

Transformation agraire et résistance en Colombie

James J. Brittain & R. James Sacouman

Résumé

En plus d'endurer la plus longue guerre civile continue de l'hémisphère occidental, la Colombie est ravagée par des décennies de dures politiques économiques néolibérales. Ces politiques, telles qu'appliquées dans les zones rurales de Colombie, visent la domination ou l'extermination économique et physique de la classe paysanne. Si les turbulences de la guerre civile n'ont pas épargné les villes colombiennes, elles ont surtout dévasté les campagnes. Au cœur de ces conditions d'assujettissement néanmoins bucoliques, La Esmeralda s'active pourtant, cas probant de résistance collective unifiée des paysans, travailleurs et activistes communautaires aux assauts économiques, politiques, culturels et militaires/paramilitaires menés par l'État. La Esmeralda est un des principaux projets de FENSUAGRO, le plus grand organisme rural colombien de main d'œuvre, qui représente et défend aussi bien ses membres que leurs communautés. Il s'agit essentiellement d'un centre expérimental, agricole et éducatif qui offre un environnement sécuritaire aux paysans déstitués et aux autres petits producteurs, et fournit des services socio-éducatifs pour améliorer les connaissances en agriculture organique, la compréhension de l'égalité des sexes et des droits des femmes, l'alphabétisation, et autres. Sur la toile de fond du contexte socioéconomique et politique national actuel, La Esmeralda se démarque fortement des violentes réalités qui ont baigné et baignent encore une grande partie de la Colombie agraire, et démontre la force d'âme dont font preuve les peuples ruraux pour créer une société pacifique et plus égalitaire.

Agrarian Transformation and Resistance in the Colombian Countryside

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Abstract

In addition to being devastated by decades of harsh neo-liberal economic policies, Colombia has been witness to the longest ongoing civil war in the Western Hemisphere. As applied in Colombia's rural areas, such policies are focused on the domination or the economic and physical extermination of the peasantry. While Colombia's cities have not been left unscathed by the turmoil, the rural regions have been far more devastated by the civil war. Nevertheless, within this subjugated yet bucolic condition lies La Esmeralda, a clear case of unified collective resistance by peasants, workers and community activists to state-led economic, political, cultural, and military/paramilitary assaults. La Esmeralda is a core project of FENSUAGRO, Colombia's largest rural-based labour organization, which represents and defends both members and their communities. In essence, it is an experimental agricultural and educational centre that provides displaced landless peasants and other small producers a safe environment while increasing understanding of organic agriculture, gender equity, and women's rights, literacy training, and other socio-educational services. When weighed against the backdrop of the nation's contemporary socioeconomic and political context, La Esmeralda provides a stark contrast to the violent realities that have and continue to surround much of rural Colombia and demonstrates the fortitude of rural people to create a more just and peaceful society.

Introduction

Ravaged by a half-century of civil war and two decades of harsh neoliberal economic policies that have devastated the agricultural and public sectors, the vast majority of the Colombian population has experienced intensified impoverishment. Within this increasingly destructive social environment, however, lies *La Esmeralda*. Located almost in the centre of the country, the *Federación Nacional Sindical Unitaria Agropecuaria*, FEN-

SUAGRO (National Federation of United Agricultural Farming Unions) created *La Esmeralda*, an educational centre in sustainable peasant production, self-organization and human rights: a progressive organic response to the horrors that have befallen many of the rural inhabitants of this Latin American nation made possible by the unified efforts of unionists throughout the countryside. Amongst the shade of plantain and banana trees, one can walk through the experimental agricultural and educational centre and look out over acres of coffee groves and see once displaced landless peasants peacefully harvesting organically grown Arabica beans; hear women conducting presentations on gender equity and women's rights to groups of young and old; or feel the thundering applause of *campesinos* commending friends and comrades who have completed courses at the centre's free self-sufficient school. Such activities, when weighed against the backdrop of the nation's contemporary socioeconomic and political context, are a steep contrast to the violent realities that have and continue to surround much of rural Colombia.

This article begins with a rather detailed account of the immiseration of the peasantry in contemporary rural Colombia. It then introduces some key Marxist theoretical points in order to understand the emergence and vitality of FENSUAGRO, Colombia's most important, peasant-run union and community action organization. We then discuss the highly significant case of FENSUAGRO's commitment to a new Colombia, its social and political education centre, *La Esmeralda*. We argue that *La Esmeralda* demonstrates the fortitude of thousands of organized rural workers labouring with some of the most impoverished and exploited peoples to create a more just Colombia. Its existence and growth is evidence of a Marxist theoretical approach to the political economy of resistance in Colombia that emphasizes the centrality and leadership of the associated peasantry in movements for a new Colombia.

To carry out the following study we employed participant observation of the activities at *La Esmeralda* coupled by semi-structured in-depth interviews with various peoples associated with the organization directly. This entailed interviews with FENSUAGRO's highest levels of leadership through to grassroots members, all of whom have a direct sustained connection to the countryside as a small or medium-sized producer. The essential purpose of these discussions was to empower participants them-

selves to explain *their* views toward social change and resistance.

The Political Economy of Rural Colombia: The Realities of Neoliberalism, Land, Coffee, and Coca

Due to its numerous natural resources and impressive commodity-based export potential, Colombia appears, on paper, to be a wealthy country. In 2003, the then United States Attorney General Ramsey Clark listed the extensive surplus of resources that could, in fact, meet the social needs of Colombia's population:

The nation's productivity is enormous. Colombia has 26 million head of cattle, 60 per cent more in proportion to its population than the United States, a chicken for every pot and abundant fish. Annually, Colombia grows 180 pounds of plantains for every man, woman and child; 130 pounds of potatoes; 110 pounds of bananas and 90 pounds of rice and 50 pounds of corn. Colombia produces 830,000 tons of the best coffee in the world and 32 million tons of sugar cane a year . . . It extracts close to 200 million barrels of oil a year with new fields awaiting development and 24 million tons of coal, the largest coal deposits in South America. More than 700,000 troy ounces of gold are mined annually and more than 6 million carats of emeralds, half the world production (Clark, 2003: 24).

In the midst of this apparent surplus, however, is the reality that consumption levels within Colombia are skewed and malnourishment is rampant, especially within the countryside. Mario A. Murillo and indigenous activist Jesus Rey Avirama (2004: 38) noted that "notwithstanding the relative stability and wealth of the country, one cannot erase the fact that the majority of Colombians are poor" leaving Colombia with the second "most inequitable distribution of wealth in the Western Hemisphere". Former political counsellor to the Canadian Embassy in Bogotá, Nicholas Coghlan (2004: 153-154) noted that one of the reasons for this disparity is that Colombia's "considerable wealth is concentrated in fewer hands than in most of Latin America" and that the perpetuation of this inequitable distribution of wealth sustains the struggle between rich and poor (Ramirez Cuellar, 2005: 83; Coghlan, 2004: 153; Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, 2004;

Korzeniewicz and Smith, 2000: 10-11; see Table 1). In 2003, following the implementation of privatization programs and state-supported land concentration incentives, Clark noted that “in the midst of this vast potential for social and economic justice, the human condition in Colombia is desperate”.

Per capita income is barely over \$2,000 with more than half the population living on less than \$500. The gap between the rich few and many poor is a human and national tragedy. A very small part of the population holds most of the wealth. The richest 1 per cent control 45 per cent of the wealth. Half of the farmland is held by 37 interests (Clark, 2003: 24).

Due to the negative effects of neoliberalism (Díaz-Callejas, 2005), rates of poverty have dramatically amplified over the last several years as the societal fall-out from the implementation of neoliberal social and economic policies are increasingly realized (Veltmeyer, 2005: 97). In 2004, it was documented that 97 per cent of the people within rural Colombia had access to only one-quarter of all the country’s arable land, while in 2005, a mere 1.8 per cent of Colombia’s populace held legal tender to 53 per cent of the land (Ramirez Cuellar, 2005: 83). Within a year such disparities increased, as 61.2 per cent of all officially registered rural land holdings were owned by roughly 0.4 per cent of the population (Ahmad, 2006: 60; Avilés, 2006: 24). During a long journey over the poorly maintained roads of Southern Colombia’s countryside, a FENSUAGRO representative informed us that one can drive for a day and never leave the same property as one landowning family can own entire regions – equalling

Table 1: Colombian Gini Coefficient ²

<i>Time Period</i>	<i>Gini Coefficient</i>
1980	0.518
1989	0.532
1994	0.505
1999	0.566
2004	0.562
2006	0.584

thousands of hectares – yet the family lives in either Medellín or Bogotá.

Colombia has the second largest internally displaced population on the planet while only 20 per cent of all its accessible land is utilized (Restrepo, 2003; see also Sweig and McCarthy, 2005: 32). When examining the issue of displacement, Vieira (2008) noted that the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Colombia rose 38 per cent from the time of the rise of paramilitarism in the 1980s to 2007. It is now second only to Sudan, which has the largest number of IDPs in the world. To put this into perspective, Colombia has well over one million more IDPs than the entire Middle-East combined (including Iraq). Colombian government figures indicate the country has roughly 1.9 million IDPs (see Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2007). However, this is half the figure documented by numerous domestic and international human rights organizations and research centres. For example, the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (*Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento*, CODHES), the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) all agree that the actual figure fluctuates between 3.9 and 4.2 million (see Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento, 2007; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2007; Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2007). While displacement did not become a significant problem until the rise of paramilitarism, forced displacements have increased considerably during the Uribe Vélez and Francisco Santos Calderón administrations [2002- present] (Consultoría, 2007)

With the increase in land centralization and displacements, rural poverty has soared.³ Since the adoption of neoliberal economic policies, rural poverty has increased 12 per cent (Avilés, 2006: 90; Stokes, 2005: 130). Such factors have led to the recognition by many that it is within the rural regions of the country that the most devastating political-economic consequences persist (Leech, 2002: 17; Keen and Haynes, 2000: 534). Former Colombian Senator Apolinar Díaz-Callejas (2005) indicated that over 69 per cent of the entire Colombian population now lives in poverty whereas the countryside has a rate hovering around 87 per cent (Rojas, 2005: 210; Contraloría General de la República, 2004: 43, 44; UNDP, 2003: 42 – see Graph 1). Doug Stokes (2005: 130) adds that the combination of neoliberalism

and capital concentration has intensified class divisions; “In 1990 the ratio of income between the poorest and richest 10 per cent was 40:1. After a decade of economic restructuring this reached 80:1 in 2000” (see also Avilés, 2006: 24; Coghlan, 2004: 153; Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, 2004; Controloría General de la República, 2004: 47; see Table 2).⁴

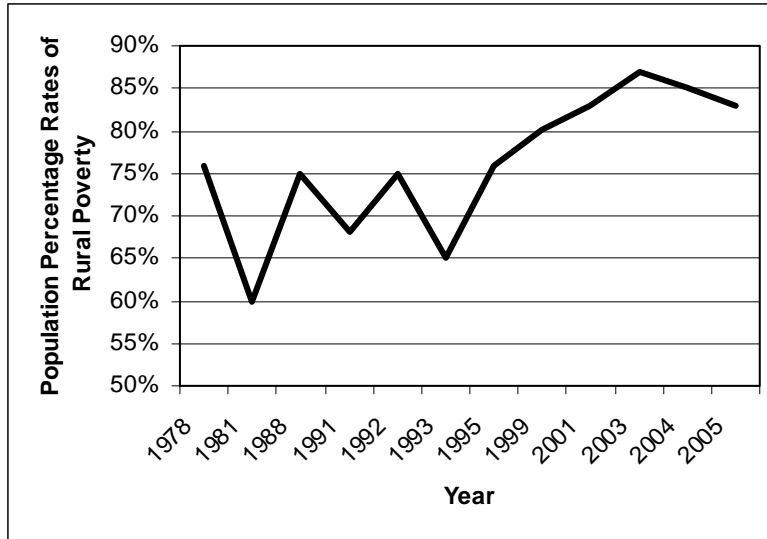
Table 2: Incremental Leaps in Income Distribution Inequality⁵

<i>Decade</i>	<i>Distribution of Income (Richest 10% and Poorest 10%)</i>
1950s	11:1
1980s	18:1
1990s	40:1
2000s	80:1

One of the most acute examples of the attacks felt by the rural population from neoliberal economic policies has been the reorganization of the coffee industry. Once a thriving coffee growing region, sections of southwestern Colombia witnessed a dramatic shift in the return of their once lucrative product. At its peak in 1955, coffee accounted for roughly 84 per cent of Colombian export earnings (Kofas, 1986: 17; Arrubla, 1970: 136; Mandel, 1968: 460) and roughly 300,000 to 350,000 farmers cultivated coffee while 2 million Colombians benefited directly and indirectly from the industry during the 1970s and 1980s (O’Shaughnessy and Branford, 2005: 29; Harding, 1996: 40). Increasing global trade and changes to the tariff structures, along with the denunciation of the International Coffee Agreement (ICA)⁶ in the late-1980s and 1990s resulted in falling export prices, thus drastically altering the historic and stable returns from the once sustainable coffee harvests (Harding, 1996: 41).

For many years, the cultivation of coffee beans provided farmers in the coffee-growing areas a measure of security and stability in the midst of Colombia’s violence. But the international market price for coffee—Colombia’s third-largest legal export, behind oil and coal—has plummeted ... forcing many farmers to seek alternative means of survival. Increasing numbers of coffee growers have begun replacing their coffee plants with coca bushes. . . The dilemma now faced by

Graph 1: Comparative Leaps in General Rates of Rural Poverty⁷



Colombia’s coffee growers began with a World Bank development project in Vietnam that, during the 1990s, encouraged Vietnamese farmers to grow coffee. The program was so “successful” that in 2001 Vietnam surpassed Colombia to become the number two coffee producing country in the world behind Brazil. However, a resulting global glut in coffee caused the market price to plummet from over \$2 a pound at the end of the 1980s to 58 cents by the end of 2001. Consequently, coffee growers around the world, including those in Vietnam, are now desperately struggling to survive by growing a crop that sells for less than it costs to produce (Leech, 2002: 50-51).

The elimination of the ICA further hurt small rural producers in the highlands of south-central Colombia as indicated below:

The liberalization of the international price of coffee in 1989 after the collapse of the International Coffee Agreement, which ended restrictive quotas on supply, brought the price of coffee to a thirty-year low by 2003, exacerbating already extensive rural poverty.

The collapse of coffee prices led thousands of small coffee farmers to switch to growing poppies for heroin production, as coffee input fell by 25 per cent (Avilés, 2006: 90).

According to renowned Colombian political economist Héctor Mondragón, falling coffee returns were caused by the World Trade Organization and international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank as they compelled many countries to reduce and/or eliminate national tariffs on many agricultural products, including coffee. As a result, farmers were unable to maintain subsistence levels through the growth of conventional agricultural products.⁸

Thanks to free trade, the Colombian farmer has no other option. The agricultural sector has been ruined. We import 8 times more food than we did ten years ago. Starting last year, we've been importing coffee, to meet our export quotas. The quotas can't even be met because the price is too low. Latin America is destroying the coffee harvest. In the last 2 months, coffee prices dropped 22 per cent for the grower. It was already at a low—1/3 of the price 10 years ago. Selling coffee is now a losing proposition. Production costs are higher than the sale price ... The US broke the world coffee pact, which provided some stability for growers and consumers alike, in order to make the WTO happen. Before that Colombia had a fund used to stabilize the price of coffee. Now such a fund is illegal (Mondragón, 2001).⁹

Gabriel Silva, an official from the National Federation of Colombian Coffee Growers (CNCF), stated that from a \$4 dollar cup of coffee purchased in North America “around one cent will go back to the farmer” (ABC, 2004). This represents a drop in revenue to coffee producers from \$3.80 for every pound of coffee in 1997, falling to \$0.70 in 2004 (ABC, 2004). FENSUAGRO coffee growers, alongside popular US and British business reports, indicate that the return is really lower.

In the fall of 2005, the Associated Press published a report quoting Silva who stated that during the 2003-2004 coffee season¹⁰ the price per pound was roughly 77 cents. This ‘data’ is

rather questionable as Farr indicates that Colombian coffee had reached its highest return in years when, in January 2004 (during the 2003-2004 season), it fetched a sum of “\$690 a metric ton” (Farr, 2004) or roughly 31 cents per pound. FENSUAGRO argued that it was important to measure whether farmers received an increase in revenue from their coffee sales, which, according to several interviews with small-scale coffee farmers conducted by the authors within the coffee zones between August 2004 and December 2006, they did not.¹¹

Losses due to neoliberal economic policies were not just witnessed within the coffee sector but throughout the entire agriculture industry as a whole. The rural population had few options to which it could turn for survival. Hence, it was during this period that roughly half a million peasants began to cultivate coca with an approximate 1 million turning to coca as a source of socioeconomic security in some function (Richani, 2002: 97, 75). Such figures are significant in light of the changes to the coffee industry. As noted, prior to neoliberalism, coffee provided a form of livelihood to an estimated 300,000 to 350,000 small producers and peasants (O’Shaughnessy and Branford, 2005: 29; Harding, 1996: 40). By the 1980s, roughly 300,000 peasants were directly involved in the industry and received some level of income while the 1990s saw coca cultivation quickly double within certain regions of Colombia (see Schulte-Bockholt, 2006: 98; Felbab-Brown, 2005: 112; Leech, 2002: 43).¹² When weighed against the number of coffee farmers that once existed in the southern coffee regions (300,000), one can recognize the comparative proportionate movement toward the cultivation of coca as a means of survival (Peceny and Durnan, 2006: 109; O’Shaughnessy and Branford, 2005: 29).

Many benefits have accrued to the peasantry and small-producers from coca production such as the elimination of “the high transaction costs otherwise incurred by transporting legal crops to markets in areas with very poor transportation systems”, (Felbab-Brown, 2005: 108-109; see also Richani, 2002: 71). Coca has remained one of the only crops that can be grown in the harsh, poor lands inhabited by the peasantry, allowing “the *campesinos*’ to keep their heads above water (Goff, 2004: 33; Rochlin, 2003: 135-136). Although the localized peasantry who choose to utilize the cultivation of coca to sustain their families (Peceny and Durnan, 2006: 99) receive only a “small portion of

the profit from the cocaine market, the illegality of coca means that they reap substantially more from producing this commodity than from any other crop”.¹³

This livelihood [illicit crop cultivation] is not only stable, but also far more comfortable than the alternatives open to poor, minimally-mobile peasants. The price that traffickers can offer for coca leaves surpasses the price peasants can get for cocoa pods by between two and eight times, for rubber by four times, and for maize by more than 40 times (Felbab-Brown, 2005: 108).

It is important to note that the growth and expansion of the coca-industry throughout much of rural Colombia is not based solely on the increased concentration of land and inequitable distribution of income. Such conditions are rather a subcategory of a larger problem within the national economy; an economy that exists and is based upon a larger globalized capitalist economy centred on the same principal. Many of the small-producers and subsistence peasants interviewed by the authors shared the feeling that neoliberalism means even worse days are sure to be seen on the horizon.

In response to the rising rates of poverty and the growth in coca cultivation, FENSUAGRO has opted for cooperative development that is of, for, and by the rural people of Colombia. By creating a unified labour body through which tens of thousands of rural producers can come together, discuss, and act on issues of importance, FENSUAGRO is providing an option that responds to both the grassroots and structural needs. Consolidating various sectors of Colombia’s diverse rural population under the shared goal of resistance and social change, the organization has been able to respond to the ills brought about by the Colombian political and economic elite and the international capitalist paradigm.

FENSUGARO: An Organized Class-based Response to Political and Economic Exclusion

Within the Marxist tradition, numerous arguments have come to the fore emphasizing the need to dismiss dogmatic interpretations which negate the potential or power of a class conscious peasantry (see Raby, 2006). Saul (2006: 48) contests any

approach failing to recognize the agency of those organized proletarians within the global South; such workers, both rural and urban, play an essential role “in keeping anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist themes firmly in the mix of global resistance”. In Colombia, the urban working class has been crucial to the struggle for labour-union consciousness and for garnering benefits. On the other hand, peasant-based movements continue to demonstrate the most effective class conscious force leading anti-imperialist resistance in the Andean country (Petras, Veltmeyer, Vasapollo, and Casadio, 2005: 92, 102). It is important to acknowledge the radical capacity of this non-traditional stratum of society. The rural population in Colombia has produced a much needed movement that can successfully resist immiseration while creating the conditions for substantive and social change within the countryside. Those approaches that assert that peasants can only be subservient allies in the struggle against capitalism may contest such findings or even disregard the necessity of the peasantry within contemporary social relations of production. Doing so, however, fails to take into account that historically this peasantry has been essential to the growth of capitalism in the global South.

Dismissing as conscious actors half the global population (Amin, 2004: 32) ironically negates key Marxist insights. In fact, the peasantry in Colombia today demonstrates a significant force in resisting the expansion of exploitive capitalist relations. Lenin, for instance, opposed any notion that the peasantry was an inferior actor within the construct of capitalism or a deterrent to the system’s progress. On the contrary, he proclaimed that the bucolic producer assisted in the continuity and expansion of capitalism through cultural-economic forms; i.e., child labour, absence of working hours, etc. (Lenin, 1964b: 120-129). In fact, Lenin (1964a: 173) argued that the peasantry, prior to coming to a place of class consciousness, was, in fact, capitalism’s “deepest and most durable foundation” and ally. As capital’s need to expand continued, however, so too did the marginalization and subsequent dissolution of the once rural landholders into two specific classes; the rural bourgeoisie and the rural proletariat (Lenin, 1964a: 174). Doing so more clearly situated the now rural proletarian, surviving only through the selling of one’s labour power, in the same realm as the more classically referred urban proletarian, thereby increasing the conditions of evolved class consciousness.

Years prior to Lenin's assessment, Marx argued that the peasantry was more than able to relate as a class member to the (more traditionally accepted) industrial worker. In *Class Struggles in France*, Marx (1978: 122) reasoned that although the peasantry was exploited, albeit in a different fashion than the industrial proletariat, they were still exploited in the same 'form' – that form being 'capital'. In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx and Engels assessed that what happened within the rural stage of a given economy was paralleled in the urban setting. Both the city and countryside were affected by capitalism. "The farmer produces wheat, etc. in much the same way as the manufacturer produces yarn or machines" (Marx and Engels, 1998: 608). Marx (1996b: 386) recognized that "a radical change in the mode of production in one sphere of industry involves a similar change in another". A radical alteration within the rural sphere had the potential to result in dramatic changes for the urban; hence the relevance of both rural resistance and urban struggle. Under capitalist formation, the urban worker as well as the rural labourer, were potentially united in their resistance to the mutually exploitative system. It is in this synchronistic relationship that both the peasant and the industrial worker share a similar class disposition (Marx and Engels, 1976: 490-491; Marx, 1989d: 518).

Within this perspective, de Janvry places the Latin American peasantry in a proper class framework by illustrating that "the rural proletariat very often has the appearance of a peasant, owing to his control over a small plot of land, even though the social relations that characterize it are more those of a worker" (de Janvry, 1981: 99). De Janvry, like Lenin, explains how as capitalism globalized so to would peasants increasingly be forced into a class reality of class-based resistance. Post and Wright (1989: 151-152) describe how the rural labourer/producer became a part of the class conscious proletariat through the material conditions in which he/she existed. They argue that as capitalism increasingly expanded throughout the world, organized resistance against the social relations of production was a necessity. They make a case that the peasantry of the global South is "now so linked to the market that much of their labour is devoted to producing a surplus drained from them and turned into value for capital" (Post and Wright, 1989: 151). In short, the peasantry of the contemporary period is clearly a working class, albeit in a different, apparently more indirect, form than that of the urban-

based industrial worker, struggling in an antagonist position to capitalist exploitation.

Class struggle is organized resistance to the negative confines of capitalist society and imperial expansionism. Like many countries throughout the Americas, Colombia has a dual economy¹⁴ and it is within this structure that FENSUAGRO exists. Over the last three decades, FENSUAGRO has come to be a formidable force in Colombia's working-class struggle for justice, respect, and equity. Like many labour organizations that exist around the world, FENSUAGRO was formed not on a simple premise of workers coming together to satisfy their individual wants but rather as a material response to the systemic repression carried out by the state (both government and military) and the economic elite. Within the context of Colombia's widespread reputation of poor labour standards, especially systemic abuse against movements attempting to better the social and economic conditions of workers, FENSUAGRO has been targeted for extermination by rural large-scale capital, the narco-mafia, the Colombian state, and its paramilitary associates.

FENSUAGRO is comprised entirely of workers in rural production (be they peasants, semi-proletarians who sometimes directly sell their labour power, or full-time workers). Creating a progressive model of trade-unionism, FENSUAGRO organizes rural communities to defend against displacements and atrocities carried out by the cartel of landowners, state officials, and paramilitary criminals. For example, FENSUAGRO resists large-scale capitalist incursions into rural production via monoculture palm oil plantations while organizing domestic and international markets for local organic, fairly produced and traded goods. Such forms of resistance are primarily defensive since they seek to maintain and gradually promote better working conditions and livelihoods. In one sense, they are reactionary forms of struggle, since massive political economic, military, and paramilitary assaults have had to be beaten back for survival. In its 30 plus years of existence, FENSUAGRO's resistance to immiseration has made peasant and worker unity a life and death issue.

The subject of human rights abuses and repression toward organized labour in Colombia is not ground-breaking news. The Latin American nation has been acknowledged as the most dangerous country in the world for trade-unionists and worker collectives for some time. Since 2000, Colombia has been home

to ninety per cent of all the unionists murdered globally, in addition to having the highest rate of threats and forced displacement of workers in the world. Since the presidency of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, [2002-present], atrocities have increased against organized labour. While the current administration has claimed that documented homicides against domestic unionists have decreased during Uribe's tenure, arbitrary disappearances, illegal searches, and harassment have risen significantly.¹⁵ During Uribe's first term [2002-2006], illegal searches of unionists and their headquarters grew by 1100 per cent (ENS, 2004: 3). In addition, there were more disappearances of workers in 2005 than in the previous seven years combined, and 2006 saw the greatest escalation of hostilities toward unionists than any year prior (Leech, 2005; John, 2006). With the majority of the country's 865,000 unionists located within metropolitan areas, many abuses take place in cities and are thus more easily recognized by foreign labour groups, NGOs, and social justice organizations that have sought solidarity with these urban unions.¹⁶ While this solidarity is imperative, this has left the rural sector of the Colombian labour movement largely unaccounted for.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Colombian state, fully encouraged by the US administration and various IFIs, systematically supported a rural land policy that enabled the country's economic and political elite to centralize wealth and political and ideological power in the hands of a limited few. The state implemented legislation that effectively allowed large landholders, cattle ranchers, and other entrepreneurs to legally employ armed security/paramilitary forces to 'lawfully' induce acts of class-based violence to displace the localized population and quell acts of resistance (Murillo and Avirama, 2004: 101; Leech, 2002: 20; Richani, 2002: 50, 52, 104-105). These activities were said to accelerate economic growth through the monopolization of underutilized natural resources and subsequent industrial development (Brittain, 2005). Based on this policy, much of Colombia's violence has been aimed at the rural peripheries. It is within this context that numerous *campesinos* organized themselves in order to respond to their immediate conditions of exploitation and repression by creating a long-term solution to defend peasant-based agriculture for the collective benefit of small producers.

FENSUAGRO's organizational history began in 1976 with the establishment of the *Federación Nacional Sindical Ag-*

ropecuaria, FENSA (National Federation of Agricultural Unions) – an independent labour movement seeking agrarian reform through a coalition of rural producers and indigenous peoples across Colombia. Several years later a national labour congress was established with the creation of the *Central Unitaria de Trabajadores*, CUT (Central Trade Union Federation of Colombia), which helped unify workers within the urban centres of the country. In conjunction with the CUT's formation in 1987, FENSA restructured itself into a larger, more widespread labour organization, inclusive of all rural workers and of rural communities, which represented a parallel model to the CUT within the rural regions of the country. As a result, a more significant, more encompassing collective of rural workers was mobilized in a rural context (FENSUAGRO) in response to Colombia's dual economy dominated by elite interests.

FENSUAGRO's president, Eberto Díaz Montes, stated in an interview that the organization's fundamental task was the promotion of a multi-faceted program that seeks an 'organic unification' in FENSUAGRO of participating rural unions, small producer associations, worker cooperatives, community action groups, and regional collectives. Through such institutional solidarity, the organization fights for a real agrarian reform; defends rural wage-labourers; promotes the equal and active participation of rural women, youth, indigenous, and Afro-Colombian populations; seeks to decentralize the monopoly of large landowners; and strives for a more just, peaceful Colombia through the pursuit of a social and political solution to the country's civil war. FENSUAGRO is solely constructed, led, and organized by the pastoral inhabitants of Colombia. It has become the country's largest rural labour organization with representation in twenty-two of the country's thirty-two departments. It brings together thirty-seven different union locals, seven rural associations and an estimated membership of ninety to one-hundred thousand¹⁷, equalling roughly 10 per cent of the nation's unionists. The organization champions small and medium-sized farmers, agricultural workers (flower and banana workers, coffee, palm, and sugar-cane harvesters, etc.), landless peasants, subsistence-based *campesinos*, day labourers, tenant farmers, and other members of the rural populace. With such a significant and broad socio-geographical diversity of members in conscious opposition to the exploits of elite interests, FENSUAGRO has developed into one of the most

important sociopolitical organizations struggling for social justice within Colombia. FENSUAGRO attempts to defend and expand, through class-rooted collective education and action, the dignity of rural labour and rural communities.

One of the mechanisms through which FENSUAGRO is pursuing its objective of a more sustainable equitable society is *La Esmeralda*. Created through the consolidated efforts of thousands of members of FENSUAGRO seeking to provide other *campesinos* with credit, education and sustainable agricultural practices, *La Esmeralda* is an alternative experimental farm and educational centre located in Puerto Brasil, within the municipality of Viotá, Cundinamarca. Over the last few years, the centre has educated thousands of rural Colombians through peasant-based processes of communal solidarity. The centre teaches and implements organic farming techniques; the protection and internal sharing of indigenous seeds, environmental resource alteration and sustainability; and provides courses in animal husbandry, diversification of presently existing and future alternative crops, the recovery of food production sovereignty and the strengthening of a *campesino* socio-economy as an alternative to neoliberal economic policy.

In 2005, a new program was introduced at *La Esmeralda* to respond to the growing number of rural peoples being displaced and dispossessed from their traditional livelihoods by reactionary forces. The campaign saw FENSUAGRO establish a rehabilitation project that assists roughly thirty displaced Colombian families over a two-three month cycle by providing housing and educational services within the *La Esmeralda* facilities. During this period, displaced Colombians are given training in organic agriculture, caloric nutrition, mountain-based and plains ecology, literacy and writing skills, agrarian politics, and education on the importance of women in farming. The project also conducts symposiums on how communities can effectively compile data on local human rights abuses so as to expose atrocities in an open and timely manner. Once the two-three month period is over the families leave the centre and colonize unused or fallow lands and begin the learned cooperative farming initiatives. However, as FENSUAGRO generates more progressive, self-directed conditions for social change, a growing counter-response has met its efforts.

Colombia's Civil War and its Impact on FENSUAGRO

The Colombian civil war is a complex struggle, with the Colombian elite continuing to centralize wealth and political power in the hands of a select few. As stated, this dominant minority promotes neoliberal economic policies and seeks to disintegrate social and collective rights with the intention of debilitating internal social movements, labour groups struggling for equity, indigenous collectives seeking localized autonomy, and rural producers desiring a progressive redistributive land reform program. It is based on this pursuit of power and profit that a forty-four year old civil war has continued throughout the country, disproportionately affecting the people in the countryside. As FENSUAGRO becomes an ever greater mobilizing force for rural people to demonstrate their power, it has also grown to be the most targeted rural organization by reactionary right-wing forces within Colombia. Since its inception in 1976, close to seven hundred members have allegedly disappeared or been murdered by state and paramilitary forces with a significant increase during the last five years. After meetings with several leaders in the organization, we were informed that close to a thousand FENSUAGRO members have been abducted, arrested, detained and murdered by specific right-wing groups since the arrival of the Uribe administration.¹⁸ Along with targeting individuals, reactionary forces have targeted numerous FENSUAGRO-based projects, most notably *La Esmeralda*.

Since its creation, *La Esmeralda* has become the target of numerous aggressive acts at the hands of right-wing paramilitaries and Colombia's armed forces. Due to the rural socio-geographical location of FENSUAGRO's activities, many members live in regions in, or in close proximity to, left-wing guerrillas who have been struggling against the Colombian state for half a century. Interestingly, people associated with FENSUAGRO repeatedly indicated that none of their members have ever had a problem or experienced any difficulties with members of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas - Ejército del Pueblo*, FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army), the most prominent political-military guerrilla movement within Colombia. Prior to the arrival of reactionary forces such as paramilitaries, the guerrillas lived within areas of significant rural populations and provided a sense of stability for those in said locales without incident (Hylton, 2006; Taussig,

2004b; Pearce, 1990). Recent assaults targeting rural areas by Colombian state and paramilitary forces has, according to our interviewees, greatly increased incidents of threats, torture, or attacks on FENSUAGRO organizers, their families, and other unarmed civilians associated with the organization.

During 2004 and 2006, the (allegedly demobilized) *Auto-defensas Unidas de Colombia*, AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) paramilitary constructed roadblocks and threatened supporters entering the Centre and prevented the movement of peoples or supplies bound for the Centre throughout Viotá. AUC and state forces have also destroyed sections of *La Esmeralda*'s infrastructure, detained and caused the disappearance of several FENSUAGRO members, and killed over two dozen unionists working specifically within the community. As of March 2006, one of the social architects of *La Esmeralda*, Huber Ballesteros (FENSUAGRO's vice-president), and Oscar Salazar (a community leader from La Vega, Cauca) became blatant targets of state intimidation and harassment. Military intelligence officers had begun shadowing Ballesteros and Salazar in their former home base of Popayán, Cauca with a fully-tinted Mazda 323 and a Honda street-bike. Such activities were of significance as five other FENSUAGRO members had been assassinated in the year prior after experiencing identical circumstances. The Colombian government's *Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad*, DAS (Administrative Department of Security) has been one of the most prominent groups accused of being involved in assaults and detentions of numerous FENSUAGRO members over the past four years and is alleged by unionists in the organization to have assassinated workers as well.¹⁹ Ballesteros has gone into hiding while continuing his work for FENSUAGRO.

Conclusion

The preceding provides an account of how class conscious resistance continues to prevail in rural Colombia. Even in the face of extreme violence, intimidation, and repression, FENSUAGRO continues to conduct its work while maintaining its cooperative activities at *La Esmeralda*. After the attacks on the Centre, the authors witnessed, in late-2006, that the members of the organization have not abandoned the project but rather have begun an expansion of the facility due to increased support from the community and an ongoing need for future programs to bene-

fit the increasingly marginalized rural populace.

Within the debates and lessons being learned in the new socialist wave in the Americas (see, e.g., Harnecker, 2007; Lebowitz, 2006; and, more generally, LeBlanc, 2006), FENSUAGRO, a radical, peasant-organized rural movement, is often neglected. FENSUAGRO represents a vital and leading example of the self-emancipation of the working classes and small peasantry. It is a prime example of a practice that is much more broadly communal and participatory than the waves associated with the Paris Commune in the nineteenth century and the Russian Revolution of the twentieth century. Over the last thirty years, FENSUAGRO has demonstrated that through unity and struggle Colombian *campesinos* can implement an organic response to not only the socially irresponsible economic policies that favour elite interests but that they have the capacity to resist the aggressions of the Colombian state. It may be through such a model that a peaceful and more socially just Colombia can come into fruition.

Endnotes

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Brittain and Sacouman are both co-founders of the Atlantic Canada-Colombia Research Group (ACCRG). The authors are highly appreciative of all the comments made by anonymous readers, the Editor and the Assistant Editor. We accept responsibility for all errors and omissions.
2. Sources: Rojas, 2006: 3; Ramirez Cuellar, 2005: 83; Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, 2004; Korzeniewicz and Smith, 2000: 10-11.
3. It has been argued that rates of land centralization and rates of poverty can be parallel (Safford and Palacios, 2003: 309-311).
4. While a clear inequitable demonstration of income distribution is recognized above, it must be noted that this is a conservative overview of wealth allocations. In certain regions these figures are greatly underestimated, according to Feder (1971) and Harrison (1993). Feder's (1971: 10-11) study, related to the mid-late twentieth century, stated that in one rural community within southern Colombia the income distribution averaged 480: 1. Harrison's figures, while not as high as Feder's, noted that in the later years of the twentieth century income differentiation between the 'average large land-

- owner' and the 'average labourer' was anywhere from 80:1 to 200:1 (Harrison, 1993: 109).
5. Source: Avilés, 2006: 24; Hylton, 2006: 118; Richani, 2005: 118; Rojas, 2005: 210; Comisión Colombiana de Juristas, 2004; Murillo and Avirama, 2004: 38, 129; Livingstone, 2003: 100; UNDP, 2003: 42; Safford and Palacios, 2003: 307; Lang, 1988: 99. Additional confirmation was provided by renowned Colombian economist Nelson Raúl Fajardo Marulanda in conversation with the author in December, 2003. Source: Stokes, 2005: 130; Pearse, 1990: 70; Lambert, 1971: 46.
 6. The ICA places "limitations on export volume" in global coffee production and distribution; therefore it can be thought of as the coffee equivalent of OPEC's policies toward oil production (Vanden and Prevost, 2006: 153; Nelson, Shultz, and Slighton, 1971: 249).
 7. Source: Stokes, 2005: 130; Pearse, 1990: 70; Lambert, 1971: 46.
 8. If the third largest legitimate export (coffee) leaving the country cannot afford a peasant or small-producer a means of subsistence than there is little to no chance that yucca (potatoes), maize (corn), or bananas will either (Kirk, 2003: 264). A staple within the Colombian diet one 50lb sack of yucca (potatoes) costs about 3000 to 5000 (about \$2.00 USD) pesos to produce. However, given the time and labour power that has been applied to the actual production of the yucca, coupled with the land that was cleared to grow the goods, the transportation costs to get the product to market, and other 'hidden' expenses that are associated with the production and sale of the good mean that, in many cases, the farmer actually experiences a loss of income (Richani, 2002: 71).
 9. Gutierrez (2003: 52) shares Mondragón's disdain by citing how "opening the nation's economy to so-called world competition meant that Colombia would now import more than it exported. The once-healthy agricultural sector was devastated".
 10. The average recognized coffee season runs from October to September.
 11. The principal reason for the rise in coffee prices in 2004 (a four year high) was a "6.7 magnitude earthquake that struck the west coast of Colombia", which devastated the coffee growing region, the producers, and their families, thus reducing production for the interim and increasing demand. Interestingly, yet disturbingly, the last large increase in coffee returns also occurred in 1999 when a 6.2-magnitude earthquake hit the coffee growing zones and took the lives of over 1,000 coffee harvesters within the coffee growing regions (Farr, 2004). Most disconcertingly is that gains in coffee prices are applauded without examining the social costs of monetary returns: the lives of the producers.

12. Schulte-Bockholt (2006: 96) broadens the claim that the peasantry became involved in the coca industry as a direct consequence of the state's failure to provide an efficient constructive land reform (see also Berry, 1999), compounded by the increasing monopoly-based global economic policies affecting agricultural products throughout the world via neoliberalism.
13. Schulte-Bockholt (2006: 146n.43) provides a clear example of how the peasantry would not make much at this end of the drug economy as "the product is worth far less at this stage of its production and distribution cycle".
14. The term dual economy largely refers to a country's socioeconomic model whose class make-up consists of an industrial and commodity-based working-class that resides alongside a rural sphere of agricultural subsistence/wage-labourers. Vanden and Prevost (2006: 158) refer to this system as being divided into two sectors; "one was comprised of near-feudal social and economic relations on the *latifundio* and in landowner/sharecropper relations and sustenance agriculture; the other was centered in the modern export sector that tended to employ modern capitalist practices". While spoken of in the past tense, such a system still exists to some degree in much of Latin America, especially Colombia.
15. It should also be noted that in early-2007, during the Uribe administration, there was a manipulation of crime statistics that served "to make Colombia appear safer than it is," which subsequently resulted in a lack of clarity in previous figures (Crowe, 2007). The former Director of the Federal Statistics Office of the government, Cesar Caballero, leaked that the President's Office "told him not to release a study that found sharply higher homicide rates". In addition, Caballero stated that Uribe created a formal policy presenting an image that security had improved under his administration, even though, in reality, it had not (Crowe, 2007).
16. The majority of Colombian unionists are found in sectors associated with education, health care, the public sector, and national resource extraction, i.e. mining and petroleum (Beck, 2006).
17. The actual formal membership figures are purposely difficult to calculate due to the fact that if information about the individuals, communities, and municipalities in alliance with FENSUAGRO was made public, then those persons (and regions) would be immediately targeted by state and paramilitary forces.
18. Some individuals who have been detained, threatened, and interrogated by state forces include Fanime Reyes (secretary), Hernando Hernandez (indigenous human rights representative), Vitelvina Courteous Vargas (union leader), Rudy Robles (general secretary), Ney Medrano (a regional human rights director) and Eliecer Flores (a regional treasurer). More disturbing accounts of abuses include FEN-

SUAGRO's former vice-president Pedro Jaime Mosquera, Alberto Marquez, and Nelson Castiblanco Franco (Marquez's bodyguard) who were murdered by paramilitary forces, while Cesar Augusto Fonseca, Jose Rafael Fonseca Cassiani, and Ramon Fonseca Cassiani were mutilated by chainsaws. In May of 2008, one of FENSUAGRO's International Representatives was accused by the state of having direct links with the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas – Ejército del Pueblo*, FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army), thereby criminalizing the organization as an anti-state guerrilla cell and characterizing anyone who has had relations with the FARC-EP as a supporter of the insurgency.

19. In 2004, a former Secretary General of FENSUAGRO was incarcerated when her 'assigned' DAS bodyguards made false allegations that she was allied with the FARC-EP, which resulted in her imprisonment and later exile.

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