barahona claim that this is the key period that began the banana enclave economy. All subsequent foreign investors benefited from this turn of events. By 1911, Zemurray's Cuyamel Fruit Company was planting large tracts of land.⁵⁷ The banana companies had control over the ports and shipping system because they owned them and the customs offices because the Honduran government allowed it.

Paradoxically, the liberal reform project, a national project for Honduras, in its modernity and prosperity, ushered in domination by foreign industrial interests and the development of an export economy that failed to build the nation as desired.

Land for rails: concessions to the bananas companies

The best example of the intersection of U.S. banana companies' projects and the liberal reformers' project is the land concessionary period of the first half of the twentieth century. During this period, Honduran national aspirations were deferred even

⁵⁴ While in New Orleans, Bonilla befriended Zemurray. This friendship would prove useful to him in regaining power in Honduras. Zemurray provided \$100,000, guns, and a ship for the insurrection in 1911. Argueta, *Bananos y Política: Samuel Zemurray y la Cuyamel Fruit Company en Honduras*, 81-83.

⁵⁵ Ibid. ; Karnes, *Tropical Enterprise the Standard Fruit and Steamship Company in Latin America*, 11-12, 15-16.

⁵⁶ Argueta, *Bananos y Política: Samuel Zemurray y la Cuyamel Fruit Company en Honduras*, 36.

⁵⁷ Karnes, *Tropical Enterprise the Standard Fruit and Steamship Company in Latin America*, 14.

⁵⁷ Argueta, *Bananos y Política: Samuel Zemurray y la Cuyamel Fruit Company en Honduras*, 36-37; Kepner Jr., *Social Aspects of the Banana Industry*, 53.

as the country developed a prosperous banana economy. Beginning in the late 1800s, Honduran government policies granted concessions as a means to incentivize and attract investors to develop the economy as a part of the liberal reforms.

One of the first U.S. investors to obtain a land grant from the Honduran government was the New York and Honduras Rosario Mining Company, eventually breaking ground for other North American companies.⁵⁸ In 1879, in negotiations between the New York-based Rosario Mining Company and President Soto, a private landowner of mining territory, the company was granted legal privileges to exploit the San Juancito mining territory, benefiting the President's private coffers.⁵⁹ The privileges President Soto granted abolished export taxes on precious metals, imported machinery, and other mining equipment, and gave the company liberal uses of land and access to wood and other natural resources for twenty years with the possibility of renewal.⁶⁰

For his projects in the 1850s, Squier secured an agreement with Honduras granting his company complete economic control of the railroad system for seventy years. In addition, it exempted him from taxes and gave him access to build across all the private and public lands along the path of the railroad, as well as ownership of two hundred yards of land surrounding the tracks, along with one thousand square miles in the region of Yoro.⁶¹ The contractual language made no mention of profits for the Honduran government from the operation of the railroad. A rail project, initiated in 1866 was never completed. British and French lenders and contractors either stole or misspent the money.⁶² In 1879 Washington Valentine, another U.S. entrepreneur, laid

⁵⁸ d'Ans, *Honduras Emergencia Dificil de una Nacion, de un Estado*, 136-137; Victor Meza, *Historia del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Centro de Documentación de Honduras (CEDOH), 1991), xi; McCameron, *Bananas Labor and Politics in Honduras: 1954-1963*, 1.

⁵⁹ The practice of government officials using their public influence to benefit their private landowning interests would remain a common practice of the elite in government well into the twentieth century. d'Ans, *Honduras Emergencia Dificil de una Nacion, de un Estado*, 136-138.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ d'Ans, *Honduras Emergencia Dificil de una Nacion, de un Estado*, 106-107.

⁶² A small railroad was built from Puerto Cortés past San Pedro Sula to San Francisco, near the Lake of Yojoa. From there ferries would take passengers to Tegucigalpa. Ibid., 111-112.

claim to the National Honduran Railroad, really a relatively short stretch of rail, by gaining concessions.⁶³ Valentine's staff managed the rail system between 1902 and 1908.⁶⁴ Vaccaro lobbied presidents in Tegucigalpa to obtain land concessions and to evade taxes on imported machinery and goods. The most notable land concession Vaccaro acquired allowed it to lay track and build a railroad that would easily transport bananas with relatively little damage from the North Coast and onto ships.

Honduran leaders were sensitive to the great preoccupation among investors with the country's reigning and extreme poverty, perceived lack of political stability, and the nonexistent transportation system despite the available raw materials and land.⁶⁵ Companies cited these concerns as leverage when requesting land concessions from the Honduran government. According to historian Charles Kepner, "Foreign capitalists, stressing the lack of transportation and other facilities and emphasizing the risks involved because of the frequency of upheavals, have insisted upon securing excessive concessions before undertaking operations in this region."⁶⁶ Honduras was eager to accommodate them in hopes of attaining their long-desired rail system.

"Land for railroads" agreements between the banana companies and the Honduran government hastened their domination over the country's most fertile land and over its largest export crop.⁶⁷ The companies such as the United Fruit Company (which began cultivation between 1910 and 1912), through its subsidiaries the Tela Railroad Company and the Truxillo Railroad Company, and the Cuyamel Fruit Company and the Vaccaro Brothers Company (which became the Standard Fruit and Steamship Company in 1926), obtained land from the Honduran government and local

⁶³ Argueta, *Bananos y Politica: Samuel Zemurray y la Cuyamel Fruit Company en Honduras*, 10-11, 105-106; Finney, "Rosario and the Election of 1887: The Political Economy of Mining in Honduras," 84-85.

⁶⁴ Argueta, *Bananos y Politica: Samuel Zemurray y la Cuyamel Fruit Company en Honduras*, 10-11; 105-106.

⁶⁵ Later in the 20th Century they would also cite labor troubles. Bucheli, *Bananas and Business the United Fruit Company in Colombia, 1899-2000*, 58-64.

⁶⁶ Kepner Jr., *Social Aspects of the Banana Industry*, 33.

⁶⁷ McCameron, *Bananas Labor and Politics in Honduras: 1954-1963*, 11.

planters in three primary ways: 1) from land concessions granted by the Honduran government with the agreement that the company would build a railroad system, 2) through lease and/or purchase of land from local planters, and 3) through direct coercion.⁶⁸ Banana companies and railroad men often exercised power over the government in a variety of ways that included working with local power players and party factions, with little concern for the needs of the country, to obtain access to land they perceived to be fertile, exotic, wasted, unused, and available. The “land for railroads” agreements consisted of government land grants that were between “250 to 500 hectares for every kilometer of rail” the companies agreed to build.⁶⁹ In exchange for construction of the rail line, the companies also profited from the raw materials found within these land concessions—including lumber, petroleum, and coal— which these companies used for daily operations.⁷⁰

Between 1905 and 1915, Honduran government officials and U.S. fruit companies signed four key contracts with the important goal of obtaining a rail system.⁷¹ In 1906 and 1910, the Honduran government signed two contracts with Vaccaro (transferred to the Standard Fruit Company in 1924). In 1912, the Honduran government signed two other contracts, one with the Fairbanks Syndicate of Indianapolis and another with H.V. Rolston of Cuyamel (the last two eventually were transferred over respectively to the Ufco. subsidiaries, Tela Railroad Company and the Truxillo Railroad Company in 1913).⁷² The contracts proposed rail system with various points of origin. The Tela Railroad Company contract of 1912 also established that the company would build a landing pier in Tela. All the contracts coincide on the main

⁶⁸ Kepner Jr., *Social Aspects of the Banana Industry* , 25.

⁶⁹ McCameron, *Bananas Labor and Politics in Honduras: 1954-1963* , 11.

⁷⁰ Alejandro Sagastume, *Cariás: El Caudillo de Zambrano 1933-1948* (Tegucigalpa: Editores Graficentro, 1988) , 44.

⁷¹ Frank Ellis, *Las Transnacionales del Banano en Centroamerica*, trans. Juan Mario Castellanos (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1983) , 63.

⁷² The first set of land concession contracts were known as the “*concesiones de la Standard*” and the second set of contracts is known as “*concesiones de la Truxillo y la Tela.*” *Ibid.*, 64.

points: the Honduran government granted the U.S. companies the right to cut wood and extract gravel in any section of national territory. The companies also had the freedom to exploit rivers and sources of water, the free use of national territory to build service areas for the railroad system, and were exempt from paying taxes on imports and exports or paying for the maintenance, and operation of the railroad.⁷³ These initial contracts led to others as the companies' needs grew.

Beyond land concessions and tax incentives the foreigners desired even greater influence. They vied for control of the ports and sought to control taxes on imports and exports—even full control of the industry, costs, quality, and distribution. Control of the trade tariffs and ports was so important that the companies felt U.S. state department appointees should do it in order to maintain a fair price for U.S. companies. These actions also reflect the lack of trust U.S. investors had in the local governments in the North Coast and their desire to dictate the terms under which they would conduct business.

To foreign investors the geography of the North Coast, with its deep-water bays and rail possibilities, was particularly suited for the construction of ports. Companies preferred to have access to them but also to have complete control of the routes to the ports. They invested in building the wharfs, and their ships had priority docking. Control over the ports allowed the banana companies to control the speed and efficiency of getting their goods to market fast, it also gave them control over the local banana producer/supplier. Companies that controlled the wharf also controlled local taxes paid on imported and exported goods. Controlling tariff prices benefited the companies because they often imported goods and equipment from the U.S. that were indispensable to maintaining production in the banana fields—everything from

⁷³ Ibid., 65-66.

machinery and sanitation equipment to the supplies that filled the shelves of the company commissaries.⁷⁴

With the rise of the UFCo. and Standard Fruit Company, the banana industry replaced mining as the primary industry in the country and powerfully influenced the Honduran economy. Honduran presidents continued to approve land grants to the banana companies in hopes of building a railroad prioritizing the banana companies (over local producers) as the only source of industrialization and development.

The liberal dream of a national railroad system to connect the different regions of the country and thereby eliminate the problems of regionalism was resurrected and put in the hands of the banana companies. The companies, however, were not interested in developing the internal infrastructure of the country. Consequently, the *bananeras* developed intricate loops on already existing east-west rails to the main towns where they had fruit-producing centers and other subsidiaries. Sadly, the banana export companies failed to come through with a plan for a national railroad, creating instead a railroad system that would benefit their plantations in the North Coast. The land concessions led to the construction of rail lines, but they were limited to transporting bananas; it was a transport system strictly under foreign company control. Other potential export crops, such as coffee, became dependent on these rails for transportation, as well as on the ports and ships owned by the UFCo. or the Standard Fruit Company.⁷⁵ The railroad project that would have connected the nation was again a failure.

⁷⁴ Morrow Wilson, *Empire of Green and Gold the Story of the American Banana Trade* ; Argueta, *Bananos y Politica: Samuel Zemurray y la Cuyamel Fruit Company en Honduras*

⁷⁵ Crowther, *The Romance and Rise of the American Tropics*, 208.

Land and Local Growers

Still, in a short period, the country had begun a fast transition from a “society of mostly craftsmen (*artesanos*) [and] *campesinos*, where the predominant work was local and familial” to an economy based on “foreign capital investment which rushed a national process of development to establish the agro-export economy and forced the country to mold itself according to world market needs.”⁷⁶ Distinct regions of the country, however, including largely *campesino* economies and parcel holders, were not all ready for (or even necessarily supportive of) the liberal reforms. During the initial period of land concessions, the Honduran government attempted to control the parceling of land in alternate blocks (in a checkered pattern). The 1895 Agrarian Law stipulated that

...land use would be conceded in alternating lots to those who made a commitment to exploit them, one for the beneficiary and another one that the government would either retain or sell.⁷⁷

For instance, plots of land for planting bananas were distributed to Honduran planters, as well as the banana companies, in a checkered pattern along the North Coast.⁷⁸ The banana companies, however, obtained land illicitly by either buying out local planters or ousting them from production by not purchasing their product and forcing the local planter to sell cheaply, if the government land concession process failed. Domestic Honduran planters and even some Honduran government interests, at least publicly, often protested when huge land areas or control over territory was ceded to the companies.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Meza, *Historia del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño* (1981), 4-5. (Author's Translation).

⁷⁷ Argueta, *Bananos y Política: Samuel Zemurray y la Cuyamel Fruit Company en Honduras*, 93-94.

⁷⁸ Kepner Jr., *Social Aspects of the Banana Industry*; Crowther, *The Romance and Rise of the American Tropics*, 212-215.

⁷⁹ Crowther, *The Romance and Rise of the American Tropics*, 212-213.

The earlier foreign investments relied on the local growers, but the instability of supply brought on by hurricanes and natural disasters and political turmoil gave way to a vertical integration model whereby the company could control the entire processes of production and distribution.⁸⁰ Marcelo Bucheli notes that the "United Fruit maintained its vertical integration in the years after the acquisition of Cuyamel" and the success of this system was seen as either a "triumph of civilization over nature" or as the "latest stage of imperialism."⁸¹ Local banana producers would ultimately suffer under the collaboration of Honduran elites and the banana companies. This situation made it impossible for Honduran planters to exist and export without the U.S. banana companies. Smaller planters in particular worked to supply these big companies, often losing their land and leasing land from the companies or becoming their employees.

The perception and impact of the land concessions and their consequences provide examples of the intersecting, even clashing, projects of different actors and interests on the North Coast in the period. While on one end of the spectrum the banana companies and the liberal reformers constructed the agro-export banana industry, at the other end of the spectrum workers, labor organizers, leftist parties, and even small farmers were evolving into an organized resistance and labor movement. The following half of the chapter describes the multiple interests that collided in dissatisfaction with government policies and foreign domination and as a response to economic threat and as a struggle for survival. The small growers were in opposition to the unilateral power of the U.S. banana companies. Large-scale migration fueled by the rapid banana industry development, and workers' efforts to form worker organizations and coalesce in a larger labor movement, were counter-hegemonic responses to the foreign companies' domination. As the flipside to the liberal dream and export economy

⁸⁰ Bucheli, *Bananas and Business the United Fruit Company in Colombia, 1899-2000*, 48-49.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

expansion, these projects are important because they served in the development of worker consciousness and informed the circumstances in which the strike occurred.

Independent local producers subsumed by the banana companies

The small growers had been important in the process of developing a local merchant class, and their demise fundamentally changed the way production occurred. The dominance of the transnational banana businesses challenged the process of local business development and changed the context and course of economic development in the country. Between 1870 and 1912, early banana production and export relied heavily on small banana producers (*poquiteros*) from the local areas, who cultivated primarily for export through contracts with the banana companies.⁸² Soluri found that in 1899, there were 1,100 local banana (*plátano*) producers in Omoa, El Paraíso, Puerto Cortés, San Pedro Sula, El Porvenir, La Ceiba and San Luis.⁸³ The majority of these regions would become part of the UFCo. by the 1920s. Soluri demonstrates that there was already a booming banana economy in 1899, where 70% of the *poquiteros fincas* took up 1,700 hectares, or 28% of the arable land.⁸⁴ According to Soluri these small farmers were the first to transform the North Coast, ecologically and socially. With the development of the banana industry and trade there was a great transformation in the development of ports and transport routes.⁸⁵

Poquiteros also transformed the North Coast socially by forming an association of banana growers. In San Pedro Sula, eighty-five growers formed a banana growers society in 1894 to advocate for the removal of obstacles they faced and to promote their

⁸²Crowther, *The Romance and Rise of the American Tropics* 210 and John Soluri, *A la Sombra del Bananal: Poquiteros y Transformaciones Ecológicas en la Costa Norte de Honduras 1870-1950*, ed. Colección Cuadernos Universitarios (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Universitaria de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, 2002), 5-11.

⁸³ Soluri, *A la Sombra del Bananal: Poquiteros y Transformaciones Ecológicas en la Costa Norte de Honduras 1870-1950*, 10. (Author's translation).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

own economic growth.⁸⁶ By 1895, a society comprised of 150 growers in Omoa had selected a committee to negotiate contracts with the foreign exporters.⁸⁷ Tensions among local growers and the large banana companies grew around the terms of the sales contracts for bananas. As the largest purchaser of bananas for export, the dominant UFCo. dictated terms of trade. Local growers were dependent on sales to the company. The company could harm local *poquiteros'* livelihood by the common practice of not purchasing from them and leaving stems on the wharves to rot. Eventually, local growers were put out of business by UFCo and other banana businesses.⁸⁸

“The Trust,” another name given to the UFCo. by small planters and local merchants, was becoming monopolistic effectively destroying local competition, and assimilating local businesses into their operation. Opposition to UFCo. came in many forms; for instance, in Bluefields, Nicaragua, small planters organized and challenged such buyouts by forming the “Anti-Trust,” a coalition of smaller companies to stand against the UFCo. They were successful in shipping to the United States, but the UFCo. eventually controlled their access to transportation, broke them financially, and then bought them out.⁸⁹

In Honduras, in 1913, 1916, 1925, and 1932 there were paralyzing strikes in which small planters were leaders or allies with workers and local merchants. The destruction of local growers was evident by 1929, after the merger of Cuyamel and the United Fruit, which established UFCo to preside over land, rail, and the banana business in general.⁹⁰ The incidences of militant strikes reduced in frequency after the merger. Despite the inability of *poquiteros* to stop UFCo. domination over their business and

⁸⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁸ Karnes, *Tropical Enterprise the Standard Fruit and Steamship Company in Latin America*, 11-12.

⁸⁹ Thomas F. O'Brien, *The Revolutionary Mission American Enterprise in Latin America, 1900-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 91-92.

⁹⁰ For a list of strikes see: Mario Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño* (Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana EDUCA, 1981), 67-89.; O'Brien, *The Revolutionary Mission American Enterprise in Latin America, 1900-1945*, 92-102.

their land, theirs was an important resistance project against the foreign-owned banana companies. The earlier strikes and collaboration with workers awoke nationalist sentiments against the banana companies, serving as a model for later strikes.

The Labor Movement of the North Coast

Efforts to build a labor movement in Honduras can be traced to early mutual aid societies (starting in the late 1800s) whose main objective was to support workers and their families in illness or death.⁹¹ Craft workers and small business owners made up the majority of these organizations. Many were cultural clubs and had religious affiliations. For the most part, these were not political in nature, and therefore did not threaten the state or the *bananeras*, and in turn earned their support. Workers' actions against the *bananeras* had been sporadic and immediately subjugated by the police force introduced by the *bananeras*, the *cabos de comisariato*.⁹² The organizations that existed in cities such as San Pedro Sula and the capital, Tegucigalpa, were mostly craft unions focused on local labor issues, not necessarily connected to the banana agricultural workers in the North Coast and even less with the *campesinos* (farmers) in the other regions of the country.

The link between workers and labor activists in Tegucigalpa who supported working class actions was important in the building of a labor movement in the 1920s. The labor movement had its roots in the organizing in the mines nearest to Tegucigalpa. Workers laboring for the U.S. owned mining concerns, such as the New York & Honduras Rosario Mining Company, and the first craft/artisan organizations were involved in initial forays into collective labor organizing.⁹³

⁹¹ Meza, *Historia del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño* (1991), 3.

⁹² In the 1940s *Cabos de Comisariato* were also known as *comanches*. Ibid. , 6, 41.; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Olympia Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February, 15, 2006; Jose Sanchez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, November 15, 2006.

⁹³ Finney, "Rosario and the Election of 1887: The Political Economy of Mining in Honduras," 84.

In 1921, mutual aid societies were united under the umbrella organization *Federación de Obreros Hondureños* (Federation of Honduran Workers—FOH), and quickly became aligned with the reformist policies of the *Partido Liberal* (Liberal Party). Within the ranks of the FOH, a new group of members envisioned forming a more militant organization that would truly challenge the *bananeras* and began to consolidate the working classes. Manuel Cálix Herrera, Juan Pablo Wainwright, and Graciela García, were among the many who in 1925 formed the *Liga Sindical del Norte* (Northern Union League).⁹⁴ Workers and labor activists were also interested in the formation of a Communist Party and began to set their sights on the U.S. owned businesses, such as the UFCo and the Standard Fruit Company, as the most important targets for organizing workers.

The early efforts of the 1920s and 1930s, were critical to the building of consciousness and organizing principles around wages, the eight-hour day and other demands concretized eventually in the thirty demands of the 1954 strike. Earlier organizing efforts were markers of worker agency and assertion. The banana *fincas* and wharves were marked by small and short strikes that revolved around the demands for wages and the eight-hour day. These smaller, sometimes wildcat strikes, began to instill consciousness in workers about the North American companies and the role the Honduran state should play in the demand for better wages and rights in the workplace. Labor strife demanded local responses, and local craft organizations in the cities grew in the 1920s and 1930s. But it was the organizing in the North Coast which most effectively challenged the company production. Euraque eloquently points out,

⁹⁴ O'Brien, *The Revolutionary Mission American Enterprise in Latin America, 1900-1945*, 99.

The history of the working people also promoted a social and political culture that broadly contrasted with that of the interior. The elite and nonelite processes of class formation on the North Coast affected one another in ways that together produced a different civil society, especially by the 1950s. However, that history was linked as well to events and developments in the 1920s and 1930s.⁹⁵

Organizers in this region advanced the rights of workers to improve their conditions despite persecution and challenges. Their actions revolved around San Pedro Sula, where worker organizations developed an opposition consciousness against the foreign owned companies.⁹⁶ Although in the 1920s Tegucigalpa-led organizing efforts were prominent, especially around the mining companies, their influence waned with the decline of the mining industry's profits and laborer needs.

The history of the first worker organizations and particularly the events of the 1920s demonstrated the development of a national labor movement, one that was contested between the Liberal Party and the leftist interests in building a Communist party. The FOH eventually aligned with the *Confederación Obrera Centroamericana* (Central American Workers Confederation—COCA), which was linked to the *Confederación Obrera Panamericana* (Panamerican Worker Confederation—COPA), an organization created by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in the United States.⁹⁷ The FOH was reformist in scope, and the FOH was influential in gaining company hospitals and infirmaries, as well as housing with screens on the windows to keep out malaria-ridden mosquitoes in the living quarters. The FOH also provided a safe cultural space that served as an outlet for the workers and their families. It was in the FOH that the *Sociedad Cultura Femenina* (Society of Feminine Culture), a women's

⁹⁵ Dario Euraque, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic Region and State in Honduras, 1870-1972* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996) , 36.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹⁷ The AFL created this organization in New York City in 1919. Towards the end of the 1920s, Central American communists took over the COCA. It was then that the FOH worked closely with COCA. Meza, *Historia del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño* (1991), 32.

organization began classes for the children of the workers and literacy projects for adults.⁹⁸ Labor organizations also recognized the challenges posed by the geographic divisions within the country. In 1929, the *Federación Sindical de Honduras* (Union Federation of Honduras—FSH) was founded and its goals included an intention to form a North Coast specific federation of workers known as the *Federación de Sociedad Obreras del Norte* (Federation of Workers from the North). Together, these organizations comprised a faction within the FOH that was largely responsible for the creation of the Worker Constitution (*La Constitución Obrera*) in 1926, which established that workers in the organization would not affiliate with already established political parties, the Liberal Party or the Nationalist Party (*Partido Nacional*), but rather with newly created ones that answered to workers' needs.⁹⁹ This marked the first attempts to turn the FOH into a more political organization. Divisions arose between the leadership of the FOH that supported the Liberal Party and the more radical members behind the more politically oriented FSH. The FSH's aims were to educate and politicize workers. The FSH joined the *Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina*--CTAL (the social democrat, left-leaning regional Latin American Confederation founded by Mexican labor leader Lombardo Toledano). The *Sociedad Cultura Femenina* also decided to leave the FOH and joined the more militant FSH, under the leadership of Graciela García.¹⁰⁰ The FSH's largest contribution to the labor movement aside from solidarity and participation in the strike of 1925 was its proposal for a union that would represent all workers in all sectors of the banana plantations. In

⁹⁸ RinaVillars, *Porque quiero seguir viviendo habla Graciela Garcia*, (Tegucigalpa: Editorial Guaymuras, 1991). 35, 40

⁹⁹ Poder Judicial de Honduras, Centro Electrónico de Documentación e Información Judicial, San Pedro Sula, *Expediente sin Numero, Exhibición Personal de Manuel Cáliz Herrera, San Pedro Sula*. October 2, 1929.

¹⁰⁰ It is important to note here that Graciela Garcia was one of the leading women organizers within the radical wing of the FOH and FSH. Her role as a woman and a leftist is usually overshadowed in the historical memory of the labor movement. She was forced into exile in Mexico by the Carias Andino dictatorship. Rina Villars, *Porque Quiero Seguir Viviendo...Habla Graciela Garcia* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 1991).

this effort, the FSH formed union committees (*comités sindicales*) among workers at the docks, transportation centers, mechanic shops, and fruit centers.¹⁰¹ For the first time, a workers' organization proposed an agenda that challenged the Tela Railroad Company and Standard Fruit Company, rather than working with the boss for menial gains (as the FOH had done for years). Then, beginning in 1933 and lasting for the sixteen years of Carías Andino's dictatorship, there was a complete shutdown of labor organizing. Martial laws, persecution of Communist Party members, and punishment for workers who dared to organize became routine. Especially brutalized were members of the Liberal Party, whose members were forced to suppress their activities for the entirety of Carías Andino's rule.

For many workers, the FOH lacked the political clarity they sought. It was the North Coast workers, grouped under the larger *Sociedades Obreras del Norte* (North Coast Federation of Worker Societies) who called for a clear agenda that reflected workers' real lives and needs in 1926. Radical workers wanted to move toward syndicalism and away from mutual aid groups. By 1929, Marxist leaning workers, who according to Graciela Garcia set "the platform of the North Coast Federation of Worker Societies (*Sociedades Obreras del Norte*) addressed Marxist principles which were beginning to resonate with people in the country, especially in the North Coast."¹⁰² Marxists in the North Coast had identified the banana regions, particularly the U.S. enclaves of the UFCo and the Standard Fruit Company, as important organizing targets because they had the largest concentration of workers in the country.¹⁰³ The North Coast organizations pushed the debate on mutual aid societies, making radical demands for changes to existing legislation that prohibited mutual aid societies from engaging in

¹⁰¹ Victor Meza, *Historia del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño* (Tegucigalpa: Editorial Guaymuras, 1981), 42.

¹⁰² Villars, *Porque Quiero Seguir Viviendo...Habla Graciela Garcia* , 74.

¹⁰³ In the 1920s these companies were the Truxillo Railroad Company, the Tela Railroad Company, the Cuyamel Fruit Company, and the Vaccaro Brothers.

political and militant campaigns.¹⁰⁴ North Coast organizations were also successful in moving the COCA to develop a united worker platform that would then be carried out by all the worker organizations in the country.¹⁰⁵ Their influence was felt at the meeting of the COCA when they managed to move the membership to adopt a 'syndicalism system,' versus the 'society' model in the newly drafted worker constitution.¹⁰⁶ Actively engaged in worker struggles, these individuals, members of *Sociedad Obreras del Norte*, created newspapers where they proposed concrete demands of the government on behalf of worker rights. *Sociedad Obreras del Norte's* efforts were significant in opening up space for the organizing efforts of workers in the banana industry. Their efforts were met with repression and persecution by the Honduran state.

From these early days of labor organizing and going forward, workers and organizers faced anti-labor activities by the government and the businesses in collaboration with U.S. influences. The first Honduran Communist Party was created in 1929 and was persecuted extensively by the banana companies, particularly the UFCo Tropical Division managerial team.¹⁰⁷ The Honduran government took its cue from the U.S. Embassy and also persecuted "labor agitators" such as Manuel Cáliz Herrera.¹⁰⁸ The Honduran local government collaborated with the U.S. Embassy and persecuted workers and labor organizers who attempted to organize a union. In 1929, Manuel Cáliz Herrera was arrested twice in the same year.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Villars, *Porque Quiero Seguir Viviendo...Habla Graciela Garcia* , 75.

¹⁰⁵ The COCA Congress, which brought together labor organizations from all over Central America, took place in November of 1926, in Honduras. Ibid. , 74.

¹⁰⁶ This clearly demonstrated a move from the mutual aid model to the organizing model which prioritized recruitment and participation of workers. Ibid. , 76.

¹⁰⁷ This is a contentious issue as there is no documentation about the 1923 founding of the Communist Party, but many see 1929 as the year of its founding.

¹⁰⁸ Manuel Cáliz Herrera and Pablo Wainwright are credited with the first founding of the Communist Party in 1929.

¹⁰⁹ The second time Cáliz Herrera was arrested for a note delivered to the U.S. Embassy in protest of the Sacco and Vanzetti case. He was accused of offense and insult against the Vice Consul of the U.S. consulate in Tela. "Amparo a favor de Manuel Cáliz Herrera interpuesto por Hermegildo Briceno R." Expediente Sin Numero. August 29, 1929. CEDIJ; "Consulta sobre instancia Manuel Cáliz Herrera et. al." Expediente Sin Numero. October 22, 1929. CEDIJ.

Cálix Herrera was the editor of worker newspaper *El Martillo* (The Hammer) and was often persecuted because of the newspaper's frequent critique of the UFCo and the United States. More importantly, the newspaper served as a vehicle for the dissemination of national and international news for and about workers.¹¹⁰ Reading these newspapers was considered so subversive an act that it was often prohibited in the *fincas* and workers themselves would be cautious not to be caught in possession of a paper.¹¹¹ Despite the clandestine nature of organizing and the cautious dissemination of worker newspapers, workers (who could read) read them and passed information along to other workers. *El Martillo*, one of the most effective worker newspapers of the 1920s, in fact, had as a tag line "*Periódico Obrero Campesino: Organo del Grupo Defensa Proletaria*," (Worker and Campesino Newspaper Organ of the 'Group for the Defense of the Proletariat.') clearly stating its commitment to workers and the working class. The newspaper's ideas may have been new to North Coast workers, most of whom were from *campesino* origins.¹¹² The newspaper called all workers and peasants to unite under the banner of the working class; in the June 1929 issue, *El Martillo* called for workers all over Honduras to support the five hundred mining workers of the Rosario Mining Company, who had been surrounded by the military upon their gathering for strike.¹¹³ While the event took place near Tegucigalpa, the banana workers of the North Coast were able to read about the strike and the repression that ensued. News of the actions at the Rosario Mining Company, a U.S. company, served as an example that local struggle to organize and stand up to banana companies was possible. Workers were also able to read about and debate the political climate, and understand

¹¹⁰ *El Martillo*, June 2, 1929, loose document (*hoja suelta*), CEDIJ.

¹¹¹ This trend continued until the 1950s. Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006.; Leonardo Bautista, interview by author, campo Limones, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006; José Reyes Pineda, interview by author, campo Limones, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006; Edmundo Williams, interview by author, Finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 25, 2004.

¹¹² "*Worker and Campesino Newspaper Organ of the 'Group for the Defense of the Proletariat.'*" *El Martillo*, June 2, 1929, Loose document (*hoja suelta*), CEDIJ.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

the need for clandestine work. Finally, identifying with workers at a distance gave workers a sense of camaraderie and engagement with causes outside of their own, building courage, and consciousness around working class issues. The newspaper was considered dangerous for the company; it not only attacked U.S. foreign owned businesses, but it also served the function of empowering and informing workers who in the past had been completely dependent on information from the companies through controlled communications, such as movie viewings in the *fincas*, or direct communication from supervisors, overseers and other company employees. The worker newspapers were often the only source of national news workers received in the *fincas*.¹¹⁴ Manuel Cálix Herrera, the public figure behind the newspaper, had earned a persona non grata status with the companies and the U.S. Embassy, which pressured the local Honduran police to imprison and disappear him for three days, assigning him a special guard that would stay on site day and night.¹¹⁵ To avoid being shut down, the newspaper had to be moved from Tela to La Ceiba during this period.

The UFCo had its own system for profiling worker organizers who were associated with the Communist Party in the 1920s. In one internal memo from the Tropical Divisions manager, Arthur A. Pollan, to the General Offices in Boston, a picture of Manuel Cálix Herrera was included. Attached to the report was the following profile:

¹¹⁴ Ibid. Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Leonardo Bautista, campo Limones, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006.; José Reyes Pineda, interview by author, campo Limones, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006; Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 25, 2004.

¹¹⁵ "Amparo a favor de Manuel Cálix Herrera interpuesto por Hemergildo Briceno R." Expediente Sin Número. August 29, 1929. CEDIJ.

This man is an agitator of the worst type; anti-American, extremist, given to writing and preaching Red, Bolshevist, and Comunistic [sic] Propaganda. He has recently been the principal organizer of a Bolshevist move origination on the north coast of Honduras. It is possible that as his activities have been restricted in that country, he will move to other fields, and you should be on the lookout for him.¹¹⁶

Alongside the note and photo, there was a physical description of Cáliz Herrera. The internal memo went to the other Tropical Division managers, warning them about Cáliz Herrera's work and ideas and the danger of their spread. They were suspicious of his physical travel to other *fincas* in the isthmus. Author Philippe Bourgois' compilation of documents speak to what he calls the "bureaucratic logic of monopoly capital" and also "provide vibrant testimony to the repeated and diverse attempts by workers (and occasionally host-country governments) to organize in defense of their rights on the plantation."¹¹⁷ In this case, in Honduras' North Coast, Cáliz Herrera's life and work are documented and furthermore his effectiveness as an organizer of workers is evident. Pollan's account describes Cáliz Herrera as

... quick and alert, and rapid in his movements. Usually dresses without coat or necktie, and a straw hat, with one side turned down with a rakish fashion. Personal habits: drinks occasionally, sometimes to excess, given to frequenting low resorts.¹¹⁸

Cáliz Herrera tried to fit in with the demographic of the banana *campos*. This was extremely important in that era not only to be able to organize, but also to understand the conditions in which workers were organizing. Newspapers such as *Vanguardia*

¹¹⁶Philippe Bourgois, "One Hundred Years of United Fruit Company Letters," in *Banana Wars Power, Production, and History in the Americas*, ed. Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 138.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 103.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 140.

Revolucionaria, *Voz Obrera*, *El Chilío*, and *La Pulga* were influenced in the 1940s and 1950s by *El Martillo* and Cáliz Herrera's work.

The Organizing Years: *Partido Democrático Revolucionario Hondureño*

It was the dictatorship of Tiburcio Carías Andino (1933-1948) that most proactively fostered the growth of the banana companies during his *caudillista* government, prolonging the lack of unity in the country and among Hondurans. Carías was practically hand-picked by the *bananeras*, which used their influence and money to manipulate the election process to put him in power. Once in office, Carías thanked and repaid them with many concessions, among them the reduction of taxes, land grants, and an open door to his presidential office.¹¹⁹

El Carriato lasted sixteen years and was marked by increased state repression benefiting the companies. Many organizations fighting for popular voice were forced to organize clandestinely or to leave the country.¹²⁰ Even members of the Liberal Party, the mainstream liberal political party, found themselves exiled for disagreeing with the government of Carías. Carías did not present a challenge to the operations of the UFCo. or the Standard Fruit Company; in fact, he was one of their more loyal supporters.¹²¹ Under the permissive eye of Carías the economy grew dependent on the one crop export monoculture.¹²² Carías was willfully oblivious to the needs of the workers and was often quoted as saying “Honduras [does] not suffer any social problems,”¹²³ and while many countries’ labor movements flourished throughout Latin America, Honduran workers efforts were met with repression, imprisonment, torture, and exile. During this

¹¹⁹ Sagastume, *Carías: El Caudillo de Zambrano 1933-1948*, 46.

¹²⁰ Euraque, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic Region and State in Honduras, 1870-1972*, 52-53; Marvin Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 2004), 23.

¹²¹ Sagastume, *Carías: El Caudillo de Zambrano 1933-1948*.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 41.

¹²³ McCameron, *Bananas Labor and Politics in Honduras: 1954-1963*, 17.

period and before the general strike, “existing legislation [was] based on the Napoleonic Code, [which] considered labor a commodity, subject to the laws of supply and demand.”¹²⁴

Any opposition to Carías, primarily the *Partido Liberal* (the opposing party to Carías’ *Partido Nacional*), was punished with persecution, exile, and even death. In response to civil society opposition, he created a climate of terror by abrogating most civil liberties, such as freedom of the press and the ability even to form social clubs.¹²⁵ Much of the organizing of the *Partido Liberal* and the more progressive PDRH and leftist *Comité Coordinador Obrero* (Worker Coordinating Committee--CCO)¹²⁶ happened clandestinely in the country abroad by exile networks.

Carías Andino repressed workers and anyone who was perceived to be part of the Communist and Liberal Parties. During this period, the Ambassador and the Chargé d’Affaires of the U.S. Embassy reported to Washington that there was little or no labor activity in 1943.¹²⁷ The Carías Andino dictatorship squashed organizing efforts in two significant ways: first by persecuting, incarcerating, and eventually forcing organizers into exile; and secondly, by empowering local and regional governments to persecute people seen to be in opposition to the dictatorship and the National Party. Four groups, all in opposition to the Carías Andino regime, shared the stage of the 1954 strike: the PDRH, the CCO and later the CLO,¹²⁸ and the Liberal Party.¹²⁹ The left-leaning

¹²⁴ Ibid., 49.

¹²⁵ Sagastume, *Carías: El Caudillo de Zambrano 1933-1948*, 93.

¹²⁶ The *Comité Coordinador Obrero* (Labor Coordinating Committee--hereinafter referred to as “CCO”) was “constituted in 1950 to promote syndicalism principles in the major industries of national production (mining, banana industry, railroad workers, ports, textiles, construction and others). This body proposed the fight for universal demands like a Labor Code and the law of Social Security.” Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 55-57; The CCO was an organization that brought together various other craft unions and worker committees and had as its main avenue of communication the newspaper *Voz Obrera*. Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*, 120-121.

¹²⁷ Ambassador John D. Erwin to the U.S. Department of State quoted in Euraque, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic Region and State in Honduras, 1870-1972*, 36; Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*.

¹²⁸ The *Comite de Lucha Obrera* (Committee of Labor Struggle--hereinafter referred to as “CLO”) was a Worker Committee of the Communist Party, formally founded on April of 1954. Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*, 142.

organization PDRH was founded in 1944 as an alternative to the bipartisan system.¹³⁰

The new party brought together people of different ideological leanings, from centrists to Marxist thinkers. The inspiration behind the creation of the PDRH were the October Revolution in Guatemala (1944-1954). Julio C. Rivera, a member of the PDRH recalls:

La revolución Guatemalteca de 1944 fue, para nosotros, el más impresionante de todos los sucesos acaecidos en el plano internacional en aquellos años...La información que recibíamos desde Guatemala no era muy fluida, pero sabíamos lo que estaba pasando en el vecino país.¹³¹
[The Guatemalan revolution of 1944 was for us the one of the most impressive events happening in the international arena in those years...the information that we received from Guatemala was not very fluid, but we knew what was happening in the neighboring country.]

The fall of Jorge Ubico in Guatemala was the most significant event of the decade for Central Americans, "governments could not hide the palpable reality of the fall of Jorge Ubico."¹³² The events in Guatemala gave Liberal Party members and Marxist organizers the courage to defy the Cárías Andino dictatorship by protesting publicly in San Pedro Sula in 1944, a rally that ended in a massacre. These like-minded individuals began to organize in the North Coast, meeting in El Progreso, Tela, and San Pedro Sula, but the membership came from towns all over the nation.¹³³ The PDRH platform party called for many vindications, but two of the most significant to workers were the creation of a Labor Code and the call for substantial agrarian reform.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Local historians and current day organizers claim that these are the Communist Party organizers who were the first to organize workers in the banana *fincas*, and that their main organizing tactic was to distribute *El Martillo*, a worker newspaper that circulated in the *fincas* of the banana companies at the time. It is believed that the first Communist Party was organized in 1929 by Juan Pablo Wainright and Manuel Cáliz Herrera.

¹³⁰ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 136.

¹³¹ The real preoccupation to the U.S. Embassy was the development of Guatemala's October Revolution and the risk that these ideals would eventually seep into Honduras and other countries. Guatemalans were closely watched and tracked in U.S. consular reports. Ibid. 136. (Author's translation).

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 137.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

Vanguardia Revolucionaria, the newspaper of the PDRH, was one of the main activities of the party.¹³⁵ The PDRH organizers had two major tasks: to distribute the paper clandestinely to the banana *fincas* and to develop a committee in each region and department where workers would begin to discuss the ideas and principles of organizing.¹³⁶ The newspaper was essential in the *fincas* where workers began to identify their issues, denounce their problems, and write letters to the editor asking the paper to print their issues and demands. It was a place where the abuses they endured could be aired and known by others. Soon, workers began to ask PDRH members to help them by drafting petitions to their supervisors to solve some of their individual workplace issues.

En infinidad de ocasiones [los trabajadores] se acercaron para que se les hicieran notas dirigidas a determinado jefe departamental de la Compañía, reclamándole mejores salarios.¹³⁷

[On infinite number of occasions [workers] got close to us so that we would write notes addressed to a particular departmental supervisor of the Company, asking for improvement in wages.]

The Tela Railroad Company never responded to these petitions but the letter-writing to the supervisors and company continued repeatedly. The organizers of the PDRH helped workers write the petitions as often as they wished. Eventually, Rivera explains, "workers came to the conclusion that this path was not going allow them to obtain the results they wished; they continued to meet and began to organize."¹³⁸

The organizing objective, Rivera explains, took many years. There were about five members of the PDRH who were engaged in building clandestine organizing

¹³⁵ The original name of the newspaper was *Vanguardia* and was later changed to *Vanguardia Revolucionaria*. In the 1920s the worker parties also used this tactic.

¹³⁶ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 144-145.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

committees (small secret study groups). The PDRH had initiated their work in 1945-1946 with the objective of strengthening the party with membership and building consciousness among workers about working class conditions,

En estas reuniones, los agentes [del PDRH] explicaban a los obreros que era necesario organizarse y luchar ordenadamente para obtener resultados. Así fue como algunos departamentos de la compañía bananera lograron organizarse, constituyendo sus propias directivas.¹³⁹ *[In these meeting, the agents [of the PDRH] explained to workers that it was necessary to organize and struggle in an organized manner to obtain results. That is how some departments in the banana company managed to get organized, constituting their very own directive and leadership.]*

The PDRH organizers were perceived to be communist agitators.¹⁴⁰ They were persecuted and forced to meet secretly, and meetings were sporadic. Often-times workers would walk to the edge of the *finca*, meet the PDRH organizer, and walk him to the meeting location. After the meeting they would then walk them back to the town. Meetings with workers consisted of no more than four or five people, as larger concentrations would raise suspicion. It was not until right before the strike that organizers witnessed a meeting of one hundred or more people.¹⁴¹ PDRH members and worker organizers met for hours in the dead of night, and walked long hours to bring propaganda and newspapers. The workers took and disseminated them eagerly, and many would bury the newspapers and documents in the fields for fear that they would be discovered. Because organizing the worker committees was highly penalized, PDRH organizers had to be careful and highly selective in finding workers who were in

¹³⁹ Ibid., 145.

¹⁴⁰ The U.S. Embassy attempted to curtail international travel in between *campos* and recorded and tracked the presence and "danger" of groups such as the PDRH. Standard Fruit workers were perceived to be less dangerous than the Francisco Rios group in Tela. "Robert H. Smith, Vice President Overseas, Standard Fruit." Labor Folder 1954-55, Box 176(2), November 26, 1954. Record Group 84, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁴¹ Julio C. Rivera, interview by author, San José, Costa Rica, July 2008.

solidarity and were reliable. They had no trouble identifying these workers: many had been working for the company for a long time. They attended meetings and came up with their own goals.¹⁴² Without this long trajectory of the PDRH organizing at the local level in the *fincas*, the coordination during the 1954 strike would have been nearly impossible.

Because of the incessant persecution of labor organizers who were perceived to be Marxists, the new labor leadership was developed covertly, a tradition that continued into the 1940s with the creation of the second Communist Party of Honduras in 1954. There was an understanding among organizers that they needed to understand the plight of banana workers by working in the fields and being as close as possible to the lives of *fincas* workers. This notion of organizing from within the ranks of workers can be traced to Manuel Cáliz Herrera, Juan Pablo Wainwright, and others in the early 1920s. Left-leaning PDRH organizers and sympathetic workers later became involved in the second founding of the Communist Party in 1954.

Liberal Party members were persecuted as much as PDRH and Communist Party members were. The Liberal Party was persecuted under the Carías Andino regime for its opposition to the Nationalist Party, a tension that was palpable well into the 1950s. Both groups, the PDRH and the Liberal Party had distinct agendas, but the government and police saw them as one and the same and both an equal threat. The Carías Andino dictatorship was a straightjacket to any worker movement and demands for a Labor Code. Many organizers, both PDRH members and Liberal Party activists, were exiled in nearby Guatemala in the early 1940s. Despite their exile, organizers and intellectuals continued organizing; in fact, many reentered the country illicitly, walking

¹⁴² Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 145.

across mountains and rivers from nearby Guatemala, to continue building toward the Honduran worker strike.¹⁴³

The Communist Party, however, was perceived as organized by "outside agitators" and as "unpatriotic," Rivera recalls:

En aquellos tiempos, organizar a los trabajadores era un delito que se podía pagar con la muerte; era un acto de conspiración no solo contra las compañías bananeras, sino contra el Estado mismo.¹⁴⁴
[In those times, organizing workers was a crime that could be paid with death; it was an act of conspiracy, not just against the banana companies but also against the state.]

The same claims were not made of the Liberal Party. Despite facing persecution during elections, Liberal leaders and members could exist somewhat publicly in ways that the Communist Party members could not. The different spaces these groups occupied and their different roles in the organizing in the banana fields explain later power dynamics among worker organizations during the strike and committee building process.¹⁴⁵

Tracking down Communist Party members and "labor agitators" was in large part the work of the U.S. Embassy in Honduras.¹⁴⁶ In a memo to Embassy officials in February of 1953, an aide explained that the CTAL would be having their gathering in Chile in March of 1953 and that leaders of the newspaper *Voz Obrera* and others would seek visas to attend.¹⁴⁷ This memo was intended to prevent the paper's leadership from

¹⁴³ Such is the case of Ventura Ramos and Rigoberto Padilla Rush. Many also kept in touch via letters and messages with other party members.

¹⁴⁴ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 144. Workers testimonies also reflect the danger Rivera speaks of here, belonging to the Liberal party or any left leaning party was extremely dangerous for them as well. Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Julio C. Rivera, interview by author, San José, Costa Rica, July, 2008; Leonardo Bautista, interview by author, Campo Limones, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006.

¹⁴⁵ Teresina Rossi Matamoros, interview by author, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, December, 21, 2006; *Ibid.*, 361-62.

¹⁴⁶ "Labor Troubles along North Coast of Honduras" quoted in Euraque, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic Region and State in Honduras, 1870-1972*, 37.

¹⁴⁷ The single note tracks these individuals: Rodolfo López and Carlos Bernhard, the editor and administrator of the newspaper, and the secretary general of *Comité Coordinador Obrero*, Jose Argueta.

obtaining visas to travel to the worker congress. Jose Argueta Urquíá and the *Comité Coordinador Obrero* (Coordinating Worker Committee) were under constant vigilance due to their weekly newspaper *Voz Obrera*, which was widely read in the banana fields, and also for the organization's perceived connections to the CTAL. An extensive Labor Report (1952) by the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa to the U.S. State Department cited efforts by the Honduran government to create a Labor Bureau and change the existent labor rules and regulations.¹⁴⁸ But the biggest perceived threat in the area of labor was the trip of activists, including Argueta, to Asunción, Paraguay on behalf of *Voz Obrera* a worker paper of the CCO.¹⁴⁹ *Voz Obrera* identified explicitly as "strictly leftist and apparently completely financed by the CTAL from Mexico."¹⁵⁰ The same memo explained that these worker papers were "anti-administration" newspapers because they

... mentioned the perennial chant of exploitation by the United Fruit Company. In most cases attacks were made against the Company's policy of labor turn-over and accusations were made that the Company was dismissing 2 to 3 thousand employees at a time. In many cases the accusation is true but the Company really cannot be accused of any exploitation since the labor turn-over on the farms and the wharves is seasonal or when the opportunity applies and most of the workers whom the Company is accused of dismissing ordinarily are rehired within a short period in a different place or are occasional workers to start with.¹⁵¹

The reality in the banana *fincas* and on the wharves of the UFCo. and Standard Fruit Company was that workers' contracts lasted as long as the work demand lasted. Worker job security and seniority were nonexistent concepts for companies and even Honduran government representatives. Workers, however, were already starting to demand better

"Aide-memoire" No. 96, Box 177 (3), Labor Affairs 1953 Folder, Record Group, 84, National Archives College Park, Maryland.

¹⁴⁸ "Annual Labor Report-Calendar year 1952," Box 177 (Old Box 3), Folder Labor Affairs, 1953. Record Group 84, National Archives College Park, Maryland.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

pay and the security of employment. These demands were not only made by banana company workers but also workers in other industries in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa. By 1952, Honduras was ripe for change, at least in the various workplaces, both national and foreign owned companies.¹⁵²

While the memorandum identified that the CCO was doing the bulk of the labor organizing, a smaller organization called *Sociedad Esfuerza[sic] y Cultura* was cited as having connections to the CTAL due to its representative Angel Castillo's travel to Mexico City.¹⁵³ Castillo and his group were perceived as dangerous because of their internal labor work. Their international connections most preoccupied the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa, as they were concerned that funding came from more developed labor movements in countries such as Mexico or Argentina. These small labor committees demonstrated the spurt of new labor organizations in the country and the continuity of older efforts. At the same time the *Federación de Asociaciones Femeninas Hondureñas* was attempting to gain suffrage, but their efforts were not perceived to be as threatening as the working class organizing happening around the American enclaves.

The U.S. Embassy's strategy to combat the 'communist threat' was to train leaders in the newly created Honduran Labor Bureau "to bring democratic labor organizational techniques and know-how into Honduras to cultivate the field as a preventative [means], so to speak, against Communist Labor agitation."¹⁵⁴ The U.S. labor representatives, Arturo Jaregui and Serafino Romualdi, came on behalf of the *Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajo* (Inter American Regional Workers' Organisation, ORIT), and they became trainers and advisors to the Honduran

¹⁵² The same memo details that various newspapers accused "local commerce and foreigners (which included Turcos and Gringos, an all-inclusive term) of exploiting workers." Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ "U.S. Embassy Memo." November 24, 1953. Box 177 (Box 3) Labor Affairs Folder 1953, Record Group 84, 300-570.5, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

government as emerging leaders of the labor union. The U.S. Embassy connection and reliance on the ORIT was meant to be kept secret and downplayed.¹⁵⁵

Previous Strike Movements

The Honduran General Strike of 1954 was not the first effort by workers to organize for better wages. There were several significant strikes and work stoppages that led up to the 1954 strike, both in the Tela Railroad Company and Standard Fruit Company *fincas*. These previous strikes demonstrate a process of claims-making that would become practice for workers throughout these years, even during the Carías Andino dictatorial repression. Despite the scant availability of documentation on some of these previous efforts, one can trace a historical precedent of worker agency within the banana enclave, efforts that represented significant steps towards building a labor movement.

Though the evidence is slim, historians have documented several strike efforts in the country.¹⁵⁶ In 1869, British Rail builders recruited Jamaican workers and Honduran troops were called on to protect them from deserters.¹⁵⁷ In 1909, workers went on strike to protest mining accidents while working for the Rosario Mining Company. Their demands called for better working conditions and better pay.¹⁵⁸ Strikers had to face the “San Juancito Police,” a security force paid for by the Rosario Mining Company of New York and Honduras.¹⁵⁹ According to Mario Posas, the key period of activity that contributed to the forming of an organized labor response to U.S. companies, especially

¹⁵⁵ "Letter from Wymberly Coerr to William P. Hudson," July 20, 1954, U.S. Embassy, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, Box 176 (Box 2) Labor Affairs 1954-55, Record Group 84, 300-570.5, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁵⁶ Coinciding with Mario Posas and Dario Euraque, the labor movement and strikes before 1916 are nonexistent in the U.S. State Department consular records. Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño* 67; Dario Euraque, "The Threat of Blackness to the Mestizo Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Honduran Banana Economy, 1920s and 1930s," in *Banana Wars Power Production and History in the Americas*, ed. Steve and Mark Moberg striffler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003)

¹⁵⁷ Acker, *Honduras the Making of a Banana Republic*, 78.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

in the North Coast begins with the 1916 strike and extends into 1932.¹⁶⁰ The earlier strikes of the North Coast took place in the three banana companies in operation: the Cuyamel (later incorporated into the UFCo.), the Truxillo Steamship and Fruit Company (a subsidiary of the UFCo. closed in 1934) and the Vaccaro Brothers and Company (incorporated into the Standard Fruit Company in the 1920s). From Posas' description of the earlier strikes we can deduce the following assertions: the strike demands were overwhelmingly centered around demanding wage increases, particularly the 1920, 1925, 1930, 1932 strikes.¹⁶¹ The strikes also made quality of life demands around access to healthcare and lower prices in the purchasing of goods from the company commissaries.¹⁶² The demands remained workplace and issue driven. Regionally specific demands never led to a labor contract or the formation of an organization, such as a labor union, and certainly did not have the larger goal or the formation of a labor code in mind. Lastly, the strikes that preceded the 1954 strikes were not always violent; workers exhibited a great deal of restraint, demonstrating organized and disciplined action against the military troops called in by the companies. More often than not, the Honduran government acted in response to company complaints and requests for intervention.

The outcomes of previous strikes also reflect a power struggle between the companies and workers through which workers were successful at building unity. Honduran government mediation often reflected a sympathy for the companies and an urgency about getting production back on schedule. The collusion of company power with the complicit Honduran state is evidenced by the outcomes, in which workers were unable to attain the right to organize a union. Although the positive outcomes of the strikes and advances for workers were piecemeal, changes remained in place through

¹⁶⁰ Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*, 67.

¹⁶¹ There were strikes in 1916, 1920, 1920, 1925, 1930 and 1932. Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid., 70-83.

worker vigilance and action. In earlier strikes, workers' mobilizing and negotiating power came from a large number of *finca* workers. Worker committees in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa understood that *finca* workers were an important sector of the population with the potential for organizing and the power to shut down production.

Earlier strikes: Tela Railroad Company

The first strike effort documented was in 1916, where six hundred workers went on strike to protest the exchange rate at the Cuyamel commissary.¹⁶³ The official exchange rate was 2.50 Lempiras but the company commissary gave workers and exchange rate of 2.31 Lempiras for a one U.S. dollar.¹⁶⁴ Company commissaries were the only stores allowed to operate in the banana enclaves and workers were forced to shop there. There was animosity between workers and the company when the exchange rate benefited the company rather than workers.¹⁶⁵ The strike started on a Sunday, when workers did not show up to their usual positions to cut fruit. The company tried to break the strike by hiring *esquirolas* (strike breakers who happened to be black workers).¹⁶⁶ From the description of this strike we can infer racial tensions between the black strike breakers and the strikers, assumed to be *mestizos* in the newspaper account cited by Posas.¹⁶⁷ The company used race as a divide and conquer wedge to create animosity among workers during heightened times of labor activity. This divide was also present during the regular work year as company policies enforced segregation between workers. Black workers hired as strikebreakers cut about five thousand stems in the dead of night. Striking workers responded by destroying the stems.¹⁶⁸ Local troops

¹⁶³ The company was located in the Northwest part of the Honduran coast. Elisavinda Echeverri-Gent, "Labor, Class and Political Representation: A Comparative Analysis of Honduras and Costa Rica" (University of Chicago, 1988); Euraque, "The Threat of Blackness to the Mestizo Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Honduran Banana Economy, 1920s and 1930s," 232-235.

¹⁶⁴ Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*, 71.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*, 71-72.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

arrested four hundred striking workers and imprisoned them,¹⁶⁹ but workers were released the next day.¹⁷⁰ Echeverri-Gent documented another strike in 1919 at the Cuyamel Fruit Company led by British office employees.¹⁷¹ Overall, these strikes seemed to be workplace-issue focused without solidarity actions from other departments or areas of work.

Posas's research analyzed a series of strikes through 1925 which were linked to national issues. The next strike to take place in what would become Tela Railroad Company territory was in 1925 in a sugar mill owned and operated by Cuyamel in La Lima. The strike began in the sugar mill and extended to various other work centers around the North Coast.¹⁷² Their demands included eliminating pay by coupons (*ordenes*), an increase in pay to two dollars a day, weekly pay, access for family members to be treated in the company hospital, a twenty-five percent reduction in rates from the company store, and what eventually would be an important demand: the fight for the eight-hour day.¹⁷³

Two things are remarkable about this strike. First, workers earned many of their demands, among them the eight-hour day (considered the largest gain) and access to the company hospital; and second, there was a link made from these localized movements to the national scene (with government mediation).¹⁷⁴ All of the demands were met except the wage increase and the price reduction in prices at the company commissary.¹⁷⁵ The company also allowed for the first time "*vivanderos*," or local

¹⁶⁹ Workers were taken to the Fortaleza de Omoa, where they were held in the courtyard and not in cells. Perhaps in sympathy for their cause, they were released the next day.

¹⁷⁰ Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño* 72.

¹⁷¹ Echeverri-Gent, "Labor, Class and Political Representation: A Comparative Analysis of Honduras and Costa Rica"

¹⁷² Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*, 74-76.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 74-76.; The Company had the practice of paying every 10 days and monthly. It is important to note that workers in 1925 demanding healthcare for the family in the Company hospital marks an important time demonstrating the growth of families, women and children in the *fincas*.

¹⁷⁴ Wage increases, the workday, and access to hospitals during the strike of 1954 were again three of the primary demands. The government mediator, Posas cites, notes that the strike spread to Tela Railroad Company, the Standard Fruit Company and Truxillo Railroad Company. *Ibid.*, 74-76.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

vendors, to enter the *campos* to sell items to workers.¹⁷⁶ A government mediator, Francisco Martinez Funez, was sent to ensure the workers would negotiate with the company. Other strikes occurred in the various banana companies, but those demands are not documented.¹⁷⁷ This particular effort was viewed by local media and the company as a revolutionary movement in the North Coast, and warnings against "communists" were issued.¹⁷⁸ Although allowing local vendors to enter the *campos* and sell goods and wares to workers during payday may seem like a small concession given that workers' biggest demand was that of improved wages, it would prove to be an important one for women and other migrants to gain entry into the *campos* for work alongside the *finca* workers.

In 1932 the Tela Railroad Company and the Truxillo Railroad Company held significant strikes. Once again the demands revolved around wage increases. During this period, companies were suffering from the stock market crash of 1929 in the United States and cited falling banana prices as an excuse to lower wages in the ports for stevedores from twenty-five cents to seventeen cents pay per day,¹⁷⁹ as well as to lower the price of bananas purchased from independent national producers. The day after the stevedores went on strike it was characterized as a "revolutionary eruption."¹⁸⁰ The strike was well organized and there was little violence from workers. Two-hundred company-hired *esquiroles* ended up joining the strikers. After five days of striking, the stevedores only managed to win back twenty cents pay per day; the other demands were met.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. , 77-83.

¹⁸⁰ At the time President Mejia Colindres declared martial law in the North Coast. The Company urged workers to return to work and threatened to abandon its *fincas* in the region. Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Such demands met included a clock to mark worked time, a promise to improve wages as soon as economic conditions improved, improving food and living arrangement for workers who were laid off in between jobs. Of the documentation that Mario Posas reviews, there is little information on the Truxillo Railroad Company strike. Possibly government mediators were sent to settle strike. Ibid.

The *Costa Abajo* strikes (strikes in the *campos* that would eventually form part of the UFCo. Empire) demonstrated continuous effort by workers in the North Coast to demand better wages and improved work conditions. They also set a precedent for workers to pursue this avenue of collective action and to make demands within the enclave economies.¹⁸² The win of the eight-hour day at the Cuyamel sugar mill would also set an important precedent for workers to issue local demands.

Most remarkable was the demand for the eight-hour day, which according to Posas' documentation, was met, though a written document is not available. It appears that the struggle for the eight-hour day was a constant struggle throughout the country. In the 1932 strike of the Tela Railroad Company, workers won a time clock that marked their work time.¹⁸³ The fight for the eight-hour day would be stifled by the Carías Andino dictatorship. Most union organizing efforts continued during the dictatorship of Carías Andino, even if clandestinely. Two major efforts were the 1940 TACA Airline strike and the effort to organize in the banana *fincas* of the PDRH in 1946, two efforts that sought enforcement of the eight-hour day and overall labor rights. Both these efforts met repressive ends, the last effort held back by the 1944 massacre at a Liberal Party rally in San Pedro Sula.¹⁸⁴ Nevertheless, winning respect for the eight-hour day was an important and ongoing effort among workers.¹⁸⁵

In other industries, concern about fair work hours and pay were commonplace. Local efforts, for instance, were constantly being initiated by workers in San Pedro Sula

¹⁸² Because of little documentation for this period we do not have further information of the individual departments and conditions and activities workers undertook to change them before taking a strike vote. It is also unclear if the demands and concessions won had lasting effects or if they led to written agreements.

¹⁸³ Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

¹⁸⁵ "Artículo 191. La jornada máxima obligatoria asalariada será de ocho horas diarias y por casa seis días de trabajo habrá uno de descanso." Letter from the Central Strike Committee to the Mediation Commission. June 17, 1954. Page 13. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." Archivo Privado Mario Posas (Hereafter referred to as APMP).

as late as 1946 by various workers associations against their Honduran employers in the city. This same year a worker society "La Fraternidad" sent a worker delegation and letter to the Political Governor of Cortés to have the eight-hour day law respected:

Para pedir a gobernación que se procediera a exigir el cumplimiento de la ley constitucional en cuanto se refiere a las ocho horas de trabajo a que se limita la jornada, el señor Gonzales Aragón para reforzar su petición aludió a varios abusos en los diferentes ramos.¹⁸⁶

[To ask the governorship and demand the constitutional law referring to the eight hour day of work, Mr. Gonzales Aragon, to reinforce his petition gave some examples of the abuses [of the law] in various industries.]

To this request the Political Governor of Cortés responded that "almost all the companies observed the eight-hour day but there were a few companies that surpassed the limit by half an hour or an hour." He explained that his office had taken steps to investigate the matter and further circulate the information to the various local companies.¹⁸⁷

The discussion that ensued demonstrated the *Sociedad Obrera's* urgency to secure a process of reporting the violations to the law. There was no mechanism for reporting to the Political Governor's office or to the police the companies' violations or "*cumplimiento*" of the law. The Political Governor suggested that workers report to this government entity to enforce compliance instead of resolving this issue through the use of organizations, such as *La Fraternidad*, perhaps because such groups were perceived to cause more antagonism with the employer. Accounts of this discussion demonstrate the government paternalism towards workers' lives and concerns. Their issues were not resolved. While the government entity felt they would investigate the matter for

¹⁸⁶ Acta No. 226, Libro Copiador 1946, Pages 60-65. Archivo de Gobernación de Cortés. San Pedro Sula, Honduras.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

workers, the reality was that the law was not observed and mechanisms were not in place to penalize employers.

By this time, in the early 1940s, worker associations had already submitted a petition to the National Congress demanding a National Labor Code, which they also presented to the Political Governor of Cortés. To this petition, the Political Governor responded that a full study of the situation needed to be conducted and presented to the National Congress, thereby putting the responsibility on the national body. Actions like these, on behalf of worker committees and associations in San Pedro Sula, kept the issue at the forefront and further exhibited worker agency within an ineffective process. It also demonstrated that the arena of worker rights and respect for the eight-hour day were contested areas, despite existing legislation, and workers had to stay vigilant and push forward. Prior to the strike of 1954, universal demands of a labor code were already a commonplace demand among the more progressive worker committees and associations.¹⁸⁸

Earlier strikes: Standard Fruit Company

The first strike documented for the Vacarro Brothers was in 1920, when one thousand workers went on strike, leaving the *fincas* and setting off to La Ceiba to discuss the strike demands with the Political Governor Antonio R. Lagos (*Gobernador Politico*).¹⁸⁹ Workers demanded a wage increase and remained in the town of La Ceiba, demonstrating and organizing for solidarity from local merchants. The dock workers joined their struggle paralyzing the ports. The strike is recognized for the discipline workers exhibited.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*, 76-83.

¹⁹⁰ President Gutierrez sent troops and declared martial law in the region. He also deployed a Mediation Commission to help resolve the conflict. Ibid.

In 1930, another strike erupted in the Standard Fruit Company when workers demanded wage increases and better living conditions.¹⁹¹ The Honduran government declared martial law and determined that the strike was inspired by "communists." However, the gains of this strike included the right to end pay coupons (which could only be used in the company commissary), and cash payments for workers. In 1932, twelve hundred workers from *Costa Arriba* participated in another well organized strike protesting poor wages. The company claimed financial strife as the reason for having not met workers' demands. Workers formed security teams (*patrullas de vigilancia*) to keep the peace among workers and prevent loitering or destruction of company goods. The strike received much support from local merchants and growers in La Ceiba and Savá. The Company gave in on all the demands workers made except wage increases. Workers in the *Costa Arriba* (North Eastern Caribbean Coast) sought wage increases and better living conditions.¹⁹² The strike movements in the Standard Fruit *campos* were more successful in gaining concessions other than wage increases. All of these worker actions in this early period informed the 1954 strike.

A Note on Worker Migration to the North Coast

All the events of the North Coast played out in a region predominantly populated by immigrants, many of whom were migrant workers. The increased migration of workers to the North Coast was crucial to the development of a working class to challenge large banana companies. During the period of 1944 to 1957, the North Coast had the reputation of being the best place to secure work. The North Coast was the land of opportunity, a place where a *campesino*, man or woman, could get a

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Living conditions for the Standard Fruit Company were poor until the 1940s; workers up until that period lived in *manaca* huts (huts made of mud walls and palm leaf roofs) as compared to the wooden *barracones* common in the Tela Railroad Company. Juan Blas Cardona, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.

start on life or even start over. The new banana development also demanded a large workforce, for which the companies relied on large-scale migration networks that developed over time. A steady migrant labor supply was important to keep the banana companies operating. Migrant workers to the North Coast constructed a community and a banana worker culture that fueled the labor movement. Immigrant workers, both men and women, contributed to dramatic transformation of the North Coast.

In the early part of the twentieth century, workers first migrated to the area, lured by promises of wealth from company recruiters tasked with satisfying a need for a larger workforce than the *poquiteros* had attracted. Although the companies recruited workers aggressively, others came drawn by word of mouth and reports, that almost always promised higher wages than those in their villages. Workers often traveled to the North Coast with great hardship. Passage to return home was expensive and the distances great; most people walked for weeks.¹⁹³ Paved roads did not exist between the Department of Olancho in the southeast, Valle in the south, Copán in the west, and the North Coast. Travel from these towns to the banana regions was done on foot, hitching rides on donkeys and horses. The majority of the Olancho residents tended to migrate towards the Standard Fruit Company installations on the eastern riverbank of the Aguán River or the Truxillo Rail Road Company, which existed up until 1934.¹⁹⁴ Migrants from Copán and Valle tended to head into the Cuyamel Fruit Company. After the consolidation of the Tela Railroad Company in 1912, many went to the larger and extensive UFCo *fincas*. Although migrant workers traversed the entire coast looking for work, they initially arrived to work for the Company in a particular *fincas* until it became impossible to remain there, at which point they would move to another *fincas*.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

¹⁹⁴ Karnes, *Tropical Enterprise the Standard Fruit and Steamship Company in Latin America*.

¹⁹⁵ Gerardo Pery Laredo, interview by author, Tornabé, Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006.; Juan Nuñez Sierra, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006.

According to Marvin Barahona, scouts for both Tela Railroad Company and Standard Fruit were sent to secure labor: “During the first years of company activity they would send recruiters to the towns and hamlets to look for workers. The new salaried men would come from the central and southern regions of the country.”¹⁹⁶ These young men, many of whom came from small rural towns and hamlets in Honduras, other Central American countries, and Jamaica, rarely left the North Coast after coming to work and took few leaves of absence from their employment to return home. Rural workers came to the North Coast because the company offered better salaries than what they could earn elsewhere.¹⁹⁷ Pay in the rest of the country was \$0.50 cents a day, while by 1944, banana workers (including migrants) were earning up to \$1.50 to \$2 a day.

Initial migration was primarily male, but from the 1940s onward more *campesina* women migrated north looking for work in the various informal-economy industries in the *campos*. Young women also migrated to the North Coast, and not always with their husbands; many found partners who had also migrated from the interior of Honduras and countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Jamaica. By the 1950s, however, women were arriving in the North Coast on their own looking for work.¹⁹⁸

For the initial migrants who came to work for the Tela Railroad Company, the North Coast was not hospitable. Many times performing grueling tasks such as those of digging canals and clearing dense foliage to plant neat rows of banana trees, men died of malaria, yellow fever, and dysentery.¹⁹⁹ Despite the hardship and inhospitability workers still arrived. Over time, migration networks were useful to immigrants who

¹⁹⁶ Barahona, *La Hegemonía de los Estados Unidos en Honduras (1907-1932)*, 59. (Author's translation).

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 59.

¹⁹⁸ Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February, 5, 2006; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

¹⁹⁹ Kepner Jr., *Social Aspects of the Banana Industry*; Barahona, *La Hegemonía de los Estados Unidos en Honduras (1907-1932)*, 59.

came on their own to the North Coast looking for work. *Campesino* migration, explored from the perspective of workers' lives, demonstrates not only the enclave economies' power over workers but also the subsistence conditions prevalent in Honduras.

Salvadoran migration

Salvadoran migration to the North Coast was not only extensive, but also constant in the first half of the twentieth century. Salvadoran migration of men and women informal workers and family members of *finca* workers grew out of the labor demand from the banana plantations. Salvadoran migrants, who had the longest precedent of living and working within the UFCo and Standard Fruit Company system, often helped their family and friends obtain jobs within the company.

Salvadorans began to migrate to Honduras in the 1910s and 1920s when news of the abundance of work reached El Salvador. The number of registered Salvadorans in Honduras went from 6,260 in 1910 to 13,452 in 1926 (but undocumented migration was common and difficult to measure).²⁰⁰ By the end of the 1920s they "represented roughly 10% of the labour [sic.] force."²⁰¹ Cecilia Menjivar calculates that in 1930, an additional 25,000 Salvadorans migrated to Honduras and that by the 1940s there were 100,000 Salvadorans in the country.²⁰² Euraque found that in 1930, 52% of the immigrant Salvadoran population in Honduras lived in the North Coast and by 1935 the figure had

²⁰⁰ Dario Euraque, "The Threat of Blackness to the Mestizo Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Honduran Banana Economy, 1920s-1930s," in *Banana Wars Power Production and History in the Americas*, ed. Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 236.

²⁰¹ Elisavinda Echeverri-Gent, "Forgotten Workers: British West Indians and the Early Days of the Banana Industry in Costa Rica and Honduras," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 24, no. 2 (May 1992): 301.

²⁰² Cecilia Menjivar, *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America* (University of California Press, 2000), 40-42.

risen to 62%.²⁰³ Barahona estimates that there were about 300,000 Salvadorans in Honduras in 1944, mostly in the North Coast and laboring for the banana companies.²⁰⁴

Landless Salvadoran *campesinos* migrated to Honduras to escape hunger and find work. The coffee boom of the 1920s was devastating for *campesinos* in El Salvador, because the traditional *ejido* lands (communal land), were converted into private farms.²⁰⁵ The coffee export economy slowly built a small but powerful elite class in that country with a corresponding large poor landless peasant class of *jornaleros* (day workers). The plight of landless *jornaleros* hit a critical point in 1932. After organizing and struggling to push for land reform, they confronted police forces in what resulted in a bloody massacre of mostly indigenous peoples. Jeffrey Gould and Aldo Lauria-Santiago have documented that the period of the 1920s in El Salvador, leading up to the *Matanza* (Massacre) of 1932, was a fertile time for union organizing and leftist organizations such as those led by Farabundo Martí and other Communist Party organizers, many of whom were indigenous.²⁰⁶ The organizing efforts attempted to end growing hunger among peasants by reclaiming arable land. These [day] workers were searching for an "alternative to authoritarian capitalistic modernity," a class warfare challenge to the landed elite.²⁰⁷ The 1932 *Matanza* strengthened the dictatorship of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez (1931-1944), a period that saw continued oppression and little land redistribution.²⁰⁸ Many workers, landless peasants, and marginalized communities fled or migrated to the Honduran North coast. Their presence influenced the North Coast profoundly, first in the creation of networks that were useful

²⁰³ Euraque, "The Threat of Blackness to the Mestizo Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Honduran Banana Economy, 1920s-1930s," 236-237.

²⁰⁴ Barahona has noted that the largest presence of foreigners in the 1910 census were Salvadorans (6,260) and Guatemalans (5,779). Marvin Barahona, *Evolución Histórica de la Identidad Nacional* (Tegucigalpa: Editorial Guaymuras, 2002), 263.

²⁰⁵ Jeffrey L. Gould and Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920-1932* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 7, 16-20.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 63-98, 252-59.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 241-42.

for finding work and later in the use of these networks in the organizing of the 1954 strike.

The state, immigration control

While immigrants were desired during the early development period of the banana *fincas*, by the 1920s immigration entry was controlled. According to Elisavinda Echeverri-Gent, the Tela Railroad and the Truxillo Railroad, both of them United Fruit subsidiaries, recruited British West Indian workers in first two decades of the twentieth century to work in the *fincas*; in fact, the company recruited more workers than it needed. The recruitment of Jamaican workers created a "surplus labor power allow[ing] them to keep labour costs down."²⁰⁹ By the 1920s, the Honduran state was concerned with the British West Indian migration. Many Hondurans saw these workers as competition. The elites at the time were also engaging in the national project of *mestizaje*, which also meant a rejection of blackness. Black workers presented a problem to the formation of Honduras as an indo-mestizo nation. Perhaps more concerned about the *mestizo* nation than black migration, Honduran elites, government officials, journalists, and writers—as well as the leftist organizers attempting to organize the North Coast in the 1920s—engaged in xenophobic practices which were primarily aimed at Jamaicans.

The first effort to address immigration flow came during the period of the Liberal Reforms, when the state sought to increase European immigration to aid in the industrialization process of developing an export economy.²¹⁰ Initial efforts came in February of 1866 when the Honduran congress passed *La Ley de Inmigración* (the

²⁰⁹ Echeverri-Gent, "Forgotten Workers: British West Indians and the Early Days of the Banana Industry in Costa Rica and Honduras," 298.

²¹⁰ Barahona, *Honduras en el Siglo 20 una Sintesis Histórica*; Jorge Alberto Amaya, *Los Arabes Palestinos en Honduras (1900-1950)* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 2006).

Immigration Law).²¹¹ At the time, the immigration law was intended to encourage foreign investment by making it appealing to migrate and invest in Honduras. Among some of the guarantees was the right of immigrants to be treated as native Hondurans if they took up residence in the country. Immigrants who had letters proving they had lived in the country for five years and had public land under cultivation could claim it as theirs. There was a suspension of taxes for importing machinery, tools, instruments, and books for a period of eight years. Finally, immigrants renting lands or plantations would not be required to pay more than would native Hondurans.²¹² While Hondurans expected great migration from Europe, it was Palestinians and other Arab immigrants who made their way to Honduras's North Coast and towns in the 1920s and made up 12% percent of the regional population by 1930.²¹³ At first they were peddlers selling their wares, arriving in Mexico or El Salvador and then making their way to the North Coast.²¹⁴

Anti-immigration decrees issued in 1929 and in 1934 sought to restrict migration of black Jamaicans and Arabs among other immigrants. In 1929, a law decreed that "Arab, Turks, Syrians, Armenians, blacks, and Chinese had to post 2500 dollars before entering the country."²¹⁵ Similarly in 1930, an immigration law prohibited the migration of "blacks, Chinese, and gypsies" and the other races and ethnicities; "Arabs, Turks, Syrians, Armenians, Palestinians, Czechoslovaks, Lebanese, and Polish" were not permitted to enter unless they showed proof that they came to work in "agriculture and or to promote new industries."²¹⁶

²¹¹ Amaya, *Los Arabes Palestinos en Honduras (1900-1950)*, 31.

²¹² *La Ley de Inmigración*, 26 de Febrero de 1866. Ibid., 31-33.

²¹³ Ibid. ; Nancie L. González, *Dollar, Dove, and Eagle One Hundred Years of Palestinian Migration to Honduras* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), 61, 90-91.

²¹⁴ González, *Dollar, Dove, and Eagle One Hundred Years of Palestinian Migration to Honduras* ; Amaya, *Los Arabes Palestinos en Honduras (1900-1950)* González, *Dollar, Dove, and Eagle One Hundred Years of Palestinian Migration to Honduras*, 61, 68-69.

²¹⁵ Dario Euraque, *Conversaciones Historicas Con el Mestizaje y su Identidad Nacional en Honduras* (San Pedro Sula, Honduras: Centro Editoria, 2004), 98-99.

²¹⁶ Marvin Barahona, *Evolución Histórica de la Identidad Nacional* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 1991), 263-264; Euraque, *Conversaciones Historicas Con el Mestizaje y su Identidad*

The first two decades of the twentieth century proved to be an especially dangerous period for British Jamaicans and other West Indian workers at the hands of the mostly *mestizo* workers, who saw them as competition, or a company ploy to replace workers that attempted to organize. Labor organizers at the time demanded their deportation.²¹⁷ The xenophobic actions by labor organizers, and *mestizo* workers, were driven by racial assumptions against British West Indians and other Caribbean black workers. Discrimination arose for a variety of reasons, such as competition for work and the perceived favoritism of U.S. companies for West Indian workers due to their ability to speak English. The conditions and exploitation that migrant workers faced were part and parcel of the process of economic development process set forth by the liberal reform period. Worker experiences, including migration experiences, prompted labor militancy on the banana *fincas* and various company departments.

Conclusion

The 1954 strike actors inherited three legacies of struggle from the early PDRH, CCO and CLO organizers: first, that organizing in the workplace was a clandestine activity, and if found, a worker could not only lose his job, but end up in prison. Second, organizers were not outside agitators as the companies claimed; they either were banana workers or became workers during the organizing process.²¹⁸ Third, by 1944 the site of struggle was clear to Honduran organizers: the Tela Railroad Company and the Standard Fruit Company *fincas* and camps. Although none of the strikes in the

Nacional en Honduras, 98-99.; González, *Dollar, Dove, and Eagle One Hundred Years of Palestinian Migration to Honduras*, 90.

²¹⁷ Euraque deduces that Salvadoran workers were a larger group than Jamaican workers were in 1916. Echeverri-Gent claims the opposite, despite a large presence of British West Indian workers. Both agree that this period was perilous for black workers. Echeverri-Gent, "Forgotten Workers: British West Indians and the Early Days of the Banana Industry in Costa Rica and Honduras," 301.; Euraque, "The Threat of Blackness to the Mestizo Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Honduran Banana Economy, 1920s-1930s," 234-239.

²¹⁸ The Tela Railroad Company attempted to discredit the strike leaders of the first committee by accusing them of being 'outside agitators' and not even workers. Their position as workers gave them power and access with *finca* workers.

early years forced the transcendental changes that resulted from the 1954 general strike, they set a historical precedent for confronting exploitative working conditions and unbridled company power. They formed the seeds of a new more powerful labor movement.

Workers and their militancy, often forgotten in the discussion of the transformation of the North Coast, dramatically changed the region. Their cultural, political, and economic influence was crucial to the construction of a labor movement.

CHAPTER 3:

LA GRAN HUELGA DEL 1954:

LABOR ORGANIZING IN THE BANANA LABOR CAMPS

*[El sindicato] entro en juego el '54, pero el '49 empezaron [a organizar]. Vinieron esos tres hombres... [y buscaban] cinco hombres en cada campo. Esa organización se hizo de cinco en cinco. Yo buscaba a los compañeros, los más centrados, los consientes...y les iba hablando. A mí me dieron ese cargo...Porque nosotros sabíamos cuando la huelga se iba a levantar ocho días antes nos avisaron a nosotros. Bueno tal día estén ya listos que es parada de trabajo en todas las fincas. Y así fue...Si ya estaba el plan preparado. Fue dura esa huelga.*¹

[The union] entered into play in '54 but organizing started in '49. Three men came...[they looked for] five men in each campo. It was organized five by five. I would look for coworkers, the more centered and conscious ones...I would talk with them. They gave me that responsibility...Because we knew eight days before the strike began, they notified us. Well I would tell workers, be ready to stop work such and such day there will be a stoppage in all the *fincas*. That is how it was...the plan was already prepared. The strike was hard.]

In late April and the early days of May 1954, a series of worker actions exposed a collection of complaints and demands against the Tela Railroad and Steamship Company, a subsidiary of the United Fruit Company, hereinafter referred to as "Tela Railroad Company" or the "Company." These actions culminated in the Honduran General Strike of 1954, the first strike in Honduras to have influence on a national scale. The strike forced the banana companies in the region to negotiate better working conditions in a contract with workers, to recognize the workers' union, and to support codification of workers' rights at a national level.²

¹ Leonardo Bautista, interview by author, campo Limones, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006.

² Teresina Rossi Matamoros, interview by author, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, December 21, 2006.; Marvin Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 2004), 333.

The conventional national narrative of the strike, an indisputably monumental event in Honduran history, focuses on a single event as the trigger of a rapid and sudden general strike. According to reports from the United Fruit Company and national newspapers, the port workers in Puerto Cortés stopped work to demand the rehire of a stevedore they perceived to have been unjustly fired.³ The port workers' actions were a response to the Company's unwillingness to respond to a workers' petition and the subsequent unfair firing. Furor over this news spread across the *fincas* and resulted in work stoppages and demonstrations of solidarity from workers in banana *fincas* owned by the Tela Railroad Company and the competing Standard Fruit Company, as well as various other industries and factories. Firing workers for little or no reason at all was a very common Tela Railroad Company practice.⁴ The news of the work stoppage spread throughout the rest of the North Coast and to major cities in Honduras, culminating in the general strike.⁵ The conventional narrative, however, tells just part of the story.

This chapter focuses on workers' and organizers' testimonies, which reveal a complex unfolding of the strike with multiple tracks of activity. Oral histories, in fact, reveal that each division of the United Fruit Company went on strike at different times and at their own pace. I argue that the strike was neither a spontaneous mass action, nor a top-down coordinated action, but reflected a combination of these characteristics, coupled with worker-initiated actions on the ground. Workers engaged in different ways and paces based on their conditions.⁶ Rank and file workers' narratives provide evidence of several significant elements of the strike history. First, workers' organizing

³ Mario R. Argueta, *La Gran Huelga Bananera 69 Días que Estremecieron a Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Universitaria, 1995), 65.

⁴ Edmundo Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004; Williams, interview by author, Finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 24, 2004; Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006; Angel Martinez, interview by author, Colonial Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, January 29, 2006; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Agapito Robleda Castro, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, August 2, 2006; Julio C. Rivera, interview by author, San José, Costa Rica, July, 2008.

⁵ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 21.

⁶ Teresina Rossi Matamoros, interview by author, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, December 21, 2006.

efforts in the years prior to the strike set the foundation for the successful work stoppage in 1954. The strike can be located within a continuum of workers' experiences, which included perilous work in the *fincas*, traditional responses to injustice, such as strikes and work stoppages, and other efforts to address working conditions and organize in the *fincas*--all of which lay the groundwork for the events of 1954. Second, workers' testimonies identify five geographical points in the region of initial worker activity that led to the general strike; each of these lays claim to the title as the start of the strike. Third, workers provide substantiation of an evolution and escalation from localized activity to coordinated regional activity, to consolidation and eventually centralization as an industry-wide strike that captured solidarity across the North Coast and the nation.

Worker narratives inform this chapter's analysis of a number of issues and themes: the roles of the worker-organizers versus the perception of the predominance of outside agitators; the relationships among workers; the dominance of skilled sectors in the leadership of the strike movements resulting in different experiences among *finca* workers, mechanics, engineers and other Company sectors; the prioritization of a *mestizo* and male workforce in the strike committee; and the different ethno-racial and gendered experiences of all workers in the organizing efforts. This chapter also considers the conflict and collaboration between Liberal Party organizers and left-leaning Marxist organizers, the legacy of these intra-party relations, as well as the use of surveillance and the tensions characterizing the relation between the parties and the U.S. Embassy. Finally, while it is important to analyze the strike as a manifestation of workers' demands and intentions, it is equally important to recognize the impact and

positioning of the strike in the context of Honduran national politics of the period, and against the backdrop of the geopolitical terrain of Central America.⁷

The workers' memories of the strike paint a narrative of worker agency, collaboration, and assertion, marking a moment of change that started on the North Coast with the banana workers and reverberated throughout the entire country. Workers' oral histories reveal that the movement for the strike was not sudden and spontaneous; it was an outgrowth of previous organizing efforts, some public and some clandestine. The initiation and development of the work stoppages that culminated in the 1954 banana strike did not happen simultaneously or identically, but rather through dynamics particular to each of the banana regions and local towns. The strike was also made possible by the historic engagement of an inadvertent collaboration among then left leaning *Partido Democrático Revolucionario Hondureño (PDRH)*, the *Comité Coordinador Obrero (CCO)*, and the newly consolidated *Comité de Lucha Obrera (CLO)*, a worker committee representative of the Communist Party. These parties, particularly the PDRH and the CLO, later clashed in a tense struggle over power and the direction of the strike with the Liberal Party. The activities of these organizations helped to create the context in which the strike developed.

Worker organizations in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, such as the PDRH, CCO, CLO, and international labor federations like the *Confederación de Trabajadores de la América Latina (CTAL)* sought to promote syndicalism and labor movements in the country and region.⁸ Worker committees in these cities would get news of strikes

⁷ Workers were inspired by the popular reforms taking place in nearby Guatemala during the period of 1944 to 1954. The strike in 1954 took place on the eve of the U.S. led coup d'état which ousted President Arbenz Guzman in that country.

⁸ Worker committees, craft organizations worked in coordination with either of these groups: PDRH, CCO or CLO. Honduras did not have a labor code or any labor laws already won by other countries in Central America in the 1920s and 1930s. The Confederation of Latin American Workers (hereinafter referred to as CTAL) was a Marxist leaning Latin American federation of unions; led by notorious figure Lombardo Toledano of Mexico City. Mario Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño* (Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana EDUCA, 1981), 146.

and concessions won by labor movements in other countries. Of particular interest were the struggles of banana workers in Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Colombia.⁹

Banana workers, in the 1940s and 50s, were a desirable organizing target in Honduras.¹⁰ Organizing in the banana industry in Honduras, however, was a challenging task because of the Tela Railroad Company's close relationship with the U.S. Embassy, and its power to influence national politics in its favor. Labor organizers who were aware of workers' conditions continuously attempted to gain access to banana workers to address these issues while at the same time connecting them to larger universal worker conditions.¹¹ Many organizers linked to the PDRH in the North Coast were either Tela Railroad Company workers or had recently obtained jobs in the various departments and *fincas*.¹² Others were local teachers and concerned members of the community who contributed by writing news stories in progressive worker papers, such as *Voz Obrera* and *Vanguardia Revolucionaria*. Various Company departments, led by worker organizers of these groups, were involved in the demand for better salaries.

On May 1, 1954, workers successfully came together to celebrate International Workers' Day in the central parks of San Pedro Sula, La Lima (at the time a hamlet or *aldea* of San Pedro Sula) and El Progreso, where they made demands of the most notorious banana company, the Tela Railroad Company.¹³ Organizers, primarily of the CCO and PDRH, sought to include banana workers and hoped that workers would join

⁹ Workers received news of these labor movements through worker newspapers such as *Vanguardia Revolucionaria* (PDRH newspaper) and *Voz Obrera* (CCO newspaper). During the strike workers received solidarity letters from the labor movements in these countries via communication with the CTAL. Archivo Lombardo Toledano, copias proporcionadas por Archivo Privado de Tomas Erazo Peña. San Pedro Sula, Honduras (from now on referred to as *APTEP*).

¹⁰ The banana enclave functioned as its own entity often resembling a separate country within Honduras, politically and economically secluded from the national reality; workers laboring in the banana fields often lived, worked and spent their free time within the confines of the expansive banana fields and nearby company towns.

¹¹ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 206.

¹² Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August, 8, 2004; Teresina Rossi Matamoros, interview by author, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, December 21, 2006; Julio C. Rivera, interview by author, San José, Costa Rica, July, 2008.

¹³ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 62-63.

in and march during the May 1st International Workers' Day celebration.¹⁴ Ultimately, they also hoped to instill in banana *finca* workers a desire to improve their conditions in each of their work areas and to participate in a movement for working people in the national arena.¹⁵ These committees organized worker support for May 1st celebrations to promote their demands--the need for a Labor Code and the recognition of the right to organize a union. They were well aware that their work and the attempt to organize a May Day protest was a very dangerous act that could lead to severe retaliation; they could lose their jobs, or more dangerously, face military violence and imprisonment.¹⁶ But workers in San Pedro Sula and La Lima, including those who were part of an organized group, PDRH, or CCO, embraced this action as an opportunity to build consciousness among *finca* workers in the Tela Railroad Company and the Standard Fruit Company and to raise awareness of the need and support for the labor code.

At the same time in different regions of the North Coast workers were already organizing in response to objectionable working conditions on their *fincas*. As workers and organizations in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa prepared for the May 1st mobilization, Tela Railroad Company workers moved to address their own workplace issues. Organized worker actions that had been evolving since February were hitting their zenith by late April 1954. There is no evidence that observance of May Day was an impetus for the escalation of organizing tactics in the *fincas* in the regions outside of the cities. But by May 3, all the divisions of the Tela Railroad Company were stopping

¹⁴ The PDRH voted in 1953 to celebrate International Worker's Day on May 1, 1953. The actual strike could not be pulled off that year because communication had reached all sectors; while some sectors did stop work and struck others did not. The May Day action was then postponed for the next year, 1954. Ibid. 206; Julio C. Rivera, interview by author, San José, Costa Rica, July, 2008; Teresina Rossi Matamoros, interview by author, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, December 21, 2006.

¹⁵ Previous attempts to organize International Workers' Day marches were unsuccessful due to police repression. Ibid., 57.

¹⁶ Julio C. Rivera, interview by author, San José, Costa Rica, July, 2008; Teresina Rossi Matamoros, interview by author, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, December 21, 2006; Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August, 8, 2004.

work as a way to address frustrations with working conditions.¹⁷ The departments in or near the Company towns congregated first, but the *finca* workers, many in outlying *fincas* and desolate areas, were still not on strike. Starting May 3, "messengers from the strikers [in the Company towns] rapidly deployed towards all the banana *fincas* and managed to get the support of the thousands of workers,"¹⁸ convening workers in what became the two major strike centers of La Lima and El Progreso.¹⁹

There are numerous stories of the actual beginning of the strike told by people of different towns and regions and by workers of different companies. Some of these divergent narratives present the strike as a singular, spontaneous event where news of initial movements in Puerto Cortés or El Progreso spread to other areas. Closer analysis of the strike, however, reveals that it was an outcome of contemporaneous organizing processes led by the various worker committees, the result of continuous worker activity and consciousness building. The strike spread as a series of organized responses, rooted in a historical practice of organizing in response to lived experience and in developing worker agency and consciousness.

By the early 1950s, workers had a history of collective action at the department level where they regularly presented petitions and led small efforts to improve conditions in their immediate areas of work. In their demands, wage increases were key, but often-times they also sought to improve conditions or demanded the firing of especially cruel supervisors. Other demands required improvements in the company housing, access to healthcare for family, and transportation services. Although there are many narratives which posit various locations and incidents as the beginning of the strike, in reality multiple centers of strike activity emerged simultaneously. Workers'

¹⁷ The *finca* regions were in the vicinity of La Lima, El Progreso, Tela and Bataan in the outskirts of Tela.

¹⁸ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 65. (Author's translation).

¹⁹ In El Progreso workers congregated outside the American Zone, the military pushed them to the *Parque Ramon Rosa* in the center of town. In La Lima, where a central park did not exist, workers congregated at *Campo Chula Vista*, one of the open fields close to Lima Nueva, the Company town.

oral histories identify five major areas of initial activity preceding the strike—La Lima, El Progreso, Tela, Puerto Cortés, and Bataán--where the first days of the strike were extensions of worker actions already set in motion days before the work stoppage.²⁰

The Lead-up to the Strike in La Lima

As the strike spread across Honduras, La Lima became one of the two major strike centers; the other was El Progreso. Like other localities, La Lima had a unique and specific experience of mobilization for the strike that was dictated by local circumstances, decisions, leaders, and actors. National or regional party influences or other organizational directives to join a broad movement were only a part of the story. Long before May 1954, frustration with wages and dissatisfaction with working conditions had motivated workers in La Lima to organize under the guidance of Cesar Coto, one of the local PDRH organizers.²¹ A strong, well-organized worker committee and base had already been established in La Lima prior to the strike and workers followed this local leadership into action in May 1954.

Daniel Madrid Guevara, a member of the worker committee in *Finca Tibombo*, one of the outlying *fincas* farthest from La Lima, explains that the leaders in this *finca* waited explicitly for a message from Cesar Coto in La Lima to stop work and begin to mobilize to the strike center of *Campo Chula Vista* in La Lima.²² They did not look beyond La Lima for leadership or command. While waiting for news from La Lima, other men wanted to initiate a march into town to join other striking workers, but according to Madrid Guevara, these individuals were agitating on behalf of the

²⁰ In Bataán, the company produced a type of banana plant that gave a fibrous material that could be made into rope to assist the United States during World War II. The UFCo previously produced this in the Philippines and actually had a contract with the U.S. state department. This production center no longer exists and I was not able to locate workers who actually worked there. Organizers, however, did mention this work center as an important one during the strike.

²¹ Edmundo Williams, interview by author, *Finca Indiana*, La Lima, Cortés, July 24, 2004; Leonardo Bautista, interview by author, *Campo Limones*, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006.

²² Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006.

Company, which wanted striking workers to march into La Lima prematurely to destroy the organization effort and potentially face *la básica* (the military). Later, workers learned that *el ejército* (military) was waiting in *Campo Dos* near La Lima, prepared to stop the effort by force.²³ Fearing injury of workers at the hands of armed soldiers, organizers adhered to strict orders to wait for communication from the leadership in La Lima before beginning their march into town.²⁴ To thwart the disruptive efforts of pro-Company employees to create confusion, and to affirm their connection to the leadership of the work action, two women volunteered to travel to La Lima to bring news. They set out across hidden paths, through back roads and villages to La Lima, avoiding military posts. They delivered a concealed note from *finca* strike leaders to La Lima strike leaders, explaining the uncertainty back in *Finca Tibombo*. The strike leaders in La Lima assured workers that they would not march until the troops moved from *Campo Dos*. Eventually, the workers marched safely to La Lima, and along the way, convinced workers from the *fincas* they passed to stop working and march with them into town. With the *Finca Tibombo* leadership at the head, workers ensured that work stopped in the outlying *fincas*, always peacefully, and moved into *campo Chula Vista*, the strike center in La Lima.²⁵

A great swell of workers arrived in La Lima by May 3. Once workers congregated in *Campo Chula Vista*, workers organized work committees, donation committees, and *vigilancia* (security) committees. The *patronas* (woman cooks), along with men and women *ayudantas* (cook helpers), cooked for the immense number of workers there, while other men and women secured donations from local merchants and

²³ Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 25, 2004.

²⁴ Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 25, 2004.

²⁵ Newspaper accounts noted the great number of workers striking and their remarkably peaceful strike movement. The fierce *manchados*, those thought to be wedded to alcohol and crude conduct, were not behaving according to the locally understood stereotype.

landowners in La Lima and San Pedro Sula, obtaining entire cows or produce for the community kitchens.²⁶ Men and women were integrated in the security committees that inspected the *fincas* by patrol to make sure that no workers were laboring in the *fincas*. If a worker was found in the *finca* or in the *barracones* (company housing), he was forced to come to the strike center in La Lima. The reasoning behind clearing the *fincas* of workers was twofold. First, workers intended to demonstrate unity in a “*brazos caídos*” (fallen/idle arms) strike until demands were met. They also wanted to prevent the Company from blaming workers for potential violence and destruction of Company property. The strike committees wanted to make sure that the only damage the Company suffered was the loss from the maturing fruit ripening on the stems.²⁷ La Lima, as a strike center, along with El Progreso, was monitored diligently by workers to prevent violence among workers.²⁸ The level of organization and thorough delegation of responsibilities are indications of the discipline of an organized movement, a process that had taken the *Partido Democrático Revolucionario Hondureño* and *Comité de Lucha Obrera* many years to develop and implement.

Early Days of the Strike in El Progreso

El Progreso became one of the other strike centers on the North Coast, and workers also tell of organizing efforts there pre-dating the strike. In El Progreso, Agapito Robleda Castro worked in the Construction Department of the Tela Railroad Company, which built and repaired the *barracones* and other buildings and installations

²⁶ Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Sylvia Robleda, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, July 4, 2006.

²⁷ Julio Antonio Cuellar Mendoza, interview by author, Los Angeles, California, June 5, 2010.

²⁸ Most of the confrontation was initiated by the troops hired by the Company to observe them. Robert McCameron, *Bananas Labor and Politics in Honduras: 1954-1963* (New York: Maxwell School of Citizenship, 1983), 49.

of the Company.²⁹ Robleda Castro was sympathetic to the PDRH, which touted its commitment to moving workers from complacency and fear to collective action, a principle derived from its identity as a workers' organization and from study with other political worker organizations.³⁰ The biggest complaints historically in this department were the construction workers' low salaries and the Company's refusal to pay for workers' train rides back home for weekends.³¹ Between February and May 1954, workers increased their pressure on the Company to address these frustrations.³² In response to the construction workers' complaints, the Company proposed a contract system as a way to deal with their concerns and improve their salaries.³³ The proposed solution was not satisfactory for the department leaders, but workers remained hopeful that the contract system would work for them. Workers primarily wanted a wage increase in some form. As Agapito Robleda told me:

*Había confusión al respecto. Muchos trabajadores miraban con simpatía la propuesta de la compañía bananera, ilusionados por la posibilidad de ingresos elevados.*³⁴

[There was some confusion on this point. Many workers, hopeful that they would receive wage increases, looked at the banana company's proposal sympathetically.]

After much debate, workers agreed to the contract system in the Construction Department, but worker leaders, many of whom were active with the PDRH, convened workers again and managed to change the vote to challenge the contract system.

²⁹ The Construction Department included workers who labored in the workshops in El Progreso but also workers who were deployed on construction assignments in the various *fincas* and *campos*.

³⁰ Agapito Robleda Castro, *La Verdad de la Huelga de 1954 y de la Formación del Sitratenco* (San Pedro Sula, Honduras: Impresora Litografica San Felipe de Jesus S. de R. L., 2008).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

³² *Ibid.*; Agapito Robleda, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, August 2, 2006; Julio C. Rivera, interview by author, San José, Costa Rica, July, 2008.

³³ Agapito Robleda, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, August 2, 2006; Agapito Robleda Castro, *La Verdad de la Huelga de 1954 y de la Formación del Sitratenco* (San Pedro Sula, Honduras: Impresora Litografica San Felipe de Jesus S. de R. L., 1995), 33-36.

³⁴ Agapito Robleda, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, August 2, 2006.

According to Robleda Castro, the second vote was different because workers received an explanation about the drawbacks of the contract system in the Standard Fruit Company and its failure to benefit workers there.³⁵ Once the decision was made to reject the contract system, a commission of workers, including Robleda Castro, was chosen to communicate the final vote to the supervisor nicknamed "*el Sonto*," Alfredo Blecken. Blecken told them to accept the contract system or they would be fired.³⁶ Robleda Castro and other representatives made their way to the other work centers where 139 workers labored in *cuadrillas* in the *Fincas Pajuil, Perdiz, Pato, and Loro* (*fincas* known in the region as *Los Pajaros*) to solicit a collective decision on the matter. Robleda Castro and other representatives of the Construction Department, alongside the laborers in the *finca*, came together for a meeting on April 27, 1954, where they discussed their concerns in the workplace and the prospect of losing their jobs. Feeling extremely indignant about the attitude of the supervisor, they unanimously voted to strike. Workers from the *fincas* in and around El Progreso then 'took over' a passenger train (with the support of railroad conductors and rail workers who later joined the imminent strike movement), spreading the word to workers in all the *fincas* and train terminals about the strike as they passed them on the tracks. Upon arrival in El Progreso, they communicated the decision taken by workers in the *fincas* of *Los Pajaros* to the El Progreso Construction and Engineering departments.³⁷ In total, two

³⁵ The contract system (referred to as '*trabajo por destajo*' by workers), was not advantageous to workers in many departments because the contractor would be paid monthly, and then he would pay workers. Some construction workers earned less or were not paid until a particular project or certain part of the project was concluded, which took days or weeks longer than if they were paid by the Company. Workers knew about the other banana company through various networks, and before the strike, workers could leave a *finca* to find work elsewhere, possibly with the other company. Workers also knew about work conditions in the Standard Fruit Company through the various worker newspapers that circulated in that region. Robleda Castro, *La Verdad de la Hulega de 1954 y de la Formacion del Sitraterco*, 33-36.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ As construction workers were organizing to address their issues, the mechanics in the Engineering Department in El Progreso also felt discontent with the Company and asked for the firing of a Company supervisor, L.O. Meyer, who was known for being especially cruel to workers. Their specific work issue led them to support the construction workers and walk out with them. Agapito Robleda Castro, interview

thousand workers joined the strike vote, bringing strength in numbers and debilitating the Company's crucial production departments, the *finca* agricultural workers, and the train operators.³⁸ Workers marched to the American Zone (*Zona Americana*) in El Progreso in an official work stoppage. They congregated there believing that President Galvez would arrive to conduct the negotiations himself. As Jesus Gomez recounted:

...solo eran gringos los que habían, no los dejábamos salir...a ninguna parte. Entonces se quejaron y en ese tiempo vino la básica [Honduran military]. A ametrallarnos venían...pero nosotros nos fuimos [hacia la Zona Americana] porque nos dijeron que venía el Doctor Gálvez que estaba de presidente, y que, era la básica que venía a fregar. Nos retiraron de allí y nos trajeron al parque [Ramón Rosa] a punta de fusil a todos, si allí [en el parque] en los palos colgábamos las hamacas.³⁹ [..there were only gringos (North Americans) there, we did not let them leave ...go anywhere. They then complained and the military troops came [la básica] they were going to shoot at us...We went to the [American Zone] because they told us that Doctor Gálvez, who was president at the time, and no, it was the military that was coming to harass us. They pushed us away and from there, brought us to the park [Ramon Rosa] at gun's point, yes there [in the park] we used to hang our hammocks between the trees].

Workers remember the scene with the military at the American Zone vividly and with some bitterness, because they meant no harm to North Americans and were peacefully gathered.⁴⁰ In the initial days, when the multitude of men saw other men on strike, it gave them a great deal of confidence to continue with the strike, despite physical threats by the Honduran troops deployed to repress them by then President Galvez. They were later moved by military strongmen to *Parque Ramon Rosa* in El Progreso.

by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, August 2, 2006; Julio Rivera, San José, Costa Rica, July, 2008; Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 90.

³⁸ Robleda Castro, *La Verdad de la Hulega de 1954 y de la Formacion del Sitraterco*, 46-53.

³⁹ Jesus Gomez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006.

⁴⁰ Leonardo Bautista, interview by author, campo Limones, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006; Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

Jesus Gomez, who at the time worked in the warehouse where pesticides were stored for the Tela Railroad Company, said he was aware that workers were meeting in small committees to talk about the conditions in the Company, but he did not get involved immediately. His first engagement with the strike came when the workers marched to the American Zone in El Progreso.⁴¹ In El Progreso, he was assigned to the security committee to make sure that workers were not returning to work in the *fincas* or looting or engaging in disorder.⁴²

The North Americans and other *trabajadores de confianza* (trusted company employees) were paralyzed, afraid to leave their Company housing. Their work was also disrupted, since beyond the *fincas*, service workers, *yarderos*, washerwomen, maids and other service employees in the American Zone of La Lima had also joined the strike alongside the El Progreso workers. The situation in El Progreso was escalating faster than other towns and *fincas*.

At a May 1 convening, the Construction Department workers agreed to present their demands in a petition to the Company on May 3. They agreed that after presenting the petition they would go on strike. Between May 1 and 3, the PDRH and CCO communicated the Construction Department workers' plans to other previously organized committees and asked for solidarity. The five Tela Divisions (Puerto Cortés, La Lima, El Progreso, Tela and Bataan) managed to go on strike by May 3 and May 4.⁴³ The May 3 timeline set up by the construction workers of El Progreso fueled and challenged other workers to do the same, some in solidarity and others because they had been part of organizing efforts since the mid 1940s. As in La Lima, these activities

⁴¹ Jesus Gomez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006.

⁴² Jesus Gomez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006.

⁴³ Edmundo Williams, interview by author, Finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 24, 2004.; Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006.; Agapito Robleda Castro, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, August 2, 2006.; Julio C. Rivera, interview by author, San José, Costa Rica, July, 2008.; Teresina Rossi Matamoros, interview by author, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, December 21, 2006.

speak to a level of organization and structure that challenges the notion of a sudden or spontaneous strike.

Beginnings in Puerto Cortés

Juan Bautista Canales worked in La Lima and later became a strike leader in Puerto Cortés. He had been targeted for unjust termination by his supervisor in La Lima. But just as he was being let go, another supervisor came to his aid and transferred him to the Mechanical Department in Puerto Cortés before the strike.⁴⁴ In Puerto Cortés, Canales found workers that encouraged his rebellious attitude but challenged him to develop a political consciousness.

Me dijeron, mira Canales, es necesario [que entiendas que] esto que te ha pasado [injustamente despedido], sucede en todas partes, [en todas partes] la Compañía tiene capataces de esa calaña...sucede entonces en todas partes, necesitamos organizarnos, necesitamos que nosotros seamos conscientes de cuál es nuestra actitud como clase obrera.⁴⁵
[They told me, look Canales, it is necessary that [you understand] what has happened to you [unjust firing/transfer] happens everywhere in the Company, everywhere they have supervisors of this type...it happens everywhere. We need to organize; we need to be conscious of our attitude as a working class].

After undergoing study with the PDRH worker committee in Puerto Cortés, Canales was ready to combat "*tanto bandidaje y una situación desesperante*" (much stealing from workers and a desperate situation). In the defiance of Company supervisors, he

⁴⁴ Canales worked the night shift for two years in the tractor shop in La Lima before being officially transferred to the port city of Puerto Cortés. While working in La Lima he had a run-in with his supervisor who made his work difficult. Workers during that period (before the 1954 strike and without a labor union contract) did not have any recourse against bad supervisors except going to the Company's Labor Relations Office where a representative, Chaz Racini [sic], would take down the details of the case, "give me your name and all your information and tomorrow we will resolve this matter"; but what the worker had the next day was that he would be fired, why go to the Company in this situation?" Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.

⁴⁵ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.

read newspapers like *Vanguardia Revolucionaria* and *Voz Obrera*. In the years leading up to the strike, Canales became involved with this group of mostly men in producing the newspaper *Vanguardia Revolucionaria*, led by Ventura Ramos Alvarado.⁴⁶ He and his co-workers in the Mechanical Department were an important part of the 1954 work stoppage in Puerto Cortés.

Events that led to the strike in Puerto Cortés were brewing earlier among the dockworkers and stevedores responsible for loading the ships at port. Stevedores had been forced to work during peak season the Monday of Easter Week (*Lunes Santo*). They demanded to be paid time and a half, but the Company refused.⁴⁷ Rafael Garcia, a leader among the stevedores, suggested that if the Company did not pay them, the workers should stop working. Rafael Garcia was not a politically trained man; he arose as a leader in response to workplace issues, almost out of a necessity to confront the workload and inadequate remuneration of workers for grueling labor. He was fired after meeting with the Company supervisor about workers' demands.⁴⁸ Because this action in Garcia's case took place in a different department, Canales and his department were not immediately aware of recent developments, but learned of them upon arriving in the Mechanical Department workshop for work the next day, "*hay [había] un mar humano, allí en el muelle paralizado porque no quieren trabajar y hay un barco esperando [para ser cargado de fruta].*" (there was a human sea of people, there in the wharf, paralyzed because they did not want to work and there was a ship waiting [for fruit to be

⁴⁶ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.

⁴⁷ It is unclear if workers asked for double time or time and half pay. During strike negotiations the Company rebuttal suggests the practice of paying time and half was already a policy in practice. It is clear, however, the stevedores sought better treatment, demanding an end to racial discrimination, better food and a consideration of the grueling labor schedule by reducing the work hours in the night shift.

⁴⁸ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.; Agapito Robleda Castro, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, August 2, 2006.; Robleda Castro, *La Verdad de la Hulega de 1954 y de la Formacion del Sitratenco* (2005), 72.

loaded]).⁴⁹ The mechanics in Canales' shop attempted to work but stevedores began to throw rocks at anyone still working, forcing them to come out and support the strike.

At this point, workers who had more political training began to support the stevedores' efforts, calling for reinstatement of individual workers and longer term demands beyond wage increases, and promoting labor protections for all workers. The information "*corrió como reguero de pólvora hasta San Pedro Sula y los compañeros...se desplazaron*" (spread like wildfire to San Pedro Sula and the comrades began to move) and the various political organizations came to Puerto Cortés to aid the striking stevedores and Mechanical Department; "*inmediatamente mandaron a un compañero del PDRH, a Cardona Casaña*" (the PDH sent a comrade, Cardona Casaña immediately).⁵⁰ It was then that the leadership of the broader work stoppage came together under political organizers and workers, such as Canales.⁵¹ The PDRH and CCO worker committees had been working with the workers' study groups such as Canales' in Puerto Cortés. These workers' committees' connections to the machine shops were influential in building solidarity with the stevedores and port workers demands. The developments in Puerto Cortés were a convergence of worker-led actions to address intolerable conditions with the bases of politicized and organized workers built from past intentional organizing efforts.

The Beginning of the Strike in Tela

The town of Tela, once a site of United Fruit Company headquarters, also had a history of organizing activity prior to the strike. Many locals and teachers habitually circulated ideas and news from other labor and revolutionary movements. In Tela, the PDRH had organized worker committees, youth groups such as *Alianza de la Juventud*

⁴⁹ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlantida, August 8, 2004.

⁵⁰ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlantida, August 8, 2004.

⁵¹ Canales was arrested for the first time the day of the first meeting in his own house because he was seen as a worker agitator.

Democrática Hondureña,⁵² and the organization where Teresina Rossi, a key strike leader, began her involvement.⁵³ Members of these groups worked tirelessly to bring information and to organize in the nearby *fincas* and in the various departments of the Company in Tela Nueva. The intentions of worker organizations, including CCO and the PDRH, were to do the long-term work of consciousness-building and development of workers' committees in each *fincas*. In 1954, they also hoped to incite workers to participate in the May Day activities.⁵⁴

News of the organizing of workers in the late days of April in El Progreso and in the *Campos Los Pajaros* (located between El Progreso and Tela) spread to other Company towns, divisions, departments, and *fincas* workers. These struggles over workplace issues in El Progreso and Puerto Cortés had already begun to escalate into serious work disruptions that were well-timed and powerful enough to stop the ships from sailing with bananas for export. The work stoppages and workers' actions to address their concerns enabled a timely convergence of the two objectives of the worker committees: committee building and May Day rally participation.

The news of the Construction Department workers' planned strike in El Progreso was received by worker committees in Tela, stimulating support from office staff, hospital staff, hotel staff, and nearby departments such as the Materials and Supplies Department (M&S) to join in the proposed strike. While workers in Tela attempted to join the strike on May 3, they were not able to do so because local Liberal

⁵² Teresina Rossi Matamoros first came across this organization of youth before being introduced to the PDRH. Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 327.

⁵³ Rossi Matamoros was a bilingual secretary and a member of the first Central Strike Committee. Though her role in the Central Strike Committee was that of Secretary, typing up most of the demands and letters sent to the mediation commission and the Company, Rossi Matamoros was also influential in trying to organize her department and other positions in the Company offices to walk out. Teresina Rossi Matamoros, interview by author, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, December 21, 2006.; Julio C. Rivera, interview by author, San José, Costa Rica, July, 2008.

⁵⁴ May Day activities were seen as a onetime event that may have made public all the workers' committees and workers within the Company. The work of committee building was done with the larger goal of organizing a strike and not just a rally.

Party leaders, who were also workers, initially opposed joining the strike. Liberal Party leaders feared blame for the mobilization, which would hurt their candidate in the upcoming presidential election.⁵⁵ Teresina Rossi Matamoros explains that in Tela workers confronted a challenge between the Liberal Party activists and those, like her, who worked with organizations with Marxist leanings and had divergent strategies.⁵⁶ The Liberal Party activists did not want to strike, and many of them held other workers back from joining the strike for at least a day. The Liberal Party had not been an organic part of the organizing process or the coordination and organization of worker committees in the various *fincas*. Conflicting messages confused workers who were not sure what to do. Rossi Matamoros and other organizers confronted this issue and worked tirelessly to urge them to go on strike and to give workers in Tela courage to respond to the organizing efforts.⁵⁷ Rossi Matamoros remembers that workers feared walking out, but did it anyway, facing the military in Tela.

Tela workers eventually went on strike on May 4, joining the effort in El Progreso. “In El Progreso, workers and their families congregated daily in the public park *Ramon Rosa*”⁵⁸ and strikers set up temporary kitchens where everyone from the town was fed with food and supplies provided to the strikers by *campesinos* and local merchants. By May 4, 1954, all workers, including those from the Tela sector, the *fincas*, the Mechanical and Construction Departments, and railroad and service workers in the American Zone were on strike in El Progreso or La Lima. During the initial days of the strike, workers began to develop their internal infrastructure and organization for their desired representation. The striking workers did not go home to their *barracones*

⁵⁵ Although Liberal Party activists wanted worker votes for their candidate, Ramon Villeda Morales, they did not trust the government and feared unfair elections. Villeda Morales was not able to take office until 1957 despite winning the elections.

⁵⁶ The Tela worker committees were led by Francisco (Chico) Rios and Teresina Rossi Matamoros, among other members of the PDRH. Teresina Rossi Matamoros, interview by author, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, December 21, 2006.

⁵⁷ Teresina Rossi Matamoros, interview by author, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, December 21, 2006.

⁵⁸ McCameron, *Bananas Labor and Politics in Honduras: 1954-1963*, 37.

during the mobilization and instead set up strike centers as places where everyone from the region would come together to remain. Many strikers slept at the strike center in their hammocks. The centers encouraged workers to remain on strike and to participate actively in demonstrations of strength in front of the military and the companies. As in the other locales, in Tela we see evidence of organizing that pre-dates the May 1954 strike.

Coordination Leads to Consolidation

The gradual spreading of awareness of work actions and solidarity with workers in Puerto Cortés, El Progreso and other areas created a ripple effect of work stoppages along the North Coast. Workers were called on to support the demonstrations and did so in large numbers—in no small measure due to the efforts of worker organizers who helped spread the message of the strike and the call for solidarity from *finca* to *finca*. By May 4, when banana *finca* workers went on strike in all of the *fincas*, other workers and industries followed suit. Organizers recognized a need and opportunity for leadership, but leftists feared persecutions and remained behind the scenes during the initial address to the crowds assembled in the strike center of El Progreso.⁵⁹ Because they organized covertly, their situation created an opening for well-positioned, well-spoken, and educated Liberal Party leaders. Though at first reluctant to join the strike, when they saw the successful work stoppage, they stood up as effective spokespeople for the coordinated movement along the North Coast. They in fact positioned themselves as spokespeople, hoping it would benefit their party ranks.⁶⁰ The need to maintain a unified strike front among workers, in the face of employer opposition during a long strike, along with the political concerns of the PDRH and other left formations,

⁵⁹ Teresina Rossi Matamoros, interview by author, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, December 21, 2006.

⁶⁰ The Liberal party activists and organizers were worried about the upcoming election that same year. While some worried that the strike would be blamed on them others saw it as an opportunity to gain votes.

prompted the creation of an ad hoc strike committee that later evolved into the Central Strike Committee. In part, the ad hoc committee was positioned to ensure that the more centrist Liberal Party would not dampen the movement-building work in which the other organizations had invested so much over the years. The ad hoc committee also served the important role of gathering together regional representatives of the *fincas* and striking workers to formulate collective demands. Thus, the initial coordination and cooperative solidarity that marked the very early stages of the strike gave way to consolidation by previously organized leadership bodies and established base organizations, and later centralization behind a Central Strike Committee, which became the only recognized bargaining agent for all of the Tela Railroad Company workers.

The Central Strike Committee: Tela Railroad Company

On May 17th, 1954 the initial ad hoc committee gave way to the worker-elected Central Strike Committee (*Junta Directiva del Comité Central de Huelga--CCH*).⁶¹ The local strike committees in the five divisions of Puerto Cortés, La Lima, El Progreso, Tela and Bataán came together and each elected three of the leaders of their local strike committee (for a total of fifteen individuals) to represent the mass of striking workers regionally and to lead them in negotiations with the Company and the Mediation Commission.⁶² El Progreso, seen as a key center of activity and strategy and as the place where the PDRH had the strongest support, was chosen as the center of activities

⁶¹ An ad hoc committee had submitted thirty demands to the company a week earlier on May 11, 1954 and the Construction Department workers had also submitted a list of demands on May 3, 1954, before going on strike. To bring coherence and unity to their demands the Central Strike Committee was elected. Members of the Central Strike Committee were: Cesar Augusto Coto, secretary general; Juan Bautista Canales, secretary of strike organization; Marcos Santos, propaganda secretary; Guillermo Rosales, note taker and recorder of agreements; Gabriel David, Augusto Castañeda, Manuel Sierra, Jose Velasquez, Adan Posas, Cruz Melendez, Ernesto Perez, Angel M. Dominguez, Antonio Rivas y Gregorio Ferra as adjunct secretaries. Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 69.

⁶² Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*, 147-148; Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 69-75.

for the Central Strike Committee.⁶³ Of these committee members, all men, most of them were sympathizers of the PDRH.⁶⁴ This leadership body was responsible for improving coordination and support among the different support committee activities.

This new leadership formation adhered to the demands articulated in the thirty points sent to the Company on May 11th and added seven additional demands before they would enter negotiations. The added list of demands established their function and roles as the only bargaining committee for workers. They demanded that the Honduran government release workers incarcerated for their strike activity and for organizing across the North Coast.⁶⁵ Workers were well aware that the Tela Railroad Company was not negotiating in good faith and the government mediation commission was often partial to the Company. The list called for respect for the worker's Central Strike Committee, asking that J. Antonio Inestroza, the Minister of Justice (*Gobernacion y Justicia*) “abstain from using inappropriate language, and making threats that fall out of place, during the mediation talks.”⁶⁶ At the same time it demanded that the military retreat from the protection of the banana zones since workers had already demonstrated their ability to protect the Company property.⁶⁷ More importantly, the Central Strike Committee demanded an end to intimidation of strike supporters, a tactic that was beginning to threaten the strike leadership in early May.⁶⁸ The one recourse the Central Strike Committee had in light of the persecution was to establish their body as the

⁶³ Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*, 147-148; Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 156.

⁶⁴ Many of PDRH were also sympathizers and worked jointly with the Comité de Lucha Obrera of the newly formed Communist Party (1954).

⁶⁵ The list of workers incarcerated was not just limited to workers of the strike centers, but also workers incarcerated in Olanchito and La Ceiba, areas of work of the Standard Fruit Company, demonstrating that the organizing committees were in touch with the Standard Fruit Company strike committee since May 7th, 1954, when Tela worker sent a letter to Standard fruit workers to join in the strike. See appendix for the list of additional demands Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 70.

⁶⁶ Point No. 6, *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 75-77.

highest form of workers representation and therefore the only committee with the permission to negotiate for workers.⁶⁹ This consolidation would prove to be an important move for workers, as divisions and local interests were already brewing in La Lima causing friction among two strike leaders. This powerful insistence of its role as *the* representative of the workers movement made it harder for the Company to divide or pit striking workers against each other.

The workers' response to the Company proposal on June 17 is perhaps the most revealing about workers' lives and conditions. Great care was taken to respond to every company allegation with detail and accuracy. Workers demonstrated two very clear points in their rebuttal. First, the Company did not have policies that represented the workers' needs, therefore local supervisors and overseers made up their own, often-arbitrary rules in the fields. Second, the Company did not understand that the workforce had changed, from a mostly single male and migrant workforce to a family-oriented workforce, with an increased presence of women, an invisible workforce. In their response to the Company letter, workers refuted the Company's claims that they paid better wages than the rest of the country. In reality, according to workers' estimations, they did not.⁷⁰ Banana workers argued that agricultural workers throughout the nation earned lower wages than banana workers, but they also had fewer work responsibilities and hours of work. Agricultural workers' tools and food were provided by landowners, unlike banana workers who paid for their own out of their salaries. Agricultural workers in the country also had access to national public hospitals where they received free services. Other agricultural workers also experienced a less extreme climate conditions and less grueling conditions of work when compared to the banana workers of the North

⁶⁹ Point 4, Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 76.

⁷⁰ Letter to Mediation Commission, June 17, 1954, "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP.; Letter Response Tela Railroad Company, June 13, 1954. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP.

Coast.⁷¹ Banana workers demanded pay for their specialized expertise as banana workers who labored under harsh conditions and lived in enclave economies where the cost of living was higher and medical services fees were deducted from their paychecks.

The Central Strike Committee effectively continued to develop the emerging structure that represented workers' issues and reflected regional and departmental representation. Workers were organized into five committees representing the five distinct areas of Tela Railroad Company operations. These committees would eventually become known as *seccionales*, with departments and areas of work known as *subseccionales*. The larger Central Strike Committee brought together in unity the diverse needs and tensions of the five sectors. They were also responsible for issuing public statements on behalf of the striking workers.⁷² Each work center had its own demands particular to the region, department and position. With a workforce of over 10,000, worker leaders were conscious about the need to prevent divisions and breaks in negotiations. Also, concerned about the Mediation Commission's bias toward the Company, the newly formed strike committee positioned itself to demand the respect for its proposals, calling on the mediators to “observ[e] the due respect in the proposals presented by both sides.”⁷³

It is important here to note the orientation and composition of the Central Strike Committee. An evaluation of the Central Strike Committee, its hierarchy and the elected representatives of the sections and subsections during the strike reflects the impact of race and gender on the organizing priorities. The hierarchy privileged *mestizo* males in

⁷¹Letter to Mediation Commission, June 17, 1954, "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP.

⁷²The strike began in Puerto Cortés with committees of workers in El Progreso taking the lead also in making demands. The Tela committee was also very influential in the leadership of the strike. All these committees had members who would eventually form the *Comité Central de Huelga* formed May 17, 1954. Teresina Rossi Matamoros, interview by author, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, December 21, 2006.

⁷³On May 17th, the Central Strike Committee elaborated an additional 7 points to the 30 demands, this petition geared towards the Honduran government. Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 75-76.

skilled positions in the leadership. The first Central Strike Committee leadership was unique in that aside from almost all being skilled workers, many if not all of them had been part of a study group of the PDRH and later the CLO, participating in clandestine meetings at Julio C. Rivera's house in complete secrecy.⁷⁴ Juan B. Canales and Rigoberto Padilla Rush had attended school and received training, Canales worked in a skilled mechanic workshop, Padilla Rush in the Tropical Radio company of the Tela Railroad. Other committee members, such as Rossi Matamoros, worked as a bilingual secretary in the Material and Supplies department in Tela, and Marcos Bardales worked in the engineering department, installing irrigation systems.⁷⁵ Another organizer, Caesar Coto was known as a teacher.⁷⁶ Though many were skilled workers, their commitment to agricultural workers was clear in their organizing of their movement. Rivera explains:

Que yo no perteneciera a la clase popular, obrera o campesina, no quiere decir que no tuviera sentimientos que me acercaran a ese sector de la población. Es posible que los obreros mismos les pareciera extraña mi conducta; en otras condiciones y con otra actitud, tal vez me hubieran considerado su enemigo. Los trabajadores que estaban al corriente de mis actividades, me tenían consideración y algún cariño por esa posición mía.⁷⁷

[That I did not belong to the popular class, working class or campesino class did not mean that I did not have sympathy for that sector of the population. It is possible that workers themselves may have thought my conduct strange. Under other circumstances and if I had another attitude towards them, perhaps they would have thought me an enemy. The workers that were aware of my activities, had consideration and caring for my position].

⁷⁴Ibid., 179.; Julio C. Rivera, interview by author, San Jose, Costa Rica, July, 2008.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 395.; Teresina Rossi Matamoros, interview by author, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, December 21, 2006.

⁷⁶ Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima Cortés, July 25, 2004.

⁷⁷ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 186.

Rivera's personal grievance was that he lost a parcel of land he owned to Tela Railroad Company.⁷⁸ But his overall commitment to the political work was of more importance and is reflected in his class consciousness, his leadership of the study group and later the strike. Aside from being a charismatic leader, his organizing and teaching ability, his resolve, his persecution and subsequent incarcerations proved to the banana *finca* men his loyalty on their behalf.⁷⁹

Although the only *finca* worker who held a position as *secretario adjunto* (adjunct secretary) to the Central Strike Committee was Gabriel David Galeano, it did not mean that *finca* workers did not exhibit organization in each *finca*.⁸⁰ Workers in the *finca* had their own organization system. The system was built over time and began with the recruitment of workers. Edmundo Williams, or Mundo, as he is known throughout the *campos* in the outskirts of La Lima credits his “awakening” (“nos vino a despertar”) to Cesar Augusto Coto, a Honduran organizer exile who had just returned from nearby Guatemala where he organized with other banana workers. Coto worked with and trained Honduran banana workers on campaign strategies, giving people the tools with which to organize by conducting *charlas* on tactics to avoid the ensuing repression:

*Como [en] esos tiempos no habían [sic] leyes no había nada hasta que por último a nosotros nos vino uno a despertar que es paisano mío, Cesar Augusto Coto. Que el solo estuvo aquí encarcelado pero ya nos había a nosotros abierto [la conciencia]. Fue cuando nos organizamos y empezamos a hacer las sesiones. Que mire para averiguar dónde íbamos [a] hacer las sesiones teníamos que ir tirando pedazos de güineo-- agarramos un güineo de esos [señala una mata de banano verde], por allí se dirigía. ...así hacíamos las sesiones.*⁸¹

⁷⁸ Julio C. Rivera, interview by author, San Jose, Costa Rica, July, 2008.

⁷⁹ Julio C. Rivera still lives in exile in San Jose, Costa Rica. Julio C. Rivera, interview by author, San Jose, Costa Rica, July, 2008.

⁸⁰ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 247.

⁸¹ Interview with Edmundo Cabrera Williams, July 25, 2004. Campo Laurel, La Lima, Honduras.

[In those times there were no laws, there was nothing until a fellow countryman (paisano) came to awaken us, Cesar Augusto Coto. He was in jail most of the time he was here, but he had already awoken us. This is when we organized and started to hold the sessions. Look, to find out where we would have session that day we had to leave a trail of pieces of green bananas (*güineo*)—we would get one of those *güineos* [points to a green banana tree with bananas] and that is what would direct us...that is how we did the sessions.]

While Mundo gives Coto most of the credit for “awakening” the mass of workers in La Lima area, he describes the various roles *finca* workers took on to keep the organization going while Coto was incarcerated. Workers conducted the *charlas* themselves and determined strategy in what was known as the *Comite de Huelga del Monte* (*Strike Committee from the Fields or Fincas*).

*...el secretario general de esa Huelga del Monte, así le decíamos, se llamaba Marcos Miranda...viejito era cortero. Ese fue que jaló gente que fue un gusto...*⁸²

[...the secretary general of the Strike Committee from the Fields, that is how we called them, his name was Marcos Miranda...[the] old man was a cutter (*cortero*). He was the one that brought many people to the strike.]

This *Comite de Huelga del Monte* was made up of men who were all agricultural finca workers and their role was to pass information to other workers about the workplace and the possibility of a strike. The *charlas* were particularly challenging because there was constant surveillance and any literature found on any worker or in their *barracón* (company housing) would be sufficient cause for death. Williams recalls:

...a mi [me] venían todos los folletos y resulta que una vez viene la jura [military police or paramilitary] de Don Guayo Galeano. Como yo estaba en ese tiempo en ese campo de Ticamaya, que ahora le dicen El Remolino, una aldea....y sale[n] aquel montón de soldados por todas esas casas instalaron maquinas de patas de gallinas [ametralladoras] y al final pudieron, sugestionaron...Nosotros cambiamos de sesiones íbamos un día

⁸² Ibid.

*en una parte, otro día en otro, por eso es que Ud. nosotros usábamos esa seña, ya sabíamos todos que iban ir viendo pedazos de guineo partido por allí se dirigían todos.*⁸³

[...I would receive all the pamphlets; it so happened that one time La Jura of Don Guayo Galeano (Guayo Galeano's military police or paramilitary) came [to my house]. I was in those times in the camps of Ticamaya, now they call it El Remolino, a small village (aldea)...and the soldiers spread throughout the houses setting up their machine guns (he calls them *maquinas de patas de gallina*—referring to machine guns). In the end they could, they influenced... We changed sessions [location], we would one day to one place, another day to another, that is why we used that signal, we all knew that when we saw the trail of green bananas that is where followed.”]

Canales and Williams found roles that challenged them to collectivize their personal experiences of strife on the banana plantations.

The ranks' diversity was reflected in the movement in more subtle ways. In the development of the *Pliego de Peticiones* (demands), workers were invited to *charlas or sesiones* of the leadership of the sectional committees and Central Strike Committee. But only those perceived to be literate or those who were in skilled job positions were identified as leaders who engaged in the most arduous study groups with Honduran intellectuals and producers of *Vanguardia Revolucionaria* and *Voz Obrera*, both linked to the *Comité de Lucha Obrera*.⁸⁴ For these leaders, the strike was part of an organized plan, a step to be taken based on their political evaluation of the country, one informed by a theoretical study. For workers such as Williams immersion into the organizing was experienced differently; he relied on word-of-mouth. Word of mouth was perhaps the

⁸³ Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima Cortés, July 25, 2004.

⁸⁴ Much of the organizing of the *Partido Liberal* and the PDRH, happened from abroad by exile networks or clandestinely in the country. Even though most of the founders were killed or exiled to Guatemala during *el Cariato* the party survived and morphed out of the Communist Party of Honduras (PCH) in 1944. The party, its youth affiliates and its newspaper, *Vanguardia Revolucionaria*, among others, were crucial to the support of the strike, and in some areas, like El Progreso and Tela, helped organize the walkouts. *Voz Obrera* emerged after the persecution of *Vanguardia* prevented the latter's normal distribution. Dario Euraque, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic Region and State in Honduras, 1870-1972* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 41-42.; Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 58-59.

most powerful and safest tactic for communication because in this way workers could avoid discovery and potential persecution by paramilitary police.

Women were excluded from day to day organizing, perhaps not by design, but merely because the effort was not made to recruit them. One woman, Teressina Rossi Matamoros, was recruited by Julio C. Rivera to participate in the study groups and was elected to the strike committee; she was a former secretary who sympathized with the workers and who quit her job and became a steady supporter in Tela. Canales explains that her main tasks were to type up the notes from meetings and to type up what would eventually be the *Pliego de Peticiones* or 'los 30 Puntos', the demands. She became engaged after working with Chico Rios, a strike leader in Tela. As Juan Canales reported:

Estaba Chico Ríos, el organizó un comité técnico ejecutivo, y allí estaba Teresina. Teresina se había salido de la oficina de la gerencia y se fue aonde [adonde] Chico Ríos. Porque Chico la había estado instruyendo políticamente entonces Teresina fue muy activa... [Durante la elaboración de los '30 Puntos'] La pobre Teresina tenía los dedos llagados de tanto estar así [hace sonido de escribir a máquina] a máquina escribiendo. Todo se hacía a pura maquina. ¿Aja Teresina? Hay que seguir. A pues esta ahorita vamos a firmar, vamos a firmarlo, el pliego de peticiones, porque Reikoff [sic.] estaba en Tela.⁸⁵

[There was Chico Rios, he organized a technical executive committee, and Teresina was there. Teresina had left her job with the management office and went to Chico Rios. Chico had been training her in political study. Teresina was very active... [During the elaboration of the '30 Points'] Poor Teresina had her blistered fingers due to so much typing [makes a typing motion and noise]. Everything was typed. Well Teresina? [they would ask] Let's continue. Well then right now we will sign, we will sign the demands, because Reikoff[sic.] was in Tela.”]

While Rossi Matamoros held a role within the organizing committee and was able to participate in the study groups, the wives of the workers are described as secondary

⁸⁵Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.

supporters, making food, taking care of the children and leading the food bank effort during the actual strike. Further prodding actually reveals that this may be an issue of perception. On the questions regarding women, both Canales and Williams speak of their wives and other women in passing, but these roles may have been key to the functioning of the overall plan. Canales explains that the leadership tried to maintain a cordial relationship with women workers and the wives of workers:

*...lo que si procurábamos era tenerlas a ellas como amigas, para que cooperaran con nosotros, pero en los estudios casi no, no participaban, o sea que las mujeres tienen otro problema es el cuidado del hogar y los hijos...*⁸⁶

[...we tried to keep them as our friends, so that they would cooperate with us, but in study [political study groups] they hardly participated, it is because women have another problem that is the taking care of home and the kids..]

While not all women were active in study groups or in the organizing of the strike, a great majority did join the ranks when the strike unfurled, performing key roles that were indispensable.

Even though the contributions of PDRH and CCO members were crucial to building the list of demands and advancing the workers' positions, not all the strike representatives were part of these groups.⁸⁷ The Central Strike Committee structure, with *seccionales* and *subseccionales*, created an effective communications system. In addition to a range of newspapers and bulletins, striking workers spread the word about the union and shared information about workers' issues through the representative

⁸⁶ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.

⁸⁷ It is important to note that the worker organization was not controlled by the PDRH; workers also organized around their own conditions and needs. Later many company school teachers were elected to the leadership without doing the organizing work. This is how Valencia rose to lead the second strike committee. Throughout the strike, company school teachers and 'anti-communist' members of strike committee formed separate committees parallel to the ones elected by workers. The masses, as Rossi Matamoros tells us, were always on the side of the original strike committee and the demands that committee made. Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 349-351.

structure to inform the negotiating process. Every point accepted or negotiated was required to be approved by worker vote. This structure and practice was the antecedent for the labor union's structure and function.

While the Central Strike Committee effectively unified workers from the different centers, divisions arose when the leadership of La Lima disagreed with the Tela and El Progreso regional strike committees. Manuel de Jesus Valencia, a charismatic teacher in Company schools and member of the Nationalist party, managed to garner support from striking workers. He became a leader and spokesperson in La Lima. Meanwhile, PDRH organizer, Cesar Augusto Coto, who spent many years organizing in the *fincas* near La Lima, also had the support and loyalty of workers. Coto, a recognized representative in the strike committee organization disagreed with Valencia's politics and his lack of ideological commitment. He believed Valencia was working for the Company, trying to create a division between La Lima and El Progreso and trying to gain support from the regional strike committee in Puerto Cortés in opposition to the El Progreso-centered Central Strike Committee.⁸⁸

A tug of war ensued between the two leaders when the Company proposed a rehabilitation of some of the train lines, particularly the ones between Tela, El Progreso and La Lima.⁸⁹ This tentative agreement included the resumption of activities one day a week for train operators and commissary workers. The workers voted adamantly not to return to any kind of work until the company agreed to the '30 points' (*los 30 puntos*).⁹⁰ Ultimately, the fissures in La Lima leadership were ideological. Coto's own leadership was informed by the structure of worker votes and participation, while Valencia felt empowered to make decisions without consulting workers or with only the input of La

⁸⁸ A train with workers headed to Puerto Cortés was stopped by the Central Strike Committee, believing they were traveling to Puerto Cortés to instigate an internal movement against El Progreso and the Central Strike Committee.

⁸⁹ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 163.

⁹⁰ Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*, 234-248.; Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 70-74.

Lima workers. Valencia was a complicated figure throughout the negotiations process; he had a strong following in La Lima but was heavily distrusted among workers in other regions. Coto was known to have played an active role in tactically bringing together different factions of the movement, including Communist Party and PDRH members for a common goal. Valencia's attack on Coto in the early days of June was destructive; he accused Coto and the Central Strike Committee of being 'communists.'⁹¹ The accusation reverberated onto the national scene as the Central Strike Committee attempted to defend its position as representative of a majority of the workers. This was futile and the military descended on the Central Strike Committee, incarcerating many of the PDRH and those perceived to be part of the newly created Communist Party.⁹² The first Central Strike Committee, originated on May 17, was persecuted and jailed.

The first strike committee was elected by workers and was composed of PDRH members. Their initial influence was more visionary, including in the initial set of claims universal demands for workers. In the later days of May these members were persecuted and thrown in jail in Tegucigalpa, many remaining there until September of 1954 and others forced into exile. The second strike committee election took place once the original strike committee leadership was thrown in jail. This election took place out of necessity, without a strike committee the workers would not have had a negotiating body. It is unclear how this second election happened, but what is clear that the next set of leaders were mostly Liberal Party members.

The Company utilized the Committee's internal destabilization to their advantage and reiterated accusations that the committee did not have the support of the workers and was comprised of Communist leaders. The workers were left with no choice but to elect a new committee to represent them; the strike committee

⁹¹ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 84-88.

⁹² Coto spent the rest of the strike in the penitentiary in Tegucigalpa, and was released in September of that year. Many of these leaders, with the exception of a few, were arrested without charges on May 31, thrown in jail, and remained there for the rest of the strike. Ibid. 87.

reconstituted without the original members.⁹³ On June 7, workers reelected a second central committee. Valencia conveniently placed himself at the head of the organization, elected as representative of La Lima.

The worker response to the Company's proposal of June 13 would come from the second strike committee as they agreed to the company's terms of negotiations. By this time, there were significant changes in the negotiations, but the thirty demands remained on the bargaining table between the new committee and the Company. The new committee, for instance, negotiated demand No. 27, which stated that all workers be returned to their original positions and that there would not be actions taken against workers that participated in the strike and the various committees.⁹⁴ The Company's rebuttal on June 13 also made significant changes to demand No. 27, such as maintaining their right to transfers and layoffs, and adding a provision that "worker representatives will cooperate with the Company in eliminating from the Company the communist elements."⁹⁵ The new strike committee and the Mediation Commission accepted this point with the Company amendments during negotiations. The new strike committee, in fact, reneged on the original petition's universal demands of no discrimination based on race, sex and nationality, by agreeing to terms, on June 25, prioritizing "the rehiring of workers Honduran workers and those that have worked for

⁹³ The first strike committee was comprised of members of the PDRH. The second strike committee was engineered by the Inter-American Regional Labor Organization (ORIT). The ORIT was created by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in January 1951. Unions perceived to be Communist were excluded. Serafino Romualdi, the U.S. representative for Latin America, was chosen as director. The ORIT ensured that the men chosen in the new strike committee were local school teachers and men that were confirmed to not have radical left politics. They were: Raul Edgardo Estrada, Antonio Radillo B., Manuel de J.Valencia B., Jose Roberto Pachame, Rufino Sosa. Adjunct secretaries were: Rafael Alberty, Santos Ochoa, por Beningno Gonzales, S. Lilio Pineda M., Jose Cubas Gross, Celeo Gonzalez, Henry Sheran, Israel Orellana, Jose Arnulio Espinoza, Humberto Diaz Zelaya, Carlos Ramirez. Letter to Mediation Commission, June 17, 1954, "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." Documento del Archivo Privado del Dr. Mario Posas. APMP.

⁹⁴ Letter to Company with demands. May 11, 1954. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP.

⁹⁵ Letter Response Tela Railroad Company, June 13, 1954. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP.

the Company previously (*en el reenganche de trabajadores deberá darse preferencia a los hondureños y prioridad a los que han trabajado previamente por la Empresa*)."⁹⁶

The newly elected strike committee was operating on the structure left over by the first strike committee, yet the original and universal larger demands were evidently set aside. The rest of the universal demands were negotiated and named symbolically, but no processes were set up to make sure that discrimination by sex and race were avoided.⁹⁷ The negotiations with the second Central Strike Committee began on June 12, and by July 9, the contract was ratified and workers returned to work. Most other workers from the Standard Fruit subsidiaries (as well as cigar makers and textile workers) had by this point already returned to work.

The experience most memorable to workers was that of the *sufrimiento* (suffering) they lived during the days of the strike. Strike workers were optimistic during the first days of the strike, as ample donations of food and support came to the strikers. But the last days of the strike were full of strife. Donations were scant. Workers ran out of extra money to purchase food from *patronas* and food vendors around the strike centers. The only food available during the last weeks of the strike were boiled green bananas (*güineo verde*) and boiled beans. The days of the early rainy season were especially grueling to workers who slept outside on their hammocks in the strike centers. The outstanding memories of suffering were compounded by financial loss for many workers who bought food on credit. The Company only paid forty days of work, and not the sixty-nine days that the strike lasted, making it impossible for workers to pay their debts.⁹⁸ Workers' testimonies focus on these challenges—particularly that they ate very poorly towards the end of the strike.

⁹⁶ Letter June 25, *Observaciones del Comité Central de Huelga al Plan Propuesto por la Comisión Mediadora*, "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Adela Chavez, interview by author, La Lima Nueva, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

To explain why workers accepted the loss of the original strike committee and its demands, the reelection of a new committee and the conciliatory return to work, one can only speculate that the lack of food and supplies was wearing on the workers; or perhaps the divisions within the organization compounded with lack of food and supplies led to their eventual acceptance, despite any disapproval or reluctance. Other workers may have simply embraced the goal of gaining the right to organize as a pivotal success that would enable them to begin organizing autonomous unions, even though these first unions were immediately replaced or reconstructed after the massive layoffs and retaliation tactics undertaken by the company. Yet another reason may be in the fact that the first Central Strike Committee leadership may not have had the time to communicate to the rest of the striking workers the situation because they were either jailed or forced to flee.

Strike Demands and Negotiations with the Tela Railroad Company

By May 4, 25,000 workers were on strike. Between May 4 and May 11, workers were organizing themselves in what would eventually become the structure of the union. Workers were represented in regional sections by geographic area, and subsections by work departments.⁹⁹ On May 11th, the initial ad hoc committee of worker representatives presented thirty strike demands to the Company, later known as the *'Pliego de Peticiones'* or simply *'los 30 puntos'*, (the 30 Points or thirty demands) which made clear the concerns of workers to the Tela Railroad Company and to Hondurans at large. The initial letter, which included workers' list of thirty demands, also cited the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Man and the International Letter of Social Guarantees (*Carta Interamericana De Garantías Sociales*) "in defense

⁹⁹ "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." Reporte de la Comisión Mediadora. San Pedro Sula, Junio, 1954. APMP.

of their material, social, political and cultural rights.”¹⁰⁰ The 30 Points were gathered during assemblies with workers throughout the five divisions (Puerto Cortés, La Lima, El Progreso, Bataan, Tela) of the Tela Railroad Company. By May 11, the demands from each region, by department, were brought together under a formal collective petition for the first time in the history of worker organizing in the zone.

As the strike progressed, the Tela Railroad Company did not engage with workers and instead called on the Honduran government to intervene. The Honduran government sent a mediation team to the North Coast, which settled in San Pedro Sula, met with both sides, and compiled proposals based on the thirty demands the workers submitted. The Tela Railroad Company maintained a hard, non-negotiation stance,¹⁰¹ and ignored the petition, refusing to negotiate with the workers or acknowledge the ‘30 points,’ insisting on workers' return to work prior to any discussion.¹⁰² The Honduran government's mediation commission tried to engage both parties. Workers, however, feared that the mediation team had the Company's best interests at heart and not theirs. They stood steadfast and did not go back to work.

¹⁰⁰ During his presidency Galvez signed on to the *International Letter of Social Guarantees*, but its objectives were never observed and it was reverted two months later with an accord that declared it null (Acuerdo 1724; Acuerdo 2255). The letter called for countries to observe minimum wage standards. During the Galvez presidency there was no Ministry of Labor, but instead the Dirección General de Trabajo y Previsión Social, which did not serve workers. Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*, 126; McCameron, *Bananas Labor and Politics in Honduras: 1954-1963*, 30-31.

¹⁰¹ The Tela Railroad Company refused to negotiate despite the Standard Fruit Company's decision to negotiate and settle a contract with the workers nineteen days after the strike began in that region. The Standard Fruit workers went on strike on May 7 and the Company began negotiations with their strike committee eleven days later. The Tela Railroad Company responded to the worker strike committee a month later.

¹⁰² The Company issued its response on June 13, 1954, nearly a month later and after the destruction of the first Central Strike Committee. See appendix for the list of demands. Ad hoc committee that elaborated the thirty demands were: Juan B. Canales, (Puerto Cortés), Cesar Augusto Coto (La Lima), S. Lilio Pineda M. (El Progreso) and Luis B. Yanes, (Tela). There was no official representation for Bataan. Although not reflected in the actual document the secretary responsible for typing and elaborating the report was Teresina Rossi Matamoros. The Tela Railroad Company's response on June 13, 1954 considers this petition the second petition made. The first was presented by the workers in the Construction Department on May 3, right before going on strike. That petition was specific to the construction workers' issues and demands. This longer set of demands reflects unity among all workers, all departments and regions.

The thirty demands that the ad hoc worker committee presented to the Company centered around several themes of great importance to workers: wage increases, respect for the eight-hour day, adequate access to healthcare for workers and their family members, transportation and work equipment (including protective gear), improvement in housing and food in the wharves for *muelleros* (stevedores), and access to education. Larger more symbolic issues revolved around race and gender equity and respect for workers and their right to organize a union. The 30 Points also show that women service workers were considered a part of the workforce and were considered in the formulation of the thirty demands.

Workers used the existing Honduran laws around the eight-hour day, education and protection for workers and women's rights to justify their claims.¹⁰³ These sets of high-priority demands by workers reflect that the Company often violated the established Honduran legislation of the eight hour day and remuneration for overtime work. By citing Honduran legislation to justify their demands, workers deliberately called attention to the fact that the Company did not adhere to Honduran laws. Workers also referenced legislation that was violated regularly by foreign and national employers, who often disregarded labor standards and forced workers to labor according to the export schedule.¹⁰⁴ Workers' immediate demands included a substantial wage increase that would raise their wages by 30 to 72% depending on the position.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Letter to Mediation Commission. June 17, 1954. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." Reporte de la Comisión Mediadora. San Pedro Sula, Junio 1954. APMP.

¹⁰⁴ The eight-hour day was cemented into law in Honduras in 1925 as "Artículo 191. La jornada máxima obligatoria asalariada será de ocho horas diarias y por casa seis días de trabajo habrá uno de descanso." Letter from the Central Strike Committee to the Mediation Commission. June 17, 1954. Page 13. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP.

¹⁰⁵ "Tabla de Porcentajes de Aumentos" y "Tabla Especial Para el Aumento de Salarios de los trabajadores de Departamento de Agricultura (Inciso b. del Artículo 1)". 11 de Mayo, 1954. Paginas 9-7. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." Reporte de la Comisión Mediadora. San Pedro Sula, Junio 1954. APMP

Corteros and the contract system

The elimination of the contract system was an important demand for most workers perceived to be skilled and workers in a workshop, i.e. construction or the machine shop. Agricultural *finca* workers (*corteros, muleros, junteros*), however, stood to benefit from the contractor system. This is reflected in the demand to end the contract system of work in all departments except for agricultural work. For *corteros* the contract system worked. *Corteros* were cutting contractors; they were seasoned workers who led a team of workers that they themselves chose, including the *mulero* (mule team driver) and *juntero* (gatherer/carrier). The *cortero* was paid by the company and negotiated with the timekeeper. He served as a buffer between workers and the *mandador*. The *cortero* would accord on the number goal of stems needed and receive pay for the pieces or stems the team cut; he then paid the rest of the workers.¹⁰⁶ John Soluri's analysis of managements' recollections notes that three work teams of nine men, who performed "fast-paced and team-oriented" work.¹⁰⁷ Oral history gathered in the region reveals that each team was made often of four to five men instead of nine, but the size had to do with the cutting needs of the day.¹⁰⁸ Once a cargo ship was waiting at the docks to be loaded with fruit, orders came down to every *mandador* and timekeeper, determining the goals for each *finca*.¹⁰⁹ The *mandador* and the *cortero* would communicate on cutting goals. The *cortero* had vast knowledge of the fields; they were respected both for their knowledge of the cutting work and their knowledge of the overall readiness of the *finca*. Once a goal was identified for the particular *finca*, the *corteros* would set the whole process in motion, working long hours from one to two days, until reaching the limit.

¹⁰⁶ Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

¹⁰⁷ John Soluri, *Banana Cultures Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2005), 144.

¹⁰⁸ Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Working with their own team, *corteros* could control the pace of the work, choose the workers, and have some flexibility and independence in the fields.¹¹⁰ Oral histories reveal that this is an important way in which workers organized their *finca* work. They were so used to this system that they would "cut corners" to earn extra money for the work team, eliminating the *juntero*.¹¹¹ Although, *junteros* and *muleros* were picked by the *cortero*, the contractor, *junteros* and *muleros* saw their position as an important step to becoming *corteros* themselves, the highest position within the hierarchy of the *finca* before the management position of timekeeper.¹¹² *Corteros* supported this demand as long as their particular contract system did not change. Deducing from the subtlety of this demand, ending the contract system for all workers except *finca* workers, it is evident that the first Central Strike Committee had insider knowledge of the issues and was greatly preoccupied with addressing them in ways that worked best for workers. The first strike committee leaders took great care and preoccupation in addressing every department's issues properly, because they knew the issues of the varying departments. The original list of demands was based on the knowledge of the different department's workplace issues. At the same time we can see the firm participation of *corteros* in making these demands important to the larger strike committee.

Demands to address women's and family issues

In these demands worker also included wage increases for washerwomen and service employees in the American Zone, many of whom were women.¹¹³ Several

¹¹⁰Soluri, *Banana Cultures Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States*, 144-148.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹¹² Francisco Napoleon Galo, interview by author, El Progreso, Yoro, July 1, 2004.; Oscar Rodriguez Pagoada, interview by author, American Zone, La Lima, Cortés, September, 2, 2006.

¹¹³ No. 1: Sections 1b, 1c. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa". Reporte de la Comisión Mediadora.

points addressed the Company's failure to adhere to the eight-hour day law and asked for double-time pay for time worked after eight hours, and reduced hours for nighttime employees to six hours per workday.¹¹⁴ Requiring double pay would encourage the Company to adhere to the eight-hour day regulation, hire a second shift, or pay overtime. In their demands, workers sought respect for pay schedules that reflected weekly pay and monthly pay instead of the company schedule of a 10-day pay period.¹¹⁵ Also included was the permission to miss work; workers often did not have permission to leave work to go to the hospital, attend funerals, or deal with other life or family situations.¹¹⁶ Workers who wanted time off or had suffered an accident and could not work would have to leave their position entirely and hope that on their return the job would still be there. Also of great concern for all workers, especially rail workers, banana cutters and pesticide *poiseros* (also, *veneneros*, pesticide spray workers) was the right to receive appropriate healthcare and pay for time lost due to work accidents.¹¹⁷ There were significant demands for protective equipment for workers, in addition to free transportation, materials for work (at the time all workers paid for their machetes, shovels, hoes and other digging tools).¹¹⁸ No protective gear

San Pedro Sula, Junio 1954. APMP; Olympia Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

¹¹⁴ No. 1: Section 1d, No. 6, No. 7, "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP

¹¹⁵ No. 4, No.7 Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP.

¹¹⁶ No. 17, "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." 3. APMP.

¹¹⁷ Special attention was given to obtaining protective gear from pesticides, rest time, and food for stevedores and dock workers and adequate, quality healthcare for these workers and their families. During floods, outbreaks of malaria and typhoid were common, and the company hospitals looked down on workers and were often not ready with adequate personnel to treat them. Women having babies in the Company hospitals were victims of racial discrimination. No. 2: Sections 2a, 2b, 2d and No. 3 in "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa."; APMP.; Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 321-322.; Argueta, *La Gran Huelga Bananera 69 Días que Estremecieron a Honduras*, 125-129.

¹¹⁸ No.9, No. 10, No. 17, No.18 and No. 23 "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP.

was provided by the Company. Despite the dangerous work and environment, there were no provisions to ensure workers' health and safety.

Healthcare for family members was also a high priority. Even service workers in the American Zone did not have access to the hospital, despite working so close to the facilities. Workers proposed a 2% employee¹¹⁹ contribution from their salaries for upkeep of the company hospital on the condition that their families would be treated free of charge.¹²⁰ The demand for access to improved healthcare, housing, and an eight-hour day reflected that the workforce was family-oriented, diverging from the Company's assumption of a primarily single male workforce. A family-oriented workforce was evident in the rebuttal from workers on June 17 to the Company proposal of June 13, 1954, in which workers demanded that dispensaries and hospitals be well staffed by doctors, specialists and nurses that could take care of their needs:

*Punto 2, Inciso E: Aceptado, toda vez que la enfermera sea graduada y se mantenga el equipo necesario, lo mismo que le cuidado que siempre llegue a tiempo y no como ha sucedido últimamente que, en casos de parto, ya encuentran al niño nacido.*¹²¹

[Section 2E: Accepted, on the condition that the nurse is certified and has the proper equipment and that care arrives in a timely manner in contrast to what has transpired lately, including cases of childbirth in which they arrive after the child has already been born].

Demands for improvement in living conditions, food establishments in the wharves, and access to education were prominent and would benefit families and

¹¹⁹ This figure fluctuates between 2% to 5% in the sources, 2% percent being the most common estimate.

¹²⁰ Pieces of information on conditions at the time are available; the biggest concern the workers cited was wages. However, there were many problems resulting from pesticides and injuries on the job from workers having to carry heavy stems (*racimos*) of bananas onto ships. Pesticides were also dangerous to workers at the time, though not well documented in the sources consulted. During floods, outbreaks of malaria and typhoid were common, and the company hospitals looked down on workers and were often not ready to treat them.

¹²¹ Letter from the Central Strike Committee to the Mediation Commission. June 17, 1954. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." Page 11. APMP.

women, including *patronas* who were not linked to supervisors in the *finca*. Workers proposed the "Abolition of the obligation to eat in the eating establishment of the wife of the supervisor" (*21ª Abolición de la obligación de comer donde los capataces*) to prevent coercion of workers in their selection of *comedores* for their meals.¹²² Many workers made their own contracts with *comedores de las patronas* (*patrona's comedores*) in the outlying *campos*. In new areas to which the Company expanded their plantations, workers were commonly expected to patronize the *comedor* of the wife of a supervisor (*capataz*). This felt unfair to workers since they preferred to buy from vendors or eat with other cooks. This proposal aimed to limit the power of the supervisors and their wives and to open work opportunities for unaccompanied women, *patronas*, *ayudantas* and vendors in new areas.¹²³

Working class women during this time performed paid labor in the banana camps by offering cooking and ironing services to bachelor workers, the largest contingent of the workforce. Edmundo Williams' wife earned thirty *Lempiras* a week cooking for bachelors.¹²⁴ According to Canales, many women also worked as service workers and nannies in the homes of the company bosses. About one-hundred women worked in a *Banania* factory (which was also owned by the company). Many were nurses in company hospitals. Others were telephone workers, known as *las Clavileras*, and yet others were 'servants assigned to the company employees.'¹²⁵ The role of women, both in formal paid labor in the factories or in the Companies' telephone service, and women in informal arrangements, for instance, as cooks and maids, were marginally discussed by the interviewees. Traces of their participation can be observed

¹²² Letter to Company with demands. May 11, 1954. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP.

¹²³ Lucila Goodlitt, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 10, 2006.; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006; Candida Garya, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 6, 2006.

¹²⁴ Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 25, 2004.

¹²⁵ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August, 8, 2004.; Jose Sanchez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, November 5, 2006.

in the *Pliego de Peticiones* demands document, however, where one of the points demanded just compensation for ‘servants assigned to company employees.’¹²⁶

Several other demands addressed the lives of women in significant ways, demonstrating their significant numbers in service jobs at the American Zone, the hotels, and hospitals. There was a demand for direct pay from the Company and a demand for paid meals and wage increases for washerwomen. This demand would change the Company practice of providing stipends to supervisors and first class employees in the American Zone and Lima Nueva (the side of La Lima where the Company's Honduran trusted employees lived) to pay for service workers, cooks, washerwomen, babysitters and *yarderos* (often men). The stipend arrangement was not advantageous to women because they either received less pay or were at the mercy of each individual household's workload and pay schedule.¹²⁷

The thirty demands as a whole clearly demonstrate not only the overwhelming presence of women workers, but also workers' intent and ability to advocate for women workers and family needs, including healthcare (as mentioned above), recognition as workers of the Company, as a bargaining unit and with access to Company benefits, and fair treatment. Workers fought hard for the recognition of informal sector service workers, washerwomen, and cooks who served trusted company employees in the American Zones. The demand read:

¹²⁶ One of Williams' first positions was that of a ‘yardero’ or yard keeper for a company supervisor. For *Pliego de Peticiones* see: Letter to Company May 11, 1954 in "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP ; Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 71-75; McCameron, *Bananas Labor and Politics in Honduras: 1954-1963*, 133-137.

¹²⁷ No.2: Section 2d, "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP.; Olympia E. Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

*Punto 2, Inciso D: Insistimos en que las cocineras y lavanderas deben ser consideradas como empleadas de la Empresa, teniendo desde luego, derecho a todas las prestaciones como tales.*¹²⁸

[Number 2, section D: We insist that the cook and washerwomen should be considered employees of the Company and as such should have the right to all worker benefits].

Workers essentially advocated for the formalization of an unacknowledged and informal workforce.

Several factors may have influenced this demand. The sheer numbers of service workers laboring within the American Zone was crucial to the strike. In the 1950s, women's participation in the Honduran labor force was uniquely high when compared to other Central American nations. Honduras' rate of female participation in the labor force was 41.8% compared to 11.8% in Guatemala and 16.2% in El Salvador.¹²⁹

Workers supported and demanded equal pay for equal work for women.¹³⁰ Even this general demand, perhaps a universal demand, reflects a consciousness not present in previous strikes.

Very few North Coast working women made it to leadership positions or committees in the strike, but still their labor and role in the strike was significant. *Las Clavileras*, for instance, were instrumental in helping maintain the communication flow between *fincas* and strike centers; "*meti[endo] mecha*," means literally lighting the communication with their messages over the phone.¹³¹ Although the organizing role of women is minimized in the conventional narrative of the strike, both Canales and Williams allude to the role of women in preventing workers from getting caught by the

¹²⁸ Letter from the Central Strike Committee to the Mediation Commission. June 17, 1954. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." Page 11. APMP.

¹²⁹ Juan Pablo Pérez Sáinz, *From the Finca to the Maquila: Labor and Capitalist Development in Central America* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), 17-18.

¹³⁰ 11° -A trabajo igual debe corresponder igual remuneración, cualquiera que sea el sexo, raza, credo o nacionalidad del trabajador. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP.

¹³¹ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.

militaries. Canales' wife even went to jail and was forced to leave her children at home alone for fifteen days because she refused to say where he was hiding.¹³² Canales remembers that his wife was abreast of the political plans because she was home when they would hold meetings; her participation in the day-to-day organizing, though, was marginal. Williams' wife also saved him by disposing of the newspapers *Vanguardia Revolucionaria* just before the military came to look for him at home.¹³³ The women of the *Banania* factory also went on strike and yet others stand out as messengers between strike centers. Despite the obvious presence of women both in the *fincas* and as workers in the Company towns, the everyday narrative of the strike marginalized them to a secondary supportive role.

Evident in the text of the demands, among the urgent demands of salary improvement and work days, is a symbolic demand for both gender and racial equity:

*11° -A trabajo igual debe corresponder igual remuneración, cualquiera que sea el sexo, raza, credo o nacionalidad del trabajador.*¹³⁴
[Number 11-For equal work there should be equal pay regardless of sex, race, creed or nationality of the worker].

Company policies were extremely discriminatory to black workers, Salvadorans and women. Black workers were not allowed to enter the American Zone club, the hotel, the bakery and were often relegated to sleeping outside the *barracones* if they did not have a family. In the Company's hotel, neither black nor *mestizo* workers were allowed to enter their bakery unless they worked there.¹³⁵ Black workers experienced

¹³² Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.

¹³³ Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 25, 2004.

¹³⁴ No. 11, "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." 3. APMP.

¹³⁵ Don Jose Sanchez recalls that he often found a guard at the door to enter and buy him a piece of bread. To this day he feels uncomfortable entering the American Zone in La Lima. Similarly the demand for clean homes "for all workers that need them" spoke to the fact that many black workers were often left to sleep outside them in the singles *barracones*. Jose Sanchez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, November 5, 2006.

discrimination at the wharves where *mestizo* workers were prioritized. Black workers, who were perceived to have less body mass than other workers, according to Canales, were often turned away if there were *mestizo* workers ready to take up the numbers or jobs slots:

*...entonces planteo en el problema Domingo Martínez de la discriminación, en el muelle donde el trabajaba también sucedía lo mismo. El que les distribuía los boletos para trabajar llamaba así de fulano, sutano, mengano siempre dejaban a los negros por fuera.*¹³⁶
[...Domingo Martinez posed the problem of discrimination; in the port where he worked the same thing happened. The one that gave out the numbers for work would call such and such workers, always leaving out the black workers.]

Aside from not having secure work every day, when black workers did manage to get work, their jobs were often the hardest and most grueling of physical labor--commonly, the work of *stevedores* in the *fincas* and in the ports. The *muelleros* (stevedores and dock workers) were a significantly black and mixed workforce.¹³⁷ They were expected to unload the '*racimo*,' or bunches of bananas, weighing anywhere from seventy-five to one-hundred pounds. These were unloaded from the '*rejillas*' or railroad wooden container onto their bare backs. Another worker used a very sharp machete to slice the stems while still on the back of the carrier, skillfully, the machete barely missed cutting the carriers' backs. It is interesting to note that *mestizo* workers saw black workers as weaker than *mestizos* because they did not work in the fields. *Mestizo* workers may not have been aware of Company policies that actually tracked workers into different departments. The first strike committee attempted to address workplace

¹³⁶ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.

¹³⁷ The additions to the 30 point petition included: "11a.) Equal Pay for Equal work. and 12a.) Equal Justice for all workers and 22a.) Employees not to be subjected to racial discrimination in company hospitals."Original '30 Puntos' Pliego de Peticiones de los Trabajadores de la Tela RRCo. Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*, 234-241.

discrimination directly with the inclusion of the universal demands, and also engaged in negotiation related to this work.

During his interview, Williams was very quick to say that black workers and mestizo workers were equal in the fields. But Canales and Williams subtly marginalize this group by glossing over the discrimination of black workers, perhaps accepting it as part of the company hierarchy. A black *finca* worker would probably present a different narrative. Gerardo Pery Laredo lived discrimination in the *campos*, as did other black workers that worked alongside him, constantly negotiating space with *mestizos*.

Teresina Rossi Matamoros's testimony tells us that race was a determinant in who entered the "mess halls" or clubs. On one occasion, a friend who was "*trigueña*" was not allowed to enter the "mess hall." The guard told them it was busy and whispered to Teresina, a light skinned woman, that she could go in if she wanted. The *mess hall* was a dining room where the first class, trusted employees of the Tela Railroad Company, came to dine. Rossi's friend may not have been black, for a *mestiza* could also be *trigueña*, but it was clear that ethnicity and race were policed and degrees of skin color were important to Company installations, as they were in the United States. Race and ethnicity instilled a sense of hierarchy among workers.¹³⁸ Workers' testimonies indicate targeted discrimination against black workers. The discrimination marked the lives of workers beyond the work selection process and affected their daily living and the local worker culture in the Company towns.

Another strike demand, the "Abolition of racial and worker discrimination in hospitals, dispensaries, ambulances and hotels (*Nº 22- Abolición de toda discriminación racial y por categoría de trabajo en los Hospitales, Dispensarios, Ambulancias y*

¹³⁸ *Trigueña* in the context of the North Coast literally translates into the color of wheat to mean brown or light brown. It does not necessarily mean black, but it is associated with black, a *mestiza*, however, could also be *trigueña*. Marvin Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guyamuras, 1994), 324.

Hoteles)" identifies the Company spaces where workers felt the worst discrimination.¹³⁹ Workers received medical care in the hospitals according to their position in the company and often had second or third category status when they went in for treatment. Each floor served a category in the Company's hospital of La Lima.¹⁴⁰ It was understood that *finca* workers were in the lowest rank when receiving services and many feared going to the hospital except in cases of extreme emergency.

Along with the demand for better wages, and respect for the right to organize, the worker committees (*secciones* and *subseccionales*) of the emerging labor union also sought to change the culture created and work organization imposed by Company policies.¹⁴¹ The demands on the Tela Railroad Company were made public to all workers in Honduras, setting a model for all workers of how to make workplace demands and what work policies should look like. The thirty demands served as a template not just for local workplace issues but also for broader universal demands.

The ad hoc committee, the initial strike committee responsible for the elaboration of the thirty points, was preoccupied with larger universal demands, like an end to discrimination based on sex, race, and nationalism.¹⁴² This initial committee had a larger vision for the union movement that did not stop at building a localized union, but aimed also to change the working class culture in the North Coast. These ambitions faded as interchange with the Company began, concrete workplace policies dominated the negotiations, and the leadership and representation of the workers changed over the duration of the strike.

¹³⁹ No. 22, "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." 4, APMP.

¹⁴⁰ Marina Graunard, interview by author, Tela, Atlántida, June 9, 2006.

¹⁴¹ Though the labor union movement prioritizes a mestizo and male strike committee which may have been a reflection of the Company imposed order, there are some exceptions that reflect the individual departments and regional understanding of demands. This is important because there is an understanding that the strike committee should represent the value of all and not just of their own particular needs.

¹⁴² No. 11, "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." 3, APMP.

A month after the ad hoc committee submitted the thirty demands with the facilitation of the government mediation commission, workers heard back for the first time from the Company.¹⁴³ In the response, the Company, as workers expected, did not accept all of the workers' demands and especially rejected those affecting service workers and the proposed abolition of contract labor. The Company claimed that these service workers did not work directly for the Company and therefore were not their employees.¹⁴⁴

The Company furthermore cited great losses due to wind blow-downs of *fincas* and the strike itself; in fact, these losses affected banana production gains well into 1955.¹⁴⁵ UFCo's anti-union strategies and practices were similar in all the Latin American countries where it did business. They initially did not recognize the demands of the workers, hired strikebreakers, denied workers actually worked for them and often absconded behind country political instability to avoid accepting the union.¹⁴⁶ The United Fruit Company in particular felt confident that their subsidiaries in other countries could supply the banana needed for export until strikes subsided. They then "could afford to wait out the isolated strike, repress workers, or simply abandon production in particular locales."¹⁴⁷

The Company considered that their workers' salaries were higher than all agricultural workers in the country and cited the added benefits of health care and goods

¹⁴³ Letter Response Tela Railroad Company, June 13, 1954. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." APMP.

¹⁴⁴ Once again women faced the reality of the informal economy they lived and worked in around the banana fields. Clearly these workers supported the banana economy, but at the same time the Company claimed they had no rights to benefits.

¹⁴⁵ Blow downs where high winds that hit the *fincas* and literally blew down the trees and large leaves. Less strong winds would damage the leaves, slicing through them. Soluri, *Banana Cultures Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States*, 142.

¹⁴⁶ In Costa Rica the UFCo refused to negotiate with workers and instigated a dispute between Costa Rica and Nicaragua to avoid negotiations. Lara Putnam, *The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica, 1870-1960* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 64.

¹⁴⁷ Steve Striffler, *In the Shadows of State and Capital the United Fruit Company, Populart Struggle, and Agrarian Restructuring in Ecuador, 1900-1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 32-33.

at cost such as milk and meat.¹⁴⁸ The Company was not conciliatory with regard to real wage increases or overtime. They also did not accept demands on transportation and the demand for work supplies.¹⁴⁹ The Company's rebuttal suggested time and half pay for overtime and no special shift for nighttime port workers.¹⁵⁰ Thus began a back and forth process of negotiation, assisted by the government mediation team that would eventually result in a resolution of the strike about a month later.

Gains of the Strike

Workers' narratives of the strike's outcome are diverse. For many, the gains were important, especially the recognition of their labor union, which opened the door to other workers in other industries to organize their unions without intimidation.¹⁵¹ Of the initial thirty demands submitted for negotiation on May 11, 1954, the recognition of the union as a bargaining body for the workers, and their right to organize a union, was perhaps the greatest achievement. The strike also exposed the labor legislation of the time to be unsatisfactory. Additionally, the government, through the Mediation Commission, proposed the creation of a body with representation from the union and the Company that would work to establish improved labor legislation after the contract was finalized between workers and the Company.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that the Company directed their communication to the mediation commission and not to the workers directly, giving the governmental mediation team more power to influence the process, despite knowing very little about workers' issues and lives.

¹⁵⁰ The Company claimed that this practice was already the norm. Workers demands demonstrate it was poorly upheld. Letter from Tela Railroad Company to Mediation Commission. June 13, 1954. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa," APMP.

¹⁵¹ At the same time new work rules and regulations set up by the contract were perceived by *finca* worker's as a loss of autonomy.

¹⁵² "Propuesta de la Comisión Mediadora para la Solución del Conflicto" 21 de Junio, 1954. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa," APMP.

The positive results of the strike were monumental for the time. Although gains in wages did not reach the 50% workers asked for, the debate around wages during the strike prompted change in both the overall relations between Company and workers and consequently between supervisors and workers in the banana fields as well. The negotiation around wage increases, regularization of the pay schedule to once a week, the respect for the eight-hour day, pay for overtime work, and limits placed on the night shift workload were all significant changes that empowered workers. Workers gained important autonomy in their daily lives, including access to improved food and freedom to choose their meals rather than being forced to eat at supervisors' wives *comedores*. Workers' families gained from the strike negotiations--access to healthcare, improved housing, recognition of service workers as Company employees and improved nutrition. Stevedores and dockworkers in general received improvements in pay; after the strike, they would be paid continuously for shift work, a change of the past practice of withholding pay for hours during delays in work not caused by them. Their work schedules were regularized and reflected a greater consideration for workers' lives. The improvement in food for stevedores and rail workers also meant more employment and economic opportunities for women food vendors and *patronas* not linked to a supervisor. These changes would make the *campos* and *fincas* dramatically different places to live and work after May 1954. Workers had more agency; their families were recognized. After the strike, the realities of their lives and hard work were visible to the supervisors in the various areas of work, a qualitative change that workers welcomed and valued.

A Model for all Honduran Workers

Beyond the powerful national implications and industry-changing results of the 1954 strike, the Tela Railroad strike gave other workers, and especially Standard Fruit Employees, a model of action that would help them achieve their goals. Many workers,

particularly those working for national industries, worked for very low wages which did not reflect the cost of living. During the strike, workers all over Honduras stopped work, closed their shops or factories, peacefully draped the Honduran flag in the entrance to the factories/striking centers, prevented any Honduran workers from entering, and made lists of demands of their employer.¹⁵³ The Honduran government responded by assigning mediation commissions, and workers then elected a negotiating body representative of the strikers. Labor contracts were unknown before this period. The Tela Railroad Company worker model of organizing was essential for workers in other industries demanding changes in the workplace in an organized way and on an ongoing basis. While some of the labor contracts cemented new practices that benefitted workers, they also created limits and policies for the Companies whose power had previously been unchecked and who had imposed paternalistic relations upon their employees.

The strike also affirmed the importance of consciousness-building among workers as a part of a national Honduran workers' movement. Workers organizing with PDRH had learned about other countries' labor movements. The consciousness building process included denunciations of labor conditions in the *fincas* and various departments. For committees such as PDRH, *Comité Coordinador Obrero* and *Comité de Lucha Obrero* the rhetoric of nationalism was influential and helped to instill consciousness among workers about their particular conditions. Organizing efforts also exposed foreign capital, namely, the banana companies and foreign nationals, as exploiters of Honduran workers.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 88-100.

¹⁵⁴ Salvadoran workers were somehow included in this rhetoric in the banana *campos* and *fincas*; they were known for their hard work and solidarity as workers for the Marxist labor committees.

Standard Fruit Workers Follow Tela Railroad

News of the Tela Railroad Company strike news spread nationally and internationally as workers all over Honduras began to make demands of their employers in the national industries. Worker actions combined as a national strike, one which Barahona notes, lacked a national central strike committee.¹⁵⁵ The absence of a national coordinating body outside the banana *fincas* meant that each localized strike effort was led locally and the outcomes were mediated between the workers and local companies. Barahona notes that textile workers in various factories owned and managed by Arab immigrants, an industry which had been organized by the CCO since 1950 began to make demands of their employers, many going on strike:

The first strikes broke out in San Pedro Sula on the afternoon of May 18 when approximately 1000 women from seven textile factories blocked the entrance to the factory installations and demanded an increase in wages.¹⁵⁶

The Standard Fruit Company, the largest competitor of the Tela Railroad Company, inspired by the actions of the workers in Eastern Caribbean Coast, went on strike on May 7, 1954 making four major demands of their employer.¹⁵⁷ The workers' primary demand was explicit--the firing of oppressive personnel, "the superintendent of railway, J.A. Gridner, the administrator of the Hospital D'Antoni, Jaime Rodriguez and the assistant to the superintendent of the wharf (*muelle*), Ramon Cerril."¹⁵⁸ To workers these men were abusive. Workers also asked for increases in wages, paid vacations, and

¹⁵⁵ Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*, 88.

¹⁵⁶ The seven factories were owned by Arab immigrants or sons of Arab immigrants to Honduras and were the following: "Bolivar factory owned by Elias Katan, Presidente Paz Factory owned by Jacobo Katan, La Selecta Factory owned by Francisco Abuffele, Charalco Factory owned by Constantino Larach, the Hamilton Factory owned by Elias Canahuati, La Esperanza Factory owned by A. Handal and lastly a factory owned by Jose Miselen." Ibid., 93. (Author's translation).

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 90.; see Standard Fruit Company Demands in Appendix.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

access for family members in Company hospitals. By the 20th of May, the Standard Fruit Company strike ended with an agreement on the first point but left the rest unresolved, particularly on wages, which would be increased on a scale from 4 to 8 percent.¹⁵⁹ Workers revolted in the *fincas* of Olanchito, particularly Lomitas and Ceibita, where workers stopped a passenger train. The workers felt deceived by the negotiations and attempted to protest but were repressed by the Honduran troops.¹⁶⁰ Nevertheless, workers' memory of the great 1954 strike while working for the Standard Fruit Company demonstrates an important step in changing conditions.

Jose Narciso Duarte Cruz, a *venenero*, was on his way to work at five in the morning when one of the strike leaders in the Standard Fruit Company, Antonio Navarro, stopped him.¹⁶¹ Duarte Cruz explains that Navarro told him about the strike:

*'Narciso no vaya a trabajar porque hoy no vamos a trabajar, hay una huelga,' entonces yo me regrese. Yo era un jovenzuelo en ese momento, pero ya los señores mayores empezaron a decirnos, que la huelga se había iniciado y que no había más trabajo hasta que se resolviera el problema.*¹⁶²

['Narciso do not go to work because today we are not going to work, there will be a strike,' I then turned back. I was a very young man at that moment; the older men began to talk to explain to us that the strike was initiating and that there was no more work until the issue was resolved.]

According to Duarte Cruz, older and more experienced workers led the strike effort and as others joined, they deployed themselves into the nine work centers to insist the majority of workers join. While many workers voluntarily marched out and joined the strike movement others did not, resistant workers were forced to join the strike under threat of violence. Duarte Cruz explains:

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 90-92.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 92-93.

¹⁶¹ Duarte Cruz was *venenero*. Narciso Duarte Cruz, interview by author, Savá, Colon, June 10, 2006.

¹⁶² He remembers that the strike leader was captured and never returned after the strike. Narciso Duarte Cruz, interview by author, Savá, Colon, June 10, 2006.

*Nos fuimos al centro de producción de los trabajos, para sacar a los que se habían ido a trabajar y los que oponían resistencia, los mayores les daban garrotazos porque ahí no había, ahí se tenía que entender a buenas o malas, entonces seguimos la lucha.*¹⁶³

[We went to the center of production, the work centers, to bring out the ones that had gone to work and the ones that resisted, the older workers would beat them with sticks because there was no room, there you had to understand, good or bad, we followed the struggle.]

In the Standard Fruit Company strike, older workers led the strike and coached younger workers. Many workers were young or new migrants to the region and had not lived through previous strikes. By 1954, the few older workers who lived through the strikes of the 1930s still worked in the *finca*, but their leadership role was important to the strike movement. Workers feared retaliation for striking and did not want to lose their employment. All, however, experienced the Carias Andino dictatorship in one way or another. While some had participated in presenting petitions and making smaller demands, a work stoppage of the nine centers of production had never before been seen.

The Standard Fruit Company strike lasted eleven days, officially ending on May 20, 1954. Though inspired by the Tela Railroad Company strike, the Standard Fruit workers' strike ended far sooner and through less extensive negotiations, but the monumental achievement of union recognition, spurred by the Tela Railroad Company workers' movement, was also realized.

The Strike as a Product of the Time and Inheritance

Although the strike sparked a remarkable sea change for workers in Honduras at the time, its impact was ultimately limited and influenced by both the geopolitical dynamics in the region and by the historical legacy of past strikes and worker actions in

¹⁶³ Narciso Duarte Cruz, interview by author, Savá, Colon, June 10, 2006.

the nation. The fear of communism in the region, the U.S. dominance in Latin American political affairs, the triangular relationship between the U.S. and Honduran governments and Honduran business interests, and the positioning and experiences of various worker organizations were determinative in the ultimate resolution of the 1954 strike.

Strikers and the worker leadership committees could not avoid anti-communist rhetoric and accusations throughout the strike, as this attitude permeated regional, transnational relations. During the gathering of Tenth Inter-American Conference of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Venezuela, the Caracas Declaration was enacted, demanding 'hemispheric solidarity' against communism from all Latin American countries.¹⁶⁴ Guatemala refused to sign on to the OAS declaration (they saw it as an overstepping effort led by the U.S. State Department) and was officially labeled a communist government.¹⁶⁵ The declaration stated that any "Communist government in any American state would constitute a direct threat and would automatically trigger a consultative meeting of the OAS."¹⁶⁶ Though the OAS declined to engage in a military intervention against Guatemala, it did not oppose U.S. support of a subversive attack planned by Guatemalan general Castillo Armas in Honduras to depose President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán.¹⁶⁷ The Caracas declaration symbolically sent a message to other American nations, in the name of 'hemispheric solidarity,' to oppose communism.

¹⁶⁴ The Secretary of State in 1954, John Foster Dulles and the U.S. Delegation, argued for the Caracas declaration to oppose communism, targeting the Guatemalan government. The Guatemalan delegation hoped for hemispheric solidarity from the Latin American countries. Gleijeses suggests that there was 'severe arm twisting' to get nations to endorse the U.S. delegation and Dulles. Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 270-276.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 270-276.

¹⁶⁶ The Organization of American States (OAS) is a US-dominated organization that emerged from the Pan-American Conference held in Mexico City before the WWII ended. The military component met in Rio in 1947. Tulio Halperín Donghi, *The Contemporary History of Latin America* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1993), 257.

¹⁶⁷ The invasion by general Carlos Castillo Armas was a successful coup d'état. The coup was 'easy', proving the unthreatening nature of Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán's government and the U.S.'s ability to establish hegemony over the region. Ibid., 256-57.

The Guatemalan government turned to their neighboring countries for solidarity and asked the Honduran government to sign a non-aggression agreement, which the Honduran government refused to sign. Given U.S. influence and power, instead, Honduras entered into a Bilateral Arms Agreement with the United States in 1954. This agreement granted U.S. government unlimited access to Honduran soil for purposes of training and military exercises. The Honduran government agreed to pay an unknown sum of money to the U.S. government for the soldiers' stay. Prior to the signing of the agreement, the United States had already trained Honduran fighter pilots and many Honduran military officers began to train on U.S. soil in 1946.¹⁶⁸ It is under this international political backdrop that the Honduran striking workers waged their union struggle. Facing the rampant and ubiquitous accusations of communism, worker leaders struggled to keep the strike within the national consciousness as a patriotic Honduran form of struggle.

Árbenz Guzmán's imminent fall and the accusations of communism in Guatemala put inordinate pressure on the banana workers' Central Strike Committee in Honduras to disavow any connections with communists and to allow Liberal Party members to engage in the strike committee process. Taking cues from the events of the time, the Tela Railroad Company charged the workers with attempting to cause a national economic crisis and of being communists like the Guatemalans. The strike committee was understandably afraid that the anti-communist sentiment, already spreading through Honduras, would destroy the strike effort. These dynamics were particularly challenging for Honduran workers, because they were dealing not only with a resistant employer, but a transnational one with allies in the U.S. State Department, the Honduran government, and the national military. These interests came together to

¹⁶⁸ Margarita Oseguera de Ochoa, *Honduras Hoy : Sociedad y Crisis Política*, Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Centro de Documentación de Honduras 1987), 207-215.

protect the Company's territory, both economically and politically. The Tela Railroad Company did not negotiate with workers until a few days before Arbenz Guzmán's government was deposed in June of 1954.¹⁶⁹ The local Tela Railroad Company proceeded to work with the Honduran government to isolate members of the Central Strike Committee that they perceived to be "communist". While the structure set up by the Central Strike Committee made it hard for the Company to divide and conquer the various local strike committees individually, this intentionally-created structure ultimately betrayed the Central Strike Committee. The Company used its power and influence with the Honduran government to campaign against workers who were perceived to be communist, effectively targeting the first unified strike committee elected by workers. For workers on the ground, there was little choice but to elect a second Central Strike Committee to replace the first in order to maintain a recognized negotiating body. This transition enabled teachers like Valencia and others, who had not been organically connected to the organizing process and who arguably had less accountability to *finca* workers, to attain stature as bargaining representatives for all the workers with the Company. Once the first committee was in jail, the new process would be influenced heavily by Antonio Jaregui and Serafino Romualdi, special envoys of the ORIT secretly invited by the United States Embassy.¹⁷⁰ As early as 1953, the U.S. Embassy and the ORIT were working together, Jaregui and his organizations offered

To bring democratic labor organization techniques and know-how into Honduras to cultivate the field as a preventive, so to speak, against communist labor.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Workers gave the Tela Railroad Company their initial thirty demands on May 7, and the Company replied via the Mediation commission on June 13, Their negotiation position was strong and uncompromising. On June 16, 1954 Coronel Carlos Enrique Castillo Armas invaded from Honduras and in two weeks ousted Arbenz Guzman. Halperin Donghi, *The Contemporary History of Latin America*, 256.

¹⁷⁰ *Memo November 24, 1953*, John D. Erwin to US State Department, Box 177 (Box 3), Labor Affairs, Record Group 84; National Archives Building, College Park, Maryland, Washington, DC.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

The U.S. Embassy had identified that the "Honduran government was 'apathetic' toward labor."¹⁷² By the time the 1954 strike was taking place the relationships between the Tela Railroad Company with the ORIT and the U.S. Embassy were established and were called on to participate as advisors.

Conclusion: the Strike's Importance to Honduras

For almost fifty years, the Tela Railroad Company had existed in Honduras with a relatively unchallenged access to natural resources and labor.¹⁷³ The Company's reach was so expansive that nearly every Honduran (*campesinos* and professionals) had worked or had a family member that worked in the North Coast. The presidential administrations worked with the banana companies, often going against the interests of their own governments and national producers. The largest employer, the Tela Railroad Company, also controlled transportation, land resources, and international politics in Honduras. The 1950s was a period of great change for Honduras, during which many modernizing trends were initiated by President Galvez, including the creation of ministries and the construction of roads. Galvez, though handpicked by his predecessor Carías Andino, and a former Tela Railroad Company lawyer, was moving away from the old order. Though not ideologically liberal or progressive, the shift away from the Carías' dictatorial rule was significant. The strike and the workers' ability to demonstrate their significant power in the role of production prompted legislative and governmental labor legislation. The great gains of the union leadership were the push for the construction of a Ministry of Labor, the formation of their union and the right to organize. But the largest gain and most dramatic outcome of the workers' direct action

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ In 1954 the Honduran government granted the United Fruit Company rights to national rivers and water sources.

was the shift in power relations between employer and workers and local townspeople and workers. The strike was a process by which workers were able to participate in the building of the labor movement concretely and in changing the national landscape by changing the role of workers in the nation. The concrete process of organizing worker committees in the year prior to the strike and during the strike movement, and the formation of a union leadership structure were the building blocks of the base of the recognized post-1954 labor movement. The North Coast thus became influential in the development of a working class culture that would affect the rest of the nation.

CHAPTER 4:

FINCA WORKERS: CONSTRUCTION OF BANANA WORKER CULTURE

This chapter looks at the lives and experiences of agricultural workers in the banana *fincas* and company housing in the banana sectors of the North Coast of Honduras before and leading up to the great banana strike of 1954. Through an analysis of the everyday lives, working conditions, environment, and leisure time of primarily male *finca* laborers in the banana groves, we see a complex geography of gender, racial, and ethnic relationships and negotiations among social actors that shaped the workplace and labor responsibilities. Male workers' lives in this terrain on the North Coast provide evidence of the formation of a working-class masculinity that was integral to work, survival and dignity. The banana worker identity and culture were the reflections of specific racial and ethnic constructions in the North Coast. Perhaps more importantly, the construction of a working class male banana worker identity allowed workers to transgress status quo power dynamics and resist against company control. The banana worker identity and culture contributed to the formation of the labor movement in the North Coast, the strike, and ultimately influenced subsequent political dynamics and labor leadership in the nation.

This chapter maps out power relations, gender and racial constructs in the banana *campo* and underscores the importance of the development of the *campeño* identity to the formation of a collective worker identity on the North Coast and the nation.¹ At the same time, workers' oral narratives reinforce and promulgate the strike as a result of ethno-racially diverse workers negotiating their lives on the North Coast, not a state project or a party-led institutional action. While there was a dominant banana

¹Many North Coast inhabitants used *Los Campos* or *campos bananeros* to refer to the rural banana-growing areas, without distinguishing between the planted fields, *fincas*, where workers labored and the living camps. But for the most part workers used terms more precisely to make a distinction between the two. Workers used *finca* to denote the place of work and *campos* as the living areas. In this chapter and in keeping with workers' words, *finca* refers to the banana groves or fields and *campos* to the living camps.

worker culture, many workers' experiences diverged from the common narrative and these, too, became part of the North Coast culture. Remarkably, the workers' diversity and particularly gendered and racialized differences did not prevent cohesion, and in fact, became a part of the character of the movement of the strike. Ultimately, North Coast workers shared a commonality of experience and were unified in their desire to thrive and achieve better conditions, as evidenced by the strike itself.

This chapter begins by describing workers' lives and the community they created looking at three spheres of existence--work, living, and leisure time. In each of these areas, workers' testimonies provide insight on how they adapted to the harsh environment and work, coped and confronted the companies' desire for firm control, pursued their own aspirations, and grappled with sometimes conflicted or uneasy interactions with other workers. This section also discusses examples of workers' efforts to resist company control, perhaps small indicators of workers' readiness for the eventual strike, and closes with a reiteration of the importance of workers' living conditions and culture as the context and backdrop against which the strike was possible. Next, the chapter explores the dominant presence of male *mestizo* workers and the construction of a banana worker identity around their lives and experiences, including their identification with "*indio*" as a nationalist identity. These experiences and the realities of workers' lives and self-perceptions are juxtaposed against both the company-imposed identities and societal expectations and assumptions about banana workers, which ultimately served to promote unity among workers across differences, including non-*indio* immigrants and workers, mostly Salvadorans, black Garifuna, and Jamaican workers. The chapter ends with the divergent experiences of women, as a lead-in to Chapter 4's discussion of *patronas* and women in the *campos*.

A North Coast Made Vibrant by a Diverse Workforce

The North Coast was a cosmopolitan area where workers, merchants, Honduran growers, the Honduran state, and U.S. banana companies and their employees contributed to the vibrancy of the region. Although the banana companies are often credited with the construction of the North Coast, culturally, politically, and environmentally, the region was and is actually a result of the negotiations of relationships and contestations of power between these multiple players. Banana workers, and in particular agricultural workers, had a significant influence due to their sheer numbers in the region. Although often the details of their lives and experiences receive scant attention outside of Honduran literary and academic circles, agricultural workers and their labor formed perhaps the most important sector of the transnational banana companies and arguably made most lasting contributions to the North Coast and later development of the country.

At the height of the industry in the 1920's in Honduras, banana workers in the banana groves of the Tela Railroad Company and the Standard Fruit Company were the best-paid workers in Honduras. This was the most desirable work on the entire North Coast, but at the same time, the lives of banana workers on these *fincas* were marked by brutal working and living conditions. The mostly male *finca* workers lived virtually without any workers' rights—except the ones they created for themselves. These workers' stories are valuable because they created a unique working class culture on the North Coast, and as critical players in the 1954 strike, these workers were catalysts for major changes in the region, as well as for nationwide liberal reforms.

By 1944, banana workers formed the majority of the population of the North Coast. Many faced hardships as they journeyed to the North Coast from their hometowns in various departments and provinces of Honduras, El Salvador and Jamaica to acquire work in the banana plantations. Like many migrant workers of the time, they persevered and made the best of their lives and environment to survive. *Campeños*, as

they preferred to be called, had been coming to the North Coast since the early 1900s directly from other southern and southwestern departments of Copán, Ocotepeque, Valle, Olancho, and even from El Salvador.² Others had spent many decades in the North Coast because their fathers or mothers had migrated to those regions in earlier decades. They were not a regular and dominant presence in the Company towns, however, because they spent most of their lives laboring in the banana plantations.

Work, leisure, *campo* life, and workers' navigation of these resulted in the development of their very own brand of working class identity particular to the banana regions and North Coast. The strike can be better understood by analyzing the terrain, including workers' lives, on which the strike was organized. The cohesion in the strike movement was rooted in a collectively lived experience in the banana *fincas*, despite *campeño* diversity. Workers' relations in the *fincas*, *campos* and during leisure time give us rich information about their negotiated identities, lived experiences, and why they joined the organizing for the strike. Their testimonies and experiences provide a far more complex and nuanced understanding of their lives and identities than either the iconic worker images that have come to symbolize the strike, or the simplistic and stereotypical perceptions circulated in local narratives and propagated by many on the North Coast.

The banana agriculture workers were regarded by local company-town dwellers as men to be feared. Company town dwellers characterized *campeños* as men who demonstrated violent behavior because of their excessive alcohol consumption. For the workers, however, this 'hard' reputation was critical to their sense of identity and masculinity. In fact, banana workers' identity was more complex and this complexity is reflected in locals' narratives. Their own self-image and identity was often a contradictory dichotomous understanding of themselves: that of hard worker, but also of

² The Honduran Republic is comprised of 18 departments with a capital city (the twin cities of Tegucigalpa and Comayagüela).

a fierce violent man; or that of provider and wage earner and that of squanderer, gambler, and alcohol consumer. The reality was somewhere in the middle of all these.

Work and Life in the *Campos*

Finca workers of the North Coast built lives and leisure “*a lo pobre*” (poorly) in the *campos*, which were perceived as uninhabitable by townspeople and outsiders.³ They constructed their homes and community, and adapted to the environment and the work. North Americans, *mestizos*, and *criollo empleados de confianza* (Honduran trusted company employees) living on the North Coast found the banana *fincas* and accompanying *campos* inhospitable. Workers of elite status in the companies would only enter the plantations by train or train-cart (pulley) to monitor the work. They confined their stay near or around *la Zona*, a “tamed” well-developed area. While the *fincas* were viewed as unsuitable for North Americans, but thousands of workers struggled against the odds to live modest, dignified lives there.

In the banana regions of Honduras, the working class constructed itself, politically and culturally, in a process unique to the North Coast. The intricacies of the construction and convergence of heterogeneous sectors of the working class in the North Coast was influenced further by race and ethnicity, nationality, and gender and can be understood by analyzing life and work in the *campos*.⁴ E.P. Thompson notes in his classic work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, that the working class in England was not solely created by or in reaction to the capitalism of the Industrial Revolution, but that the working class also constructed itself politically and culturally.⁵ Thompson explains that in the context of the Industrial Revolution was a "phase of

³Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

⁴ Roberts' discussion of Thompson's work in "Peasants and Proletarians" and Thompson's chapter on Community are helpful in thinking about the banana workers and their construction of community. B.R. Roberts, "Peasants and Proletarians," *Annual Review of Sociology* 16(1990): 357; E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 401-447.

⁵ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* ; Roberts, "Peasants and Proletarians," 353-377, 368.

transition between two ways of life" where different communities and working lives collided to form a working class unit:

We may see the lines of change more clearly if we recall that the Industrial Revolution was not a settled social context but a phase of transition between two ways of life. And we must see, not one "typical" community (Middleton or Pudsey), but many different communities co-existing with each other.⁶

He continues,

In all of these communities, there were a number of converging influences at work, all making towards discipline, and the growth in working-class consciousness.⁷

While the banana regions present a different context from England's Industrial Revolution, similarly, the process of proletarianization in the regions reflected, not simply an economic, but also cultural and political formations of identity. Workers brought with them *campesino* rural traditions, which influenced the construction of new wage/contractor worker practices in the banana regions. Without the *campesino* understanding of land and work, banana workers in the *fincas* would not have been successful workers. The majority of workers who migrated to work in the banana *fincas*--and those I interviewed--were agricultural workers who expressed an affinity for working the land. They had a knowledge and comfort level with the tools and skills of cultivation of land and sought to put their expertise to gainful use in the North Coast. The function of the vast banana plantations relied on the availability of knowledgeable workers to cultivate the *fincas*; *campeños* were a ready and willing labor source that enabled and aided the rapid growth of the industry.

⁶ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 418.

⁷ *Ibid.*

At the same time, the construction of the regional banana worker culture was influenced by the transition of *campesinos* and subsistence farmers to wage work and the new operational systems that the fruit companies introduced into their lives and work. Together these adaptations formed a hybrid environment and culture, best described as a unique semi-rural, semi-urban terrain, emblematic of the banana *campos* of the 1940s and 1950s Honduras. It is appropriate to note here that this paper presents a uniquely Honduran experience of the development of the banana industry. Despite the dominance of the U.S banana industry throughout Central America and some commonalities across the region, corporate practices varied from country to country, and the *bananeras* adapted according to domestic practices of their Central American hosts. For instance, the contracting system was not the same in all United Fruit Company banana plantations.⁸ In the Honduran North Coast, there was a starker hierarchy in the contractor team. Other differences in the work processes and workers' positions varied as well. This differentiation in company practices may be a sign of negotiated preferences or may have been the result of competition between United Fruit and Standard Fruit Companies in the Honduran North Coast and the Costa Rican Caribbean Coast. It may also have been the adaptations required for the industries to adapt to each country's specific circumstances, including the roles and agency of workers. In Honduras, the specification of the small, entry-level positions and the myriad of work positions reveal what Marx called the *salario a destajo*, where pay calculation consists of the amount of accomplished tasks during a determined amount of

⁸ In Limon, Costa Rica there were various types of contracts, but usually a team of three worked in cutting and “the pay, calculated by the piece, was split among three” as distinct from the Honduran model described later. In the context of Limón, Costa Rica, according to Lara Putnam a *conchero* is the man “who received the stem on his back and hauled it into a nearby hut.” In Honduras this work position is referred to as a *juntero* and not to be confused with a *conchero*, who took the *concha* (skin of banana or plantain) of the banana or the banana tree leaves and banana tree skins to pad the train, *rejias*, so that the stems would not be damaged while in transit. Lara Putnam, *The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica, 1870-1960* (Chapell Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 122.

time, essentially a piece rate for work time instead of a period rate for time worked.⁹ While it may have developed differently in other areas, in Honduras the banana industry of the time provides evidence of dramatic changes in workers' lives and work, as well as the transition into proletarianization in concrete ways. The worker was expected to do repetitive and menial work for a pre-determined length and until completion of a certain tasks or production quotas.

In Honduras, banana workers inhabited a dynamic position, transitioning between rural *campesino* lives in their hometowns to a state of proletarianization in the North Coast.¹⁰ In the banana regions, workers constructed their own community that looked sometimes very different from their original communities, but that reflected a sustained nostalgia for the *campesino* life expressed in interviews as a desire to return home with ample earnings to buy a plot of land or build a house. For North Coast workers who lacked access to land and their own means of production, the aspiration to return home to work the land was an important sustained dream for their lives in the *campos*.¹¹ In the *campos*, banana workers lacked "the web of family and communal relationships"¹² that peasants depended on for their survival in rural areas in Thompson's England; instead, they were forced to create other networks around the new economy, forming distinct communities in each *campo* and within each ethnic group. These various communities, however, came together to form a larger banana worker identity. The *campeño* constructions of community in the banana *campos* diverge from the theory of the peasant economy which positions the household as the unit of analysis for labor and gender relations.

In the banana regions, the banana workers' community consisted of physical intersections of space, activity, and identities in three major social and geographic

⁹ Karl Marx, *El Capital* (Mexico: Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 1994)142-145.

¹⁰ Roberts, "Peasants and Proletarians," 364-366.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 357.

¹² *Ibid.*

spheres within the plantation and living quarters: 1) the workplace, in this case the work in the *fincas*, 2) the household unit and living arrangements in the *campos*, and 3) leisure pastime time and organizing.

There was a dominant Honduran, *mestizo*, male workers' identity construction that typified the North Coast banana worker experience, but specific constructions of banana worker-*campeño* community can be distinguished by race, ethnicity, and nationality. The lives of *mestizo* workers from the rural interior of Honduras, for instance, were markedly different than those of Garifuna workers, Salvadoran migrants, Jamaican workers. Garifuna workers, for instance, returned to their villages after a stint of work; they rarely made the *campos* of the Tela Railroad Company their full time home. Salvadorans formed migratory networks, housing networks, and work alliances, and rarely returned home.¹³ Regional and social networks, experiences informed by ethno-racial identity, and different roles and opportunities in the *fincas* influenced workers' lives and the ways they built their communities.

The fincas: a workplace

Honduran popular writer and former banana worker Ramón Amaya Amador titled his most popular novel about the banana *fincas*, which was banned throughout the 1980s in Honduras, *Prisión Verde*, suggesting a powerful metaphor for the geography of the *finca* and workers' lives.¹⁴ The "green prison" he so aptly described was a place where workers entered and rarely left, making the North Coast their home and their children's homes. Workers inhabited but also strained against the "green prison," which was framed around the work in the *fincas* and workers' negotiation of their lives in a prescribed system of work.

¹³Patrocinia Martínez, interview by author, San Juan de Tela, Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006; Pedro Gonzalo Martínez, interview by author, San Juan de Tela, Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006; Gerardo Pery Laredo, Tornabe, Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006.

¹⁴Ramón Amaya Amador, *Prisión Verde* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Universitaria, 1987).

Everyday life and work were characterized by arduous labor. Workers faced long workdays and low pay, compounded by hazardous working conditions that exposed them to harmful chemicals, diseases like malaria, and perils like the infamous ‘*barba amarilla*’ snake, which was said to kill with just one bite.¹⁵ Poor *campesino* men endured nearly inhuman expectations that they would labor for twelve hours straight, cutting, carrying, spraying, watering, washing, cleaning fields, cutting tree roots, and enduring extreme sun and humid weather.¹⁶ During the late 1940s and early 1950s workers did not earn over 2.20 lempiras (\$1.10 US) a day, but these were still the highest paying jobs in the region.¹⁷

Despite the perception of the banana groves as a wild, untamed territory, in fact, there was an established order of things, including a Company hierarchy and system of work and hiring into which workers entered. Workers survived in part due to strong and shared connections among laborers. Workers migrated to the North Coast often with contacts from their hometowns, provinces, or departments; this ensured some sort of access to work.¹⁸ Men entered the *finca* work through a system of *padrinazgo* (patronage), unlike the jobs of the company towns where references and proof of certain skills were demanded. A *padrino* or a friend who worked for the company in a particular *finca* or port would help a new worker get hired. The person recommending the worker was also responsible for him. One worker recalled:

¹⁵ Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 25, 2004; Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004; Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006; Angel Martinez, interview by author, Colonia Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, June, 2006.

¹⁶ Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006; Francisco Amerto Lagos, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

¹⁷ Jesus Gomez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Angel Martinez, interview by author, Colonial Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, June, 2006; Oscar Rodriguez Pagoada, interview by author, American Zone, La Lima, Cortés, September 2, 2006; Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 25, 2004.

¹⁸ Angel Martinez, interview by author, Colonial Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, June, 2006.

*Lo único [era] que él que lo recomendaba a uno respondía por uno. Entonces uno tenía que portarse de lo mejor, porque si uno se portaba mal quedaba mal él que lo recomendaba; era mejor aguantar y si no aguantaba mejor irse pero no cometer un error.*¹⁹

[The person who recommended you was responsible for you. One had to be on one's best behavior, because if one behaved badly, the person that recommended one would look bad. It was better to put up with anything [and not complain] or leave the job than to make a mistake.]

The worker being recommended had to ensure he would do a good job. We are able to see that through immigrant social networks people found work. Social networks drove the system of finding work between men of the same region. Young men would often come back to their hometowns telling stories about the North Coast and sharing ideas of travel. These networks offered protection; workers watched out for each other and were careful not to get others in trouble. The most expansive and accessible social networks were those established and supported by *mestizo* men, as these were both the majority, as well as the workers who fit most easily in the established worker culture.

Workers, upon arrival in the North Coast, typically started as day laborers who picked up jobs on a day-to-day basis. The goal for most was to gain entry in any regularly scheduled job with the company and then seek opportunities to move into other preferred positions that might pay better or lead to more autonomous agricultural positions in the *fincas*. *Finca* workers came to work in any kind of job they could find, customarily starting at the very bottom of the *finca* hierarchy. The entry positions for *finca* laborers were usually the worst paid and least desirable, and workers had little choice in the beginning of what they did. Changing jobs did not typically include promotion or ascension into better paid positions, but workers appreciated opportunities to move. If they tired of certain kinds of work they went to another *finca* to find work in keeping with their skills and training.²⁰ Each *finca* was its own fiefdom and offered its

¹⁹ Angel Martínez, interview by author, Colonial Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, June, 2006

²⁰ Eduardo Padilla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 30, 2006.

own distinct culture. In the absence of clearly stated policies on worker and labor, each supervisor made his own labor relations policies and practices.

Workers describe a variety of daily jobs that provided entry level work for the company. Young men jumped at the opportunity to take entry-level *finca* work as a stepping stone to better-paid positions. Young men would make contact with work teams and position themselves for other positions as they became available. For example, the position of *chapeador* (weed cutter who trimmed the grass and overgrown weeds from the *fincas*, trusted employees' yards, and/or *campos*) was seen as the worst job and the lowest paid, but workers could earn enough to eat for a day and gain entry into the *bananeras* (banana companies). Some of the low-ranking entry-level positions came with much peril. Others were just perceived as more grueling or menial. Generally, workers endured these positions with the hope of advancing, and long enough to move on to more favorable positions. The desire of most workers was to gain better-paid employment and to find a path to agricultural work in the *fincas*, which, in addition to being better paid, carried with it an affirmation of manhood among *campeños*.

Entry-level workers did whatever was asked of them. One worker described his entry into the fields at age sixteen. His assignment was to bag fruit, but he was asked to do many other odd jobs:

Todo lo que le mandaban a uno tenía que hacer [uno]. El primer trabajo era, como yo estaba cipote, era andar embolsando racimos. Y allí fue que salí a la finca a trabajar, fuí mulero de fruta, estibador de fruta, fuí lavador de fruta, cuando la fruta se lavaba en dos tanques-- uno de ácido y otro de agua. Lavaba uno el trozo en el ácido y de allí lo metía al agua como antes se iban los racimos.²¹

[Whatever they ordered one to do we had to do. Because I was a young man my first job was to bag fruit. From there on I went out to work in the finca, I was a mulero of fruit [steered mule team to

²¹ Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 25, 2004.

carry fruit], stevedore of fruit, fruit washer, back when the fruit was washed in two large containers--one was full of acid another with water. One had to wash the stem in the acid and then dip it in the water container. That is how the stems were sent [shipped] before.]

Williams describes his initial work in the *finca*. Bagging fruit was considered easy starting work for a young boy in his teens and Williams learned the process of cleaning and shipping the fruit. From these entry-level jobs, he worked his way into different positions.

Workers who later graduated into higher skilled positions (e.g., in the Chemical or Engineering Departments), or became *empleados de confianza* of the company, also often started with varied types of work, as was the case of Oscar Rodriguez Pagoada,

Mi primer trabajo fue en las fincas, en finca Santa Rosa, [hice] trabajos varios de la finca en ese tiempo, lo que me ponían a hacer a chapear a fertilizar, a cualquier trabajo que se presentaba.²²

[My first job was in the fincas, in finca Santa Rosa. I did various jobs in the finca at that time, whatever they assigned me to do: weeding, fertilizing, any job that presented itself.]

Pagoada began to work in the *finca* at age fourteen, immediately after completing sixth grade, which was considered a high degree of education at the time. He cites this educational background and his connection to other workers in company offices as one of the key reasons for his ascension into the company system of trusted employees.²³

Others worked for the *capitánes de finca* (captains or supervisors of *fincas*) and were expected to perform various menial tasks seemingly at the whim of the *capitán de finca* and his family, as in the case of Eduardo Padilla, a *yardero* (yard worker) for an

²² Oscar Rodriguez Pagoada, interview by author, American Zone, La Lima, Cortés, September 2, 2006.

²³ Ibid.

empleado de confianza in a company town.²⁴ *Yarderos* worked doing all kinds of menial jobs, many times it included errands and other times gardening and cleaning work. It was an entry-level job because it was poorly paid and many times considered light work. Jesus Gomez, who also started as a *yardero*, explained that much of his work involved being a chaperone for the teenage daughters of his employer, a North American *empleado de confianza* (trusted employee):

Mi primer trabajo era de ser yardero. Yardero [significa] es de servirles a las hijas de Mr. Keller, a Zoila, que están vivas, Zoila Keller. Fui yardero de los señores esos. [Ser yardero] no era limpiar la yarda. Yardero le nombraban porque yo me ocupaba de cuidar las muchachas, por ser una persona honrada yo las cuidaba a ellas. Ellas, está claro, tenían su novio ¿veda? [sic]²⁵ [My first job was as yardero [gardener/yard worker]. Yardero means that I served the daughters of Mr. Keller, Zoila, she is still alive, Zoila Keller. I was a yardero of that family. To be a yardero meant that I would clean the yard. They called me this because I was in charge of taking care of his daughters. I was an trustable person they trusted me to take care of their daughters. They of course had their boyfriends.]

The *yardero* position, though it included daily physical and personal contact with the employer, did not necessarily translate into better work. These were subordinate entry level positions akin to a position as errand boy or servant. But for

²⁴ "*Yardero*," derived from "yardworker" is one among many North American English language words adapted to Spanish and used by workers in the North Coast. English was the language of trade, an indicator of the dominance of the U.S. companies. Other common terms of the industry were: "*enmenes*" from "M & S"; "*poisero*" from "poison worker"; "*cuque*" from "cook."

²⁵ Jesus Gomez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006. The employer, in this case the North American Mr. Keller, wanted to know he could trust this worker around his daughters,' as Gomez explains he was an honest and honorable person (*persona honrada*) which meant he could be trusted in the cultural context of Honduras. Gomez, a young man himself, had to prove that he was a good, honest man, who would not steal from him and would certainly not enamor or abuse Mr. Keller's daughters. Mr. Keller would confirm his honorability daily. If Gomez took them to the movies, he would be quizzed about which movie they saw, making sure that he was next to them at all times and also making sure they did not sneak off with their boyfriends. Gomez had recently arrived from the interior of the country and felt nervous about these tests because he had not been exposed to films and the company town's social activities before.

Gomez as for others making a start on the North Coast, doing errands as a *yardero* was perhaps important entry work because it allowed him to obtain a recommendation for a future position, which was his purpose when he arrived in La Lima. Gomez eventually moved on to work in the *fincas*, but his experience with Mr. Keller did not necessarily help him advance. Working for Mr. Keller was for Gomez an entry-level job through which he was able to meet other workers and understand the work of the banana industry as well as organization of work, so that he could make the right connections to earn work in the *fincas* for better pay.²⁶

Among the more risky entry-level assignments were jobs as part of a *venenero* (pesticide) team, which included a *manguerero* (pesticide hose carrier) and a *escopetero* (sprayer).²⁷ The team carried a water and pesticide hose to the areas in need of treatment taking turns carrying and spraying.²⁸ Workers were resourceful in their daily work; they invented ways to minimize exposure to the hazardous pesticides. As Williams recounted:

*Como uno aprende, él que sabia no se untaba pero ni las uñas. Porque uno tenía que estar ---claro mire así como está el viento [demuestra cómo se hacía con su cuerpo], uno se tiraba la cosa [la escopeta con veneno] de atrás [del viento] a modo de que no se viniera [hacia] aquí [el veneno].*²⁹

[How one learns. A worker that knew how to do it...would not even dirty his fingernails, because he would figure out the direction of the wind [he demonstrates with his body how he did it], spray in the direction behind the wind, away from him, in a way that it would not flow into him. They had their ways [they had skill].

Pesticides and chemicals, however, dusted and sprayed many of the men despite workers' great skills and efforts to avoid it:

²⁶ Jesus Gomez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006.

²⁷ Casta Figueroa Portillo, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

²⁸ Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 24, 2006.

²⁹ Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 24, 2006.

Se fumigaba, no era con avión, era [con] escopeta. Cada finca tenía una bomba y andaban ochenta trabajadores trabajaban [trabajando] por pareja con una manguera, manguereros. Un día le tocaba...andar jalando [sic.] la manguera, otro día le tocaba al que jalaba [sic.] la manguera andar regando. Y así. Y por eso es que los racimos se manchaban, como ese sulfato de cobre es azul revuelto con cal, por eso es que se lavaba con ácido, para que no fuera manchada la... sucia la fruta pues.³⁰

[We use to fumigate, not with a plane (aerial), it was with a spray gun. Each finca had a fumigation pump. Eighty workers labored in pairs, one would pull the fumigation hose and the other had to douse the plants. Like that. That is why the bunches would stain, since it was a mixture of blue copper mixed with lime...this is why we washed [the bunches] with acid, so the fruit would not leave stained, dirty.]

Another position was that of *fertilización/fertilizador*, or fertilizer, which was the entry level position attained by Alejandro Ortega at the Tela Railroad Company in La Lima.

The work of a fertilizer was to prepare the land for planting.³¹

Trabaja[ba] regando sal, una sal negra que uno tenía que tener gran cuidado porque si le caía en una parte del cuerpo le hacía un hoyo... éramos dieciséis muchachos jóvenes, de 14, 15 y 17 los que andábamos regando sal...pero teníamos gran cuidado porque al que [le caía] se le hacía un hoyo, no volvía a trabajar.³²

[I used to work scattering salt, a black salt that one had to be very careful with it because if it fell on any part of your body it would make a hole in you...we were sixteen young men of 14, 15, 17 years old. We would be very careful because the workers that had a hole would no longer be able to work.]

Workers made lateral moves across these low-ranking positions, hoping eventually to attain preferred positions where pay was consistent.³³ For example, one

³⁰ Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 24, 2006.

³¹ Alejandro Ortega, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 8, 2006; Francisco Amerto Lagos, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

³² Alejandro Ortega, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 8, 2006.

³³ Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 24, 2006.

worker explained that after he started with the company, he eventually worked as a plumber, shadowing pesticide workers and repairing leaks in the hoses and tubes. Williams moved to pesticide sprayer, despite the fact that he studied plumbing; he was forced to take any job available until a position opened up in his trade.

Workers coveted positions as *contratistas* (contractors), most commonly of a *cortero* (fruit-cutter) team, or as *paleros* (shovelers for canal digging) in a *cuadrilla* (ditch-digging work gang).³⁴ *Contratistas* with the necessary skills to lead other workers and to act as liaisons with the company and low-ranking overseers formed and led teams of workers for particular *finca* assignments. The *contrastistas* negotiated for jobs and typically secured high earnings compared to other workers. Working by contract was desirable because workers could potentially earn double the pay.³⁵ Workers reported earning up to 8 Lempiras (\$4.00 US) as contractors, higher than the 4.40 Lempiras (\$2.20 US) standard pay for workers directly employed by the company.³⁶ Local growers and small producers that existed in the vicinity of the company were paid even less and paid in Lempiras, up to seven Lempiras (\$3.50 US) a day; the company and contracted wages were better pay.³⁷

The most sought-after work was with *cortero* teams, led by a *contratista*, a *juntero* (gatherer and carrier) and a *mulero* (handler of the mules and transport). The

³⁴ Francisco Amerto Lagos, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006; Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 24, 2006; Jesus Gomez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Angel Martinez, interview by author, Colonial Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, June, 2006; Oscar Rodriguez Pagoada, interview by author, American Zone, La Lima, Cortés, September 2, 2006; Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés; Leonardo Bautista, interview by author, campo Limones, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006; Angel Martinez, interview by author, Colonial Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, June, 2006; Pablo Raul Carcamo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006; Narciso Duarte Cruz, interview by author, Savá, Colo, June 10, 2006; Isabel Moreira, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, November 27, 2006; Juan Nuñez Sierra, La Lima, Cortés, Neftalí Rogel, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006; John Soluri, *Banana Cultures Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2005), 142-148.

³⁵ Eduardo Padilla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 30, 2006.

³⁶ Workers were generally paid in US dollars and frequently had deductions taken from their pay for company store purchases and other costs. No currency exchanges were necessary.

³⁷ Eduardo Padilla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 30, 2006.

team was contracted to cover a section of the expansive *finca* looking for bananas ready to be harvested for export. The bananas for harvesting were not necessarily all in the same rows of banana trees, so the team traversed the *finca* in search of trees with ready-to-harvest bananas. The team walked deep into the *finca* in a particular trajectory, and then came out with the banana stems to load onto the mules. The team would set a goal of cutting a certain quota of bananas bunches before the end of each day. The *contratista de corte* (banana cutter contractor) received full pay directly from the Company and then paid the other workers. These teams were an important part of the *finca* workforce and the contracting system of *corteros* was an essential part of the harvesting process and the efficient transport of bananas out of the fields.

Other *contratistas* worked on the construction and digging of ditches to establish canals for new *fincas*. Teams of laborers worked in areas lacking infrastructure like that which existed in settled camps, e.g. Company commissary and food establishments. Teams worked in *cuadrillas* (work gangs) of *paleros* led by *contratistas*. Pay arrangements were made as with the *contratistas de corte*. The *contratista* led the work, based on advanced knowledge and experience, and reported to a timekeeper and *mandador* (overseer) or *capitán de finca*.³⁸ The timekeeper was responsible for keeping time and tracking work completed and for calculating the amount of work and the pay for workers. Timekeepers were respected and regarded as skilled Honduran workers, who held some degree of formal education, could count, and had some knowledge of the *finca* work. The relationship between the *timekeeper* and the *contratista* was critical in making sure workers were paid properly for the team's completed work. The timekeeper additionally held some bookkeeping responsibilities such as making sure the

³⁸ Workers refer to *mandador* (supervisor, later called *Administrador* in the 1960s) as the captain of the *finca*. Usually the company employee assigned to oversee a region or *finca*.

right deductions were taken from workers' pay when they bought goods from the Company commissary.³⁹

This contracting system granted the *contratista* great power and provided the company with a reliable form of control of production. The hierarchy was driven by money as a primary incentive for *contratistas* and workers. The *contratista* was respected as a leader who ensured that both he and the team earned more than they would if they worked independently. A *contratista* also had the respect of his coworkers for his knowledge and experience. He undoubtedly occupied an elevated social standing that is evident in his power to influence his team. Often a *contratista* would bring his wife into the *campos* to serve as a cook for workers (*patrona*). When their wives were the *patronas*, the *junteros*, *muleros* and other lower paid entry position workers would virtually be required to eat in her *comedor*. This was especially common in *fincas* that were located far from towns or settlements, where there were more men than women. This unspoken policy would later, during the strike, be revealed by workers to be a point of contention.

The *fincas* could not provide everyone with contractor work nor the other coveted positions. Other positions, as workers described them, were reflective of the variety of tasks required for the *fincas*' operations. For example, a *deshijador* (banana tree pruner) would trim the banana plant of dangerous *hijos* (literally, "sons," but used here to refer to small banana tree outgrowths that could, if not removed, drain the plant of nutrients and impede the growth of the fruit).⁴⁰ A comparable position was that of a *regador de agua* (irrigation worker), a night shift job position. The *conchero*, another

³⁹ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, *Interview by Author* (La Lima, Cortés, 2006); Efrain Hernandez Maldonado, *Interview by Author* (La Lima, Cortés, 2006); Daniel Madrid Guevara, *Interview by Author* (La Lima, Cortés, 2006); Angel Martinez, *Interview by Author* (Colonia Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, 2006); Eduardo Padilla, *Interview by Author* (La Lima, Cortés, 2006); Oscar Rodriguez Pagoada, *Interview by Author* (Zona Americana, La Lima, Cortés, 2006)

⁴⁰ Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 25, 2004; Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004. Francisco Amerto Lagos, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

work position, was responsible for collecting the various *conchas* (skins of the fallen bananas and plantains and pruned banana leaves after the harvest). *Concheros* were responsible for bringing the skins to *rejas* (flat-bed train-cars with spaced slabs of wood on the sides) for merchandise-loading in the *finca*. These skins served as a cushion for the fruit to make sure there would be no damage to the *Gros Michel* fruit shipped for export at that time.⁴¹

In the company towns, the work positions and assignments differed from those in the interior of the *finca*.⁴² The treatment of workers also differed since most of the workers in the company towns were considered to have higher levels of skill than the *finca* workers. These workers enjoyed a higher status, to which workers refer as second class. According to Juan Bautista Canales, *finca* workers were classified as third class status. The second class status was given to skilled *indios* or criollo Hondurans who identified as *mestizos*, and first class status was reserved for the North American supervisors and captains. This class status was more apparent in the company clubs and hospitals, where certain classes could not enter or were given treatment in separate sections of the buildings.⁴³ Company towns, or small cities that sprung up around company *fincas* and regional offices, such as La Lima, El Progreso (Tela Railroad Company) and Olanchito (Standard Fruit Company) and the port cities of La Ceiba, Puerto Cortés, and Tela, were home to varied forms of labor in railroad workshops and warehouses (*talleres*). Workers repaired company machinery and handled construction or mechanical work, like cutting wood for homes and buildings. These jobs were within the confines of the company towns, where workers had to give proof of their skills, for instance, by presenting a vocational certificate from a training school.⁴⁴

⁴¹Jesus Gomez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006.

⁴² Company towns were known to *finca* workers as *terminals* because the major train terminals were located in the towns.

⁴³Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.;Marvin Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 2004), 277-316.

⁴⁴Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.

When workers moved to work for another *finca*, company, or grower they then started at the bottom in the *finca*, despite their potential skills. Angel Martinez, for example, worked in a skilled position in the Materials and Supplies Department of the Tela Railroad Company, but moved up the coast and became a fruit-cutter for the Standard Fruit Company:

*En el enmenes [M&S department] era cortar madera con serrucho eléctrico, haciendo columnas de 7 pies de allí me fui yo para El Tigre, del Tigre me fui para la Standard.*⁴⁵

[In the M&S [Materials & Supply] department the work was to cut wood with an electric saw to make columns of 7 feet, from there I left for finca El Tigre and from El Tigre I went to the Standard.]

Opportunities for promotion or pathways for advancement were virtually non-existent for banana workers. Few workers went from *finca* work to employment in the company towns, except as *yarderos*.

The company's hierarchy was implemented and enforced based on literacy skills, origin of migration, race, ethnicity, and gender. The hierarchy denoted a particular status for workers based on these categories and was not necessarily indicative of wage differences. For instance, Juan B. Canales, a worker with a certificate from the *Escuela Nacional de Artes y Oficios* (National School of Arts and Vocations) in Tegucigalpa in Mechanics and Electricity was hired into a job that was considered better, not because of better pay, but because of classification within the company hierarchy. Instead of working as a harvester, the lowest ranking job within the *finca* hierarchy, Canales worked in 1947 as a toolmaker in the repair shop for the railroad system, securing wages of one lempira per hour.⁴⁶ Another worker, Edmundo

⁴⁵Angel Martinez, interview by author, Colonial Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, June, 2006. "Enmenes" is what worker called the M&S or Materials and Supplies department located in the terminals (or company town centers). This department supplied all the building needs of the *campos* and *fincas*, supplying all other departments with a variety of objects for building and repairs.

⁴⁶Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.

Cabrera Williams, who came from the western rural part of the country, despite his formal training as a plumber, was hired as a field worker, to do various jobs for 2.20 lempiras (\$1.10 US) a day in 1945.⁴⁷ Although both young men brought technical skills to their jobs, they were valued differently because Canales came with a letter of recommendation—attesting to his literacy—while Williams had to begin from the bottom of the work hierarchy. They also came from different regions; in the hiring process the more skilled workers, like Canales, who came from the city center, were prioritized over the workers perceived to be from marginal rural areas, such as Williams, who came from a regional provincial area.

Jesus Gonzalez, before securing a better job as a *bodeguero* (storage shop keeper), a position that demanded complete Company trust, was asked to demonstrate that he could read, count, add, and subtract. It was understood that workers who lacked these skills would be relegated to the physically demanding jobs of *finca* work.⁴⁸

Amerto Lagos and Pagoada recalled that their knowledge and experience of *finca* work was not valued when they started working in the *Departamento de Quimica* (Chemical Department). The *Departamento de Quimica* hosted various teams of U.S. scientists and experts who conducted experiments to produce fruit resistant to disease.⁴⁹ In the process of working with the experts and scientists, Amerto Lagos and Pagoada demonstrated their abilities and knowledge of the plant and shared with the scientists basic knowledge of plant life, characteristics, and best practices. Their knowledge was recognized only after scientists made several mistakes after ignoring workers' suggestions. It was only after the company witnessed the utility of workers' knowledge

⁴⁷ Edmundo Williams, interview by author, finca Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, July 25, 2004.

⁴⁸ Jesus Gomez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006. Francisco Amerto Lagos, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006. The *Departamento de Quimica* (Chemical Department) that workers cite as Company experimental centers were donated to the Honduran government and is now known as the Fundación Hondureña de Investigación Agrícola, located in La Lima, Cortés.

⁴⁹ Oscar Rodriguez Pagoada, interview by author, American Zone, La Lima, Cortés, September 2, 2006. Francisco Amerto Lagos, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006. See also: Soluri, *Banana Cultures Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States*

that workers were hired in the department. Once hired, they worked in the company town, La Lima, in this case in the *Departamento de Quimica*, and their living arrangements changed.⁵⁰ Workers were identified subjectively by Company supervisors and scientists before being hired out of the *finca* and into the experimental departments, but such as move was not a common occurrence. Banana workers were regarded as “unskilled laborers.”

The labor system and general structure outlined above was the common experience for most *finca* workers, who were mostly Honduran, *mestizo*, and worked for the Tela Railroad Company. As the dominant majority, theirs were the most prevalent experiences, which informed a powerful working class culture in the North Coast. As I describe later in the chapter, however, the North Coast was a diverse community where minority workers and women also played a significant role in creating the society and the industry. In their living arrangements, as we see below, and as much as at work, workers also negotiated shared space with different ethnic and national groups.

Barracones: living quarters in the campos

Workers’ experiences and identities were formed and influenced by their housing and living arrangements, as much as they were by the harsh environment and the company’s workplace practices. During the first half of the twentieth century, no one would venture into the territory of the *campos* unless they worked or sought work there. The lack of roads and limited train availability for passengers severely hampered entry into and exit out of the *campos*. The only way in was the railroad line. Most of those who came in either walked or took the *machanguay*, *el pasajero*, or *el mixto* trains which ran only a few days a week into town and back.⁵¹ The *fincas* were neatly

⁵⁰ Oscar Rodriguez Pagoada, interview by author, American Zone, La Lima, Cortés, September 2, 2006.

⁵¹ *Machanguay* was the train that ran on certain days of the week for workers transportation and vendors, usually on Sundays. They were cars that workers called *rejas*, or cars that were used to carry the fruit and

organized in rows interspersed with dug out water channels for irrigation to maintain the banana groves. The channels were deep and wide. Workers would often hop across the channels daily, sometimes while carrying a banana stem of over 100 pounds. Next to the *fincas*, on the other side of the railroad tracks, lay the banana *campos* with *barracones*, the wooden slab company worker quarters,

El plantel donde uno trabajaba está[ban] inmediato [a] las viviendas—lo único es que los cuartos eran pequeños, habían hasta cuatro o cinco—fijese, en el suelo habían una cantidad de gente durmiendo en petates, arriba habían hamacas, aquel arriba estaba en un tabanco...⁵²

[Our work area was immediately near the living quarters. The living quarters were small rooms, four or five men [slept there]. Look, on the floor there were many people sleeping in straw mats (petates), above there were men in hammocks and higher there were men in bunks (tabancos).]

The living quarters and households can be considered in two distinct types: 1) the *barracón* household of the single worker, and 2) the joint or family *barracón* household of coupled workers. *Barracones* were the local company homes. Singles *barracones* for single men were overcrowded and poorly kept. Family *barracones* were for men with wives and children. The quality of life in the *barracones* was determined by whether or not a worker had a family or was a single worker. Single men lived in close quarters, sleeping in dirty singles *barracones* on hammocks. Men who were partnered with women could find their own rooms.

Singles' *barracones* were undesirable for most workers. As Angel Martinez described, the singles' *barracones* were packed with a variety of individuals lumped together with each other. Alejandro Ortega explains:

therefore had no seats, only slabs of wood in the sides. It is the anglicized Spanish word for "merchandise" train and not the regular passenger train, or the *pasajero*. The *mixto*, or mixed train transported fruit and people in separate boxcars.

⁵²Angel Martinez, interview by author, Colonial Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, June, 2006.

La compañía nos mandó a hacer un barracón de seis cuartos, en cada cuarto dormíamos seis en hamacas...a mi poco me gustaba habían compañeros algo puercos, entonces uno los regañaba y ya se enojaban. 'Nombre quita esos zapatos de hay.' [sic] Si no llegaban bolos a molestar y tal vez uno acostado, yo lo que hacía era que me cambiaba de barracón, me iba donde unos Salvadoreños, los Salvadoreños se llevaban bien y eran bien aseados.⁵³

[The company built us a barracón [company housing building] with six rooms, in each room six of us would sleep in hammocks...I did not like it [because] there were really dirty coworkers, I would reprimand them and they would get mad 'No way get those shoes out of the way'[he would say to them]. If not they would get to the bedroom drunk to bother and perhaps one was resting. What I would do is that I would switch barracón, I would go to the barracón of the Salvadorans because they got along and they were clean.]

Jesus Gomez lived with up to sixteen men in one room in the singles' *barracones*. The walls of the *barracones*, workers remember, were often stained with homemade *cuzusa* (also, *cususa*, illegal alcohol) liquor or the spit of chewed tobacco from the habit workers developed to maintain energy.

La vivienda era un barracón de seis cuartos, [la compañía] metían todos los que podían, vivíamos 16 en un cuarto. No tiene idea como eran esos barracones...varia gente de los lados de Copán les gustaba el tabaco...ellos comían tabaco, fumaban puro.⁵⁴

[Housing was a building [barracón] of six rooms, they [the company] would crowd as many as possible, 16 of us lived in one room. You have no idea how those buildings [barracones] were...many people from different regions of Copán liked tobacco...they chewed tobacco, smoked cigars.]

Production needs determined the number of workers hired in the *fincas*, and therefore, the living and eating arrangements. Depending on the *campo* and the level of the *finca* production, the rooms for single men were as sparsely populated as six men at

⁵³ Alejandro Ortega, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 8, 2006.

⁵⁴ Jesus Gomez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006.

a time or as packed as sixteen to twenty men at one time. Gomez and Ortega worked in different *fincas*, for instance. The number of men in each of the rooms in the singles *barracones* depended on the number of workers needed in each *finca*. Gomez may have been working at a *finca* where production at the time was at its best and needed many workers.⁵⁵

While jobs were obtained through networks, living arrangements were assigned. Workers could transgress these assignments, however, and make their own arrangements by selecting roommates of their own choice. Many workers coming from the interior, with very tenuous networks of friends or co-workers, had little choice but to make the best of housing assignments, or find a partner to get on the list for a new *cuarto* (room within a *barracón*) assignment in the family *barracones*.⁵⁶

One challenge for the men living in the singles' *barracones* was coexisting with workers from other regions and countries and dealing with each others' cultural understandings of home and each other. Angel Martinez found this to be the biggest problem that often led to violence at the time of either going to sleep or waking up to go to work,

*Aquel de arriba estaba en un tabanco, que aquel de arriba cuando bajaba para abajo [hace moción con los brazos para demostrar], era lo grave porque había todo tipo de gente. La gente Salvadoreña, la Olanchana, así sin querer ofender, un poco delicado que los anduviera despertando. Y cuando venía a dormir era lo grave también sino venían con los machetes y les cortaban los manguíos de la hamaca y para el suelo. Allí no podía decir nada allí, porque no salía, solo en pedazos, triste, la mala comparación era como vivir en un corral de cerdos.*⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ortega worked in a *campo* near the region of San Manuel, then he worked in San Manuel. Jesus Gomez worked in *fincas* Guaruma Dos, Naranjo Chino and later in Birichiche. Alejandro Ortega, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 8, 2006; Jesus Gomez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006.

⁵⁶ For workers' *compañerismo* in Costa Rican United Fruit Company lands, see the case of M.G.L in Putnam, *The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica, 1870-1960* 118-120.

⁵⁷ Angel Martinez, interview by author, Colonial Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, June, 2006.

[The one in the bunks would come down below and it was a serious situation. There were all kinds of people. The Salvadorans, the people from Olancho, without offending them, it was a delicate matter to wake them up. When they would come to sleep, they would walk in with their machetes and would cut the ropes of those already in their hammocks and to the floor it went. There was nothing that could be said because one would not leave alive, only in pieces. It was sad. I make a bad comparison; it was like living with pigs.]

The most violent forms of confrontation between men happened in the singles' *barracones*. Workers brought their daily frustrations from work back to their rooms where they lived. These frustrations were compounded by frustrations over their regional and cultural differences. Although workers preferred to room with their *paisanos* or fellow compatriots, in the singles *barracones* choice was limited. Martinez remembers lodging with *Olanchanos* and *Salvadorans*, two groups that did not get along.⁵⁸ If one worker walked into the *barracón* late at night and awoke another worker, a serious fight would ensue between the two. No one would sleep that evening. Worker prejudices were exposed in these living arrangements. Black workers often were left to sleep outside on the porch.⁵⁹

The *compañerismo* (camaraderie) reported by male workers also had its limits and was often utilitarian. Workers may or may not have been friends or friendly with each other, but if they were from a particular region or country they helped each other based on the commonality of their origins. While these ties endured, it is important not to romanticize workers' level of connection with each other. Many times, Hondurans did not get along with other Hondurans.⁶⁰ Workers' actions and tensions in the living arrangements demonstrated the newness of the wage work system, as the Company organization of work brought into proximity men from different origins.

⁵⁸Angel Martinez, interview by author, Colonial Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, June, 2006.

⁵⁹Juan Nuñez Sierra, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006; Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August, 8, 2004.

⁶⁰Alejandro Ortega, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 8, 2006.

Most men sought to marry or partner with women in order to request company housing for families—which was better because families were assigned their own rooms (*cuartos*) within the *barracones*. Many solidified relationships with girlfriends to be able to at least have their own home. Ortega explains, “*que triste vivir allá amontonado uno*” (*how sad it was to live so crowded*).⁶¹ Others created arrangements of convenience from this necessity as was the case of Daniel Madrid Guevara, who partnered with a woman to help her and himself, “*pero yo no tenia interes en quererla sino interes en ayudarla.*” (*I did not have interest in loving her I just had interest in helping her*).⁶² This had great implications for women, for many were “taken” (sometimes against the family’s will) into marriage by force and while others made arrangements with their husbands, as was the case of Daniel Madrid Guevara’s first wife.⁶³ Women were seen as useful to men because the women would be able to cook, and the men would no longer have to pay a *patrona*. The woman might even become a *patrona* and cook for other men (*cuidar gente*) or help with washing clothes (for the household and for hire), bringing in added income to the household and eliminating many costs in the single men’s lives.⁶⁴

The lack of cleanliness and the enclosed environment of the *cuartos* in the *barracones* (rooms within the *barracón* structure) was excruciating for many workers, who may have come from *campesino* single family households. The *barracones* fueled fights and exacerbated tensions for workers. In the singles’ *barracones*, the bachelors did not clean or take care of themselves except on Sundays, when they would sport their best outfits into the company town bars and brothels. Edmundo Williams remembers that there were accommodations for those men with wives:

⁶¹ Alejandro Ortega, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 8, 2006.

⁶² Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006.

⁶³ This did not mean that tensions ended, three to six families lived in a *barracón*, and although in separate *cuartos* there were shared areas that were the site of many disagreements among women. Madrid Guevara, *Interview by Author*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

*Antes no habían [sic.] casitas solo...barracones...un barracón que por un lado dormían solteros y el otro lado dormían los que tenían señoras que hacían la comida. Pero un solo barracón...en los barracones parecía uno como que estaba estribado, con hamacas pegaditos no se podía mover.*⁶⁵

[Before there were no houses, only barracón buildings...A barracón building where on one side slept singles and on the other side where those that had wives slept, the ones that made the food. It was one barracón...in the barracones we were stacked up against each other [estribados], with hammocks right next to each other, you could not move.]

The division of labor between men and women persisted in both types of households. A single worker, for instance, would have to either cook his food and wash his work clothes or purchase these services from the *patrona* and a *lavandera* for a monthly fee. A coupled worker would have his wife cook the food and carry out domestic duties, such as washing clothes. While the coupled worker assumed that his wife would do the domestic duties and he would provide income, the partner would frequently do extra jobs to make extra cash, such as wash laundry for others, or sell bread or other food. William's wife took in laundry to make ends meet and would sometimes make more than her husband.⁶⁶ María Angela Cardona, along with her children, for instance, sold food:

*Yo hacía comida también, si les cocía, iba a vender a Coyoles. Vendía carne arreglada de chancho, bien arreglada o de gallina, y la vendía. Yo compraba la cabeza de chancho y a la gente les encantaba las orejas de chancho...antes a esa comida le decían la burra, dame una burra le decían. Era un plato de arroz, ensalada, tomates, repollo y una oreja, 40 centavos valía*⁶⁷

[I used to make food too; yes, I cooked and used to go sell it in Coyoles. I used to sell cooked pork or chicken with condiment and I would sell it. I would buy the head of the pork, people really liked

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⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ María Angela Cardona, *Interview by Author*, Cuidaba gente ed. (El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro2006)

pork ears...before they used to call that kind of food burra (a quick meal to go), give me a burra they would say. It was made of a plate of rice, salad, tomatoes, cabbage and one pork ear. I charged forty cents.]

The family wage and means of earning income thus varied even among conjugal partnerships where the wife engaged in casual work. The extra income would go to clothes, education for the children and informal economy work of food vending, washing and sewing.

Many sought to live in family *barracones*. Ortega looked to get out of the singles' *barracones* and requested to be put on the wait list for a room within a family *barracón*; he then set on his search for his partner. Oscar Rodríguez Pagoada was fortunate to have his mother with him, whom he cared for, and was given a *cuarto* (room) in the family quarter's section of the *barracones*,

*Vivía en los campos... Si, los campos eran grandes y enormes, cada campo tenía capacidad para tener 150 familias y tenía[n] barracones de solteros. Allí vivía yo. Pero yo no estaba como soltero porque yo tenía mi mamá y a mí me daban un cuarto donde vivir como familia.*⁶⁸

[I lived in the campos [living quarters]... yes the campos were enormously big, each had the capacity for one hundred and fifty families, and had barracones for singles. I lived there. I was not single there because I had my mother and they gave me a room where I could live with the family.]

Pagoada's mother, however, did not just live there; she also participated in the banana economy by taking work as a *patrona*, "*en algunas temporadas le daba comida a algunos trabajadores solteros, cuidaba gente*" (at certain times she used to make food for some of the single workers, took care of men).⁶⁹ Pagoada sees this as small, temporary work and one that he claims mainly helped to subsidize their food in the

⁶⁸ Oscar Rodríguez Pagoada, interview by author, American Zone, La Lima, Cortés, September 2, 2006.

⁶⁹ Oscar Rodríguez Pagoada, interview by author, American Zone, La Lima, Cortés, September 2, 2006.

household since *patronas* often obtained good deals on the purchase of food from the company and from their relationships with local merchants. Her work allowed her to purchase extra goods for herself and the household.

Madrid Guevara explains that bringing a woman into the *campos* helped him to get his own *barracón*, but created a whole slew of other problems with the other men who saw her as a potential partner, given the few women in the *campos* in the early 1940s. The woman, Juana Marquez, was from the same region he was from and their connection was platonic; they coupled to help each other. She had three children and no husband and he wanted out of the singles' *barracón*. Marquez was being sought out by every single man that lived in the *campo*. Marquez was candid with him and explained that she could not do her job of cooking as *patrona* in their arrangement because she had too many suitors that came to make her acquaintance and she was afraid. Marquez told Madrid Guevara, "*me dijo, mire yo [a] esta gente no la conozco, y más a usted la conozco, así que prefiero, me dice, ser su mujer y no ir a caer en garras de otro*" (*she told me, look I don't know these people and I know you, I prefer to be your woman and not end up in the claws of another.*)⁷⁰ Marquez' story demonstrates that although men often chose their partners to obtain a room within the *barracón*, women also searched to be partnered. At the same time, her cautious statement reflects the fears of ending up in a violent or repressive environment or face exploitation with no chance to work; working was one of the primary reasons for women to migrate to the North Coast during this period.

The relationships between men and women were not equal partnerships. The male banana worker's relationship to the company gave him access to the *barracón*, the company commissary, the train passes in the *machanguay* train; therefore he legitimized the presence of the woman partner. The male relationship to the formal economy of the

⁷⁰ Juana Marquez was also a president of the committee responsible for cooking food during the 1954 strike. Daniel Guevara Madrid, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006.

banana industry then determined the nature of the partnership. Life was cruel for women and as in the case of Olympia Figueroa's mother, men often changed their minds and moved other women into the *barracones*, kicking out their current partners.⁷¹ Figueroa's mother and her children were moved out of her *barracón* by her own husband and were sent to another *campo* so he could move in his new partner.⁷²

Banana workers, men and women, adapted to the available living arrangements in the *campos* to survive. Many did and were able to work and raise their children outside of the constricting tradition of dowries and wedlock among middle classes in the cities and company towns. The lives and work of women and men in the *campos* formed part of the a *campeño* community.

Leisure time

Just as *finca* workers' lives and workplaces reflected a constant balancing act between company control and worker autonomy and resistance, their leisure time was similarly dichotomous. The third sphere of the *campeño* community was workers' leisure time, or time away from paid formal company work. Remarkable features of workers' non-work time included a further development of social networks that began with working together, and a constant tension between company control and workers' resistance. This friction and workers' rejection of the company's total control is evidenced by the prevalent consumption of alcohol as a leisure time activity, even in the face of severe company surveillance and restriction.

Workers' existence and activities during non-work hours influenced the work itself and the formation of the *campeño* working class identity. During these times, workers who did similar kinds of work spent free time fraternizing and building trust with each other. These interactions helped determine their allies, which would be

⁷¹ Olympia Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2010.

⁷² Ibid.

instrumental in future efforts to organize unions. During their non-work time, workers challenged company control, sometimes in small ways and others in overt clear and confrontational ways, like the 1954 strike itself. Organizing for the 1954 strike happened in part in these moments away from the *finca*, though not exclusively. Workers' describe in their leisure time a strengthening of *compañerismo* and the formation of social and labor networks (based on hometown, nationality, ethnicity, and positions of work). They also adapted to Company policies and at times directly confronted or resisted Company control, which can be seen as the antecedents of the strike.

One example of workers' rejection of the company's prescription for their lives was the formation of *campeño* soccer teams, which existed as an alternative to the company's promotion of baseball, golf, and other sports such as bowling and cricket. The company organized sporting events and activities for company trusted employees and those that lived near or in the *Zona Americana*, but workers report feeling uncomfortable in the *Zona Americana* and not wanting to attend these events.⁷³ On one fourth of July, Madrid Guevara remembers with much resentment being forced to attend the company picnic, because the ticket price was deducted from his paycheck. Elaborate sporting leagues were prevalent throughout Honduras during this period, but in the banana *campos* workers played soccer with others from nearby *campos*, as a distraction and as entertainment in the banana camps.⁷⁴

Workers enjoyed leisure time mostly right after paydays--the weekly Friday payday, the ten-day payday and the monthly payday.⁷⁵ Leisure time activities included activities such as playing dominoes, cards, playing soccer, dances, drinking at *estancos*

⁷³José Sanchez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, November 5, 2006.

⁷⁴ Poder Judicial de Honduras, Centro Electrónico de Documentación e Información Judicial (CEDIJ). San Pedro Sula, *Ligas de Fútbol, 1956, Expediente sin Numero, Hojas sueltas*.

⁷⁵ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August, 8, 2004; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

(little makeshift bars) of *patronas*, going into the company town on Sundays to hang out at the brothels, local bars, and parks, and buying supplies in the busy commerce districts. Workers remember fondly the abundance of goods, food treats, alcohol (beer, *aguardiente*, *cususa*) in an almost fair-like atmosphere during payday.

Company surveillance and control

Even during non-work hours, workers were within reach of company policies and dominion, a reflection of the company's priority to protect the productivity of the industry's needed workforce. Workers' free time was policed in different ways, which also led to instances of workers defying understood company rules. A coordinated localized surveillance of workers' lives and their activities, including potential alcohol consumption, was the result of the company's general need and priority to ensure a consistent supply of workers in the *fincas*. In the banana regions there was no Welfare Department per se. Instead, workers were policed by local *comandantes* (police commander) or *cabos de comisariato* (commissary corporal) and *auxiliares* (auxiliaries or volunteer police, usually selected workers in the *campo*).⁷⁶ *Cabos de comisariato* were essentially small town policemen, often assigned to their posts by *Gobernación Política* (departmental governor) and understood they were to protect the Company's interests.⁷⁷ These policemen had a dubious official relationship with the Honduran government, as representatives of the state, and worked in favor of and in cooperation with the Company who subsidized their wages and gave them free range to sustain surveillance over workers' lives in the *campos* and in the Company towns. The company employed *cabos de comisariato* and chose *auxiliares* from among the workforce to aid them and sometimes without extra pay, to oversee other workers'

⁷⁶ Workers understood them as law enforcement. They used *comandantes* or *cabos de comisariato* to refer to law enforcement agents with higher authority and *auxiliares* to refer to other representatives in the outskirts of town. *Cabos de comisariato* literally translates as commissary corporal.

⁷⁷ Juan Nuñez Sierra, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006.

behavior in the *campos* and during leisure time. Many accepted these roles for their perceived power and respect in the *campo*. The *cabos de comisariato*, the *auxiliaries*, and the *comandantes* exerted power over the *campos* and workers, interchangeably functioning as company security guards, law enforcement officers, private police, and even government inspectors.

Workers often mentioned with disdain the head police Guayo Galeano, a local who was designated chief by the local state authorities and paid by the Company, who was stationed at a major thoroughfare in La Lima.⁷⁸ The security station was positioned near the train and was a crossing point of sorts for travel to the *fincas*. Guayo Galeano's post enabled him to monitor workers traveling on foot in and out of town.⁷⁹ Workers experienced abuse and persecution in their everyday lives at the hands of these police, at times they suspected, even for unspoken political motives. Guayo Galeano and Matias Ariaga, the *comandantes de policia* of El Progreso, were identified by workers as members of the Nationalist party, which meant they recruited heavily among workers that identified with the Nationalist Party.⁸⁰ Police monitored *finca* workers in the *finca* daily and during payday, but according to Guevara Madrid, they were at their worst during election periods, and would especially terrorize Liberal party members.⁸¹

Guevara Madrid was a self proclaimed Liberal party member who was persecuted by *cabos de comisariato* and *auxiliares* loyal to the Nationalist party. He recalls that on the way back into the *campos* after a good Sunday in town, he and other workers would face the threatening inspection from the *cabos de comisariato*. If they smelled of alcohol they would be thrown in jail until they sobered up, ensuring that workers would return to work on Monday sober. Many times, these pseudo-policemen

⁷⁸ Sylvia Robleda, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, July 4, 2004; Agapito Robleda Castro, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, August 2, 2006.

⁷⁹ Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006.

⁸⁰ Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006.

⁸¹ Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006.

harassed workers for sport, often incarcerating men who had not drunk any alcohol.⁸² The holding cells of Guayo Galeano and Matías Arriaga's prisons in La Lima and El Progreso were often packed on Sundays at sundown. While many had drunk alcohol, the primary fear was that they would return to their *campos* and continue drinking illicit alcohol that would then prevent them from presenting themselves for work. Workers however, almost always showed up to work even if they did not sleep well or consumed alcohol.⁸³

Use of alcohol

In fact, alcohol figured prominently in the social sphere of the North Coast. Alcohol consumption was both a predominant pastime for workers, as well as a useful and oft-used tool of social control for the company. Beer and National *aguardiente* (liquor) were sold and could only be legally purchased from the company in the commissary of the *campos* and these were the only sanctioned permitted form of alcohol consumption.⁸⁴ In addition to buying beer at the commissary and drinking in the *campos*, they would ride into the local towns and purchase beer at the brothels within the company territories perched on the edges near the train depots and stops. In the *campos*, men and women food vendors earned a livelihood by providing alcohol to workers, regardless of company policies. Workers could also buy *aguardiente* from a *patrona* who may have brought it from her shopping trip in one of the larger towns of

⁸² José Sanchez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, November 5, 2006; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006.

⁸³ Absenteeism did not become a big problem until much later during the introduction of the packing warehouses. In 1962 the banana companies and United Brands (formerly United Fruit and Steamship Company) introduced the packing houses, where bananas were packed into boxes. Workers lost their freedom to move from contract to contract and *finca* to *finca*. Absenteeism was also easily tracked. Carlos Amaya Yanez, *Interview by Author* (La Lima, Cortés, 2004, 2006).

⁸⁴ Jesus Gomez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Angel Martinez, interview by author, Colonial Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, June, 2006; Oscar Rodriguez Pagoada, interview by author, American Zone, La Lima, Cortés, September 2, 2006; Alejandro Ortega, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 8, 2006.

La Lima, El Progreso, La Ceiba, or Olanchito. *Patronas* would sell *aguardiente* illicitly out of their eating establishments in servings of eighths; known as *un octavo* (an eighth).

In addition, workers had their own home-made liquor, *cususa or cuzusa*, that was made and consumed in secrecy throughout the *campos*, despite the company's prohibition. Also known as *gato de monte* (mountain cat), *cususa* was an illicit moonshine liquor made with fermented corn, water, and sometimes cane and other additives.⁸⁵ The *cususeros* (*cususa*-makers) set up *fábricas* and *cususa*-making equipment comprised of simple containers and distilling equipment that were not easily obtained in company stores. Maria Celea Ardon Torres inherited tools from a previous *cususero* who had passed away. Her makeshift distillery was described by arresting officers:

*La referida fábrica estaba en un barranco, cerca de una quebrada, la que se componía de un droncito lleno de chicha, una serpentina, y botella y media de aguardiente.*⁸⁶

[The referred operation was on a cliff, near a creek, and it was composed of droncito[small tin can or barrel] full of chicha[*cususa*], a serpentine, a bottle and alcohol.]

She inherited the knowledge of how to make it from her father, who was also a *cususero*.⁸⁷ The process itself involved taking corn, rice, or wheat and fermenting it with water and sugar for as long as six months, using the grains as the base for the

⁸⁵ Recent articles on clandestine alcohol ties *cususa* (*cuzusa*, *gato de monte*) to the indigenous and rural tradition *chicha*, fermented corn liquor drunk during town fairs and for special and spirituals ceremonies throughout the rural areas of Honduras and Nicaragua. "El Cususero". Revista Enlace. No. 1. <http://www.simas.org.ni/revistaenlace/articulo/13>. [Retrieved November 6, 2010].; Reyes, Ortega. "La cususa, ese deleite prohibido". December 19, 2009. <HTTP://ORTEGAREYES.WORDPRESS.COM/2009/12/19/LA-CUSUSA-ESE-DELEITE-PROHIBIDO/> [Retrieved August 1, 2010].

⁸⁶ Poder Judicial de Honduras, Centro Electrónico de Documentación e Información Judicial (CEDIJ). San Pedro Sula. *Expediente Sin Número. Maria Celea Ardón Torres, Hacienda Pública. 1953; Expediente Sin Nombre, Lorezo Cerna Martínez, Hacienda Pública. 1955.*

⁸⁷ Poder Judicial de Honduras, Centro Electrónico de Documentación e Información Judicial (CEDIJ). San Pedro Sula. *Expediente Sin Nombre, Lorezo Cerna Martínez, Hacienda Pública. 1955.*

liquor. The *droncito*, or (small tin can or barrel) may have been used to boil the substance, the top of it closed shut with the *serpentina*, a copper long tube sticking out of the top of the tin can (sometimes this was made of clay) and coiled around the tin can or container.⁸⁸ As the mixture boiled, the steam evaporation traveled up the tube and poured out into the clear shiny liquid on the other end. The mixture can be flavored with a variety of ingredients from cinnamon to tropical fruits and continued to boil. The first batch, the strongest essence, is then mixed with second batch making it the signature drink of the *cususero*.⁸⁹

The company and the local inspector from *Hacienda Publica*, the local police and the vendors were at odds. The company preferred all goods the workers consumed to be bought from the Company commissary. The company also relied on workers' continuous productivity and monitored excessive drinking, which was assumed to lead to violence and interruption of work. The local authorities aggressively enforced alcohol prohibition rules against consumers and vendors to protect the company's financial interests, including profits for alcohol sales in the commissary.

The consumption of *cususa* was harshly penalized by Honduran law and Company *cabos de comisariatos*.⁹⁰ Men or women accused of *cususa* production (*tener fábrica*) faced legal charges or confiscation of their equipment if caught by local *cabos de comisariato*, who operated under the directive of the company and government's

⁸⁸ Although many workers drank *cususa* and preferred it to company liquor and beer, there were many narratives about how it was made. It was a specific skill of a *cususero* (men or women) who fermented the grains for six months or more. The *cususero* retained their knowledge a secret and made their liquor behind closed doors for fear of punishment by the law. This is a custom that continues today and contemporary accounts have helped me to fill in the blanks. See: Reyes, Ortega. "La *cususa*, ese deleite prohibido". December 19, 2009. [HTTP://ORTEGAREYES.WORDPRESS.COM/2009/12/19/LA-CUSUSA-ESE-DELEITE-PROHIBIDO/](http://ortegareyes.wordpress.com/2009/12/19/LA-CUSUSA-ESE-DELEITE-PROHIBIDO/)

⁸⁹ I used the testimony of Maria Angela Cardona, 2006 and the online source to piece together the process of making *cususa*. *Cususa* was considered low grade liquor when compared to the National *aguardiente*. The practice of making *cususa* is still in practice in rural areas of Nicaragua, See: "El *Cususero*", Revista Enlace: <http://www.simas.org.ni/revistaenlace/articulo/13>

⁹⁰ Poder Judicial de Honduras, Centro Electrónico de Documentación e Información Judicial (CEDIJ). San Pedro Sula, *Expediente Sin Numero. Perez v. Inspector de Hacienda, 1939; Expediente Sin Numero. Calderon Ayala v. Administracion de Rentas. 1941; Expediente Sin Numero. Maria Celea Ardon Torres, Hacienda Pública. 1930; Expediente Sin Nombre, Lorezo Cerna Martinez, Hacienda Pública, 1955.*

department of Agriculture and Police (*Departamento de Hacienda Pública y Policía*). In the case of Tomas Calderon from El Ocotillo, Choloma, Calderon was captured in his home and accused of the contraband of illicit alcohol.⁹¹ Among the *cususa*-making equipment found in his possession were two one liter empty bottles, one which was used to bottle national liquor (*aguardiente nacional*) and assumed to belong to the state.⁹² Ardon Torres and her live-in partner Lorenzo Cerna Martinez in the hamlet of Majaine in Choloma, a company train depot, were also raided. Inspectors surprised Ardon Torres at five in the morning about one and half kilometers from her house, near a creek (*quebrada*) where she has set up her distillery. Ardón Torres explained that she was forced to work because her husband had abandoned her; she had to feed her kids.⁹³ While she was caught red-handed with the *fabrica de cususa*, her defense was that she did not know it was illegal to produce (*ignoraba que era prohibida*) and all she did was ferment an *arroba de maiz* (25 pounds of corn).⁹⁴ Although Ardon Torres confessed to being the maker, perhaps because she was female, the government engaged in the prosecution of Cerna Martinez for two years from the date of the original infraction.

Despite the risks, workers and unauthorized vendors adapted to the conditions, and maintained this alcohol consumption as a part of life and leisure on the North Coast. While drinking alcohol was not the only leisure time activity of workers at the time, the prevalence and casualness of references to alcohol, its use and availability, in worker interviews is noteworthy. Alcohol consumption was for workers, not a vice as the company saw it, but a retreat from the work, and a well deserved reward for a life of hard work. To enjoy this particular leisure activity, workers learned to deal with policing by company agents in the company towns and the *fincas*. *Cususa*-makers and

⁹¹ Poder Judicial de Honduras, Centro Electrónico de Documentación e Información Judicial (CEDIJ). San Pedro Sula, *Expediente Sin Numero. Calderon Ayala v. Administración de Rentas. 1941.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, Folio 1.

⁹³ Poder Judicial de Honduras, Centro Electrónico de Documentación e Información Judicial (CEDIJ). San Pedro Sula, *Expediente Sin Numero. Maria Celea Ardon Torres, Hacienda Pública. 1953. Archivos; Expediente Sin Nombre, Lorezo Cerna Martinez, Hacienda Pública. 1955.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

patronas learned to exist in spite of persecution and heavy policing of selling alcohol in the *campos*.

Workers also suggested that, beyond prohibition and restriction, the company used alcohol affirmatively to control workers in some cases. An overseer, a *capataz*, would offer a worker a swig of alcohol to encourage him to work faster.⁹⁵ Although it is unclear how pervasive this practice was, given the characteristics of the North Coast enclave as an enclosed, controlled region with a strict set of prescribed social codes for workers, this practice is not unlikely. Some authors have noted how widely drugs and alcohol were used by colonial powers to promote work and as a tool of control.⁹⁶

Bradburd and Jankowiak suggest

...that in later periods of [colonial] contact, when control over labor power had been consolidated through other means, drugs were used to increase the amount of the intensity of labor drawn from laboring populations...later still drugs used to intensify the amount and durations of labor shifted to alcohol, opium, and marijuana, which were used to overcome both the drudgery of long, hard, physical labor and the pain and discomfort that came with it, to caffeine-based stimulants, which provided a more sober and alert workforce.⁹⁷

On the North Coast in Honduras, the notion of alcohol as a route to obtain control is evident in the infamous letter from H.V. Rolston of the Cortés Development Company to Luis Melara, company lawyer and Honduran, on the subject of acquiring more land from the Honduran government:

It is indispensable to capture the imagination of these subjugated peoples, and attract them to the idea of our agrandisement, [sic]

⁹⁵Juan Nuñez Sierra, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006. Jesus Gomez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006.

⁹⁶Russil Durrant and Jo Thankker, *Substance Use and Abuse Cultural and Historical Perspectives* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 178.

⁹⁷William Jankowiak and Daniel Bradburd, *Drugs, Labor and Colonial Expansion* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2003), 3-4.

and in a general way to those politicians and bosses that we must use. Observation and careful study have assured us that a people degraded by drink can be assimilated to the demands of necessity and destiny; it is in our interest to make it our concern that the privileged class, whom we will need for our exclusive benefit, bend itself to our will; in general, none of them has any conviction or character, far less patriotism; they seek only position and rank, and on being granted them, we will make them hungry for even more. These men must not act on their own initiative, but rather according to determining factors and under our immediate control.⁹⁸

The organizers of the 1954 strike made this letter available to workers and ever since it has taken on importance as a document that is emblematic of the U.S.-based company and their role in the banana industry of the North Coast. Workers cite this letter and condemn the Company for the unjust representation of workers and their lives in the North Coast and the oppressive power of the U.S. companies' dominance in the banana industry. The idea that their alcohol consumption made them easily '*assimilated to the demands of necessity and destiny*' struck a bitter chord for many workers. If Amador's *Prisión Verde* epitomizes the story of the harsh life of the banana worker, the *Rolston Letter* represents, for workers, the antagonist of the story, the cause of their hardship: the companies that hired them.

Resistance and Alcohol

By looking at the use and restriction of alcohol on the North Coast we see a fluid, unstructured and arbitrary negotiation of workers' relationships with company control and attempts to control, as well as workers' creation of alternatives to company policies, which affected worker culture and identity. In this analysis, we draw out key elements of the banana worker experience, violence, a code of manhood or masculinity

⁹⁸ "The Rolston Letter" July 20, 1920. found in Richard Lapper & James Painter, *Honduras State for Sale*, ed. Latin American Bureau (London: Latin American Bureau, 1985) 23-24. Dario Euraque, *Conversaciones Historicas Con el Mestizaje y su Identidad Nacional en Honduras* (San Pedro Sula, Honduras: Centro Editoria, 2004), 112-113.

and resistance and the complicated ways these intersected.⁹⁹ These elements were an integral part of the banana worker identity and working class experience that later informs the strike. The negotiation of their lives around alcohol provides a microcosm of workers' resistance and adaptation to company control.

Violence

Alcohol, as a result of its use by workers and its policing by the company, accentuated a culture of violence on the North Coast. Alcohol undeniably caused drunkenness and sometimes led to violence among workers at times. *Cususa* was known to be a potent liquor with the potential to make men so inebriated that it would lead to serious violence. Workers recall that this homemade liquor made them “crazy”.¹⁰⁰ Drinking alcohol, both company alcohol and illicit alcohol, had its consequences, yet these did not stop them from engaging in public drinking. And certainly it did not prevent them from showing up to work.

One case involved Antonio Orellana and Paulino Alemán, two friends who were drinking together in *Campo Guaruma Uno* when they met up with two other men, Felix Orellana and Benedicto Dubón, a Salvadoran. Felix Orellana and Dubón ganged up and attacked Antonio Orellana and Paulino Alemán, causing serious injuries to both men.¹⁰¹ The two workers were unable to work for at least twenty days and Antonio Orellana was left with a mutilated hand and gashes to his arm and head. As soon as the fight was over, Dubón tried to escape to the next *finca*, *Finca 12*, where he was caught.¹⁰² The

⁹⁹ Here it is useful to look at Thomas Klubock's study of the El Teniente factory near Rancagua, Chile, where he found that workers' free time was policed and tracked by the mining company's Welfare Department. Thomas Miller Klubock, *Contested Communities Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Mine, 1904-1951* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998).

¹⁰⁰ The women vendors said that *cususa* "los ponía locos," made them crazy.

¹⁰¹ Poder Judicial de Honduras, Centro Electrónico de Documentación e Información Judicial (CEDIJ). San Pedro Sula, *Causa Instruida Contra Benedicto Dubón Ayala*, Juzgado de Letras de lo Criminal, San Pedro Sula, Expediente 10495, Julio 29, 1950.

¹⁰² This demonstrated that workers *finca*-hopped to seek improved situations or to run away from unfavorable situations at work and in the living quarters. Before the 1954 strike and labor contract in 1957, workers were able to hop between *fincas* for work without any problems. Workers often did this

testimony from witnesses and workers in and around the *barracón* who heard the commotion failed to establish who the instigator was. Everyone attested to Dubón's disappearance from the scene of the incident, but no other information was forthcoming. All that was certain was that all workers involved were consuming alcohol and were drunk, two were armed, and the incident occurred in the *barracón*. In this case, both Alemán, the injured worker, and Dubón, the accused, used the consumption of alcohol and their state of drunkenness as an excuse for not being completely aware what exactly happened, "*por motivo de su hebreidad no recuerda si alguien vio esta agresion.*" (he claimed that he did not remember if anyone saw the aggression because he was drunk).¹⁰³ Being drunk was presented as a common and acceptable excuse for the violence that occurred. Claiming drunkenness was seen as credible defenses for workers against *auxiliaries* and *cabos de comandante* and in the courts.

This case also may show a collective rejection of company control. Witnesses reported not really seeing Dubón commit the actual crime, an important fact in declarations that eventually led to Dubon's release after appealing in the courts of San Pedro Sula. The victims relied on the *auxiliar* to testify on what happened but without witnesses, it was not a strong case. It is unclear if workers saw or did not see Dubón commit the crime, but it is likely that *campeños*, were protecting each other in the context of the local courts. Workers may not have disclosed all the information they had to support the court prosecution system. The *campo*, as we have seen, was a place where people shared information and knew each other. It seems unbelievable that workers would not have known what caused the altercation at the very least. Typically, these incidents became topics of conversation during leisure time, in *comedores* or while playing cards, especially among workers who worked closely with those

after having trouble with a supervisor, if there was little work or if they were involved in a crime, like Dubon. Ibid.

¹⁰³ Poder Judicial de Honduras, Centro Electrónico de Documentación e Información Judicial (CEDIJ). San Pedro Sula, *Causa Instruida Contra Benedicto Dubón Ayala*, Juzgado de Letras de lo Criminal, San Pedro Sula, Expediente 10495, Julio 29, 1950.

involved. In this case, there is no indication of testimony as to any reason for the altercation, and in fact, the resolution of the incident does not seem important for bystanders. The violence, despite the dramatic circumstances and horrible injury, seemed to have been treated as a regular or ordinary occurrence, unworthy of special attention.

Company surveillance, monitoring and persecution of workers perceived to be engaging in illicit activities often led to violent repression. This brutality was almost commonplace and became an accepted part of workers' lives. Company watchdogs, *cabos de comisariatos*, tied alcohol consumption to violence and violent behavior. In the case of a Campo Verde *cususeros*, Eulalio Perez Garcia, Cupertino Garcia, and Manuel Mejia Portillo, the latter two men were caught by the *cabos* in the act of making *cususa* and were forced to implicate Perez Garcia, the owner of the *cususa fábrica*. Perez Garcia was then tortured by the police to reveal the location and to admit that he was the owner,

*Eulalio Perez quien confesó ser cierto que era contrabandista de aguardiente y que el guaro que sacaba lo vendía en los campos.*¹⁰⁴

[Eulalio Perez confessed to trafficking in alcohol and that the alcohol he made he sold it in the campos.]

He was confronted at his home and confessed to police after the previously arrested partners in the business were tortured.

*Cuando se levanto lo capturaron y le dieron unos cinchazos en la espalda con un machete y lo torturaron metiéndole unos palos entre los dedos de la mano y apretándoles la mano, y le decían que diera en donde tenía la sacadera.*¹⁰⁵

[When he woke up they captured him and they whipped him on his back with [the flat side of the] machete and they tortured him by sticking

¹⁰⁴ Poder Judicial de Honduras, Centro Electrónico de Documentación e Información Judicial (CEDIJ). San Pedro Sula, *Expediente Sin Numero. Perez v. Inspector de Hacienda, 1939*.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Folio 6.

sticks in between his fingers and then squeezing his hand. They told him to give up the location of where he had his equipment.]

When Perez Garcia gave up his *fábrica* and equipment, the police forced him to make the infamous *cususa* drink and then took liquor and the equipment with them. The physical coercion and violence against male *cususeros* used by local police was typical of the *campos* and their surroundings. If the men did not provide information it would be coaxed from them with corporal punishment. Abuse of power was common against workers who consumed alcohol as well as producers of *cususa*.

Masculinity

In the North Coast *campos* and *fincas*, even though both men and women were a part of the making and distribution of alcohol, alcohol consumption was regarded by the company and workers as a primarily male social sphere. As in Klubock's El Teniente narrative, in the *fincas* men were the primary targets of surveillance and arrest for alcohol consumption.¹⁰⁶ A gendered culture developed around alcohol, like Klubock's "codes of manhood," reflective of how they mobilized in other areas of the living and work environments of the *campos*, "in other social arenas and at work."¹⁰⁷ Codes of manhood were constructed and observed in *campos* particularly during leisure time, and included alcohol consumption and confrontation of company restrictions.¹⁰⁸

For banana workers, drinking alcohol in the banana *campos* and in the company towns was a public act, a social time in which workers could engage with other men. This public act differentiated men from women; they could prove their masculinity and

¹⁰⁶ According to Klubock's analysis of illicit alcohol production and consumption alcohol in the El Teniente copper mine, "Women never took part in the romanticized expeditions to scale the mountains and sneak liquor into the camps. They merely served as go-betweens and petty sellers. Men however were the major smugglers and purveyors, as well consumers, of contraband." Klubock, *Contested Communities Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Mine, 1904-1951*, 164.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 162-63.

transgress the rules of the company and social norms. Leisure time also functioned as a masculine social space where men were able to recuperate their dignity. Spaces where workers consumed alcohol, publicly and clandestinely, afforded them a way to transgress company control on repeated occasions. These spaces inscribed their lives with elements of maleness and macho attitudes and also differentiated workers from women's space, company control and the Honduran legal system. There was power in sharing their lived experience as men doing "masculine" work, helping them see themselves and cope with the insurmountable obstacles they could not change. Alcohol, gambling, and other forms of leisure were tied to violence and interruption of work, yet actually, as Klubock found in the El Teniente copper mines, these activities "helped to bond workers and to establish a collective form of identity, especially in resistance to the company's efforts to eradicate them from the camp."¹⁰⁹

Masculinity and resistance

Ultimately, the most notable element in the construction of identity and codes of manhood (seen in the dealings with alcohol as the example above) is that of transgression or resistance. Applying an analysis inspired by Klubock, I claim that workers' responses to their environment were forms of reclaiming dignity in the context of the brutal work and insalubrious living arrangements that were memorialized in *Prisión Verde* and an intentional response to unwelcome and unreasonable company control. Angel Martinez remarks that workers had built such a reputation for themselves that "not just any overseer would talk down to a worker, because the worker had nothing to lose and could make him ground meat..."¹¹⁰ The sentiment captured in this quote captures the spirit of transgression and resistance ingrained in the banana worker identity that ultimately transformed the North Coast culture.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 164.

¹¹⁰ Martinez, Angel, interview by author, Campo Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, January 29, 2006.

What may have seemed simply a violent outburst or uncontrolled altercation may actually have been a reaction to a constraining environment. Perhaps by engaging in brawls, disputes, and angry responses, as workers frequently did in the *campos*, they were also challenging codes of behavior prescribed and enforced by company supervisors and a web of social controls imposed by the industry. Workers who engaged in brawls ending in bloody machete fights were subject to serious consequences. They were arrested and processed for trial, first through the local *auxiliares* and then by the *comandante de policía* (police) in the company town. Bloody altercations, murder, and/or theft from the company were tried in the local courts. Appeals processes where final verdicts were issued or cases were closed (*sobreseimientos*), were laborious and often costly in financial and human terms. But these acts, I suggest, were one part of a larger process of worker empowerment that enabled the strike. The “passive” objectified *campesino* or subsistence farmer in adaptation to his environment became fierce, in control and powerful, in the context of the banana *fincas*.

In further exploring the *finca* worker identity and circumstances that led up to the strike, it must be repeated that the predominant experience and culture was defined by male *mestizos* who self-identified as *indios*, despite the undisputed diversity of the population of workers in the region and in the industry.¹¹¹ This is an important for three reasons: it explains the workers’ agency within the paradigm of Honduran nation-building that was occurring at the time; it acknowledges a significant exclusion and marginalization (though not an erasure) of different ethnic-racial groups and women; and it explains a dominant worker culture, imbued with a specific masculinity, that enabled resistance to the banana companies.

¹¹¹ I use “*mestizo*” to mean, consistent with current academic analysis of race and racial understandings of Honduras. Workers consistently used the term “*indio*.”

Mestizaje

I situate the banana workers self-identification within the larger discussion of race, ethnicity and the construction of a Mestizo nation, a process of Mestizaje of the first half of the twentieth century. The wide use of the term *indio* among the banana workers to describe themselves may be understood as an indicator of the power of the national movement to make Honduras a *mestizo* nation. Dario Euraque demonstrates that the nation-building project of *mestizaje* takes place within the years of 1890 to 1940, the objective of which was to cement the notion that Honduras was an indo-hispanic *mestizo* nation.¹¹² Two events in particular began to consolidate the *mestizo* nation among the elite and the government interests: first, the construction and development of the Mayan Ruins in Copan with the support of the United Fruit Company; second, the naming of the national coin of Honduras after Lempira, the mythical indigenous leader of the resistance against the Spanish incursions during the process of colonization. Also, labor migration, and especially West Indian migration, linked to the banana industry and the North Coast advanced the justification and promotion of the idea and implementation of a *mestizo* nation.¹¹³

During the dictatorship of Carías Andino, the United Fruit Company under Sam Zemurray and his U.S. educated daughter, Doris Stone, promoted what Euraque calls the *Mayanization* of Honduras in the 1930s and 1940s.¹¹⁴ This period, Euraque explains, actually made indigenous peoples invisible to the nation while rescuing a form of their civilization through mythic symbols and ruins in an *Indigenista* movement with "certain elements of North American archeology and the banana companies hegemony in Honduras in part and efforts to incorporate postcolonial discourses on national identity".¹¹⁵ The Honduran *Indigenista* movement resonated among intellectuals and fit

¹¹² Euraque, *Conversaciones Historicas Con el Mestizaje y su Identidad Nacional en Honduras*, 42.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42, 60.

well with Stone's archeology writings and the United Fruit Company's efforts to discover a version of the indigenous past, although the Maya were not the largest indigenous group in Honduras. In 1926, a contentious congressional debate on the naming of the national coin after either Lempira or Honduran Independence hero Francisco Morazán, resulted in the selection of Lempira, a resonating symbolism for the nation building process as well as a rejection of Honduras' black and African heritage.¹¹⁶ Euraque, Barahona and Chambers also document the roaring immigration debates of the time seeking to curtail the threat of foreign black migration from the West Indies, El Salvador primarily, but also Arab migration because these migrants presented serious dilemmas to the consolidation of a Honduran as a Mestizo nation.¹¹⁷

Interestingly, during the colonial period *indio* was not a desired identification, as Marvin Barahona reminds us,

*Durante el período independiente, la palabra "indio" adquirió una significación peyorativa en el seno de la población ladina y como tal paso a tener una connotación despectiva, sinónima de adjetivos tales como "ignorante", "mal educado", "estúpido", etc.*¹¹⁸

[During the Independence period, the word "indian" acquired a pejorative among ladinos [mestizos] and had a connotation invoking adjectives such as "ignorant", "poorly educated" and "stupid", etc.]

Marvin Barahona dates the process of *Mestizaje* to the colonial period where there were 'three racial influences, the Spanish, the Indigenous, and the African'.¹¹⁹ The colonial period was influential in later understandings of nation during the Independence period, informing questions of race and ethnicity, which according to Barahona, became an instant preoccupation since achieving independence from Spain (in 1821) for Honduran

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 80-81, 83.

¹¹⁷ Glenn A. Chambers, *Race, Nation, and West Indian Immigration to Honduras, 1890-1940* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 51.; Marvin Barahona, *Evolución Histórica de la Identidad Nacional* (Tegucigalpa: Editorial Guaymuras, 2002), 263-264.; Euraque, *Conversaciones Historicas Con el Mestizaje y su Identidad Nacional en Honduras*, 98-99.

¹¹⁸ Barahona, *Evolución Histórica de la Identidad Nacional*, 245.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 173.

ladinos or *mestizos*.¹²⁰ By the period of the 1940s and 1950s, the term *indio* had gained currency again, but this time during a period of heavy immigration control.

The North Coast was never as homogeneous as conceived by the Honduran government and elites who were promoting a *mestizo* national identity. Though this process was influential in workers' lives, at the same time, the workers' understanding of themselves as *indio* reflected their own constructions of an ethno-racial identity important to work and life in the *campos*. In worker narratives about the North Coast, workers would often refer to themselves as *indio* to describe that they were natives of Honduras. This *indio* identity was an instrumental ethno-racial descriptor in the everyday work and life in a multi-racial and multinational North Coast. The *indio* identity embraced by workers was functional in two important ways: on the one hand it differentiated the user of the term from other nationalities, i.e. Salvadorans (mostly mestizos) and on the other hand it strictly defined the user as not black, i.e. Jamaican (*Inglés*) immigrant or from the Garifuna community.¹²¹ The codification of an ethno-racial identity as Honduran, native and indigenous, was advantageous for banana companies as it created a potentially competitive division between black and mestizo workers.

Ginetta Candelario found that in the context of the Dominican Republic the term *indio* was a “middle term” which also meant native,

Lo Indio, is the middle term, the central of the racial continuum, the “native” alternative to foreign blackness and whiteness alike.¹²²

¹²⁰Euraque, *Conversaciones Historicas Con el Mestizaje y su Identidad Nacional en Honduras*, 224-225.

¹²¹ Glenn A. Chambers has documented that mestizos and local Hondurans used to confuse the black communities of West Indians and Garifuna. Many of the supervisors were mestizos at the time of our story and may have not made the ethnic distinctions within the black populations in the North Coast. Chambers, *Race, Nation, and West Indian Immigration to Honduras, 1890-1940* 132.

¹²² Ginetta E. B. Candelario, *Black Behind the Ears Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007) 58.

In the process of *mestizaje* in the Dominican Republic, explains Candelario, researchers argue that *indio* is a neutral, “un-marked” term that excludes blackness as it affirms Hispanicity of a different hue and (hair) texture.”¹²³ Candelario found that this long process of identification with “*indio/india*” is still used by Dominicans on and off the island,

To the extent that *mulata* has been semantically erased in favor of the *India* (who is understood to be representative of Dominican “in-between”), the *India* operates as an iconographic stand-in for contemporary Dominican women.¹²⁴

Candelario’s exploration of the ethno-racial identity of *indio* serves the discussion of the North Coast of Honduras because, as Candelario demonstrates, this identity is part of a state project. In the case of the Dominican Republic it had been evolving since the time of the Trujillato,¹²⁵ but was also an accepted more contemporary identity that was constructed and prioritized by Dominicans, on and off the island. This social construction is important when thinking about workers’ self-identification, ethnicity, and race in Honduras. The *indio* term was useful to the state project of *mestizaje* and continues to evolve today. Honduran worker narratives of today, their memories of the strike, their lives in the *campos*, and their self-identification as *indio* are markers of Honduras’ state project of *mestizaje*, as well as indicators of workers’ own identity construction in their work and living contexts in the banana fields of the North Coast.

Glenn Chambers further explores the issue in the context of the West Indian population, and determines that the Liberal Reform period was also key to the construction of a *Mestizo* nation because of the economic opening given to the foreign

¹²³ Ibid., 19.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 240.

¹²⁵ General Rafael Leónidas Trujillo was military strongman and dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961.

banana companies, which in turn elicited larger West Indian migration to the region. In addition, the Liberal reform period was crucial because the Honduran Liberalism was inspired by Europe and the United States and their 'modern scientific' approaches to nation-building that relied on exclusion and racism.¹²⁶ Chambers also cites the xenophobia, racism, and eventual deportation of Jamaicans as a key movement within the construction of the *mestizo* nation by elites and intellectuals in Honduras. It shows West Indian communities' struggles for survival and alienation from Honduran citizenship.¹²⁷ Chambers identifies *Indigenista* intellectuals, such as poet Froylan Turcios (1875-1943), as inspired by the *Indigenismo* movement in Mexico. At the same time that Turcios (once closely aligned with Sandino) promoted sovereignty and resistance to foreign owned companies, his patriotism was imbued with racial and xenophobic overtones.¹²⁸ His writings for instance, claimed that:

*...el trabajador Hondureño, que es de raza mil veces superior al negro, es más inteligente y apto para las faenas agrícolas. La mayoría de hondureños no se imaginan cuan perniciosos han sido para el país los negros de extraña procedencia que trabajan en las fincas de la Costa Norte.*¹²⁹

[...the Honduran worker, who is of a race a thousand times superior to black people, [the Honduran worker] is more intelligent and apt for agricultural work. The majority of Hondurans cannot imagine how pernicious they have been to the country these black people from strange origins who work in the North Coast *fincas*.]

¹²⁶ Chambers, *Race, Nation, and West Indian Immigration to Honduras, 1890-1940* 31-32

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* , 50-51

¹²⁸ Dario Euraque, "The Threat of Blackness to the Mestizo Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Honduran Banana Economy, 1920s-1930s," in *Banana Wars Power Production and History in the Americas*, ed. Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 243.; Barahona, *Evolución Histórica de la Identidad Nacional*, 267.; Chambers, *Race, Nation, and West Indian Immigration to Honduras, 1890-1940*, 54-55.

¹²⁹ "Froylán Turcios. "Inmigrantes Innecesarios." *El Nuevo Tiempo*. Tegucigalpa, (18 de Julio, 1016)" quoted in Euraque, *Conversaciones Historicas Con el Mestizaje y su Identidad Nacional en Honduras*, 163.

According to Chambers, Turcios saw West Indians as British subjects and allies of the foreign-owned companies which he criticized in his writings, and their abilities as workers and as citizens were subject to doubt.¹³⁰ They were an obstruction to the nation building processes in an imagined homogenous community.¹³¹ Honduran intellectuals promoted the banner of patriotism to challenge West Indian migration and "to promote the interests of the Honduran worker."¹³²

The national debates on the national coin, immigration to the North Coast among government power players and elites filtered down to workers through newspapers and fliers from the Liberal party inciting worker support, and through social policies.¹³³ In 1933, the banana companies stopped recruiting and hiring black workers, basing their actions on the 1929 and 1934 immigrations laws.¹³⁴ Prejudicial sentiments were also felt in the emerging labor movement, such as the *Federacion Obrera's* (FOH) role in introducing legislation against migration of black and Chinese workers in 1921.¹³⁵ They also sought the deportation of workers already in the country. Euraque explains that the British Embassy, the U.S. Embassy and the Companies supported this law in tune with the elite and the government's anti-migration and anti-black sentiment at the time. Black immigration was in direct opposition to the *Mestizaje* aspiration for the North Coast and rejection of black workers demonstrated a form of patriotism at the time.

The history of the promotion of *Mestizaje* situates workers' self-identification of *indio* as part of the process of constructing a national identity. *Indio* was a component of ethno-racial identity among *campeños* in Honduras during the 1940s and 1950s.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Chambers, *Race, Nation, and West Indian Immigration to Honduras, 1890-1940*, 55.

¹³² Ibid., 69.

¹³³ Euraque, *Conversaciones Historicas Con el Mestizaje y su Identidad Nacional en Honduras*, 83.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 186.186; Chambers, *Race, Nation, and West Indian Immigration to Honduras, 1890-1940*, 121-123.

¹³⁵ Euraque, "The Threat of Blackness to the Mestizo Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Honduran Banana Economy, 1920s-1930s," 243-244.

Campeños were not passive recipients of state, Company, and elite circle directions and ideas of national identity---they also constructed their own understandings of ethnicity and race, ones that were usually linked to work. The self-identification of *indio* for workers, particularly in the banana regions was a worker construction based on utility that allowed workers to survive within Company and state control and to gain access to the better work and housing.

Honduran workers used *indio* not just as a racial identity, but also to mean native of Honduras. The term *indio* denoted Honduran native clear connotations to the indo-hispanic past, and clearly not foreigner. For workers, identifying as *indio* meant that they were native of Honduras and not foreign, black, Jamaican or Garifuna descent. Salvadorans, however, could also 'pass' for 'indio' and many actually had lived in the North Coast so long that they could pass for native. The term was loaded with racial, ethnic, and xenophobic meaning that was advantageous for *mestizo* workers when obtaining work and living arrangements. Calling oneself *indio*--even for black workers--was a claim to majority and to entitlement to the dominant culture.

The *campeño* identity of *indio* benefitted workers because by claiming this identity they would attain better jobs that the Company intended for Hondurans. The Company vigilance over immigrant workers, after the 1929 and 1934 immigration laws, meant that workers had to prove that they were native Hondurans to ensure access to work. At the very least workers had to pass for Honduran, which many *mestizo* Salvadorans could do.

Workers also reinforced the *indio* identity through the system of *padrinazgo* which insured opportunity for workers to access work and were most effective for the majority *mestizo* workforce. One worker explains that he knew a company worker, a timekeeper and helper who selected the work gang, and he himself was chosen in this

way.¹³⁶ Some *mestizo* stevedores had gained the confidence and trust of certain *capataces* (overseers) and were chosen immediately and made a little more money or were given lighter work for the same amount of pay. Lighter work for instance involved counting the stems as they were loaded onto the chain stem holder.¹³⁷

From the worker narratives, we learn that many workers from the same region or area of migration stuck with each other in the working and living arrangements. Workers from El Salvador tended to stick together and sought *padrinazgo* of someone from their fellow countrymen, often going to supervisors from their own country. Leonardo Batista started to work for a *cortero* he knew,

*Empecé a trabajar en finca Copén con don César García. En ese tiempo no cobraban uno sino que cobraban los contratistas.*¹³⁸

[I began to work in finca Copén with Don César García. At that time [workers] did not charge [get paid directly] but rather the contractors charged [got paid for the team].

While knowing the *cortero* was good, it was also clear that the *cortero* benefited from the system of *padrinazgo* because as *contratista* he was paid by the company and then paid his workers, giving him a potentially profitable situation. Efrain Hernandez Maldonado remembers that in work and life in the campos, at first, "uno se iba orientando por los demas..." (one would find one's way from others).¹³⁹ At the same time the *padrinazgo* system may have excluded workers that were from different groups.

¹³⁶ Eduardo Padilla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 30, 2006.

¹³⁷ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August, 8, 2004.

¹³⁸ Leonardo Bautista, interview by author, campo Limones, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006.

¹³⁹ Efrain Hernandez Maldonado, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 28, 2006.

Black workers

Padrinazgo may have resulted in the exclusion of the minority black workers, even in the ports of Tela, La Ceiba, and Puerto Cortes, where thousands worked as port workers and which were the most diverse centers of the North Coast. *Mestizos*, Garifuna, and black workers worked together loading docks or on Company grazing lands in the ports of Tela and Puerto Cortés, but racial tensions are evident in the historical memory of workers and reflected in company policies and acts of favoritism towards *mestizo* workers.¹⁴⁰ The stereotypes about Garifuna and black workers that circulated among *mestizo* workers could not have been more contradictory and incredible. Some felt that black workers had privileged "easier" positions, such as timekeeper, hotel employee, nurse (usually Jamaican women) or work supervisor, an impression created by company hiring choices.¹⁴¹ Repeatedly *mestizo* workers remarked that "black workers" could not handle hard labor—that of *finca* work--despite representation in high numbers as hard laborers on the loading docks.¹⁴² While carrying the more than one-hundred pound stems was extremely difficult work in itself, the actual preparation of the stem for shipment was perhaps the most dangerous. The banana bunches were brought from the *finca* with unusually long stems for easy handling and carriage. While the stevedore picked up the bunch, he passed by another man with an extremely sharp machete who would slice the stem to prepare the bunch ready for shipping. The machete, according to Canales, a worker who helped to organize the union, would come within a hairline of a distance from the workers' upper back and neck as the *cortero* (cutter) would slice both sides of the stem. This was done with speed and accuracy but nevertheless workers considered this to be very risky and

¹⁴⁰ Soluri, *Banana Cultures Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States*, 132-133.

¹⁴¹ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004; Isabel Moreira, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, November 27, 2006; Marina Graugnard, interview by author, Tela, Atlántida, June 9, 2006; Juan Nuñez Sierra, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006; Juan Bennett Bustillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

dangerous. Workers labored according to need, many times into the very dark of night in a continuous assembly line of loading, cutting stems, picking up and arranging in the cargo ship until the last bunch was unloaded from the train cars.¹⁴³

Whatever the impressions, the discrimination against black workers in the ports was perhaps the most blatant as witnessed by Juan Canales while working in Puerto Cortés--none more so than in the demeaning process by which dockworkers were forced to compete for jobs daily.¹⁴⁴ Garifuna workers and *ingleses* (Jamaican workers, so-called because they spoke English) were relegated to and vied for limited work on the docks. Loading in the docks was irregular, temporary labor, fluctuating with product demand and local labor needs.¹⁴⁵ These workers, the *stevedores*, loaded banana stem onto a chain entrapment that would carry the stem onto the ship. Black workers were often turned away from work. To get hired for the day, workers presented themselves at the gates of the ship yards ready to load bananas. A supervisor picked workers arbitrarily at first sight and gave them a ticket with a number on it to designate that they had been chosen. Workers showed up daily, especially when there was *corte* (cut of fruit) for work; of course only certain people were chosen; others they were turned away, Juan Bautista Canales remembers workers telling him:

A veces regresaban [los trabajadores] 'no me dieron el boleto para trabajar.' No trabajaban era una vida azarosa...el despido, cierta discriminación, ya sea negro o mestizo, habían enfermedades...¹⁴⁶
[Sometimes [workers] would come back and say 'they did not give me a ticket for work.' They did not work, it was an unfortunate life...facing being fired, certain kinds of discrimination, whether you're black or mestizo, there were illnesses...]

¹⁴³ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.

¹⁴⁴ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.

¹⁴⁵ Francesca Gargallo, *Garifuna Garínagu Caribe Historia de una Nación Libertaria* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 2002), 80.

¹⁴⁶ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, August 8, 2004.

Race is a complicated issue in Honduras. While many of the workers I interviewed may have been black or mixed, they did not necessarily self-identify as such in oral interviews. There is little doubt, however, that company hiring policies and the *bananera* employment systems were discriminatory toward black workers. Black workers had restricted access to regular employment in the *fincas*. Once employed, black workers experienced differential treatment in the *campos*. For instance, black workers did not have the same hospital benefits of *finca* workers. Their job security was more precarious. *Mestizos* were always prioritized and more likely to be hired in the work despite the availability of black workers. These work practices influenced workers' assumptions and perceptions and affected relations in life and leisure as well.

Gerardo Pery Laredo, a Garifuna worker, migrated from Trujillo, Colon to La Ceiba to look for work. He could not find work there so he travelled to the Tela Railroad Company *fincas* looking for work but continue to struggle to find work, "*No conseguía trabajo...Decían de que no necesitaban trabajadores. De que ellos tenían.*" (*I could not find work...they would tell me they did not need workers...they had workers.*)¹⁴⁷ This could have been because he was a Garifuna worker and also because he did not know anyone to help him get a job in a *finca*. He eventually ended up in San Pedro Sula working in a bakery before he gained a foothold within the Tela Railroad Company as a *yardero*.¹⁴⁸

Once Pery Laredo became a *finca* worker he remembers being the only '*negro*' (black worker) among mestizo workers.¹⁴⁹ He recalls,

*Antes no le gustaba al indio incluirse con los negros. Si llegaba un grupo de indios allá, como a otros, no íbamos incluidos allí. Y lo mismo nosotros...Eran groseros por el color y todo.*¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Gerardo Pery Laredo, interview by author, Tornabé, Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006.

¹⁴⁸ Gerardo Pery Laredo, interview by author, Tornabé, Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006.

¹⁴⁹ Gerardo Pery Laredo, interview by author, Tornabé, Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006.

¹⁵⁰ Gerardo Pery Laredo, interview by author, Tornabé, Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006.

[Before the *indio* [*mestizo*] did not like to intermingle with blacks. If a groups of *indios* came together, like us [our groups], we [black workers] were not included in there. They were crude because of the color and all.]

Pery Laredo eventually found alliances with other Garifuna workers from Tornabe, Tela, a Garifuna village outside of Tela, and would spend almost every weekend with them or in the community. Pery Laredo explains that 'indios' had stereotypes of black workers, including Garifuna workers,

*[Mestizos decían] De que nosotros no éramos personas buenas, dicen que nosotros somos malos, no sé. Entonces venían los otros [trabajadores negros] y les contestaban de que la cosa era pareja, de tanto los negros y los indios.*¹⁵¹

[Mestizos use to say] that we were not good people, they said that we were bad, I don't know. Then the others [black workers] would answer that the situation was even, between the blacks and the indios [mestizos].

Pery Laredo's memory is revealing of the *finca* racial and ethnic negotiations around work. He explained that *campeños* held stereotypes about workers who were 'indios' and 'negros,' usual judging that black workers were "luchadores" (hard working) like the *indios* and not as efficient. While *mestizo* workers held harsh stereotypes of Garifuna and black workers, black workers also defended themselves and their work. When explaining that he was a *campeño*, a category he defined as *indio*,

*Si lo indios [son campeños]. Hay unos también de aquí [refiriéndose a aldea Garifuna de Tornabé] que que son campeños. [Ser campeño era] vivir en el campo, sembrar maíz, sembrar plátano, sembrar yuca y trabajar en la finca también.*¹⁵²

[Yes indios [are campeño]. There are some from here [referring to the village of Tornabé] that are also campeños. [To be campeños was] to live in the campos, to grow corn, grow plantain [or banana], grow manioc and work in the finca too.]

¹⁵¹ Gerardo Pery Laredo, interview by author, Tornabé, Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006.

¹⁵² Gerardo Pery Laredo, interview by author, Tornabé, Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006.

He explains that Garifuna could also be *campeños* if they lived and worked in the *campos* "esos tambien, pero son pocos, son dados y contados" (they are too but they are few, on can count in one hand.) Despite these differences in perception, interestingly, Pery Laredo still identified them with the term *indio* based on their work. For him, "*campeños son mayoritariamente 'indios,'*" but they were also Garifuna because of their relation to the agricultural work of the *finca* and their knowledge of working the land in general. For him, these were non-race-based factors of being a *campeño*.¹⁵³

Compañerismo

Pery Laredo strongly identified as a *campeño* despite his non-*mestizo* origin; to work in the *finca* and live in *campo* were important to defining that identity for him. Despite being from a village near Trujillo, he worked near the Garifuna village of Tornabé. He met a worker that invited him to the village on days off; he integrated into a Garifuna social and familial network away from home.¹⁵⁴ It is remarkable in that it speaks to a sense of unity and commonality of experience and struggle despite difference that rang through as a theme even as workers shared the different levels of inclusion and exclusion in their social spheres and others.' Workers' experiences on the North Coast varied based on numerous factors, including the workers' own origins, background, race, ethnicity, skill, and gender. For instance, Garifuna and black workers and women had vastly different experiences in the North Coast. The vast majority of workers on the North Coast, however, shared a common experience as workers struggling to survive in a challenging environment and in a competitive labor market. Constraints on workers' opportunities and options for work and livelihood resulted in an increased reliance on *compañerismo* (camaraderie) among *finca* workers.

¹⁵³ Gerardo Pery Laredo, interview by author, Tornabé, Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006.

¹⁵⁴ Gerardo Pery Laredo, interview by author, Tornabé, Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006.

Despite the hierarchy of different positions and differential treatment of workers in various *finca* work positions, there was a common experience that drew workers together. In the workplace, or the *finca*, camaraderie, worker solidarity and affinity to the contractors was created during the work hours and workday. Many workers labored in work gangs and with at the very least one other worker. This everyday contact through leisure and work time together fostered a sense of connection and community whether or not workers got along or shared race or ethnicity. A sense of camaraderie and *compañerismo* helped workers survive.

The entry process into the work of the *fincas* and the precariousness of many positions, coupled with a lack of seniority and stability, were experiences most *finca* workers shared in some variation in their lives and histories of work. The workplace was a site of shared experience for many, even most *finca* workers, expressed regularly through *compañerismo* (camaraderie) in their work life. First and foremost, *campeños* were workers in the banana *fincas*.

The spheres of the *campeño* community in the *campos* allowed them to build a distinctive collective identity for the workers, men and women, of the banana regions. This community and the identification with others about their shared work, life, and leisure melded together many people that otherwise would not have been from the same geographic areas or countries. It was not always a haven, but workers made it work. Even in times of violence, they began to see themselves as part of the North Coast.

These experiences influenced their demands later as they began to organize a union in 1954. Before the strike, there was no concept of seniority or benefits attained through a collective bargaining unit; workers often started anew in different positions as they were available. Ultimately, the *campeño* identity was informed most by resistance to Company work policies and that took hold during the sprouting labor efforts. The banana worker identity was an identity that was utilitarian for workers in the organizing process of the strike as much as it had been instrumental for their survival.

Conclusion: Gender and women

Women laborers were excluded from the male *mestizo padrinazgo*; it was understood that the company's *finca* labor positions were reserved for men. Women had different networks that connected them from their home towns to the North Coast--sometimes through older women or women that had more experience in the North Coast.¹⁵⁵ But attaining work with the company in the *fincas* was not expected. The formal company structured of *finca* labor relied on single male workers and did not recognize the contributions of women at all.

The exclusion of women from the *finca* labor made them dependent on the relationship to male workers to cement their housing and their possibility of obtaining work. Partnership with women was beneficial to men--they ensured access to family housing, and it also meant a reduction in food costs because now the woman would cook. The partnerships, envied by single men precisely because of these benefits, also reinforced the construction of "codes of manhood" that required being a provider for the family. During the period of 1944-1957, worker narratives also suggest a shift from what was once a single male workforce toward a family-oriented workforce, male workers with women partners, and extended families members.

Still for male workers, women were considered primarily in relation to men. When a woman entered into a partnership with a male worker and became a regular in the community of the *campo*, she became an object of interest. Alejandro Ortega remarks that women were cause for tension between men when they brought a woman into the *campos*: "*Y en aquel tiempo eran pocas las mujeres; habían más hombres y al que le miraban la mujer bastante regular allí la andaban molestando*" (*In those times women were few there were more men. The man that saw the woman regularly there*

¹⁵⁵ Maria Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006; Casta Figueroa Portillo, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

would bother and court her.)¹⁵⁶ The woman was desired in the *campos*, and it did not matter whose wife she was, she would be “stolen” by another stronger, a fiercer man.¹⁵⁷ Angel Martinez explains, "*Caer una mujer en los campos era como agarrar un pedazo de oro. Todos lo apetecían y él que tuviera más valor se aprovechaba de ella y así se acomodaba ella*" (When a woman landed in the *campos* she was like a piece of gold. Everyone desired her and the one with the most courage [or guts] would take advantage of her [court her, try to bed her] and she would have to get used to it).¹⁵⁸ Men heckled, engaged in cat calling, courted and dueled for women--contesting her partnership, not just because workers wanted to make a home necessarily, but because this was also part of male fraternizing that also reinforced their "codes of manhood." Revealing in this memory is the notion that women are open for the taking, by any stronger and more macho worker. Ability to ‘obtain’ a woman and keep her amid a sea of ‘needy’ men also formed part of the codes of manhood in the banana regions of the North Coast.

This limited view of women in the *campos* affirms the dominance of the male, *mestizo campesino* identity that presents just a part of the picture of North Coast culture. In fact, banana workers were both men and women. The men most often worked as formal employees of the companies, and the female workers as informal workers in and around the plantations. The construction of workers' community in the *campos* is clearly not only a construction of formal workers, but also owes much of its survival and vitality to the informal work of the informal economy in which women outnumbered men

¹⁵⁶ Alejandro Ortega, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 8, 2006.

¹⁵⁷ The term in Spanish workers used to refer to women was *robar* (to steal). Women were *robadas*, which meant that the woman was taken without permission from the parents and their partnership did not exactly mean that she was properly married. In some cases it meant elopement. In the case of an already partnered woman, she could also be *robada* (stolen) from her male partner in the *finca*. In oral testimonies, men refer to women, as property items that served a utilitarian purpose. Alejandro Ortega, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 8, 2006; Jesus Gomez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006; Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

¹⁵⁸ Angel Martinez, interview by author, Campo Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, June 2006.

CHAPTER 5:

"MUJERES QUE CUIDABAN HOMBRES:" GENDERED ROLES AND INFORMAL WORK IN THE NORTH COAST (1944–1957)

“maginese [sic] que tenía que moler uno, ahora quien va a moler doce molinadas de maíz, y después repasarla para ir hacer esas tortillas para el almuerzo. Tenía que tostar café, seis libras de café tostaba yo todas las semanas, seis libras, tenía que tostarlas en aquel fuego. Y después molerlas en un molino. Usted que cree... eso era trabajar, ni quiera Dios, así fue como se trabajo.”¹

[Imagine that one had to grind, nowadays who will grind corn [twelve ponds] up to twelve times and then grind again to make tortillas for lunch. I had to toast coffee beans; I would toast six pounds of coffee beans every week, six pounds I had to toast in that fire. Then I had to grind them in a grinder. What do you think...that was work; that is how we worked.]

In the *campos bananeros* (banana fields, including *fincas* and living quarters) of the North Coast, workers' experiences were shaped and informed by gender, race relations, and national and ethnic identities. Gender, race and ethnic relations were negotiated constantly within the context of a limited process of industrialization propelled by the banana export economies of the Tela Railroad Company and the Standard Fruit Company. This chapter looks closely at women workers' experiences in the *campos bananeros*--in particular, their role in the informal economy of food vending and preparation.

The informal and largely unregulated economy of food provision was sandwiched between the company commissary and company town merchants in La Lima, El Progreso, and Olanchito. *Mujeres que cuidaban hombres* (literally, women who take care of men), also known as *patronas* (or boss ladies), were women who ran small eating establishments (*comedores*) out of their kitchens and filled a need not met by the town merchants or company commissary. *Patronas'* labor in the kitchens and *comedores* formed part of a diverse and strong informal economy arising within and

¹ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

around the formal, male-dominated workforce of the Tela Railroad Company's and Standard Fruit Company's production organization.² This chapter suggests their work demonstrated a form of working class feminism in the North Coast.

The Informal Economy and Women's Work in the North Coast³

Women migrants to the North Coast faced various challenges in finding work and resources in the *campos bananeros*. Like the men, women migrated to the North Coast for a variety of reasons and from a variety of backgrounds. They came, some alone, from nearby areas, villages and hamlets in and around the banana plantations looking for work, or they came with family members, usually their mothers or grandmothers. Many arrived following the male migration trajectory from outlying departments such as Olancho, Valle and Copán; some came with their husbands or partners. Later, in the 1950s, women began to come alone to work. Typically, women had few opportunities to obtain good positions within the company. The export economy of bananas, due to its preference for male workers, limited women and

² "Patronas" and "mujeres que cuidaban hombres" worked strictly in the kitchen as formal cooks and may have hired workers to help them. "Vendedoras ambulantes" (traveling vendors/street vendors) were ambulatory vendors and "vendedoras con un puesto" were stationary vendors who did not have a business where they fed workers directly, but cooked bread, tamales and food rations out of their kitchen. They or their children went out to sell the foodstuff to workers or had a space where they sold their foodstuff and other goods, similar to a little store. All of these informal economy positions made women key in the food vending business that existed alongside the company commissary, or company store. María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006; Lucila Goodlitt, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006; José Eulalio Oliva, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 10, 2006.

³ Workers often referred to the western side of the North Coast and also the region where the United Fruit had its *fincas* as *Costa Abajo* and the eastern part of the North Coast where Standard Fruit had its *fincas* as *Costa Arriba*. This distinction between the two coasts represented a geographic and imaginary divide and is imbued with two analyses in workers' historical memories (those interviewed by author): the association between each coast and its corresponding company, and the racial and ethnic makeup of the regions, with *Costa Arriba* having more ethnic and racial mixing than the more "indio" (*mestizo*) *Costa Abajo*.

children's participation in the formal work of harvesting bananas or digging ditches for the plantation.⁴ For women, earning a living in this 'booming' banana economy was even more difficult. Their exclusion, deemed natural because of their sex, was excused by citing the extreme physical labor demanded in the cutting and carrying of the over one-hundred-pound stems from the banana tree to the mule-driven carts and then onto the rail cars.⁵ This justification conveniently aligned with cultural and social constructions of women's place in Honduras and among the US companies' bosses, who argued that women were simply not strong enough.⁶ In light of the limitations they faced, women had no choice but to create viable work alternatives, utilizing their homemaking skills in order to make ends meet.⁷ Women, then, tended to work in the informal economy in and around the *campos bananeros* and nearby towns.

⁴ It was not until 1962 that women entered into formal labor at the banana packing houses. While some women did work in the *Bananina* factory in La Lima, for instance, or in the offices and hospitals of the company, for the most part the *finca* work and production of bananas in the *campos bananeros* limited women from entering into the formal economy of banana production. Isolated examples of women working alongside their husbands or helping men fulfill a contract exist and workers report seeing women work in the fields; for the most part, however, company policies favored the nearly exclusive hiring of men. According to SITRATERCO Union President Carlos Amaya, women began working in the *Bananina* plant in 1962. Carlos Amaya Yanez, interview by author *interview by author*, La Lima, Cortés, July 1, 2006 and August, 2004.; Virginia Scott-Jenkins, *Bananas an American History* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003), 123. Dana Frank, *Women Transforming the Banana Unions of Latin America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 2005) 13.

⁵ Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006; Daniel Guevara Madrid, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Jose Sanchez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, November 5, 2006.; See also: John Soluri, *Banana Cultures Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2005)

⁶ Rina Villars, *Para la Casa Más que Para el Mundo: Sufragismo y Feminismo en la Historia de Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 2001)

⁷ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

“Cuidando Hombres”: The Work of Cooking and Selling Food

Mujeres que cuidaban hombres—*patronas*, *vendedoras ambulantes* (street vendors) and *vendedoras con puestos* (vendors with stands)—were women who dedicated their lives and work to selling food in and around the *campos bananeros* to earn a living. *Mujeres que cuidaban gente*⁸ cooked for the single or unaccompanied male workers, and *ayudantas* (assistants) and *cuques* (cooks) helped in *patronas*' kitchens. Other women worked as traveling/street vendors in and around the *finca* and living quarters and in public spaces where men congregated. Other women (and sometimes men) had *puestos*, designated spaces in the *campos* to sell foods and goods. Many individuals performed one or several of these work activities at different times.⁹ All of these forms of informal labor created intricate relationships among workers and helped balance the needs of life, work and the production of bananas in the *campos*.

Women were drawn into work in *comedores* or as *mujeres que cuidaban gente* for various reasons. Many workers suggest that women, who were the only few wives or women present in remote banana *fincas*, may have understandably been thrust into these jobs. Men, including many bachelors, often worked long hours digging ditches, planting, and harvesting, and could not (or claimed not to know how to) cook for themselves. Moreover, cooking in the kitchen was understood to be women's work and a woman's skill. In the absence of women in remote areas, one or two men were selected to cook but produced food of poor quality, according to many men who worked

⁸ “*Cuidar gente*” translates literally to “taking care of people” and refers to women in the *campos* that cooked meals for *finca* workers—men—in a weekly to monthly paid arrangement. María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2006.

⁹ Other vendors came into the *campos bananeros* from nearby towns such as La Lima, El Progreso and Olanchito on paydays to sell foodstuffs and goods. For the purpose of this chapter I will focus on women cooks and food vendors that lived and worked within the *campos bananeros* as a special group of entrepreneurs that lay in between the company store, *el comisariato*, and the local Honduran merchants of nearby towns, creating their own niche for work.

to develop the land for planting.¹⁰ Women were considered the appropriate ones to fulfill cooking duties, and their food was considered better than the food cooked by men in the singles' *barracones*. Beyond paying for their sustenance, male workers were willing to pay for quality food. Thus, women were able to carve out a role for themselves in the *bananeras*.

Patronas often held informal oral contracts to cook for their clients, *comensales*, single men or men unaccompanied by a female relative (a mother, wife, sister).¹¹ The work hours were long and the kitchen duties of preparing meals were labor intensive.¹² Often *patronas* did not receive pay for services immediately; many men relied on a system of credit (*de fiado*) for services. The *patrona* would provide food out of her kitchen to single men or unaccompanied men in the *fincas* for a weekly, biweekly, monthly, or even daily fee. This arrangement virtually locked *patronas* and *ayudantas* in the kitchens providing continuous service and often required that *patronas* themselves obtain goods on credit to sustain their services. The *patrona* served anywhere from five to thirty or more men daily and sometimes with little help. The agreement ranged from sixteen lempiras to thirty lempiras a month, or one lempira a day. *Finca* workers were dependent on *patronas* for their daily sustenance.

¹⁰ Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

¹¹ *Comensal* refers to a frequent diner at a *comedor* or home business. It also refers to a person who has a pay arrangement that ranges from weekly, biweekly, monthly or per meal.

¹² *Patronas* and *ayudantas* report getting up as early as 2 a.m. and as late as 4 a.m., from Monday to Sunday, in order to make tortillas and prepare food. Sylvia Robleda, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, July 4, 2004; María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2006; Ricarda Fernandez Sabillón, interview by author, Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006; Candida Garay, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 6, 2006; Lidia Aurora Lezama, interview by author, Campo Mucula, El Progreso, Yoro, April 9, 2006; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.; Adela Chávez, interview by author, La Lima Nueva, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

Patronas and ayudantas: family and hierarchy

Mujeres que cuidaban hombres and itinerant vendors worked as a family unit in the informal economy within the formal work structure of the banana export economy.¹³ *Patronas* held status as heads of the family enterprise and managed the kitchen and labor roles within it. A well functioning kitchen was crucial to the operation of a *patrona's comedor*. The *comedor* was usually located in the back or side of her *barracón*, next to an open air kitchen, where she cooked and served the meals to the men. The *patrona*, for the most part, determined the menu to be provided daily per day which remained relatively constant throughout the month. She managed the cooking and controlled the flavoring of the meals with her own *sazón* (seasoning/flavor), which made her food identifiable to the workers. Both the *patrona* and the *ayudantas* were known in the fields among workers for their cooking, price, and service. *Patronas* cooked the meals and supervised the workers, whom they hired for tasks such as grinding corn for tortillas, toasting and grinding coffee beans, and serving men who came in to eat during meal times.¹⁴ Ricarda Sabillón remembers, "*trabaje en los campos en cocina como ayudanta*," (I worked in the fields, in the kitchen as a helper); she was brought to the *campos* by a woman from her town in the department of Santa Barbara.¹⁵ Once in the North Coast, she worked for the woman's family. Sabillón explains that the only thing she had to learn how to make were flour tortillas, since they did not eat them where she was from, while "*lo demás de comida yo lo hacía porque ya lo sabía hacer*"

¹³ "*cuidar hombres*" or "*cuidar gente*" literally translates to taking care of people or taking care of men; it is the colloquial way of saying that she had a "*comedor*" or small diner. Many ambulant vendors sent out their sons to sell in the streets and many cooks used their daughters for cooking and as cook helpers.

¹⁴ In some cases, workers report young black men working as "*cuque*" (cook helper) or cook helper. Gerardo Pery Laredo, interview by author, Tornabé, Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006; Juan Nuñez Sierra, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006.

¹⁵ Ricarda Fernandez Sabillón, interview by author, Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006.

(the rest of the food I already knew how to make).¹⁶ In other cases, often in certain regions of the coast near Garifuna towns, young men were hired to grind coffee or corn for tortillas with a hand-operated metal grinder that required extreme physical exertion. Helpers who were young black men were called *cuques*.¹⁷ Gerardo Pery Laredo worked as a *cuque* when he could not find formal work in the *fincas*. Although agricultural workers saw this as light labor and not as masculine as working in the *fincas* cutting and pruning trees, the work of *cuque* was intense physical labor. *Cuques* typically labored from early in the morning to the evening, in order to grind enough *masa* (corn meal) for tortillas and coffee for all meal times.¹⁸

Often, *patronas* hired daughters, nieces, or distant relatives sent from other towns as *ayudantas*. The *patronas* often provided housing and food arrangements. If *ayudantas* were family, they were paid in-kind and given things such as cloth for dresses or needed objects. María Antonia Perla was brought to the *campos* in 1953 by her grandmother at the age of thirteen to work as an *ayudanta*.¹⁹ Her grandmother and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ A much ignored position is that of the “*almuercero*,” a boy who would run out to the *finca* during lunch time to bring food to the workers that dined in a particular *patrona's comedor* (sometimes there was only one *comedor*). These boys would receive a tip from the workers and were family members of the *patronas* or nearby homes. Other times the *cuques* were sent on this kind of errands. Many times workers took their lunch with them in the mornings and ate it cold. Other arrangements for lunch included the *patrona* packing lunch for the worker in the morning or sending the *cuque* to do the errand. If the worker was working close to the living quarters he might also decide to return for lunch. The lunch option was determined by the proximity of the *comedor* to the *finca*, the access and the type of work that the workers were doing. Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Jose Sanchez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, November 5, 2006. Francisco Amerto Lagos, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

¹⁸ Gerardo Pery Laredo, interview by author, Tornabé, Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006; Juan Nuñez Sierra, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 7, 2006.

¹⁹ María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortes, March 5, 2006.

her aunt ran a *comedor* for eighty men in *Finca Guaruma Dos*.²⁰ She recalls that despite getting up at two in the morning, every morning, and doing everything that was asked of her, her grandmother never paid her and often physically abused her:

*Nunca me pagó. Tres macaneadas me dio más bien, la primera porque faltaba un dinero, y como yo era la nueva en casa a mi me cayó...la última vez porque le dije que un hombre se estaba pasando al cuarto de su hija por las noches.*²¹

[She never paid me. She beat me three times, the first because money was missing, and since I was the new one in the house it [blame] fell on me...the last time because I told her that a man was visiting her daughter's room during the night.]

The relationship with her grandmother became even more abusive as the days went on. Her grandmother gave her a room to sleep in for which she did not charge her rent. When Perla was savagely raped at the age of thirteen by a 35-year-old worker, her grandmother did not come to her aid.²² Perla attempted to defend herself and told her grandmother and mother; in fact, the rape was so violent she ended up at the Tela Railroad hospital.²³ In response, Perla's grandmother, a stern businesswoman told the worker, "*o se casa con ella o va a la cárcel*" (either you marry her or go to jail).²⁴ Perla attempted to run away from her attacker but due to family pressure was forced to partner with him because she had become pregnant.²⁵ Perla's analysis of the cold

²⁰ María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortes, March 5, 2006. "Campo Guaruma Dos, Municipio de Villanueva, Cortés." Informe de Fomento, Agricultura y Trabajo, 1943-1944; Microfilm MF13544, Center for Research Libraries.

²¹ María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2006.

²² Ibid.

²³ María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2006.; Another woman, and former *ayudanta*, who suffered a similar fate did not want to be recorded or talk about it, simply saying "*¿Para que quiero recordar?*" (why do I want to remember?). Author's personal communication.

²⁴ María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2006.

²⁵ They did not officially marry until four years after the incident, perhaps because of her young age at the time, the worker would have been forced to serve jail time.

shoulder she received from all of the adult women in her family had to do with the benefits the *comedor* would receive from the partnership with the rapist: "*Catalogué que mi abuela me vendió por 20 monedas, por una habilidad, un cuarto en los campos*" (I worked out that my grandmother sold me for twenty coins, for a room in the fields).²⁶ Access to minimal workers' benefits, such as the commissary, the meat and milk delivery train, housing, and the Company hospital, after all, was always in high demand for *patronas* and their *comedores*, and in this case this agricultural worker used his Company benefits as commodity for exchange, suggesting that this kind of exchange may not have been uncommon.

Not all helpers were family members, but *patronas* still held positions of power in managing labor roles in the kitchen. Some young women unrelated to the *patronas*, mostly *mestizas* and black women, came to the banana fields looking for work and welcomed these opportunities in the *comedores*.²⁷ Ricarda Fernández Sabillón, though not related to the *patrona* she worked for, still experienced abuse from her boss:

*Se enojaba. Quebró[sic] un plato, me lo cobraba. Yo sentía que no era buena [porque] me cobraba las cosas.*²⁸

[She would get mad. If I broke a plate she would charge me for it. I felt that she was not good because she charged me for things [take it out of my salary].

²⁶ Despite pleading for help with her mother, Perla's mom said, "Este es tu destino, mi mamá sabe lo que hace." (This is your destiny, my mother knows what she is doing). María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2006.

²⁷ María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006; Adela Chávez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

²⁸ Ricarda Fernández Sabillón, interview by author, Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006.

Fernández Sabillón was paid meager wages, but was given food and a place to live. As soon as she could, she found herself a partner, moved into a family room with him in the *barracón*, and worked in her own kitchen.²⁹

The *ayudanta* position, despite its disadvantages for family members who did not earn full wages and were often victims of abuse, nonetheless was a position of opportunity for women in the *campos*. It was a stepping stone on the way to becoming a *patrona*.³⁰ In the *patrona*'s kitchen, the *ayudanta* could acquire the skills and experience needed to become a *patrona* herself—the basics of cooking for *campeños*, how much to charge people based on food consumption, where to buy produce, meat, dry goods, how to operate the kitchen and deal with clients, how to reinvest *comedor* earnings, hiring help and utilize the household for support. For family members and unrelated *ayudantas*, working in the *patronas*' kitchens provided an entry point for establishing their own futures and livelihoods..³¹

The power dynamics in the *patronas*' kitchen were fast and clear. They worked on the workers' time clock, which meant they had to provide the service according to the workers' various schedules. In order to meet this service demand, the *patronas* firmly exercised their power over the *ayudantas* and *cuques*, while also laboring in the kitchen for all of the hours and meals. Their value to the workforce was understood to be their ability to provide good, hot food in a timely manner and a space for winding down from work. If they did not make ends meet, then they might look for more income either by selling *aguardiente* or stocking special foods on payday, or else by sending

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰*Ayudantas* found employment in established *comedores* for as little as twelve Lempiras per month.

³¹Flour tortillas, oatmeal, and coffee for breakfast and local meals for lunch and dinner, such as beef soup, plantains and fried green bananas and refried silk beans; corn tortillas and coffee were a constant.

their kids out into the *campos* to sell food.³² In the best case scenario, *patronas* whose partners were men that worked in the Company were assured some income. Husbands provided the necessities: a home, the very basics for the household, and access to their Company benefits with the commissary and the milk and meat train. The women had to pay for their children's needs, however, and needed additional earnings for other needs as well. *Patronas* had to fend for themselves and many report doing it for their children's clothing and school needs: "*Nosotros teníamos que vender pa' mantener los hijos y pa' la escuela*" (we had to sell to sustain our children and their schooling), explains Casta Figueroa.³³ In a more common scenario, *patronas* only relied on their partners for housing; they could then use the kitchen to set up their *comedores*. *Patronas*, *vendedoras con puestos*, and *vendedoras ambulantes* intersected with workers' lives in important ways, intimately connected to their schedules, needs, and work. These relationships bolstered the construction of a lasting working class consciousness that would allow the *patronas* to support the male *finca* workers on the strike.

It is important to note that traveling/street vendors and other food purveyors, while crucial to the informal economy of food provision for the North Coast labor force, held social positions of less esteem than the *patronas*. Ambulant food vendors would specialize in one or several items such as coconut bread, sweet bread, or *nacatamales* (tamales) or a portion of a meal (known as *la burra*) that then sold for as little as 25 *centavos* in Coyoles Central.³⁴ They were small entrepreneurs that held some

³² María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006; Casta Figueroa Portillo, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

³³ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

³⁴ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.; Casta Figueroa Portillo, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006

independence and lived and supported their families by their own means. Like *patronas*, they worked every day including Sundays and holidays and sold food at negotiated prices. But traveling/street vendors earned considerably less than *patronas*. Although ambulatory vendors had more control over selling times and vending locations, their mobility made them a less routine part of workers' sustenance. Ambulatory vendors sold food and goods much cheaper than meals prepared in a *comedor*, but required immediate pay at the point of sale. *Patronas'* set locations and common practice of providing credit made the *comedores* attractive to workers. When paid at the end of the month, *patronas* were able to invest their earnings in purchasing food in bulk for their *comedores*. Life for traveling/street vendors and their families was more precarious; every child of walking age sold the food, bread, *nacatamales*, and meal portions in the streets and outside the brothels. Casta Figueroa remembers:

*Vendía chicharra con yuca cuando valía 10¢ de lempira. De una chicharra grande yo sacaba cuatro pedazos entonces yo salía a vender toda la noche. Me juntaba con mi hermana y unas compañeras, Victoria Zelaya y Olympia. Venía a vender a las cantinas y como aquí habían bastantes cantinas...venía a vender donde estaban los bolos porque los bolos compran.*³⁵

[I used to sell chicharra [fried pork skin] with cassava when it cost 10 centavos. From one large piece of chicharra I would make four pieces. I would then go out to sell all night. I would get together with my sister and my friends Victoria Zelaya and Olympia. I would come to sell to the bars, and since there were many cantinas...I would come to sell where the drunks were, because the drunks would buy.]

³⁵ Casta Figueroa Portillo, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

María Angela Cardona also sold food near the brothels and saloons in the *champería* (mud huts) of Standard Fruit workers around what is now El Carril.³⁶ Both Cardona and Casta Figueroa, along with other women, sold food all night to make ends meet. The relationships they remember were not with the workers and soldiers who visited the brothels, but the other women workers, the prostitutes, who were nice to them, bought from them. Women shared stories of charitable and generous exchanges between the women working in the brothels and those selling food outside.³⁷

Patronas' position of power and respect among workers

Workers, women and men, living and working in the banana fields and living quarters, existed within a myriad of power relations, some directly established by Company policies through *capitanes de finca* (captains or supervisors) or the *cabos comisariales* (policemen) and some derived from nuanced and tacitly understood notions of comportment. Workers depended on the banana production organization but were also constrained by Company policies, including supervisory staff who implemented their interpretation of Company policies, and a state apparatus that sometimes aided the Company.³⁸ The *patronas* existed within a *campo* hierarchy

³⁶ The Standard Fruit Company had *barracones* in certain *campos*, such as Coyoles Central, Agua Buena, and Palo Verde at the time. For the most part, in this region workers lived in what were called *champerías*, huts made of mud and *manaca* palm thatched roofs. The location of the current town of El Carril was the site of a worker *champería* at the time of the 1954 strike. Casta Figueroa Portillo, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

³⁷ *Ibid.*; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, 2006.

³⁸ Company supervisors, for instance, tended to only hire men in the *fincas*, though whether this was an official or simply unspoken policy is unclear. There is no evidence of an official company policy that excluded women from the formal work in the *fincas*. Women in the company offices needed to be bilingual secretaries, thereby excluding working class women with scant educational resources. Teresina Rossi Matamoros, interview by author, Tegucigalpa, December 21, 2006.

created by the Company for the purpose of efficient and unhindered production of bananas, but maintained and shaped by all those who lived and participated in it, including workers, vendors, Company supervisors, and local government police.

Patronas undoubtedly held a position of power and commanded respect among workers in the North Coast *fincas*. Because their work was of an entrepreneurial nature (as was that of other vendors), they had a high degree of autonomy. They had freedom to create their own menus and meal schedules and managed their own kitchens. They negotiated relationships with clients and wielded more bargaining power than the workers; ultimately, the *patrona* chose which *comensales* would receive her services and rejected others at her sole prerogative.³⁹

Typically, men would come to the *patrona*'s kitchen and ask to be allowed to come and eat there: “¿*Patrona me va a dar la comida? ¿Cuánto va a costar al mes?*” (*Patrona will you feed me? How much will you charge a month?*).⁴⁰ The *patrona* would then explain that if they wanted full portions it would cost full price (about thirty to forty lempiras a month); if they wanted the meals to be less expensive (about fifteen lempiras a month), arrangements could be made to serve smaller portions and less meat.⁴¹ Meal choices were stratified, depending on what the worker could afford, and food choices were negotiated between workers and *patronas*.⁴² Workers opted for the

³⁹ In some cases, there may only have been one *patrona*'s establishment in the area, or the *patrona* may have been the wife of a supervisor, a *contratista* or *mandador*. These circumstances limited workers' and *patronas*' choices, and would become a subject of workers' strike demands later.

⁴⁰ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006. (Author's translation).

⁴¹ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.; Adela Chávez, interview by author, La Lima Nueva, Cortés, 2006.

⁴² Some workers would ask for a reduced priced meal plan, which meant there was less meat and more beans and tortillas. Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006; Edmundo Williams, interview by author, Campo Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, August 7, 2004; Francisco

regular meal plan or paid extra for a better plan with more meat (beef or pork) or larger portions. The workers' needs, wages and work position determined the quality and quantity of food. For instance, '*poiseros*'⁴³ would leave the earliest in the morning and return earlier in the day than other workers because this was an entry-level position and grueling work. *Poiseros* earned less than some of the other man; they generally paid a bit less for their meals. The agreement at the *comedor* was verbal and flexible, so if either the worker or the *patrona* wanted to terminate the agreement they could release each other. Workers could go to the *patrona* and say "*Patroncita ya le voy a cancelar, ya no voy a comer mas.*" (*Patrona* I will cancel my debt now).⁴⁴ The banana worker could go to another kitchen if the food was not to his liking. Many workers made choices based on money, the taste of the food and the environment created in the kitchen. In the larger banana camps, there were more choices for the banana worker. In smaller ones, choice was limited and workers were happy to be accepted and served at any *comedor*.

For the most part, the workers respected the *patronas* in the *campos* and saw them as an integral part of the *fincas*. One subtle indicator of this respect lies in the word "*patrona*," the name by which the workers' consistently referred to the women who provided for them. Although clearly linked to the word *patron* (boss), *patrona* seems to say less about the woman's connection to the boss than about her position as a respected steward of the worker's sustenance and survival. In the Honduran local popular lingo, the term commonly used to describe the work and position of the

Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006; José Sanchez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, November 5, 2006.

⁴³ *Poisero* is another term to refer to *venenero*, or pesticide sprayer.

⁴⁴ "*Patroncita* I am going to pay you. I will no longer be eating here" Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

patronas was “*cuidar gente o cuidar hombres,*” literally “to take care of people or take care of men.” But the *finca* worker always referred to her as *patrona*. This indicated both the workers’ respect for her position and an acknowledgement of her power over workers’ lives, labor, and housing quarters. Workers understood her power in her kitchen and her importance in supporting their success in laboring in the *fincas*. The use of the term *patrona* distanced her role from the prescribed gender role of taking care of men’s needs.

A Middle Plane of Power

The *patronas*’ position was not, however, an uncontested power within the *fincas*. In fact, *patronas* occupied a unique position at the intersection point of privilege, power, access, and subordination. I suggest the term ‘middle plane’ to describe the position and relationships held by *patronas*, which were fluid and negotiated, at times contradictory and by turns supportive and oppositional to Company and workers’ interests. *Patronas* inhabited a space that straddled the world of the worker and the Company; the positions of supervisor and worker; the status of business owner and laborer, boss and worker; and traditional and unconventional gender roles. They also experienced complicated relationships and social positioning that were marked simultaneously by freedom and dependence on both workers and the Company; power and vulnerability to the changes in the labor market; and notably, personal closeness and solidarity with workers along with businesslike constraints of the Company hierarchy. *Patronas* inhabited this dynamic, sometimes contradictory, ‘middle plane’ of power, which was actually crucial to the smooth functioning of work on the banana *finca*.

Contact with workers

Patronas held this unique position in the *finca* in part because of their closeness to the workers. They linked the work in the *fincas* to the activities of the living quarters. Doing business in public male spaces gave the *patronas* and female traveling/street vendors privileged knowledge of the laborers' lives, their long hours, and their working conditions. Olympia Figueroa, a woman who dedicated her entire life to cooking and selling food, first started as an *ayudanta* for a *patrona* who had many *comensales* that were "*poiseros*," men who sprayed the fruit with pesticides and very often became ill in the course of their work.⁴⁵ Cooking for the men each day allowed Figueroa to understand the nature of the work and its effects on the workers:

*Ya le digo [me levantaba] a las 3 de la mañana a hacer aquellas tortillas [de harina], ellos se llevaban sus dos tortillas, solamente se tomaban un plato del osmíl y una taza de café. No más. Y después iban con su tortilla como es que le digo ya muchos de ellos se enfermaron porque no se ponían nada de defensa para el veneno. Entonces se enfermaban de los pulmones. El peligro de ellos era que cuando lo andaban echando...regando...era los que le[s] hacían daño...porque cuando ellos andaban [regando] les caía encima...está haciendo brisa, se les venía para encima a ellos mismos.*⁴⁶

[I tell you I used to get up at three in the morning to make flour tortillas. They would take two tortillas, and they would drink their oatmeal and a cup of coffee. That's it. Then they'd leave with their tortilla, and as I tell you many of them got sick because they didn't have protection from the

⁴⁵ For gender mixing in the streets as a result of industrialization see Susie S. Porter, *Working Women in Mexico City: Public Discourses and Material Conditions, 1879-1931* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 15.

⁴⁶ *Poiseros* and *veneros* (also known as *pericos* in Costa Arriba) were work positions where men sprayed plants with the Bordeaux pesticide to prevent Sigatoka disease. The solutions were of a blue green color. Workers would spray upwards and more often than not spray particles would land on top of their face, chest, and clothing. They would come out from work doused in blue green spray. Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.; Edmundo Williams, interview by author, Campo Indiana, La Lima, Cortés, August 7, 2004; Juan Bautista Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, July 25, 2004.; Soluri, *Banana Cultures Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States*, 197-200.

pesticide. Their lungs would get sick. The danger for them was when they were spraying [the pesticide] this is what got harmed them, when they were spraying it would fall on them, with the wind it would fall on them.]

Patronas' livelihoods were dependent on their engagement with the banana workers on a regular basis. A *patrona's* daily business interactions constituted what was perhaps the most contact an unaccompanied worker had with a woman in the *campos*. Food was sustenance and survival, but it also guaranteed human connection in desolate work areas where one's life and world were determined by the production schedule of getting bananas from the trunk to the ports. At the same time, their *work* brought them into contact with the workers' lives and complaints, and their sympathies arose from this contact. The *patronas* saw firsthand the harshness of work in the *finca*, the conditions of workers after they got off work and the challenges they faced in the mornings.

Patronas' labor as cooks was crucial to workers' ability to get to work on time and sustain long hours. *Patronas* understood workers' need for money and shorter hours. They also shared workers' living conditions. Even when they were not working, *finca* workers engaged frequently with *patronas*, as many *patronas* sold liquor to workers at lower prices than the Company commissary. For the most part, the relationships between workers and *patronas* were amicable and respectful, even mutually supportive (as we see during the strike). This was unlike the relationship between workers and bosses.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Sylvia Robleda, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, July 4, 2004; Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006; Adela Chávez, interview by author, La Lima Nueva, Cortés, February 6, 2006; María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2006; Casta Figueroa Portillo, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

Patronas were seen by workers as providers, allies and witnesses to their lives, but at times, the relationships were more complex, as in the case of María Angela Cardona, an *ayudanta*, street-food vendor, and self-taught seamstress who worked as a *patrona* for a *contratista* early in her life. She came into this position through her mother, who had been a washerwoman and food vendor throughout María Angela's childhood and early adulthood. She recounts an incident that reveals different power dynamics at play in *patronas'* spheres. Mara Angela Cardona was unfairly treated by a worker, and her boss stepped in and sided with her and not the worker :

*Un día peleó uno [un trabajador] conmigo porque me dijo: 'Angelita mándeme café a la finca, calentito.' Pero las tazas no ajustaron para darles de un tiempo a todos y se enoja por eso. Me dijo vieja hija de tantas y yo con 22 años que ni los había ajustados. 'Dile al patrón' y [el patrón] dijo '¿Que pasa aquí?' [otro trabajador le dice] 'Que está peleando fulano con la trabajadora.' 'A la porra con el trabajador dijo [el patrón]. Porque cocineras no se hallaban, hallar una cocinera era duro, valía más una trabajadora que un hombre porque trabajadores eran montones y trabajadoras que cocían [sic] no fácil la hallaba.'*⁴⁸
[One day a worker fought with me. He told me, "Angelita, send me hot coffee to the finca." But we didn't have enough coffee to give to all [the workers] at the same time and he got mad. He insulted me and since I was not even 22 at the time...'tell the boss' he demanded. The boss asked, 'What's going on here?' Another worker told him, "This guy's fighting with the cook." The boss said, "To hell with that worker." He said this because at that time you couldn't find a cook. Finding a cook was hard—a cook was more valuable than a man was because there were plenty of workers and cooks were not easy to find.]

This incident highlights at once a *patronas'* power over a worker, her dependent relationship on a supervisor of the Company, and her perceived subordinate role as labor that provides value for the Company. Cardona's position was situated in between

⁴⁸ María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

the worker, the client, and the owner of the kitchen, the supervisor. Her unique set of skills and the overwhelming need for them in the *campos* made her an important worker in the *comedor* (eating establishment). Cardona still fell under the paternalism of the supervisor who exerted his authority and wanted to make sure his workforce was ready and available. Supervisors had a clear and active interest in making sure the *comedores* ran smoothly.

Patronas, for the most part, enjoyed freedom from Company supervision. They determined for themselves the terms of their work lives and independently negotiated relationships with and among the men, workers, *mandadores*, *capitanes* and *cabos de comisariato*.⁴⁹ Yet for all the freedom afforded them in their work relationships, they lived with a fundamental dependence on the banana company's organization of the *finca* work, on the workers themselves, the paying *comensales*, and ultimately the Companies' pay. As with nearly everything else in the North Coast, the *patronas* were economically tied to the *bananeras*—as were other women workers, *ayudantas*, young women family members, *cuques* and other food vendors, who were subordinates of the *patronas*.

This financial dependence of the *patronas*, and the power of *patronas* over workers in negotiations about the *patronas'* services, can also be viewed as an extension of the hegemonic rule of the Company over the workers and their life in the North Coast. This extension of the Company's power was even more pronounced in the common situation where *patronas* were the wives of supervisors, usually *capitanes de finca*, *mandadores*, or *jefes/capitanes de cuadrilla*.⁵⁰ All of these were supervisory

⁴⁹ *Cabos de comisariato* were local police officers.

⁵⁰ Although many *patronas* were the bosses' wives, as was common in the remotest regions, others were not related to the bosses. These women established their own kitchens outside of any kinship relationship.

figures—but they were not the wives of the higher ranking bosses, the North American employees or elite Hondurans known as *trabajadores de confianza* (trusted company employees).⁵¹ The banana workers that were under these supervisors often felt coerced into contracting services with the wives of their supervisors. Thus the money they earned went right back to the boss via the *comedores* operated by the boss's wife. Most of the women interviewed for this project were not married to supervisors, but they identified this as a common circumstance. They seem to acknowledge the contradiction of this role, but the overriding narrative about the *patronas* is their critical role in providing for workers' needs—not their compromised position as supervisors' wives.⁵² The *patronas*' position in the middle plane perhaps unwittingly included a role as proxy for power for the Companies.

The work performed by *patronas* and traveling/street-food vendors was of an entrepreneurial nature. Their earnings were in some cases better than their husbands' earnings. Being a *patrona* offered more financial security than being married to a banana worker, working in a *campesino* economy, or working in the Company towns of La Lima, El Progreso, or La Ceiba. The *patronas* may have inadvertently carved out a space for women workers within the banana export economy. They created an industry of women's work in and around cooking and purveying food and liquor that supported the needs of the United Fruit Company and Standard Fruit Company. The system helped create space and opportunity for other women who sold food from their kitchens

Patronas who were not married to the boss or were simply hired by the boss had a more complicated hierarchical role in the *finca*—one that was not always predetermined by men—and independence in their earnings and labor.

⁵¹ *Mandador* is an overseer; a *capitán de finca* is a boss for the entire planning area whose rank is above that of the *mandador* and contract workers. María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

⁵² Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

or came to sell their wares in the public areas of the living quarters on paydays.⁵³ Theirs was an important and innovative role as a small but important entrepreneurial class, and presented new opportunities for women workers in the North Coast economy at the time.

Patronas: Linchpin of the Informal Economy of Food in the Campos Bananeros

These women workers were essential to the formal work of the banana industry and influenced processes of working-class formation in the region. Ultimately, the industry of informal women's work in and around cooking and selling food and liquor sustained and subsidized the male *finca* workers of the *bananeras*. Their unique position is a critical and previously unexplored linchpin in the *bananera* economy that facilitated the operations of the Company, the Company bosses and policies and the lives and work of the male *finca* workers.

The role played by *patronas* and *campeña* food vendors during the period from 1944 to 1954 must be viewed against a backdrop of the *bananera* economy with a few notable features.⁵⁴ First, the banana companies introduced a wage labor system in the North Coast of Honduras more similar to that employed in factories than typical of the labor systems used in rural *fincas*. The banana companies made technological advancements in both machinery and some forms of work organization, as well as

⁵³ It is important to note that *patronas* held many positions in the process of becoming heads of their own kitchens, many were ambulatory vendors and/or may have laundered and worked as maids in nearby company towns before and sometimes after becoming *patronas* of the kitchen. Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

⁵⁴ *Campeñas* refers to women who lived and worked in *campos bananeros* who may have been wives, sisters, daughters, or merely workers in the kitchens. This was a term used by most out-of-towners to refer to these women workers but also a term of self-identification used by the women themselves. The *campeña* identity was very important to women and men in the *campos* as a form of community and contributed to the construction of the national identity of workers.

botanical plant technology. In this scenario, workers' understanding of and participation in labor transformed the previous *campesino* practices and rural economy rooted in nineteenth century notions of work to a twentieth century capitalist wage economy.⁵⁵ Second, the banana company's organization and policies, coupled with demands of the agro-export economy, challenged notions of Honduran worker identity. From an agricultural *campesino* economy with independent farm laborers, the dominant worker identity became that of wage laborer in the transnational-owned *fincas*. The labor opportunities created by the companies' needs and the common perception of the banana regions as a place of ample and well-paid employment opportunities caused workers to flock to the North Coast. The system of work created by the Company, including the peculiarities of labor contracting, in turn, created the conditions conducive to the formation of an informal economy that sustained and supported the work of the men who found entry into the Company ranks. This informal economy, regulated by neither the Company nor the state, existed in a middle area of power determined by the needs and work flows of the Company and worker availability. *Campeña* vendors and *patronas* formed the crux of this informal economy and proliferated into other sectors of the country, including state road construction projects in 1955 and 1956.⁵⁶ Although the *patronas* did not have a formally sanctioned role in the projects, and instead worked alongside them, their role was key to the survival of workers and therefore the projects. The work of preparing meals, seen as a private household duty for women of the time,

⁵⁵ Kublock, Thomas M. *Contested Communities Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Copper Mine, 1904-1951*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998, 6 ; See also: Topik, Steven C. and Wells, Allen. "Introduction: Latin America's Reponse to International Market during the Export Boom." In *The Second Conquest of Latin America Coffee, Henequen, and Oil during the Export Boom, 1850-1930*, edited by Steven C. and Wells Topik, Allen, 1 -36. Austin: University of Texas Press, Austin, 1998.

⁵⁶ Informe del Secretario de Fomento, Agricultura y Trabajo, 1944-1945 to 1954-1955, Microfilm MF13544, Center for Research Libraries.

became in the banana industry, and later during road construction and maintenance projects, a form of work for women that was acceptable and permissible to the banana companies and the state. Third, this informal employment, along with that of washerwomen and domestic work, existed outside of the purview of debates about women's proper place or notions of morality to which working women may have been subjected during this period in the towns, cities, and factories of Honduras and other Latin American countries.⁵⁷ It was not just earning a profit for providing meals that made *patronas* and other informal women workers of the banana fields unique, but also their unregulated existence within the Company and the fact that they often had the most direct contact with the most productive sector of the banana industry, the *finca* workers. The *patronas* created a powerful role for themselves in the industry as an important workforce of the in-between spaces and relationships of the recognized players that made the industry work.

The importance of the informal economy

The role of the *patronas* was paradoxical in that their lives demonstrated simultaneously a striking degree of autonomy from and a fairly complete dependence on the formal work of men and the *bananeras*. The work in the *comedores* afforded women independence and autonomy in their dealings with men. At the same time, their livelihood was completely dependent on male workers' ability to earn a living wage and continue in the employment of the Company. The *patronas'* relationship with the

⁵⁷ Suffragist struggles were taking place in Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and in the North Coast cities of El Progreso and La Ceiba; they took place via public debates, newsletters and legislative debates to which working class women were not privy. While women suffragists engaged with anti-imperialist causes around the mining towns near Tegucigalpa, very few engaged the *patronas* or *campesina* women. Villars, *Para la Casa Más que Para el Mundo: Sufragismo y Feminismo en la Historia de Honduras*, 232-242 and 305-414.

banana companies was similarly contradictory. They existed in a space unregulated by the Company and were not recognized as a formal part of *finca* operations, but the *patronas*' lives and livelihood were inexorably connected to the *bananeras*, and it could be argued that the *bananeras* were also reliant on the *patronas*.

Further, this analysis submits that the Companies were aware and accepting of the *patronas*' role. Though they did not attempt to regulate the *patronas*, the Company permitted and even condoned the practice. The Company did not acknowledge this work as formal work, despite the dependence of their production on this system. In doing so, whether intentionally or incidentally, the Company reified established gender roles. It benefitted from a system of work that relied on the existing social order and traditional gender roles, which placed working class women in the kitchen as a duty, providing domestic labor unremunerated by the Company.

The *patronas* and traveling/street vendors existed among a diverse and multilayered system of local merchants and the Company commissary, all profiting from the *campeños* labor and the banana industry. Barahona notes that in the North Coast of Honduras, during the first quarter of the 20th century, the banana companies' commissaries or Company stores supplied workers with wares and foodstuffs, and the workers, in turn, paid in dollars, pesos (lempiras), and sometimes with pay tickets (*bonos*).⁵⁸ During this period local stores and vendors, many of Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese descent, successfully competed with the Company commissary.⁵⁹ *Turcos*, as merchants of Arab descent were called in the North Coast, were forced to shut their

⁵⁸ Marvin Barahona. *La Hegemonia de los Estados Unidos en Honduras (1907-1932)* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Centro de Documentacion de Honduras, 1989), 135-136.

⁵⁹ Ibid; Nancie L. González, *Dollar, Dove, and Eagle One Hundred Years of Palestinian Migration to Honduras* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), 70.

imports down, threatening their livelihoods. The Company, along with Honduran anti-immigrant nativism fervor during the first half of the twentieth century, aimed at controlling Arab immigrants, Jamaicans and others. The Honduran government's anti-immigrant policies affected the development of a diverse commercial middle sector in this region, limited to those that could invest in dollars.⁶⁰ The immigrant policies, however, did not curtail the development of a thriving informal economy around food vending and liquor.

By the later 1940s and early 1950s, the Company commissary was still the main supplier of goods, such as beef, pork and milk.⁶¹ The meat and other goods that the *patronas* and family members of Company workers used for food or vending were distributed once a week.⁶² The meat was dispensed via a butcher train. *Patronas* benefited from this weekly service, stocking up for the week.⁶³ If the *patrona* was partnered with a worker or had a son that was a worker it meant that she was allowed to

⁶⁰ Marvin Barahona, *Evolución Histórica de la Identidad Nacional* (Tegucigalpa: Editorial Guaymuras, 2002); Dario Euraque, "The Threat of Blackness to the Mestizo Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Honduran Banana Economy, 1920s-1930s," in *Banana Wars Power Production and History in the Americas*, ed. Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); González, *Dollar, Dove, and Eagle One Hundred Years of Palestinian Migration to Honduras*, 90.

⁶¹ All *patronas* and workers recall getting beef, pork and milk from the company during this period. Their pay was deducted a certain amount for the beef. Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006; Jovita Recarte, interview by author, Los Angeles, California, October 14, 2007.; Marina Argueta, interview by author, Los Angeles, California, 2007.; Adela Chávez, interview by author, La Lima Nueva, Cortés, February 6, 2006.; Ricarda Fernanda Sabillon, interview by author, Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, Casta Figueroa Portillo, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.; Candida Garay, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 6, 2006; Lidia Aurora Lezama, interview by author, Campo Mucula, El Progreso, Yoro, April 9, 2006.; María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2006.; Sylvia Robleda, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, July 4, 2004.

⁶² Adela Chávez, interview by author, La Lima Nueva, Cortés, February 6, 2006.; Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

⁶³ This depended on the location of the camp, the further removed the camp was from the Company towns of La Lima, El Progreso, La Ceiba or Olanchito, the more important the delivery of milk and meat was. If they lived closer to the Company towns, *patronas* would go into town and purchase from local merchants.

obtain milk and meat from this butcher train. A train worker recorded the amount dispensed and the worker's account number and name; payment for the goods was deducted from workers' accounts by the timekeepers at the time of their pay.⁶⁴

The goods, however, could also be obtained from Honduran stores (*almacenes*) in bulk at better prices and on credit.⁶⁵ *Mujeres que cuidaban hombres* and housewives would take the local train once a week to shop for cheaper goods in the towns of La Lima and El Progreso (for Tela Railroad Company workers) and La Ceiba and Olanchito (for Standard Fruit workers). This method was more convenient for *patronas* who often paid their bill and did not resort to credit until the strike broke out in 1954. *Patronas'* and workers' business in general was enough to make the local merchants and traveling vendors significant competition to the Company commissaries. In El Carril, a community very close to Coyoles Central and nearby several *fincas*, traveling vendors attempted to build a small marketplace, constructing *puestos*, or wooden stalls.⁶⁶ This marketplace was successful until it burned down in 1954 under mysterious circumstances. Vendors sustained serious losses and the marketplace was not rebuilt, at least not with the original vendors.⁶⁷ Although the mystery of the fire was never solved,

⁶⁴Francisco Portillo, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 6, 2006.; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Oscar Rodríguez Pagoada, interview by author, Zona Americana, La Lima, Cortés, September 2, 2006.

⁶⁵ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.; Jovita Recarte, interview by author, Los Angeles, California, October 14, 2007; Marina Argueta, interview by author, Los Angeles, California, 2007; Adela Chávez, interview by author, La Lima Nueva, Cortés, February 6, 2006.; Ricarda Fernanda Sabillon, interview by author, Nuevo San Juan, La Lima, Cortés, May 5, 2006; Casta Figueroa Portillo, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.; Candida Garay, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 6, 2006; Lidia Aurora Lezama, interview by author, Campo Mucula, El Progreso, Yoro, April 9, 2006; María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2006.; Sylvia Robleda, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, July 4, 2004.

⁶⁶ José Eulalio Oliva, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 10, 2006; Lucila Goodlitt, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 10, 2010.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

the threat the marketplace posed to Company commissaries, local Olanchito merchants, and businesses that relied on *campeños* money every payday may not be a coincidence.

The Company system of provision delivery worked for *patronas* and their *comedores* without requiring them to buy only from the Company commissary. Other traveling food vendors existed within the borders and entry points to the *campos*. These vendors also sent their sons and daughters to sell food on paydays and to sell outside of the brothels and saloons. The vendors, mostly women, found ways to sell food and survive the other days, including by the sale of alcohol.⁶⁸ The *patronas'* role in the use and sale of alcohol is taken up later in the chapter.

Self-identity as workers

Women, however, clearly identified as workers—a vital part of the *bananera* system and the community in the *campos*. The conventional view of the division of labor of the time classified women's work as domestic and secondary to men's work; men's work was considered productive and essential to the banana economy. Yet women's lives and work as informal workers supported and even subsidized workers of the Tela Railroad Company and Standard Fruit Company. Women clearly viewed their work as coexisting with the men's work. It was clear to *patronas* and also traveling/street vendors that their labor was needed wherever there were male workers in this big banana economy and that their labor should be remunerated. Men, in turn, understood the work of the *patronas* and *vendedoras* as a service that allowed them to attend to the work of the banana fields.⁶⁹ Women's testimonies show an understanding

⁶⁸ María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

⁶⁹ Dana Frank found that Seattle working class women involved in the union movement formed cooperatives and supported the movement as wives and workers; Similarly documented by Maurine

of themselves as workers and their work as equally important to the work of men. Casta Figueroa saw herself as a worker:

*Sí [me consideraba trabajadora] en ese entonces sino trabajaba no comía, ni comían sus hijos. Tenía que trabajar. En el día yo andaba vendiendo, y en la tarde ya venía con el montón de yuca; 19 libras de yuca era un lempira. Entonces yo cocinaba esas raciones y hay volvía [de noche] a las cantinas a vender.*⁷⁰

[Yes, [I considered myself a worker]. Back then if you didn't work you didn't eat, and neither did your kids. I had to work. By day I would sell and in the afternoon I would come with all that cassava; 19 pounds of cassava was one lempira. Then I'd cook the rations and then return to the cantinas [at nights] to sell.]

Women in the banana fincas expressed their orientation as workers as they participated later in union solidarity. *Patronas* saw themselves as part of the striking body of workers during the 1954 strike. Casta Figueroa supported the strike because "workers wanted more work and wanted to raise their wages."⁷¹ María Antonia Perla accompanied her partner in strike activities as well, despite not wanting to be with him in the relationship.⁷²

Daniel Madrid Guevara recalls that his partner at the time, a *patrona*, also joined the strike and helped to organize the community kitchens:

Wiener Greenwald: 'working class members and as women...the Seattle women used the term house workers interchangeably with housewives, emphasizing the centrality of work in housewifery.' Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 8; Maurine Wiener Greenwald, "Working Class Feminism and the Family Wage Ideal: The Seattle Debate on Married Women's Right to Work, 1914-1920," *Journal of American History* 76, no. 1 (1989) : 132.

⁷⁰ Casta Figueroa Portillo, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

⁷¹ Casta Figueroa Portillo, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

⁷² María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2006.

*Reunió a todas las mujeres y las mismas mujeres la pusieron como presidenta del comité de comida. Ella era la que ordenaba la comida, ella recibía todo y entregaba todo a las cocineras.*⁷³

[She gathered all the women together and the same women elected her as president of the committee in charge of food. She was the one who ordered the food. She received everything and turned it over to the cooks.]

They also described their conscious reproduction of women workers' roles. They shared with their children, primarily their daughters, what Olympia Figueroa says was "the only thing we knew how to do...to earn a living."⁷⁴ They passed on knowledge of how to cook, iron, clean, and sew—seemingly domestic jobs that in the North Coast could earn them money. Women valued this sharing with their daughters, who also learned and reproduced responses to power relationships in the *campos bananeros*. Although women's agency is not readily apparent and may not be immediately recognized as *feminist*, this may be seen as a reproduction of a type of working class feminism.

Patrona's illicit activities: Aguardiente Clandestino

A striking example of *patronas'* and other women's transgression of Company policies is their participation in the illicit sale of alcohol. This enterprise, though dangerous, would bring the *patrona* substantial profit in the *campos bananeros*, since liquor that was not sold by the Company was outlawed. While the Company employees and the Tegucigalpa elite were enjoying "whisky, gin, brandy, wine and liquors" and other imported goods,⁷⁵ it was the *aguardiente* and homemade *cuzusa*, that workers

⁷³ Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006.

⁷⁴ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

⁷⁵ Secretaría de Fomento, Agricultura y Trabajo, "Índice en orden numérico de Marcas de Fabrica Registradas," Informe de Gobierno, 1942-43. Microfilm MF134544. Center for Research Libraries, 145.

preferred and were most acquainted with. It was one of the main forms of diversion and escape for workers after their long, grueling work hours. The Company policy, which coincided with Honduran government policies, was that only Honduran beer and *aguardiente* could be consumed in the confines of the Company territory. Sales of *aguardiente* brought in from nearby towns were illegal and penalized by the *cabos de comisariato*.

Patronas often crossed lines sometimes selling *aguardiente* at cheaper prices than the commissary or a locally produced *cuzusa* that was prohibited by the Company and by the local authorities. *Cuzusa* was obtained secretly and sold secretly.⁷⁶ Workers knew to come by the back of the kitchen and ask for the liquor. Women admit to selling liquor for practical reasons; they expressed little value for the Company's prohibitions on moral or legal principle. *Cuzusa* and *aguardiente* sales were more profitable in a shorter period of time than food selling and worth the risk. Workers preferred local sellers because buying from them was less expensive and less regulated than at the *comisariato*—where everyone could see and monitor drunken behavior. In this way, *cuzusa* and alcohol vendors, *patronas* and *estanco* (vendor stand) owners alike, crossed lines and subverted the *comisarios*' control over sales.⁷⁷

Alcohol was also blamed for the violence in the *campos*. Knife and gun brawls were common. Men drinking and then going home drunk added a dynamic to life at

⁷⁶ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006; Adela Chávez, interview by author, La Lima Nueva, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

⁷⁷ There is much local lore about both special drinks sold clandestinely and the vendors that sold them, such is the case of the traveling vendor *El Choco Sabillón* who ingeniously injected *aguardiente* into the coconut, disguising that he was selling liquor. Talavera Sosa, "'El Choco' Sabillón, gran inventor del 'Coco-Loco,'" *Revista Nocturnal*, 2004.

home and with family.⁷⁸ Alcohol consumption and abuse may have been deemed private, but public responses to this activity challenge the assumption that alcohol was part of a man's world only. Socially, alcohol was a form of diversion, escape and even treatment. For instance, men preferred the *cuzusa* over *aguardiente* because 'it got them drunk faster' and was cheaper. They drank it after work and during weekends. Alcohol vendors, both men and women, were also dependent on alcohol to survive day to day. This dependence maintained a system of power, where the Company held ultimate authority to police sales and vending via *cabos de comisariato* (local police) and ultimately controlled the consumption by workers, whether legal or not. The Company's main priority was to control productivity levels of the most important sector of the whole enterprise of banana production.

Saloons and brothels made alcohol consumption an important ritual. The big draw for workers was not always the *meretrices* (women sex workers, coerced and not) but the alcohol, beer and *aguardiente*. When the men got drunk, both the saloon owners and informal workers benefited from their money. Food vendors also made money selling to drinking men, and the brothels and clubs made money from the customer's consumption of alcohol and sex. When the brothels were eliminated near Coyoles Central in the 1970s, the ambulant vendors suffered great financial losses.

⁷⁸ María Angela Cardona, interview by author, August 13, 2006; María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2006; Sylvia Robleda, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, July 4, 2004.

Transgression

The resonance of the notion of working class feminism relies in part on the understanding of the *patronas*' role as a transgression of both formal Company policies and societal norms of the time.⁷⁹ Levenson-Estrada argues in her essay "*The Loneliness of Working Class Feminism*" for the concept of working class feminism, which exists despite lacking the title, characteristics, or similar preoccupations of middle class women's movements in more industrialized countries. Levenson-Estrada states that "A critical consciousness about class needs a critical consciousness about gender, and vice versa."⁸⁰ First, the *patronas*' very existence as a critical part of the banana export economy operations, unrecognized and unacknowledged by the Company, transgressed the planned systems and policies of the Company. The establishment of the informal food provision economy—necessary for women's survival and livelihood—without which the formal banana export economy would have failed, is a dramatic and revolutionary repositioning of gender and labor roles, and even a restructuring of work and operations. Moreover, *patronas* transgressed normative gender and women's roles, and perhaps notions of middle-class femininity.⁸¹ By

⁷⁹ "Working Class Feminism" is borrowed from critical feminists who have studied working class women in the United States. See: Frank, *Purchasing Power Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* ; Greenwald, "Working Class Feminism and the Family Wage Ideal: The Seattle Debate on Married Women's Right to Work, 1914-1920," ; Deborah Levenson-Estrada, "The Loneliness of Working-Class Feminism: Women in the 'Male World' of Labor Unions, Guatemala City, 1970s," in *The Gendered World of Latin American Women Workers from the Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box*, ed. John D. French and Daniel James (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997) .

⁸⁰ Her preoccupation arises out of the Marxist Left movements in Guatemala; while these movements pushed the analysis toward a more critical evaluation of class, gender was left in the back burner, as a later goal. She denies a "pigeonholing of women's activism into maternal or womanist politics." This sort of "ghettoizing," in Joan Scott's words, is actually, where the history of women and men's relations sits within the history of pre agrarian reform Honduras. Levenson-Estrada, "The Loneliness of Working-Class Feminism: Women in the 'Male World' of Labor Unions, Guatemala City, 1970s," 220.

⁸¹ Normative women's roles at the time emphasized austerity, modesty and propriety. The lives and daily survival of the *patronas* made these notions somewhat obsolete in the North Coast. While suffragists

creating remunerable labor for women from what was perceived a household duty, *patronas* transgressed expected gender roles—both as a part of the formal economy and in relation to workers—and opened up previously inconceivable opportunities for women on the North Coast.

Their own brand of working class feminism

The *patronas* embodied a feminism on the North Coast that diverged from the nature of the suffragist, middle-class feminist movement that was prominent in Honduran towns at the time. Elite struggles for suffrage did not intimately affect these workers' lives, many of whom may have had limited reading and writing skills and lacked time to engage. *Patronas* and ambulatory vendors were aware of national political debates, including women's suffrage. They describe participation in political party elections and worker issues and support of the political parties of their husbands or family members. But *patronas* and food vendors were not organized in cooperatives nor did they share a common political agenda or interact with suffragists of the period. Still, as working women, they fundamentally impacted the work of the banana plantations and the construction of the working class.

The *patronas*' participation in the strike may be seen as their ultimate transgression of Company policies and the normative gender roles ascribed to them.

organized anti-alcohol leagues in nearby San Pedro Sula, some of the *patronas* sold *aguardiente* (alcohol) illegally and at cheaper prices than the company commissary in La Lima. Others also sold food (complete meal portions) as ambulant vendors outside of brothels in El Carril, near Coyoles Central. Women involved in the suffrage movement organized a campaign "pro moral cleansing of society" to end alcohol consumption in 1930. This campaign was founded in Tegucigalpa and promptly spread to other parts of the country; it had the support of the president at the time, Vicente Mejia Colindres. Villars, *Para la Casa Más que Para el Mundo: Sufragismo y Feminismo en la Historia de Honduras*, 251-256; Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006 ; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

Their unique position made *patronas* key stakeholders in the complex events leading up to the Great Banana Strike of 1954, from the organizing to the actual strike itself. Their dependence on the *bananeras* meant that *patronas* stood much to lose when the workers went on strike or when there were work stoppages or Company layoffs. Yet more often than not, *patronas* sided with workers during work stoppages and the Strike of 1954, and when workers challenged company rules. Their indirect relationship with the Company gave them the freedom and opportunity to challenge the Company and support the workers.

As supporters, *patronas* subsidized the strike by providing food--full meals or snacks--on credit to striking workers or simply by working without wages during the labor strike.⁸² *Patronas* asked for compensation for their work when workers still had money during the strike. They also gave cooked meals on credit to workers, especially toward the end of the strike when food donations were scarce. *Patronas* hoped that once the strike was resolved they would be compensated, but many *patronas* never regained this money nor were paid after workers resumed work. The company did not pay total time out of work and many workers decided to go to other *fincas* to try their luck. Many women saw profits earlier in the strike, selling food at the strike center of the Tela Railroad Company workers in Lima. Standard Fruit workers and women food vendors had a separate experience since that strike only lasted 11 days (compared to the 69 days of the Tela Railroad Company strike in Costa Abajo).⁸³

Patronas, vendedoras ambulantes, and vendedoras con puestos continued to sell food and subsidized the strike, which broke out in late April of 1954 in the Tela

⁸² Adela Chávez, interview by author, La Lima Nueva, Cortés, February 6, 2006; Lucila Goodlitt, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 10, 2006.

⁸³ Adela Chávez, interview by author, La Lima Nueva, Cortés, February 6, 2006.

Railroad Company banana regions. The strike centers had a kitchen staffed by women cooks, family members and volunteers, but *patronas* from nearby areas and ambulatory vendors also sold food outside of the strike center. Workers preferred the option of eating outside of the strike center earlier during the strike when the workers still had money and options. As food became scarce in the strike center, the workers remember being served boiled green bananas with beans on a banana leaf for three meals a day. Soon business for women ambulatory vendors and *patronas* near the strike centers increased. The workers paid until money ran out. Traveling/street vendors struggled differently; they could not provide credit and their businesses suffered.

The Tela Railroad Company workers congregating at the *campo* Chula Vista strike center in La Lima were greatly affected by food shortage towards the end of the strike because the initial donations began to run out as the Company continued to refuse to negotiate fairly. The losses put women in debt. Adela Sanchez, an *ayudanta*, would get up at two in the morning, leave her sons asleep at home alone, and go to Chula Vista with her sister, a *patrona*, to sell coffee and other food to strikers.

Es que al principio había dinero tenían dinero todos los trabajadores, compraban. Ya después ya no tenían dinero para la comida y fueron debiendo la comida. A la hermana mía muchos no les pagaron más bien ella quedo enjaranada con la gente que le dio los productos para trabajar.⁸⁴

[In the beginning there was money, all the workers had money, they [workers] would buy. After they did not have any money left to buy food they began to owe for the food. My sister had many that did not pay her and instead she was indebted to the people who gave her the product on credit.]

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Later they would ask for credit (*de fiado*), because the strike was draining provisions the strikers obtained during the initial stages.⁸⁵ Adela Sánchez' sister gave food on credit. At the end of the strike, the workers only received forty lempiras as compensation for the 69 days they were on strike. Although there were collective kitchens in the strike centers, like the ones Silvia Robleda participated in, there were working women like Sánchez's sister who used her *comedor* to continue her livelihood during the strike.⁸⁶

Some traveling vendors, such as Lucila Goodlitt, supported strikers by giving away food such as bread and natural juices as the strikers passed by to and from their duties of guarding the *fincas* against strikebreakers.⁸⁷ The donation was a sacrifice for a small vendor who had recently lost her business to an accidental fire.⁸⁸ These actions were small gestures compared to the larger donations of cattle and grain from more established local store owners known as *turcos* (of Arab or Palestinian decent). The sacrifice working women made during the strike, including *patronas*, traveling vendors, wives, and daughters, were key to sustaining not only workers' stomachs but also their spirits. Furthermore, the women's active participation with workers during the strike was essential to its success. When the women were not paid for their labor after the strike was over, many were left with such debt that their businesses floundered. Food vending resumed, for workers always needed to eat, but the business relationships changed because the *campos* opened up to a large number of traveling vendors and

⁸⁵ Mario R. Argueta, *La Gran Huelga Bananera 69 Días que Estremecieron a Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Universitaria, 1995) 65-108; Marvin Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 2004), 55-88.

⁸⁶ Adela Chávez, interview by author, La Lima Nueva, Cortés, February 6, 2006; Sylvia Robleda, interview by author, San Pedro Sula, Cortés, July 4, 2004.

⁸⁷ Standard Fruit workers struck for 11 days, a shorter period and more feasible for the ambulant vendors' donations.

⁸⁸ Lucilla Goodlitt, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 10, 2006.

comedores and *puestos*. After the strike, roads into the *campos* were built making the *campos* much more accessible to outside traveling vendors. Also, more women made their way as wives and workers to the *campos bananeros*. In 1962, the Company opened the packing plants where workers would pack the banana hands for export. Soon women found that this could be a source of formal employment in the Company.⁸⁹ The changes in the worker and *patrona* relationship also had to do with the fact that the workforce itself was changing from a single male workforce to a family-oriented workforce, where workers were sustaining households. While the *patronas*' position in the North Coast waned, it did not completely disappear. Many women followed the construction of the roads, providing services to workers alongside construction sites.

Patronas were also trusted allies and confidantes for protesting workers. In the *comedores*, workers felt they could talk about their problems in the fields or with their bosses. Workers shared information on strike plans in the presence of women.⁹⁰ But most importantly they relied on these women to feed and provide for them. Women reported leaving the camps for the center of town to the gathering strike centers of *campo Chula Vista* in La Lima for Tela Railroad Company and the yard of Coyoles Central for Standard Fruit workers. Vacating the camps to support the strike meant not earning money, so the *patronas* and vendors quickly adapted to the new situation, a temporary one. These relationships would carry over beyond the strike. Women demonstrated a clear working-class solidarity with striking workers, as well as a rejection of Company control and dominance. The women vendors' support (both

⁸⁹ Oscar Amaya Yanez, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, August, 2004.

⁹⁰ Juan B. Canales, interview by author, La Ceiba, Atlántida, July 25, 2004; Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006; María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima Cortés, March 5, 2006; Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006; Julio C. Rivera, interview by author, San José, Costa Rica, July, 2008.

material and emotional, sometimes at great personal financial cost) for the male workers' strike showed a clear working-class solidarity and a rejection of Company control, and helped forge relationships that carried over beyond the strike's conclusion.

Subversion of traditional gender roles: gender mixing

Patronas existed in a public space differently than middle-class and elite women of the time. For many middle-class women, society was structured strictly by moral codes and bounded by spaces of propriety. *Patronas' comedores*, however, were spaces of constant interaction with men, interactions that expanded outside of the domestic sphere and into the banana work. The interactions and the different notions of what defined women and men, which encompassed cultural as well as practical understandings, were reorganized and reworked (in the North Coast) to create a *campeña* understanding of gender relations that included women's participation in public-space worker consciousness and a deliberate solidarity. Male survival depended on women's labor in the kitchen and outside of the domestic sphere of marriage, but these typical domestic and expected duties for women were now remunerable. Normative gender roles may have been reified in this process, but this was not only the responsibility of women. Company policies and male workers shaped the ways in which women did business. In particular, they participated in the moral economy of defining what it meant to be 'good'—a good business woman, making good food, providing good service—and to exist within this new entrepreneurial class and within the economy of the Company.

This privileged position of the *patrona / finca*-laborer subverts and transgresses the male / female prescribed roles. One clear marker of this was the exchange of money for a service, that of cooking three meals a day (and sometimes illicit alcohol sales).

Another marker was that of the workers sharing the public sphere, the streets, the *comedores*, and outside brothels with these *patronas* or ambulatory vendors in a form of gender mixing not often seen in the middle classes. While the popular narrative in mestizo towns were that “indio” men were heavy drinkers who at the drop of a hat would slice anyone with a machete and or kill anyone with their pistol, for *patronas* and ambulant vendors, these supposedly violent men held the promise of survival. Though *patronas* recognized the workers' propensity for alcohol consumption and their often times violent behavior, they also understood best their work and lifestyle and generally did not fear for their own safety while working—they were *campeñas* who understood *campeño* life. This identification was critical for the strike movement when there was demand for support from everyone living and working in the banana company labor camps.⁹¹

Limitations of traditional historical narratives

Patronas held a key role in the work and hierarchy of the *campos*, one often ignored by historians of the 1954 strike and Honduran history in general. Workers often remark that there ‘were no women or few women’ on the North Coast during the first half of the twentieth century; the miraculous appearance of women came with the incorporation of their labor into the formal economy of the banana packing houses. The *patronas* and ambulant vendors not only lived and worked hard alongside men, but their labor was essential to the Company and subsidized the strike efforts. When talking

⁹¹ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006; Adela Chávez, interview by author, La Lima Nueva, Cortés, February 6, 2006; Casta Figueroa Portillo, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

about women in the *campos bananeros*, male workers talk about them as cooks primarily and as women secondarily. Their roles were defined by their work and function within the *campos* and were not seen as available women to marry or partner (some because they were already partnered). Their services were so essential to workers that their relationship of need was perhaps a more balanced relationship of power than that of the workers with their partners or wives.

This may have led historians to think of cooking as donated, unpaid domestic labor. Women were thought to be performing a domestic role, natural to their gender. Failings of traditional/conventional historical narratives and workers' historical memory, locates these working women in a place that nearly erases them from the narratives.⁹² A gendered analysis of power in the context of the *patronas* and male *finca* workers reveals that the exchange of wages was the act that gave women independence and autonomy in their household relationships by enabling women to have material resources they could use as they saw fit. This gave them power in the *campos* in a middle plane where *patronas* negotiated various relationships among workers and Company interests. Despite their dependence on male workers' connection to the Company and their pay, the household independence and autonomy in their work was important for their self-sufficiency.

The *patronas* and traveling/street vendors, in fact, were constructing their own *campeña* understandings and organization of life and work in the *campos*, not necessarily beholden to the Company policies or to the formal work and notions of manhood around the work. The *campeña* narrative, then, though not acknowledged as

⁹² Emilia Viotti da Costa, "Experience Versus Structures: New Tendencies in the History of Labor and the Working Class in Latin America: What Do We Gain? What Do We Lose?," *International Labor and Working-Class*, no. 36 (1989) 16-18.

transcendental as was the male workers' role as formal worker and striking worker, must still be understood as a critical part of the North Coast history.

Women: workers and racial identity

Femininity and work, and notions of what it was to be a woman in the North Coast, were closely linked to racial and ethnic understandings of work, gender, and life. These understandings were also shaped by individuals' *campesino* background as well as by emerging constructions of community brought on by the migration to the North Coast and the banana economy. To be a working class woman in the banana fields represented different values from the notions of women being discussed by elite and middle-class women. For instance, for elite women, suffrage was the most important struggle.⁹³ For working-class women it was their immediate survival that mattered. These women did participate in elections, as Madrid Guevara remembers it, often aiding men in protecting local ballot boxes during times of the dictatorship and beyond.⁹⁴ Yet the effort on behalf of suffrage did not have the pull it had among the cities and the educated women, primarily teachers.⁹⁵

Women in the North Coast demonstrated the construction of new understandings of gender, race, and ethnicity evident in the work that sustained the banana industry. Working-class women came to the North Coast to work and inevitably engaged in an ongoing process of reworking gender rules. Many of these new rules involved

⁹³ Villars, *Para la Casa Más que Para el Mundo: Sufragismo y Feminismo en la Historia de Honduras*

⁹⁴ Daniel Madrid Guevara, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 5, 2006.

⁹⁵ This does not mean that it was not an important gain. But it is important to note that many of the women fighting for suffrage were elite, married to elected officials, businessmen, or educated teachers. Their struggles rarely filtered into the ambit of working class women. Political parties, post 1954 strike and the ratification of the women's right to vote in 1957, sought out women as activists and for votes. Villars, *Para la Casa Más que Para el Mundo: Sufragismo y Feminismo en la Historia de Honduras*

understandings of the women's past *campesino* lives and the new situations prompted by the work of the banana industry. There was a shift in cultural understandings of class and gender as well as ethnicity in this part of the country. Gender, class, and ethno-racial understandings cohabited in the North Coast. Because they were women, wives, or daughters that came to the North Coast in search of work, it was their class, ethno-racial background (mostly likely mestiza) and gender status as well as Company policies and practices that determined the work they did within the Companies' territories. For instance, domestic workers needed to have recommendations to work in the American Zones. If a woman worker had just arrived, she would likely not know anyone that could recommend her. At the same time, her gender determined her role, wages, and overall understanding of herself as a member of the working class.

Few Hondurans could claim whiteness in a multiracial and multiethnic North Coast. Most workers referred to themselves as *indios* to mean not white or black. The ethno-racial demarcations also informed the roles of *patronas* and ambulant vendors, who also called themselves *india* to mean that they were native to Honduras. Particularly in Costa Arriba (Standard Fruit Company areas), male workers, female food vendors, and *patronas* were either *indios*, of Jamaican descent (*ingleses*) or ethnically Garifuna (from nearby beach-side towns and hamlets right outside of the banana company areas).⁹⁶ Lucila Goodlitt, a vendor and bread maker who sold bread

⁹⁶ Dario Euraque's writing on '*indo-mestizaje*' in construction of the nation are informative in the thinking about ethnicity and race in this region. Dario Euraque, *Conversaciones Historicas Con el Mestizaje y su Identidad Nacional en Honduras* (San Pedro Sula, Honduras: Centro Editoria, 2004), 17-35; Dario Euraque, "The Banana Enclave, Nationalism, and Mestizaje in Honduras, 1910s-1930s," in *Identity and Struggle at the Margins of the Nation State the Laboring Peoples of Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean*, ed. Aviva and Lauria-Santiago Chomsky, Aldo (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 151-164; Euraque, "The Threat of Blackness to the Mestizo Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Honduran Banana Economy, 1920s-1930s," 229-247.; Dario Euraque, "Free Pardos and Mulattoes Vanquish Indians Cultural Civility and Conquest and Modernity in Honduras," in *Beyond Slavery the*

and provisions to workers in Coyoles Central, never lost her identity as a Jamaican and retained the English tongue as her native language despite living in Honduras since childhood. Women workers lived and intermingled with each other, particularly in the *campos* and during work and while traveling into town. They lived in close interaction with people from the same regions and often of diverse ethnic make-up. The racial and ethnic lines were subtly sustained in living arrangements, even when work arrangements could not be controlled. María Angela Cardona shared living areas with Garifuna workers in the campo Agua Buena but eventually settled in the mostly *mestizo* town of El Carril. Goodlitt, whose dad was one of the initial settlers of El Carril, remembers that her father was the only Jamaican and black person for a long time; later other Jamaican bread makers came and settled right next to them creating a niche for life and work in El Carril.⁹⁷ In Costa Abajo, the workforce was more *indio* or *mestizo*, which led María Antonia Perla to say “there were no black people in the *campos* before” (meaning when she first arrived).⁹⁸ Black workers tended to live in either of the port towns of Tela or Puerto Cortés. Access to these towns from local villages as well as company policies may have made these towns easier for black Garifuna workers to settle, work, and return to their villages.⁹⁹ *Patronas*’ historical memory of this however is filtered through some of their own experiences, and race and ethno-racial understandings were delicate subjects. The distinctions in experiences among women were apparent in interviews among the diverse group I interviewed, who represented the gambit of multiracial people of the North Coast society. But rarely were these

Mulilayered Legacy of Africans in Latin America and the Caribbean, ed. Darién J. Davies (New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 2007), 81-101.

⁹⁷ María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006; Lucila Goddlitt, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 10, 2006.

⁹⁸ María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2006.

⁹⁹ Patrocinia Martínez, interview by author, San Juan de Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006.

interviewees forthright about racial differences and racism unless they were ethnically Garifuna or of Jamaican descent. This reality in itself is indication of a need for further and deeper research and analysis on the subject of racial difference and its impact on the culture and events of the time.

The food of the campos bananeros

Perhaps in the food *patronas* cooked we can uncover some of the complicated terrain of *mestizo* and black influences in the *campos*, and a greater appreciation of the diversity of the North Coast culture. As mentioned earlier, the Company provided a large bulk of the food, imported goods that workers consumed. But the banana itself did not become the big diet staple; it was the industry of the banana that brought U.S. products via the *comisariatos* of the United Fruit Company and Standard Fruit Company. These imports supplied and added to the cuisine of the *bananeros*. Ingredients such as oatmeal (*osmil*), white flour (*harina*), beef, and pork in abundance shaped the North Coast cuisine, where fried foods and meals-to-go were perfected.¹⁰⁰ *Patronas* also shopped at the local merchants (*almacenes*) for local goods. According to Cardona, most *patronas* had their own chicken coops to provide for soups and fried goods.¹⁰¹ Their lunch and dinner menus drew on staple traditional recipes of Honduras or El Salvador (and other places of origin), personalized with each *patrona's* own *sazón* (seasoning). The North Coast cuisine reflected all these influences.

¹⁰⁰ Local flour producers complained to the government that it was impossible for them to remain in business because the foreign competition put them out of business. Informe de Fomento, Agricultura y Trabajo, 1928-1929, Microfilm MF13544, Center for Research Libraries.

¹⁰¹ María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

Compared to rest of the working people in the country, it seemed that banana workers had a better diet, simply because of their access to Company beef, dairy, and pork from the cattle and hog farms in Puerto Arturo, Atlántida.¹⁰² *Patronas* took the Company's ingredients and incorporated them over time, attempting to create home-like staples with new ingredients (i.e., the flour tortilla) and new influence from the Garifunas and black cultures of the region. Some of the staples became a mix of the Company ingredients, customs from the migrants, and adjustment to conditions. Cooks prioritized fast, dry foods that could weather the temperature. *Baleadas*, large flour tortillas folded over beans, eggs, cheese, and oatmeal usually made the first meal of the day. While corn tortillas and coffee were also available, *baleadas* were the daily expected breakfast.¹⁰³ Ambulant vendors, wives of workers, or people from local towns would also sell sweet bread, salty coconut bread, *nacatamales*, and even fresh fish to workers on paydays.¹⁰⁴ Sweet bread, a common tradition in Honduras, was usually made from corn or rice flour, but the “little horse” (*caballito*) and other sweet breads sold to workers for the afternoon coffee or during time off were made with white flour.¹⁰⁵ Traditional soups, such as beef soup and *mondongo* (cow belly/stomach wall) soup, common in the interior and mestizo areas, evolved in the North Coast with the addition of such ingredients as cassava (*malanga* or *yuca*), green banana, plantains, and sweet potatoes, and *yuca*, typically thought of as Caribbean and perhaps even

¹⁰² Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

¹⁰³ Although there is no clear origin of the *baleada*, the meaning of the word—a “shootout” or a “shooting”—suggests life in the banana fields and *campos*, where a certain level of violence was common.

¹⁰⁴ Garifuna women sold fresh fish and coconut bread in an around Tela and also near Coyoles Central. Lucila Goodlitt, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 10, 2006.; Patrocinia Martinez, San Juan de Tela, Atlántida, August 8, 2006; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Garifuna.¹⁰⁶ *Mondongo* soup is made with coconut milk, a staple in the Garifuna cuisine.

Fast food sold by traveling/street vendors also demonstrated the merging of the traditional corn with local North Coast ingredients, such as *pollo con tajadas*, served with tortillas and green plantain chips; rice and beans, cooked with coconut milk. Small meals known as *la burra* combined *campesino* cuisine and North Cost ingredients. Traditional fare, such as *Nacatamales* (tamales) and sweet bread, were maintained as a staple adopted from the indo-Hispanic culture. Looking at the cuisine sold to workers by the *patronas* and traveling/street vendors, gives us an insight into the industry of food, access to goods, consumption and the ways in which the Company influenced diets. We can also learn about the ethno-racial assimilation in the *campos*. Through the kitchens of the *patronas* we can see that the diet of the workers reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of the camps by presenting a fusion born of different ethnic backgrounds, the ingredients made available by the Company, and the needs of the work and work schedule.

***“Ajuntadas, amachinadas”:* Informal Marriage arrangements and living quarters**

The adoption of informal marriage arrangements resulted from the lack of state presence, such as a municipal office, to grant marriage licenses, combined with the absence of the Catholic Church to set the norms for conjugal relationships.¹⁰⁷ María

¹⁰⁶ Yuca (manioc) is a tuber that is the staple of Garifuna cuisine, used to make *cassave* or *Kassave*, a tortilla-like flat bread made by the pounding of the yuca tuber. This is different than the cassava tuber, known as malanga in this region. Patrocinia Martínez, interview by author, San Juan de Tela, Tela Atlántida, 2006; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

¹⁰⁷ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.; María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2006.

Antonia Perla, for example, was not officially married in the *campos*; she returned to her home town of Villanueva to get married. Infomal arrangements were common.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, marriage was expensive for workers with little transportation and access to the institutions and churches. While marriage ceremonies were celebrated monthly in the American Zone ('*la Zona*'), finca workers and the women laboring in and around the *campos* did not partake of this ritual which was seen as only for *los de la Zona*, as Olympia Figueroa explains:

*Habían bastante [sic.] casamientos, la gente más pobre era la que menos se casaba, después yo miraba pasar de la Zona todos los meses las bodas allí con ese, era tamborito [procesión], desde allí donde era el Hotel Sula iban...*¹⁰⁹

[There were many marriages, the poorest people were the ones that did not get [officially] married. In the [American] Zone I would see weddings every month, there with that little drummer [procession]. It would start from there where the Hotel Sula was...]

Women did not always have formal marriage arrangements and in some cases had several partners without formal arrangements over time until they settled with someone. Olympia Figueroa, who lived in the *campos* most of her life and was not formally married, remembers the day her partner decided he was done with her and the family and wanted to bring another woman into the *barracón*. With the help of the *capitán de finca*, he put her and the kids on a train bound for Puerto Cortés. The same day his new partner moved in. Memories like this formed a living archive of experience for women that was reproduced and passed on to younger women. The relationship to banana men

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

was a tenuous one, and the women always had to watch out for their survival and that of their children.¹¹⁰

The informal arrangements were often clearly not to the benefit of women. Informal marriage arrangements for the workers were all they could really afford in terms of money and time, for they sometimes labored seven days a week and lived far from *el pueblo*. Figueroa had two marriage-like arrangements—the second one a lasting one. Asked whether the absence of a marriage certificate was beneficial to women, Figueroa explains that even with a marriage certificate, it was never a good situation for women who had less power in these domestic arrangements:

No, no le funcionaba eso a uno ni nada no ve que solo ellos mandaban. Solo había mando para los hombres, para uno nada. Entonces...no, si es que no tenía mando uno, aunque tuviera lo que tuviera, no tenía mando uno. Si mire, si un hombre se juntaba con uno, le daba su tina su rival para que lavara, porque antes no se lavaba en pila...le daba sus ollas para cocinar y si a la hora de irse se enojaba él y la quería despachar desnudita le quitaba todo, pues así era porque todo-- él se lo había dado-- y a él le tocaba.¹¹¹

[No it did not work for you, or anything, you see they alone ruled over us. There was only say for the man, for one nothing. Then no, if one did not get to have power, no matter what you had, you had no power. Look if a man partnered with you, he gave you your water bucket, your washer board so you could do laundry, because before we did not do laundry with a pila (large indoor sink), he would give you your pots and pans and if you wanted to leave, he got mad and sent you away naked. He would take everything away from you, because according to him, he had given you everything and it was his.]

¹¹⁰ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006; María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006; Adela Chávez, interview by author, La Lima Nueva, Cortés, February 6, 2006; Casta Figueroa Portillo, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.; Lucila Goodlitt, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 10, 2006.; María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2010.; Lidia Aurora Lezama, interview by author, Campo Mucula, El Progreso, Yoro, December 9, 2006.

¹¹¹Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

While romantic love figures as the justification for this re-arrangement, violence and coercion were also imposed on women to obtain favors and control her sexuality.

In the case of Perla, who was raped while working as an *ayudanta*, the only option she had, and the one her family gave her was to marry (which really meant to partner with) the man who raped her.¹¹² She evaded partnering by running away to work in another *campo* but was found. Between 1953, the year of her rape, and 1957, she avoided actually partnering with him. But eventually, forced by family, she had to go to her home town of Villanueva and officially marry him by church and state.¹¹³ She endured domestic violence most of her life—"I ran away many times... once he had me thrown in jail for abandoning the home. I spent eleven days in jail."¹¹⁴ Perla remembers that she was also generally responsible for the kids, remarking that other than providing her with his check for the month, he took no part in their upbringing or education. Perla's options were limited, diversion scant. If she went to dance by herself, it was considered inappropriate, and she would suffer discrimination. If a woman used makeup, she was ridiculed and called a clown. The only recourse for her was her community in the *campos*. "Life in the *campos* was free, community oriented, people worried about you."¹¹⁵ Although Perla ran away from her abusive home, her *barracón*, many times, she found community in the *campos* generally. She did not want to leave the *campos* and in fact ran away to another *campo*. She was from the *campos* and lived there, among campeño community, despite her own lack of safety with her husband in her individual *barracón*.

¹¹² María Antonia Perla, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, March 5, 2010.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Despite the problematic implications of informal arrangements for the women and children involved, and in the absence of church or state laws, informal arrangements—albeit dangerous—did provide women with certain flexibility in their lives and work. María Angela Cardona had a husband that did not provide for her family. Every time he returned home, she would find herself pregnant after he left. Her partner's absence and lack of responsibility made her and her children work long hours, selling food outside the brothels and on payday. She became the head of household and as the years went on relied less and less on her partner.¹¹⁶

Housing was a complicated matter for all workers, including women, in the *fincas*, which were situated in remote areas with few roads or means of transportation. Women had particularly precarious arrangements since they needed to be partnered with a *finca* worker in order to have access to company housing. As discussed in earlier, living in a single bedroom within a *barracón*, and not in the male quarters, was the desire of most workers. Women entering a marriage-like arrangement with a *finca* worker would often live in the *barracón* room given to the man for having a family, providing more space to live and often cleaner quarters. At the same time men benefited from having a cook, a washer woman, and a more stable life as they worked for the Company. Women would benefit from the arrangement if they needed someone to care for their children from a previous marriage.

At the same time, women wanted opportunities to earn money either *cuidando hombres* or washing clothes, and having a stable housing was an important factor. Women's work was centered around the household living arrangements. Many times even having an earning male partner was not enough to survive, so women came up

¹¹⁶ María Angela Cardona, interview by author, El Carril, Olanchito, Yoro, August 13, 2006.

with ingenious ways to feed their kids. “Women always worked, making tortillas, making bread to sell on payday, something.”¹¹⁷

Conclusion

While some women, like the *patronas*, enjoyed agency in choosing a potential arrangement, others did not. In the testimonies, some women are referred to as being the property of a man. Treated as property, they were unable to pursue work possibilities and had to do what their husband said, their earning potential limited. Sabillón, for example, was never allowed to work as a *patrona* once partnered. Angel Martinez claims that he would never have had his wife work; it would have been an insult to his manhood. Men’s employment with the Company guaranteed a livelihood and housing arrangements, which contributed to *campeños*’ identity as providers and owners of women. The Company supervisors may have fed into perceptions of women as non-laborers or devalued contributors to the economy as testimonies suggest they overlooked the condition of women in the *campos*.¹¹⁸ In spite of the lack of intentional support for women's roles or acknowledgement of their critical role in the *fincas*, women carved out a space for themselves in a variety ways, of which the *patronas* are the most powerful example.

Overall, this chapter has provided a glimpse of the gendered dynamics of the North Coast, particularly by examining the experiences of women and the various roles they played in *bananera* community and their relationships with *finca* workers, including during the strike. Women were workers, with close relationships with *finca*

¹¹⁷ Alejandro Ortega, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 8, 2006.

¹¹⁸ Olympia Edelmira Figueroa, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

workers who worked for the Company, and as the strike evolved, women helped to sustain workers and the struggle. These women and their lives are under-recognized part of the creation of a working class on the North Coast, and at the same time, provide new opportunities to consider feminist and women's aspirations of the time. The *patronas* and their positioning vis-a-vis the formal workforce of the banana companies are just one important component of women's experiences of the place and time. There is much more to be uncovered as to women's lives and contributions on the North Coast, including their often contradictory and changing relationships with male workers and the existing patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

The lasting legacies of the 1954 are apparent in the daily life of the North Coast banana workers, from the day-to-day and unceremonious union activities observed in the *fincas* and packing houses to the more complicated negotiations between Company and union on worker layoffs due to *finca* closures, to organized action.

The outcome of the 1954 strike for workers was felt throughout the *campos*. Workers' pay increased, family members gained access to healthcare, and working conditions in the ports were improved. *Patronas* also experienced improved business possibilities after the strike, including opportunities to open small stores and *puestos*, and a regularization of traveling/street vending as a part of the North Coast economy that continues today. The most dramatic change was the shift in power in the *fincas*. Local and regional supervisors could no longer act on a whim, create their own policies and abuse workers; rather, they had to abide by the contract. Changes in work practices and labor loads also had to be discussed with the union representative, a *finca* worker.

For the working classes of the North Coast in that period, the differences in gender, race and class collided and created a working class Honduran identity and solidarity, which then influenced the larger labor movement. The experiences of men and women in the *fincas* and *campos* of the banana companies, including gender relations, were centered on the work. The work in the *fincas* and *campos* was related to the formal economy of banana production and labor. This dissertation presents a history of the North Coast in this important period that centers on the lives of working men and women, which inform our understanding of the region's informal and formal labor, and the dynamics of masculinity and femininity, racial identity and difference pertaining to daily labor activities.

The 1954 banana worker strike and mobilization were transformative and thus distinguished from previous ones because banana workers this time inspired other workers in other industries and factories, and agricultural workers laboring in other *fincas*, domestic and foreign owned. The tremendous impact was felt by workers all over Honduras, and more importantly, the strike served as a model for action and empowerment. Honduran workers' lives had changed and there was much expectation.

The strike shook the enclave economy in the North Coast during that era but also demonstrated a particular convergence of the North Coast community, informed by everyday constructions of gender understandings, ethno-racial hierarchies and migratory movements. The period of 1944 to 1957, was crucial for Honduran workers, both men and women, who created a moment of opportunity to make demands and resolve ages-old complaints against the foreign companies. These years represented a period of possibility for building a labor movement, culminating in the strike, which has remained in the Honduran collective memory as a historic moment of national unity and democratic progress.

The 1954 strike powerfully impacted all Hondurans. From this mobilization came the impetus for the adoption of a labor code and the government's formation of a Ministry of Labor. The two labor unions, SITRATERCO (*Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Tela Railroad Company*) and SITRASFRUCO (*Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Standard Fruit Company*) later renamed the SUTRASFCO by a mobilization of anti-communist workers), and other local unions developed the FESITRANH (*Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Nacionales de Honduras*), the first national federation of labor unions, albeit with ORIT (Inter American Regional Organization of Workers) influence. The FESITRANH was controlled by the banana unions and held power over the country's labor movement. This national federation would represent a strengthening of a national workers' movement.

Perhaps one of the most impactful results of the 1954 strike was the rise of the modern Liberal party which led to the later presidency of Ramon Villeda Morales. Villeda Morales was seen as a friend to workers (Liberal Party workers called him endearingly *pajarito pechito rojo* or simply *pajarito*, red-chested little bird), and in the official history he is credited with many modernizing advancements in government, such as the creation of Ministries of Labor and Health.¹ Villeda Morales' administration was the beginning of a period of hope for positive change and progress in the country, and particularly for workers. On the heels of the 1954 strike, which was generally embraced as an unqualified victory for workers, a Liberal president, along with emboldened unions and political organizations, and an optimistic populace Honduras seemed to be on the brink of further progressive change.

Unfortunately, before long these hopes were diminished as several developments stalled the momentum for change. First, a terrible hurricane in September of 1954 aided the Companies in weakening the unions, SITRATERCO and SUTRAFSCO; the Companies closed *fincas* and laid off workers. This began a common Company tactic of using natural disasters as excuses for shaking up union membership and breaking contract rules.² Second, Villeda Morales worked with the U.S. Embassy and the Honduran military, to enable the persecution of labor leaders and organizers, as his presidency worked closely with Serafino Romualdi and the ORIT to identify and jail activists and organizers. Villeda Morales welcomed Romualdi's involvement and U.S. Embassy intervention.³ The result of the intervention was the

¹ President Juan Manuel Galvez presidency had begun these modernizing changes. Yesenia Martinez, *Presentation on the Formation of the Ministry of Health (Seguro Social) in Honduras*, IX Congreso de Historia Centroamericana, San José, Costa Rica, 2009.; On the Galvez and Villeda Morales years of modernization see: Victor Bulmer-Thomas, "Honduras since 1930," in *Central America since Independence*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 203-210.

² Unfortunately this practice is still used as we saw in the case of both Hurricane Mitch (1998) and Hurricane Gamma (2004).

³ The ORIT's role in Honduras is evident since 1953, but publicly the ORIT reported its role in labor affairs beginning July 17 to August 9, 1954. Because of the developments in the Arbenz Guzman

squashing of vibrant organizing efforts. The triangular contestation of power among workers, company and government was not unlike the 1954 strike dynamics which had made an imprint on Honduras. Finally in 1962, Villeda Morales was ousted in a coup d'état executed by a military junta. This ended the period of reform, and the Liberal party once again became the underdog among national politics. The same collaboration of U.S., Honduran government, and elite interests that existed during the 1954 strike, in later years, consolidated to halt Liberal party reforms.

The legacy of the strike is in part that of an interrupted and thwarted process of revolutionary possibility in the history of Honduras. It is also viewed by many, however, as a reminder of the potential for a better Honduras. It is a legacy that people still draw on to inspire movement and organizing in the country.⁴

Working class men and women redefined North Coast life as much as the enclave economy and wage work redefined them. The preceding chapters have tried to reconstruct the *campos* and *fincas* of the North Coast of Honduras in the years leading up to the great banana strike of 1954. The story is geographically focused on the banana labor camps and the living quarters, concentrating attention on the largest and under-recognized sectors of the banana working people, the agricultural workers and their

government in Guatemala, U.S. Embassy employees were extremely concerned about Honduran workers. The ORIT report, "Mission to Honduras," states that its goals were to insure the "establishment of democratic trade unions," "encourage organizations [sic.] possibilities", help the Honduran government with "social legislation" on the right to organize, and the "holding of workers' education seminar[s]". The ORIT's role in identifying, persecuting, exiling workers would not be apparent until the 1980s when AFL-CIO-affiliated institutes participated in the Contra armies and persecution of movement leaders in Honduras and other Central American countries. Kheel Center for Labor Management Documentation, Cornell University. The Serafino Romualdi Papers, 1936-1967 (Collection Number 5459). Honduras Statements and Reports, *ORIT Regional Activities Fund Committee, Brussels, 20-22, October, 1954*. 5010, Box 2 "Honduras" File.

⁴ There were organized responses in Honduras to the violence of the 1980s Contra wars, as the Honduran government aided the U.S. government in attack on Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan liberation forces. In this era, SITRATERCO, one of the most powerful unions at the time faced powerful repression. Although workers were afraid to talk about the 1954 strike or activity that could be deemed Marxist at the time, organizing persisted. The environment for Honduran workers was different than that of the early 1950s. They had some protections through the union, a labor contract. In 2004, 50 years after the strike, President Manuel Zelaya held a special ceremony for the first strike committee in the presidential house. Julio C. Rivera's exile was pardoned (as were many other exiles) and was able to attend the ceremony.

wives, partners, sisters, and other women in the *campos*. These chapters have focused on gendered life in the *campos*, the ways in which men and women organized work, leisure, family, community and organized the union movement, which in turn affected all of the workers in Honduras.

Also, an explanation of the role of women and the nature of the *patronas'* work demonstrate that the *campos* were gendered and that women's informal work was essential to the formal work of the banana companies. The informal economy and formal economy frameworks have allowed for an analysis of a gendered work space. The *patronas'* role transgressed the Company order and work organization, creating a system of economic remuneration that was outside the purview of the Company. The *patronas* formed a group that occupied a middle plane of power between worker and Company supervisors, an unsupervised and unhindered autonomous role within the *fincas* and *campos*. This privileged position enabled *patronas* to support workers during the 1954 strike. Women influenced working class identity formation.

Working class women and men in the *fincas* and *campos bananeros* inhabited mixed spaces, intermingling and exchanging money, cohabiting as partners more commonly than women and men did in middle class urban neighborhoods of the time. The ethno-racial understandings of what it meant to be Honduran intersected with gender and class in ways that "naturalized" the concept of *mestizo* in North Coast and labor movement, despite the participation of Garifuna and black workers as leaders in organizations of the Communist Party and progressive organizations.⁵ In a country with a Colonial past of African heritage, Lenca, Chortí and Tolupan indigenous heritage and a Garifuna, Caribbean indigenous and African heritage, the efforts to define "*mestizo*" as the National identity simply did not and does not reflect the nation and its populace.

⁵ Dario Euraque, *Conversaciones Historicas Con El Mestizaje y Su Identidad Nacional En Honduras* (San Pedro Sula, Honduras: Centro Editoria, 2004),184.

The thirty demands presented to the Tela Railroad Company by first Central Strike Committee attempted to address universal demands around gender and race equality. The committee leaders were thrown in jail and replaced by a new strike committee, which did not prioritize these larger universal demands. In fact, after resuming negotiations the new committee accepted the Company's demands and agreements, but did not establish a process or contract language that would insure everyone abided by these principles. They became symbolic but not enforceable.

As an ethno-racial gendered analysis of the banana *fincas*, these chapters present the history of organizing and the development of the union as a shared process between men and women in a diverse society, where their different experiences influenced the cultural understandings of men and women, masculinity and femininity.

Women and the Union

In January of 2006, women members of the *Programa de la Mujer* (Women's Program) at *Coordinadora de Sindicatos Bananeros y Agroindustriales de Honduras (COSIBAH)*, a national confederation of banana and agro-industry unions, came together in La Lima for a three-day training on women's issues in the workplace. The training included empowerment exercises to provide women with leadership skills to navigate the union hierarchy and to enable them to craft and negotiate contracts with the company as worker representatives.⁶ More notably, women shared analyses of their position in a web of patriarchal relationships within the hierarchy of the current banana companies (now Chiquita Brands and Dole Fruit), within Honduras and at home where they were subject to the double work day (*la doble jornada*).⁷ The women were young

⁶ José María Martínez & Iris Munguía, *Aprendamos Juni@S: Conozcamos de Contratación Colectiva* (Honduras: COLSIBA), 2006.

⁷ At the time, there was only one short-lived female president of a small union in a *finca* in the Valley of Aguán, the highest position achieved by women to date. Other women were serving at the local and sub-sectional level and were there to learn the skills necessary to engage with the union members, men in the workplace and the Companies. Larger goals that women discussed in that meeting were also working

and old, dressed up and dressed down, *mestizas*, *ladinas* and others of Afro Caribbean descent, representing the great diversity of the North Coast regions.

On the last day of the training the organizers and leaders of the *Programa de la Mujer* of COSIBAH, opened the morning with a historical sketch of women's roles in the labor movement in Honduras and the North Coast.⁸ Women reflected on the legacy of the 1920s labor leaders, such as Graciela Garcia, who was a leader of the *Federación Sindical Hondureña* and was influential in organizing in the mining town near Tegucigalpa.⁹ They also shared the story of one of their local predecessors in the North Coast, Emilia Hernández, also known as *La Rápida*, who acted as messenger for the Central Strike Committee, delivering messages between the striking centers of La Lima, El Progreso and Bataan.¹⁰ They talked about the role of women cooks in the community kitchens during the strike mobilizations in La Lima and El Progreso as well as women's role in the security committees during the 1954 strike in the North Coast. The training module sought to elucidate the historical role of women in the development of the labor movement. The strike of 1954 was a powerful and adopted memory for many of these women, even though many were either small children or not yet born when the strike

towards respect for maternity rights, such as time off and breastfeeding/pumping breaks, as well as the larger goal of anti-sexual harassment language in the contract. Although in some *fincas* major changes and contract language were already in place, in other union contracts, this was not the case contracts, and women used this time to exchange practices and learn from others.

⁸ Iris Munguía is the director of the Women's Program for COSIBAH and the Women's Program for Latin American organization COLSIBAH. Under her leadership many women's committees have flourished internationally. A rank-and-file member, she grew up in the *fincas* and *campos* of La Lima. Her mother, Olympia Figueroa, a former washerwoman, cooked in the *campos* and shared her time and life with me, informing chapter 3 of this dissertation.

⁹ Graciela García, *Páginas de Lucha* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 1981); Rina Villars, *Porque Quiero Seguir Viviendo...Habla Graciela Garcia* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 1991).

¹⁰ The story as retold by her son Manuel Hernández, Finance Secretary of the SITRATERCO is that his mother worked for the *Bananina* Puree factory with her partner (they did not seem to be formerly married) in a nearby village. She disguised herself to pass by police unnoticed and passed on messages between the strike leaders, "one day she would dress as a man, another day as a pregnant woman to hide the information." "'La Rápida' Emilia Hernandez en la Huelga de 1954," *Nueva Visión Sindical* 2002. 13; "'La Rápida,' Heroína Olvidada de la Huelga del 54," *Revista Nocturnal* 2004.; Manuel Hernández Hernández, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, December 16, 2006.

happened. It was lauded as the most important event in Honduran labor history as it was the impetus behind the formation of the largest banana unions, SITRATERCO and SUTRAFSCO.¹¹

The narrative was urgent and sent out two important messages: first, women of today's labor unions are heirs to their organization and past struggles; and second, that there is a history with roots in decades past of working class women as labor leaders who contributed to the banana economy. The narrative these working class women were constructing challenged the all-too-common fallacious assertion made by older men and locals nowadays that *'there were no women in the campos.'* The new narrative said that women were not only present in the *campos* and in the union struggles in supportive roles, but they were also active participants in the construction of the union, despite the informality with which their work was regarded by the Companies. These women of history, like the women in the room that day, were union supporters but also workers, household workers and political organizers--all of them a part of a new, gendered, labor and organizing history in the making.

In the present day, the 50-year-old SITRATERCO banana union is experiencing a most remarkable awakening with the emergence of women's leadership in the union, an outcome due in great part to the efforts of rank and file and women members who fought to create a COSIBAH's *Programa de la Mujer* and organized *Comités Femeninos* (women's committees) in the 1980s, which initially sought to have voice and vote (*voz y voto*) in their union.¹² Concretely, they also sought to have more 'women-oriented' contract language, such as the right to maternity leave and the right to return to their previous positions after returning from leave. More recently, their struggles have

¹¹ *Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Standard Fruit Company (SITRASFRUCO)* was organized in 1954. Post the 1954 there was a persecution of leftist leaders and was reorganized as SUTRAFSCO. James Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus a Political History of Modern Central America* (New York: Verso, 1988), 542.

¹² Iris Munguía, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.

centered on getting women elected to high-ranking union positions and helping them keep their positions.¹³

By the early 2000s there was a new leadership of women in place including Iris Munguía leading the *Programa de la Mujer*. The program systematically achieved sustainable women's leadership by teaching women leaders basic organizing and leadership skills in order to develop representation in each *finca* and at all levels of the union hierarchy of the various banana and agro-industrial unions of the North Coast.¹⁴ The program has been successful even in establishing women's committees in the various banana and agro industrial unions beyond the North Coast of Honduras, extending to the other banana regions of Central America, Colombia and Ecuador. It is not commonly acknowledged that this initiative was born among the women rank and file members of Honduras' SITRATERCO in the mid to late 1980s.¹⁵

The Honduras Coup d'état in 2009

On June 29, 2009, Liberal president Manuel Zelaya Rosales was forcefully taken out of his home, flown to Costa Rica in what hours later would become evident to the international community as a politico-military coup d'état. His ouster came on the heels of a forcibly aborted campaign called the *Cuarta Urna* (or as North Coast popular sectors renamed it *La Consulta Popular*) which aimed to hold a general, popular election on the option of a fourth ballot box in the November 2009 presidential elections to consider a constitutional assembly. Before the vote could take place, Zelaya was ousted by a collusion of military strong men, conservative and corrupt government

¹³ Iris Munguía, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, February 15, 2006.; Gloria Garcia, interview by author, La Lima, Cortés, April 10, 2006.

¹⁴Asociación de Servicios de Promoción Laboral, *Lo que Hemos Vivido: Luchas de Mujeres Bananeras* (San José, Costa Rica 2003); Dana Frank, *Women Transforming the Banana Unions of Latin America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 2005), 26.

¹⁵ See: Dana Frank's work on the present day work of the Comité Femenino of COSIBAH in Frank, *Women Transforming the Banana Unions of Latin America*, 4.

officials and neoliberal businessmen, possibly under the aegis of the U.S. Embassy. What followed was massive response from Honduran working people that spilled into the streets and workplaces daily for over six months. Demonstrations of 300,000 or more people in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa were impressive and never seen before in Honduras. The protestors eventually constituted the *Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular* (National Front of Popular Resistance, which in the early days called themselves *la Resistencia*, the Resistance). In the North Coast, the banana unions and organizations, such as SITRATERCO and COSIBAH, among others, were at the forefront of protest and mobilization. The strike of 1954, once again was being remembered, in everyday ways. "*Nunca habíamos visto tanta gente en la calle desde el 54*" was common expressed among people in La Lima, El Progreso, La Ceiba, cities that were also sites of massive protests.

The North Coast continues as a site of working class protest and resistance today, with workers engaged both at the union level and in the larger movement. The resistance movement of today, perhaps rooted in some of the history of organizing from the 1954 strike period, continues to grow in new areas.

APPENDIX A

*Los 30 Puntos: Tela Railroad Company Worker Demands*¹

Tela, May 11, 1954

Mr. J. F. Aycock,
General Manager
Tela Railroad Company
La Lima, Cortes, Honduras

Sir:

We, the undersigned, in representation of all workers of the different branches of the Company, base ourselves on the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Men, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, which proclaims that every person has the right to equitable and satisfactory conditions of work and the right to organize for the defense of material, social, cultural and political rights; a right clearly expressed in the Inter-American Act of Social Guarantees signed in Bogota which was approved by our National Congress.

Whereas: In these times the cost of living has risen considerably.

Whereas: While the cost of living is rising, the salaries we earn, not only remain frozen, but are dropping, reducing our acquisition power. This is further aggravated by the devaluation of our currency.

Whereas: We are obligated to work under deplorable conditions;

Therefore: We have agreed to submit the following petitions to you:

- 1)
 - a) A substantial salary increase in the wages of the employees and workers taking into account the actual cost of living. See attached tables.
 - b) Abolish work by contract, with the exception of the agricultural workers from the Agricultural Department and other special jobs from the district of Guaymas, for which we attached special tables.
 - c) Direct payment from the Company to the maids and service employees, and not via an intermediary, who are assigned to work for the employees; their salaries

¹ Letter from the Central Strike Committee to the Mediation Commission. May 11, 1954. "Aspectos Fundamentales de la Mediación en el Conflicto Obrero-Patronal entre la Tela Railroad Company y los Trabajadores de la Empresa." Archivo Privado de Mario Posas. (Translation by Marlom J. Portillo).

should be L.60.00 for cooks, L.50.00 for laundresses and L.100.00 to patio workers (*yarderos*), including their housing and meals

- d) Hourly employees: Piers/Docks
A 50% increase in salaries for the regular day of 8 hours, double pay for overtime (time over the 8 hour day). 50% increase in pay for the regular work day of 6 hours at night, and double pay for overtime. For dock/pier workers, the workday will be recognized and counted from the beginning when the tickets (*boletos*) of identification are distributed.
- 2)
- a) Improvement in hospitals and dispensaries (clinics) in every way; the latter (clinics) should be staffed by certified physicians (*graduados*). Hospitals should have a doctor on call at night.
 - b) The employees will contribute 2% of their salaries to sustain the hospital; covering free service for them and their families; parents, spouses and children.
 - c) In the event that the Company and employees in its hospitals for any reason cannot cover the health needs of a workers, the Company should reimburse the workers for the cost of their medical expenses.
 - d) The service workers (*maids, cooks, washerwomen, yarderos*) assigned to the employees will receive health services in the same way that the rest of workers and employees receive them.
 - e) Establish an emergency rail ambulance service fully equipped to respond to any first aid/emergency case, properly attended by both a doctor and a nurse.
- 3) Pay hourly workers their wages when sick and absent from work.
- 4) Implement weekly payroll.
- 5) Abolish unjust firing of workers. A worker can be fired only after receiving three warnings, appropriately justified, in a month.
- 6) The maximum daily work should be 8 hours long and overtime should be remunerated with double pay for monthly contract workers and for hourly workers.
- 7) The daily maximum night work time will be 6 hours, and double pay for overtime work for monthly as well as hourly workers.
- 8) 15-day paid vacation with pay will be given every year to employees that earn less than L.200.00 a month and 30 days vacation for those that earn more than L.200.00, regardless of their position as monthly or hourly employees, provided they have worked for the Company for at least a year.

- 9) Provide free rail/train transportation for the workers, employees and their families' every time they request it.
- 10) The Company will provide the necessary tools and materials to the workers to accomplish their work.
- 11) For equal work there should be equal pay for any person regardless of sex, race, credo and nationality of the worker.
- 12) Fair treatment for all workers.
- 13) Provide bonuses for all workers without exceptions in June and December.
- 14)
 - a) Improve the food in the docks/piers; build clean and appropriate dining facilities for the distribution of food.
 - b) Concede a paid hour for lunch time.
 - c) Recognize any interruption or delays in the work place not caused by the workers, as part of the workday.
 - d) Recognize the half hour after 5 minutes worked and the hour after 35 minutes worked.
 - e) Standardize salaries for watchmen (security guards), customs workers and miscellaneous work that are paid out of the dock/pier payroll.
 - f) Retire all pier workers (stevedores) at 50 years who have worked at least 5 years, because it is an exhausting, due to the demands of working nights, due to hard conditions of work that lead to exhaustion, particularly for the night shifts.
- 15) Hotel and hospital employees should be given a stipend of L.60.00 per person, the value of meal expenses, so that they may take meals outside the facilities.
- 16) Laundry workers should be considered monthly employees and with wage increases that correspond to this position in the table of wages provided.
- 17) Guarantee permission (leave of absence) to any employee or workers when they request with justification or for compelling reasons.
- 18) Recognize first-class food expenses for all the employees and workers that have to leave their home to execute their work. Place strict control over the food vouchers, because many vouchers are reduced. Give an extra voucher for night shift.
- 19) The work week should be 45 hours of work and 48 paid hours for day workers, for monthly workers and for workers per assignment (*por tarea*). All workers will be paid the seventh day, Sunday.

- 20) The cooks and laundresses will be provided free food in the houses they work. They will also not be charged for any lost or damaged dishes and other utensils.
- 21) Abolish the obligation to have meals at the foreman's homes.
- 22) Abolish all discrimination by race and job category in hospitals, dispensaries, ambulances and hotels.
- 23) The Company should provide protective personal equipment to protect workers' health, such as masks, goggles, gloves, raincoats.
- 24) Provide decent and hygienic housing for the workers that need them.
- 25) Provide secular and free elementary education (up to 6 grade) for all the children of the workers and employees. In the rural schools (the schools in the *campos*) each teacher must be able to work with at least 2 grades maximum. School supplies and materials should be provided for free as they have been. The school teaching curriculum must adhere to standards of the Ministry of Public Education.
- 26) Assign maids and house maintenance workers to employees that earn L.200.00 or more and who are married.
- 27) Guarantee that there will be no Company retaliation of any worker in the strike leadership, workers and people involved in the strike committee and strike activities. Return workers who were fired for their role in the strike, before and during strike movement, to their positions.
- 28) Pay salaries in full to all workers from the beginning of the strike until the day they return to work.
- 29) Recognize and respect the workers' union, its sections and subsections, that exist at this time. Do not change or alter the organization leadership that already exist. Adhere to the same guarantees and rights granted by the law. The union will be independent of the state and municipal (*patronal*) governance. Workers will have the right to strike and organize (to meet according to Article 61 of the Constitution). This union will seek and oversee all the points demanded and listed in this petition document.
- 30) We will wait in El Progreso for the resolution to put an end to the protest.

Puerto Cortés Delegate:

Juan B. Canales

La Lima Delegate:

Cesar Augusto Coto

Progreso Delegate:

S. Lilio Pineda M.

Tela Delegate:

Luis B. Yanes

APPENDIX B

Central Strike Committee 7 Demands of Company and Honduran Government,² May 17, 1954

1. That the company make immediate payment of all the withheld salaries to all the workers, in the different locations where they may be located due to circumstances of the strike: La Lima, Puerto Cortes, Tela, El Progreso y Batan, notifying us of the day and time when those payments will be made.
2. That the government unconditionally release all those people who have been incarcerated for collaborating or participating in our struggle. Concrete cases: Efraín Garay and those companions of the La Ceiba and Olanchito sector; Martin Bonilla, Antonio Fajardo and other companions of Puerto Cortes; Gustavo Andara Bulnes, Emilio Sanchez Guevara and other companions of Tegucigalpa.
3. That the authorities cease all the intimidation and persecution of participants and collaborators of our strike in all of the country.
4. That the government remove all the military forces assigned to guarding the Company's property as soon as possible. The *Comité Central de Huelga*, the maximum authority in the strike's movement, will take charge of its custody and protection whilst our movement is proceeding.
5. That the company will provide transportation to facilitate the preparatory work for the negotiations taking place at the *Comité Central de Huelga*.
6. That the Minister of Government and Justice, General J. Antonio Inestroza, in his limited participation as mediator and government representative, abstain from using improper language to mediate and from making threats, when participating in the negotiations.
7. That the negotiations must occur between the Tela Railroad Company and the *Comité Central de Huelga*, in representation of all the workers, with both parties preserving all due respect during the discussions.

² Marvin Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954*. (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 2004), 75-76. (Translated by Araceli Cortés).

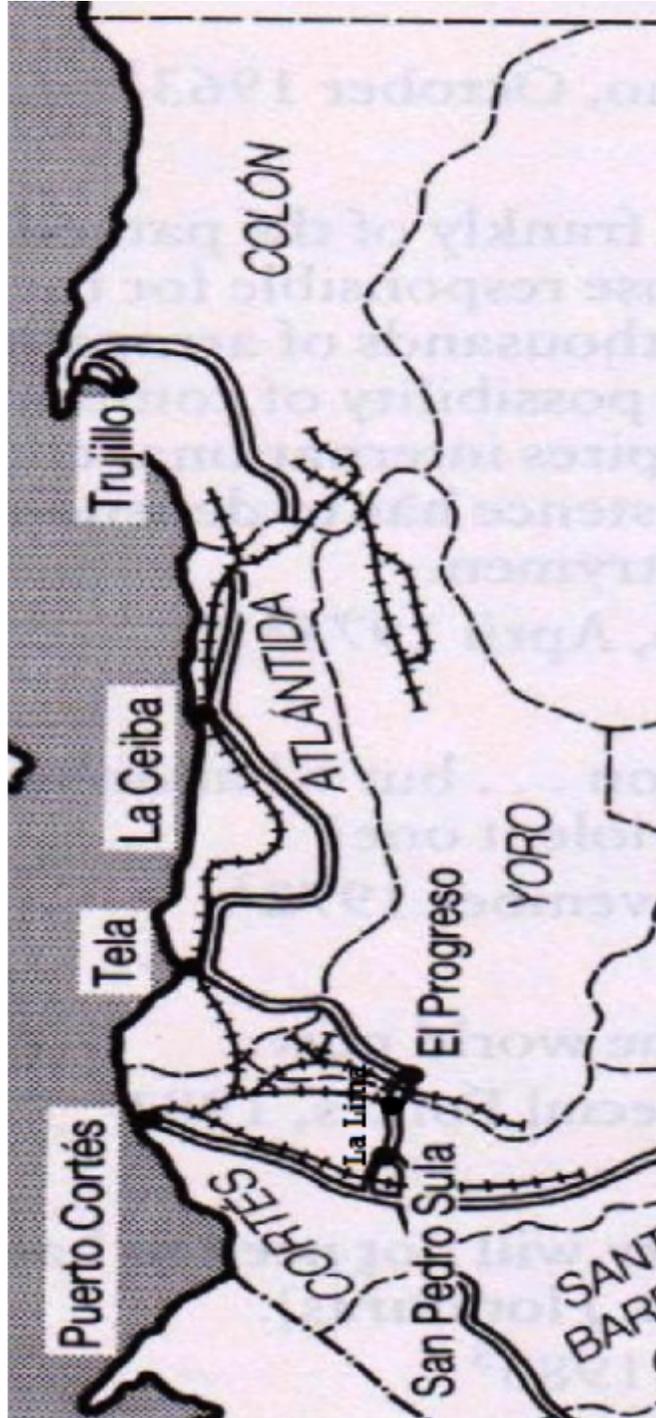
APPENDIX C

Standard Fruit Company Worker Strike Demands, May 7, 1954³

1. Immediate dismissal of the Railroad Superintendent, J.A. Girdner, of the Hospital administrator, D'Antoni, Jaime Ramirez, and the assistant to the dock (muelle) superintendent, Ramon Cerril.
2. General increase in salary for urban and city employees and workers, of fifty percent of their current accrued monthly pay or per work hour or task.
3. Obligatory commitment of the Company to grant paid vacations to employees and workers in general, after a year of uninterrupted work; paying those workers who are due vacations, in advance, the salary that corresponds to the vacation time.
4. The right to benefit from the Company's hospital services, and that this service not be limited solely to those who regard themselves as the family of the worker, that is, wife and children, but also all close family members.

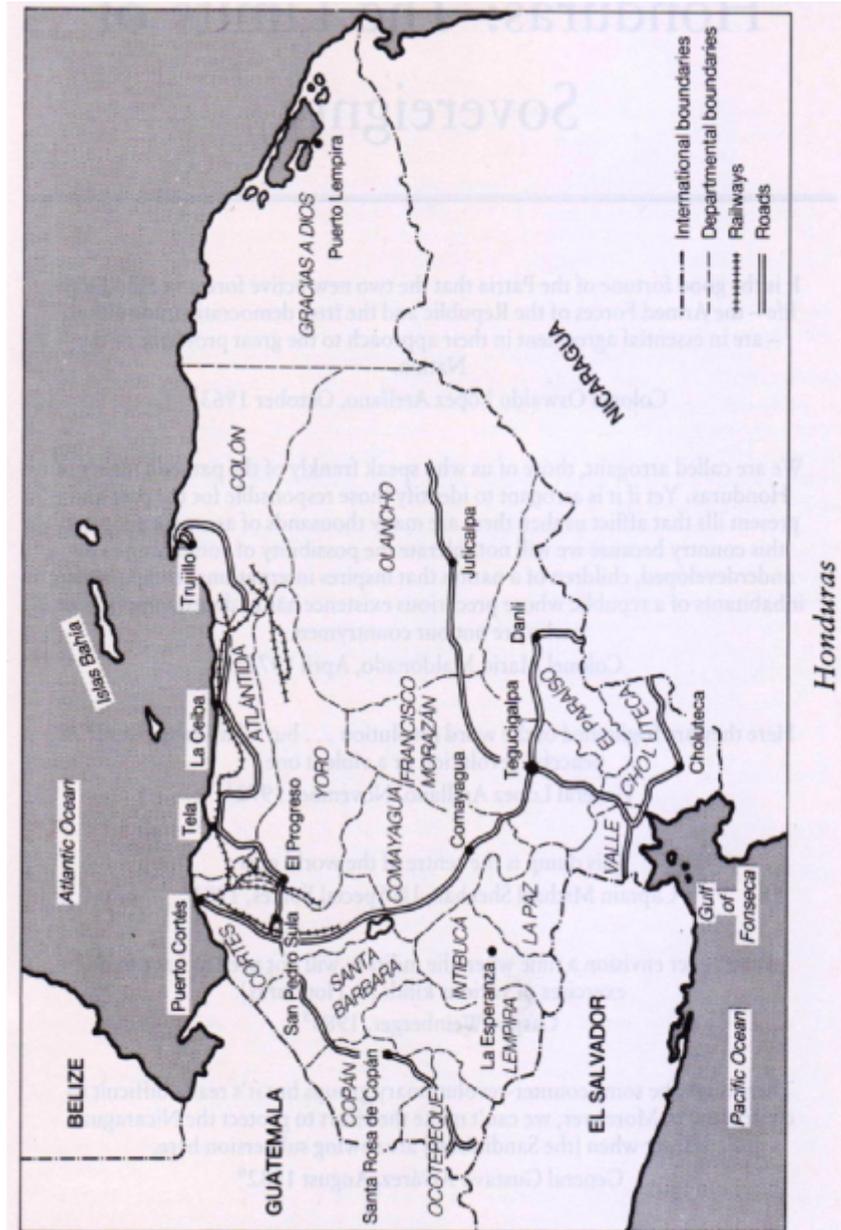
³ Marvin Barahona, *El Silencio Quedó Atrás Testimonios de la Huelga Bananera de 1954* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Editorial Guaymuras, 2004), 90. (Translated by Araceli Cortés)

APPENDIX D
Detail of North Coast of Honduras⁴



⁴ Full map can be found in James Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus a Political History of Modern Central America* (New York: Verso, 1988). 518.

APPENDIX E
 MAP OF HONDURAS⁵



⁵ Ibid.

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GLOSSARY

<i>Almuercero</i>	- a delivery boy that would deliver lunch to workers on behalf of the <i>Patrona</i> (or cook)
<i>Ayudantas</i>	-cook helper, usually related in some way to the <i>patrona</i> .
<i>Baleada</i>	-a fast food meal that grew out of the North Coast banana regions consisting of a large flour tortilla folded over beans, sour cream and cheese, with egg and sometimes chorizo.
<i>Campeño/Campeña</i>	- refers to banana workers that lived and worked in the banana labor camps. Workers use these terms when referring to themselves.
<i>Campos bananeros</i>	-banana labor and living camps
<i>Campesina/campesino</i>	- farm worker in Honduras.
<i>Chiviar/naipe</i>	-to <i>chiviar</i> is to play cards or dice. <i>Naipe</i> refers to playing cards.
<i>Cortero</i>	- a banana company work position in the <i>fincas</i> referring to the man that cuts the banana stems. The <i>cortero</i> was also usually a contractor and led a team of 4-10 workers.
<i>Costa Abajo</i>	-refers to the Western North Coast of Honduras
<i>Costa Arriba</i>	-refers to the Eastern North Coast of Honduras
<i>Cuque</i>	- a male cook helper in the <i>patrona's</i> kitchen, many times he was a young black man.
<i>Esquiroles</i>	-strike breakers
<i>Fincas bananeras</i>	-banana plantations
<i>Juntero</i>	-a banana company work position in the <i>fincas</i> referring to the man that gathered the banana stem once cut by the <i>cortero</i> and brought it out to the <i>mulero</i> and mule team for loading.

- Machanguay* -refers to the train most workers used to come into towns such as La Lima and El Progreso, believed to be a form of the English phrase "Merchandise train."
- Manguerero* -refers to the banana *finca* work position responsible for watering the *finca* during the nighttime shift.
- Mixto* -refers to a train workers rode to get from *fincas* into town, it means the "mixed train," meaning there may have been cars that carried product and other cars that carried people.
- Mulero* -refers to the banana *finca* work position of the man that received the banana stem from the *juntero* and packed it onto the mule team. The major responsibility of this worker was to load, drag the mules to the train and care for the mules.
- Palero* -refers to the banana *finca* work position where workers dug channels into the terrain in between *fincas* in the process of constructing a new *finca* operation. These channels would carry water that insured water for the entire *finca*.
- Patrona/mujer que cuidaba hombre*- a woman who worked in the *campos* as a cook, held an eating establishment and was paid by workers monthly.
- Poiseros/veneros* -refers to a banana *finca* work position where workers who sprayed pesticides. The words are derived from the word "poison" in English.
- Tren de pago/paguero*- refers to the train that ran all the *campos* on pay day.