



Reclaiming the Worker's Property

Coffee, Land Grabbing, and Farmworker Resistance in Nicaragua

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LDPI
Working
Paper

42

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Published by:

The Land Deal Politics Initiative

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Published with support from the UK Department for International Development (DfID), Atlantic Philanthropies, Inter-Church Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO), Ford Foundation and Miserior.

Abstract

In this paper I explore a land grabbing resistance movement composed of unemployed coffee workers in Central Nicaragua. Between 1996 and 2000 a private agro-export conglomerate appropriated 60 worker-owned coffee estates previously designated as the Area Propiedad del Los Trabajadores (APT), or the Worker's Property. Following mass protests between 2001 and 2006, worker representatives from the Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (ATC) and government officials negotiated and signed the Las Tunas Accords which provided redistributed land from nineteen of those coffee estates to 2,500 families. Drawing on archival research and interviews with movement participants I argue that land grabbing in the coffee lands of Central Nicaragua was embedded within past dispossessions and triggered memories of struggle against dispossession that provided the moral legitimacy and motivated a movement of farmworkers to reclaim land promised to them in the Nicaraguan revolution.

About the Author

Bradley Wilson received his Ph.D. in Geography from Rutgers University in January 2010 and currently holds a post as Assistant Professor of Geography at West Virginia University. My previous research has explored the moral and political economies of fair trade coffee, the development of the gourmet coffee industry, and the politics of agrarian reform in Nicaragua. Reclaiming the Worker's Property represents the next stage of a comparative project on the social, spatial and political-economic trajectories of agrarian reform in Nicaragua.

Acknowledgements

This research was made possible by a small grant from the Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI) and a Faculty Development and International Travel grant from West Virginia University. I would like to thank Jennifer Bair, Marion Werner, Cynthia Gorman, Ben Neimark, and Sara Keene who commented on previous drafts and the LDPI organizing committee for opening up a space for me to share this story. I would also like to thank Maria Panacione who created the maps. I would also like to recognize the generosity of the farmworkers of Matagalpa whose testimonies form the basis for this work. Their daily struggles against injustice in the coffee lands are a constant reminder of the violence of dispossession perpetuated by land grabbing.

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1 Introduction

On September 14, 2002, five thousand unemployed coffee workers representing tens of thousands more from Matagalpa, Nicaragua formed a human roadblock for ten hours across the Pan-American Highway near a little village called Las Tunas. Located at a critical junction connecting southern Nicaragua to the northern coffee lands, the protest at Las Tunas stopped all traffic for hundreds of kilometers in both directions from the border of Costa Rica to Honduras and was arguably the largest roadblock in Central American history. Committed to a long non-violent struggle and expecting a slow government response, protesters set up encampments occupying the sides of the highway. The government responded by sending in riot police to break up the demonstration and stop the gridlock. But the protesters held their ground. International and national media flocked to the barricades to document the protest. Over the next four days representatives from the Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (ATC) and a council of government officials negotiated and signed what would be called the Acuerdos de Las Tunas to provide 6,000 temporary jobs and redistribute land from eighteen coffee estates to 2,500 families.

Often interpreted by international and national observers as a protest of the hungry or a spontaneous response to the drop in international coffee prices, in this paper I argue that this movement responded to one of the most extensive land grabs in Nicaraguan history that occurred in the decade prior to the road blockade. Capitalizing on shifting political alliances, legal loopholes and land title insecurity associated with the disarticulation of state-led agrarian reform (Broegaard, 2005; 2009), an agro-industrial conglomerate CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI acquired coffee estates managed by worker-owned enterprises, popularly called the Worker's Property (APT), which were established in the peace accords ending the Contra War. In effect CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI turned "the Worker's Property," into a coffee empire. CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI then leveraged these assets to guarantee loans to fund coffee production and purchase other agro-export businesses (cattle, rice, sesame, shrimp), creating a complex financial scheme involving three of Nicaragua's largest banks. In 2000, facing a rapid decline in coffee prices, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI folded, bringing down the estates and banks with it. Creditors foreclosed on the farms, evicting permanent workers. Over the next two years dispossessed workers and union leaders organized workers to win back the land promised to the rural proletariat in the Sandinista Revolution.

Drawing on 71 oral history interviews with leaders, worker organizers, farmworkers and peasant farmers from the municipalities of Matagalpa, San Ramon, El Tuma, La Dalia and Rancho Grande in Central Nicaragua, in this paper I explore the social and spatial formation of what is now known as the Las Tunas Movement. Between 2005-2007, I conducted repeated field visits to eleven worker communities/estates that were active in the unemployed workers movement. Eight of these worker communities/estates were selected because they have been occupied by workers since at least 2002 and appear in the Las Tunas accords documents as properties in worker possession. The other three communities/estates did not appear in the accords and movement participants in those sites remain landless and/or reported to have not received benefits from their participation.

The research was conducted over a total of 16 months in 2003, 2005-2007, and in follow-up interviews conducted in 2012. In each community/estate I completed at least three oral histories in an effort to grasp the particularities of both my informants' experiences as well as background on each location for the sake of comparison. To understand other institutional and political perspectives, I also conducted interviews with signatories of the Las Tunas Accords including the mayors of San Ramon and La Dalia in 2002, FSLN party officials in Matagalpa, representatives from the Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG), regional coffee cooperatives CECOAFEN and Alfonso Nunez, the Catholic Church and the directors of the Rural Workers Association in Matagalpa.

2 Background

My research on the Las Tunas movement is part of a broader ethnographic study that examines rural struggles, land politics and the afterlives of agrarian reform in Nicaragua in the 21st century. This ethnographic work with communities that have engaged in long struggles over land grabbing frames how I interpret the explosion of interest in large-scale land acquisitions today. I argue that contemporary land grabs cannot be divorced from the histories of anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggle against large-scale land acquisition in the past. While the recent expansion in large-scale agricultural land acquisition for food, fiber and fuel by nation-states and transnational corporations is spectacular, in many cases it is rooted in histories of enclosure and counter-enclosure movements that extend far back into history. Clearly, new commodities and industries are driving forms of land grabbing previously unseen. Yet, it is also critical to remember the past. Engaging research subjects in regions experiencing land grabbing through a historical lens is critical to effectively understand how resistance may be manifested in particular places at particular times and may also draw upon previous experiences as a basis for social action. As Jeffery Gould wrote of movements in response to primitive accumulation in Nicaragua in the 19th and 20th centuries,

certain moments of accumulation may be experienced as a repetition of previous experiences. It is in those moments that seem like repetitions that may trigger memories either from childhood or those that have been transmitted communally. ...the appeal to memory of a key moment in that process may contribute dramatically to communal mobilization.

Gould, 1998: 231-232

As I illustrate through this research, land grabbing by CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI in the coffee lands of Central Nicaragua was embedded within past dispossessions and triggered memories of struggle against dispossession that motivated a movement of farmworkers to reclaim their land.

Global land grabbing and movements against capitalist enclosure are not new to the peasants and farmworkers in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan revolution, perhaps most clearly for the peasant and landless classes, represented a counter-enclosure movement to re-appropriate land resources from an entrenched elite class following a century of land grabbing by domestic and transnational investors. As Jaime Biderman wrote in explaining the social context in the countryside prior to the Nicaraguan revolution, land grabbing by domestic and transnational investors established massive inequalities in resource control, produced a class of landless laborers and created the conditions of possibility for successive export booms. The enclosure of agricultural land through large-scale acquisition transformed property-ownership, class relations and export production. As he explains, the

process of dispossession and 'commodification' of land which began in the coffee areas during the late 19th century was generalized and intensified after 1950, during the cotton and cattle booms. In addition to making land a commodity which was increasingly appropriated by larger capitalist producers, the dispossession of small food producers forced them to sell their labor power (at least on a seasonal basis) in order to survive¹.

Biderman, 1983: 11

The Nicaraguan agrarian reform led by the FSLN was one of the most highly politicized, widely documented and thoroughly researched counter-enclosures in the world. The scale of the land redistribution was staggering. By 1989 the revolutionary Nicaraguan state transferred more than 2.5

¹ "Though some proletarianization did occur, the expansion of coffee did not eliminate servile or precapitalist social relations, which continued to predominate...With some exceptions, the emerging class of coffee growers was of the Junker or landlord type...However even this interpretation may exaggerate the extent to which there was a real evolution towards capitalist development (as opposed to continued primitive accumulation)" (Biderman, 1983: 11).

million ha of arable land from large-scale, elite-owned latifundios to farming collectives, individual peasant farmers and state-owned enterprises called Area Propiedad del Pueblo (the People's Property). The size of the landholdings of the elite were reduced from 36 percent to just 6.4 percent of the total arable land in the country and an estimated 120,000 peasant farmers and worker families received land when calculating for both land transfers to cooperatives and the titling of spontaneously occupied tenant lands (CIERA, 1989). It served as a lightning rod for ideological struggles and debates over land redistribution, peasant organization, agrarian transformation and perhaps most importantly the future of socialist politics against a changing geopolitical landscape.

Tens of thousands of internationalistas descended upon Nicaragua to witness the unfolding of radical agrarian change in the making. Many were established agrarian studies scholars as well as new researchers in the field. Amidst the reform process and in the years to follow, a rich and diverse literature has explored in detail the social and political dynamics of the agrarian reform. The new theoretical insights and research output in agrarian studies was tremendous and its effects on the social, political and agrarian research imaginary still remain. As both a site of socialist solidarity as well as a laboratory for agrarian studies, the role of revolutionary Nicaragua in the 1980s cannot be understated. The lion's share of this research, particularly in development research in the 1990s, focused almost exclusively upon the effects of the reform on peasant beneficiaries who received land and on the formation and deformation of agricultural cooperatives. A thorough review of this field of research is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a few words are in order to help clarify the concerns of my work.²

In the aftermath of the civil war, peace accords and political transition in the 1990s, the peasant farmer beneficiary and cooperative movement demonstrated considerable promise in extending the socialist agrarian imaginary born within the revolutionary agrarian reform. Small-scale peasant farmers and cooperatives have garnered most of the scholarly, organizational and financial attention in the wake of the agrarian reform. Following the agrarian reform, the primary subject of scholarly, organizational and financial work has been peasant smallholders and cooperatives. Efforts to "modernize" these peasant farmers have resulted in remarkable growth among these agrarian reform beneficiaries. However, this focus on the new peasant smallholder class has also tended to turn attention away from farmworkers who made up and continue to make up the vast majority of the active rural workforce. Moreover, it has tended to foreclose discussion and debate about what happened with the large-scale, state-operated enterprises on which farmworkers labored for revolution.

The research presented in this paper concerns these forgotten farmworkers who did not walk away from the agrarian reform with clear possession of land. The situation of these forgotten farmworkers was dramatically shaped by the neoliberal transition in 1990, which abruptly closed down opportunities to transition from a landless farmworker to peasant smallholder through land reform. However this political transition, as I describe, did not dampen the desire for land among farmworkers who fought for revolutionary agrarian reform. Indeed, against all odds, a small group of coffee farmworkers in Central Nicaragua achieved that transition from landless farmworkers to peasant farmer cooperativists through the grassroots-led Las Tunas movement in the 2000s. I argue that this movement to achieve a grassroots-led agrarian reform offers insights into the political possibilities and barriers that confront landless workers and peasants in their efforts to challenge the uneven distribution of land, particularly in the context of resurgent land grabbing in Central America and around the world.

² One line of my ethnographic research on the afterlives of agrarian reform concerns the emergence of the peasant farmer and access to certified coffee markets.

3 Post-Agrarian Reform Trajectories and the Forgotten Farmworkers

To understand the story of the Las Tunas movement we must begin with The People's Property in the coffee sector of Central Nicaragua. The centerpiece of the Sandinista's modern socialist export oriented economy, the Area Propiedad del Pueblo (APP) was an agro-industrial complex made up of coffee, cattle, cotton and sugar estates managed by state officials with close collaboration with the Rural Workers Association (ATC). In the coffee-producing region of Matagalpa and Jinotega, the focus of my research, the APP properties encompassed roughly 20,000 ha of coffee land and employed tens of thousands of rural workers. APP properties represented a central foreign revenue stream for the FSLN's revolutionary socialist project. When the Sandinista's lost the elections in 1990 to Violet Chamorro, the majority of these properties were transferred to workers under a peace settlement between the ATC and the Chamorro administration that promised workers possession of the land in a 20-year lease with a right to purchase. Under this agreement The People's Property would be renamed The Workers Property, or APT, and beneficiaries included rural workers, ex-military personnel and ex-Contra combatants.

The APT represented a huge victory for the ATC to protect worker's claims to those lands in the face of privatizing counter-agrarian reform by the Chamorro administration. Without the ATC's intervention, those state assets would assuredly have been sold to private firms, thus robbing rural workers of the revolutionary promise of providing "land to those who work it." In total, the APT represented 33 agro-industrial enterprises with 10,000 worker shareholders. Nine of those enterprises were based in the coffee sector and encompassed some 17,000 ha of coffee orchards. The APT coffee enterprises were vertically integrated into one exporting company called AGROCAFE which had 2,032 worker shareholders and produced roughly 7 percent of total exports in 1990 (Rocha, 2003).

While farmworkers appeared to benefit from the transfer from APP to APT agrarian reform enterprises, my informants tended to deride them as a farce. This farce was not just engendered by the transition from APP to APT but also in original APP enterprises during the Sandinista government. Against the more romantic image of the APP as modernizing estates through unionization, my informants described minor concessions by the state in the 1980s such as wage increases, literacy, education and health campaigns brought to the estates for the first time and holiday celebrations sponsored by the directorate of the enterprises. The APP was always promoted in the most ideological sense as worker-owned and managed properties. However, farmworkers claimed that control of the estates really only shifted from the elite to the state. Most of my informants only maintained ownership of their homes and patio with no access to subsistence plots for household provisioning or market gardening. Indeed, as Francisco, an elderly worker remarked, on the estate where he worked under the APP, subsistence plots were prohibited. The lack of farmworker control over space fueled fierce desires for land.

Farmworkers always represented a complicated ally for the FSLN, even though they were envisaged as a core constituency. For the FSLN, the rural proletariat was central to its socialist agrarian reform policies focused on modernization of the countryside through state-run farms and a vigorous rural labor movement. Since the coffee producing region was the backbone of the modern agro-export economy promoted by the FSLN, a steady supply of farmworkers was necessary, although not always available. Labor shortages were one of the problems confronted by the revolutionary state in the Nicaraguan agrarian reform. Shortages in the coffee sector were created by the "peasantization" of the rural proletariat following land reform and mobilization of large numbers of farmworkers for the war, which drew vital labor away from the state-enterprises. To compensate, the state mobilized harvesting brigades composed of urban and rural youth (and to a lesser degree international solidarity groups). Given the centrality of the APP enterprises in the development of the revolutionary state economy, concerns about labor shortages forced the FSLN leadership to balance

widespread land redistribution with no redistribution at all. Effectively the state-enterprises relied upon a class of landless workers to function.

Land redistribution in the 1980s ultimately divided the rural proletariat between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. The land reform process directly responded to the escalation of the Contra insurgency and peasant organizing to gain access to land. Although the land reform benefited many landless farmworkers during this period, often with the stipulation of fighting in military reserves against the Contra, many farmworkers in Matagalpa did not receive land. As a result, in the coffee producing region of Matagalpa and Jinotega the agrarian reform produced very uneven land tenure and a laboring landscape that divided the farmworker population between reformed and non-reformed classes. Newly landed farmworkers often worked in cooperatives on collectively held or independently titled farms while the rest remained employed but landless on the state-run farms. For these farmworkers, many of whom also filled the ranks of the military reserves, their continued landlessness indicated that the revolution was unfinished.

In the 1990s these relations remained unchanged. Not only had landless workers failed to gain access to the land under the APP, but my informants also did not view the transfer of land from the APP to the APT as the fulfillment of that revolutionary promise. The APT claimed to grant land leases with the opportunity to purchase by workers, signifying a peaceful end to the civil war. However, many farmworkers I interviewed through the APT claimed that “ [the FSLN] gave us the land, but it was never really ours.” Workers names were not included in land titles under the APP or APT enterprises.³ “First it was the people’s property and then it was the worker’s property,” Rigoberto said, satirizing how the previous state officials and FSLN leadership retained control over the APP properties, “we are handing over the property to you now and it is yours, but we still need to control it for a while since you can’t do it yourselves.” Going further he said sarcastically, “they promised us that they were handing over the land to us, but we knew they still had control, these lands are too valuable and too important for them to hand it over to the *mozos*.”⁴ Ex-state officials and party leaders maintained tremendous control over administrating the properties even though ownership over the enterprises was transferred to the workers. APT properties were held by the enterprises in leases with opportunities to purchase after 20 years. Ultimately, the coffee workers in Matagalpa and Jinotega represented a large bloc of the FSLN that did not walk away from the agrarian reform period with clear title or even possession of land.

4 Grabbing the Workers’ Property: The Rise of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI

CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI capitalized on the ambiguities over land ownership generated through the transfer from APP to ATP and preyed upon the vulnerabilities of the new land “owners.” CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI’s land acquisition focused almost exclusively on directly and indirectly accumulating previously state-owned and worker-owned land assets. The base of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI’s agro-industrial complex was established through acquisition of coffee estates from five enterprises in Matagalpa and Jinotega: Juan de Dios Munoz, Jorge Vogl, Deniz Gutierrez, Chale Haslam and Alfonso Nunez. Each enterprise managed 5-9 coffee estates. The coffee estates managed by these enterprises were positioned in some of the best terrain for high value arabica coffee production and were also located along well maintained transportation routes that facilitated

³ Unlike agrarian reform titles given to individual or even collectively owned properties, land titles under the state-enterprises rested with jointly-owned businesses. In these cases, worker shareholders in the businesses did not appear on the actual land titles for the APT coffee estates. This created considerable ambiguity over who actually owned the properties.

⁴ *Mozos* refers to fieldhands on estates. *Mozo* is a word used almost exclusively by landowners to describe their workers and is inherited from the lexicon of Spanish colonialism. Farmworkers tend not use the term to describe themselves.

the easy movement of harvests. The APT holdings were extensive, including such massive latifundios as La Fundadora in Jinotega (managed by the agro-enterprise Jorge Vogl) and the neighboring estates of La Lima, La Laguna and Santa Marta (managed by the agro-enterprise Deniz Gutierrez) in the municipality of San Ramon. While the APT enterprises had won possession of these properties, they lacked working capital to manage them.

CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI financed APT enterprises, taking farm leases as collateral for loans. CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI then provided credit to finance orchard maintenance and harvest costs. Although CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI did not appear on the legal title, by taking over the leases in effect they controlled the land, labor and ultimately the coffee in production on those estates. As early as 1998, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI usurped APT properties for failing to deliver sufficient coffee to pay off debts, foreclosing on the worker-owned properties. CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's holdings and financing of APT properties was far-reaching. In one of the only published revelations of their dealings with APT properties, La Prensa reported that CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI had mortgages on 9 APT properties for nearly US\$6.5 million (Sánchez, 2000). However, these reported holdings represented just a fraction of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's coffee estate assets and only a small portion of APT properties that were registered in their name.

CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI acquired other coffee estates using different tactics. Nicaragua lacks cadastral mapping, has a contested land registry, and widespread uncertainty over the legal trajectory of particular properties (who owned what, where and when). Given this uncertainty, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI could capitalize on knowledge of properties in which there was considerable legal ambiguity. While it is difficult to ascertain hard evidence of the frequency of the practice, my informants speculated that CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI manipulated titles for some properties by purchasing a small plot, for instance from a land reform beneficiary, and then amplifying the size of the parcel purchased using a practice of title manipulation. In the case of Las Nubes in El Tuma, for instance, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI purchased 12.5 ha and converted that into a land title for more than 200 ha (Sanchez, 2000). As one informant said, describing the way they would amplify the size of the property, "they'd just add zeros."

Between 1994 and 2000, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI acquired the title or took over the mortgages of 60 coffee estates encompassing an estimated 15-18,000 hectares of land. Roughly 80 percent of those estates were APT properties. It also acquired one of the largest coffee mills in Central America, positioning itself as the largest single buyer of Nicaragua coffee and largest financier of small-scale farmers in the region. According to Nitlapan-Envio (2000) the conglomerate contracted with and financed 10,000 small- and medium-scale coffee growers in Matagalpa. CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI grew so large as a coffee enterprise it was responsible for 40 percent of total exports in 1999. But CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI wasn't just a coffee producer and exporter. It leveraged their APT assets for further investments in sesame processing and export companies, a sugar refinery, shrimp enterprises and a cattle-breeding operation, all with links to other APT enterprises. The CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI consortium was seen as such an excellent speculation that investors bankrolled it to the tune of 70 million dollars. INTERBANK, the second largest bank in Nicaragua made CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI forty percent of its entire loan portfolio. They even acquired backing from international investors through FININSA and Towerbank in Panama, which underwrote Interbank's lending. In effect, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI leveraged control over the Worker's Property (APT) into key asset within an elaborate pyramid scheme (Nitlapan-Envio, 2000).

5 Charisma, Quiescence and Conflict in the Matagalpa Valley

CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's acquisition of the Workers' Property did not happen in a vacuum. Much of the legal maneuvering took place in law offices and between the management of APT properties and

CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI officials in the absence of the worker shareholders and the ATC. It was wholly secretive and behind closed doors. For several years, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI won the consent of the masses of workers to the acquisition of these properties through the charisma of the conglomerate's leadership, the Centeno-Roque brothers. The Centeno-Roque ingratiated themselves with worker communities by paying for recreational equipment and hosting holiday events. They purchased the regional pro-baseball team and recruited the best players from Central America to play in Matagalpa. They had a compelling story of upward social mobility from rural poverty to business leaders. They assumed the persona of local heroes. These softer stories made the rounds of the gossip circuits. As my informants described, "they had money, cars, a baseball team...they were famous." Such a populist image of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI as sports patrons and community supporters were crucial in shaping worker perceptions in Matagalpa. In many interviews my informants recounted stories of the Centeno-Roque brothers. These stories glorified them as good boys of the rural working class. As Niplapan-Envio (2000) reported,

...public opinion was treated to a rags-to-riches story rivaling those on which the "American Dream" is built. Born in Quilalí and weaned on burro milk, the Centeno children made their living shining shoes and helping their family sell firewood, making clay bricks and roof tiles and cultivating a tiny plot of coffee. Working with dedication "until the wee hours of the night," they ended up somehow amassing an economic empire that has stunned Nicaraguans learning about it in detail for the first time.

Nitlapan-Envio, 2000 para. 17

CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's notoriety was also cemented as one of the only active lenders in Matagalpa in the mid-1990s after the National Development Bank was decapitalized and closed. Banks owned by the Nicaraguan elite would not finance agrarian reform beneficiaries and discriminated against high-risk, small-scale agricultural producers. While agricultural micro-financiers such as CARUNA and the UNAG's ECODEPA project struggled to meet the demand from small- and medium-sized farmers, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI filled the void, particularly in the coffee sector, financing an estimated 10,000 small- and medium-sized growers (Nitlapan-Envio, 2000). Due to their financing of the peasant farmer sector, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI counted the UNAG among its staunchest supporters even in the face of revelations linking CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI to land grabbing and fraudulent business practices. As Nitlapan reported in the aftermath of the collapse of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI, three thousand members of the UNAG "came to Managua and protested in front of the Central Bank, where they carried the Centeno brothers on their shoulders, applauding them and acclaiming them as the only support for thousands of rural producers" (Nitlapan-Envio, 2000; para. 21).

CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI was also reportedly deeply entangled in the political and economic maneuvering of FSLN party leaders seeking to preserve the collective and personal gains of the 1980s. Summing up what they believed to be the logic of accumulation by dispossession behind CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's acquisition of APT properties, Nitlapan-Envio (2000) wrote that "these valuable businesses could...consolidate the original accumulation based on the "piñata," that infamous personal appropriation of the people's wealth by quick-thinking and acting members of the outgoing Sandinista government in 1990" (para. 25). As Nitlapan-Envio cogently argued, "the farm workers who benefited from the APT project in the nineties succinctly sum up what is happening: via the Centenos, the Sandinistas are taking back the lands they gave us once upon a time" (para. 27). Whether or not a direct link can be drawn between CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI and the FSLN, what is clear is that CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI had won the consent of the leadership of the major popular arms of the FSLN's rural peasant and worker bases: the management of the APT enterprises, and even some in the leadership of ATC and UNAG (Nitlapan-Envio, 2000).

CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's public image and political entanglements had another face. In their efforts to enter and take control of coffee operations, their land grabbing also resulted in resistance, armed

conflict and legal disputes. Workers and colonos settled on APT properties had suffered tremendously to gain control over those lands and were not going to give up control without a fight. Even in cases where they had unclear title or usufruct rights, these workers and ex-combatants had strong moral claims having fought in the civil war in large part to win access to land. As such they were highly motivated to protect their land claims and many remained armed from either previous military service, in the insurgency or even in post-war militias such as the Recontras and Recompas. Therefore, to enforce their claims the conglomerate contracted with a security firm managed by ex-officials from the military's Special Operations Unit and Intelligence Agencies. CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI leaders notoriously traveled in helicopters, had heavily armed bodyguards and employed an armed militia to settle property disputes. And for good reason. Resistance to CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI land acquisitions was already brewing in 1999, two years before the first efforts to organize workers to reclaim those properties. Many communities, particularly from APT properties with outstanding debts, saw CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI as an aggressor. As was the case on the farm Los Milagros, security forces sought to push workers off the land by slaughtering livestock, destroying crops, burning homes and holding workers at gunpoint. In three publicized conflicts in the APT properties of Santa Maria de Wasaka, Los Milagros and La Pintada violent conflict erupted between CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI security forces and local resident workers, resulting in numerous casualties.

Conflicts with CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI security forces calls attention to three important issues. First, the public image of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI to win consent for their land acquisitions was precisely that, an image. Behind the curtain of their efforts to ingratiate themselves to the masses, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI was amassing a fortune in land through theft, robbery and corruption. Second, these documented conflicts over legitimate titles suggest that resistance to CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI land acquisitions was pervasive. Third, through the use of an aggressive security force, the conglomerate projected a threatening image to peasants and workers in the countryside that complemented their softer story. As one of my informants said, "they would fly into the properties in a helicopter and surrounded by men with brand new automatic weapons." Numerous informants recounted the same story. Describing the effect this image had on the people in the communities another informant said, "Look, you didn't fuck with them." This dualistic image of violence and solidarity had a psychological effect on people living in the region, which made it difficult to voice dissent. In that sense, the absence of conflict or resistance in other APT properties did not indicate an active quiescence, but a coerced fear of reprisal for raising one's voice. As my informants explained, given their ties to the higher cadre of the FSLN and their security force, many people were afraid that CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI operated with immunity from the law. "They operated outside the law," one of my informants argued. "They were the law."

While the Centeno-Roque's charismatic public image earned populist support, their ties with popular organizations representing workers and peasants and their aggressive security apparatus represented a powerful force to ensure quiescence with their acquisitions of APT properties. While force may have been necessary under certain circumstances, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI won the consent of the people through their control over capital and their compelling public image. Indeed, many of my informants revealed in interviews that they admired the Centeno-Roque brothers before they learned about their shady business practices and the extensiveness of their land holdings. The Centeno-Roque brothers won the hearts and minds of many of the rural poor in Matagalpa by aligning themselves with the working class, at the same time as they were building a coffee empire. These two faces of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI or what Nicaraguans call *el gueguense*,⁵ offers a disturbing, disorienting and paradoxical portrait of their hegemonic land grabbing project.

⁵ El Gueguense refers to a 16th century post-colonial theatrical performance written by an indigenous author from Diriamba. It is a tale of trickery to fool the aristocracy and ultimately to obtain wealth through marriage. Broadly speaking, it is a story about deception as a means to get wealth. Nicaraguans also use the term more broadly to describe someone as two faced, particularly politicians.

CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI translated political relationships, title manipulation, insider knowledge, brute force and their near celebrity status into control over some of the most valuable assets in Matagalpa and Jinotega. As described in the next section however, even though the acquisition of these coffee estates represented CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's most successful slight of hand, worker resistance emerging from those properties ultimately blew down their house of cards.

6 The Coffee Crisis and the Disarticulation of a Coffee Empire

In 2000 coffee prices on the world market dropped to record lows triggering a devastating domino effect in Nicaragua, throughout Central America and around the world. Devaluation was swift and disinvestment was decisive. Coffee producing regions confronted a catastrophe of epic proportions. Farm workers dependent on wage work to feed, clothe, medicate and educate their households felt the crisis most acutely. In 1999, the Nicaraguan coffee sector employed an estimated 175,000 permanent workers and 300,000 seasonal workers, 42 percent of the rural workforce and the highest percentage dependent on coffee wages in Central America. But by January 2001, with coffee prices hovering around 50 cents a pound, permanent employment in the coffee sector dropped by 50 percent (Varangis et al., 2003) and seasonal employment for the coffee harvest dropped by 20 percent. Without state support, the private banking sector and export houses cut their lending from 90 percent of total production in 1999 to just 5 percent of total production in 2001 and estimated 580 coffee estates reported zero access to credit (Rocha, 2001). With no financing and mounting debts, coffee producers, particularly owners of large estates, minimized costs in every conceivable way from cutting spending in costly inputs to laying off workers. Many estates shut down operations almost entirely, as one worker stated, "letting the coffee go black on the trees."

To try to fend off a total collapse of their land grabbing and agro-industrial pyramid scheme, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI cut their lending and stopped paying workers on the APT properties. In 2001, workers on those properties reported back wages of more than two years working only for food, housing, hunting and foraging rights on the estates with the promise of future repayment once coffee prices recovered. Given extensive coffee contracts with cash advances to small- and medium-sized farmers who were unable to pay off production loans, no wages paid to permanent workers and declining capital to pay seasonal workers to harvest the coffee, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI suffered capital losses on their loans and supply losses from a lack of production. Interbank, which held the mortgages on CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's extensive coffee enterprises and had supplied working capital to maintain fictitious coffee harvests, folded under the weight of these outstanding loans. CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI broke the bank. In an investigation of Interbank's failure, state officials and journalists descended upon CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's coffee warehouse in 2001 to find thousands of coffee bags filled with rice shell that were being used as a collateral for short term pre-export commercial loans to cover their operating expenses. Interbank's failure and the spectacular news reports focusing on the "escandalo de la cascara" opened what Nitlapan-Envio called Pandora's box (2001). The revelation of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's "shell game," their ties to Interbank and the effects of their fraudulent loans, titles and production figures were suddenly placed in the media spotlight for all to see. The Centeno-Roque's fall from stardom was as precipitous as their rise. Following inquiries, legal battles and a criminal trial, they were ultimately convicted of financial crimes and imprisoned in 2002.

7 Hunger, Eviction and Encampments: Coffee, Crisis and Workers' Consciousness

For lack of employment our children are dying of hunger. We want answers!

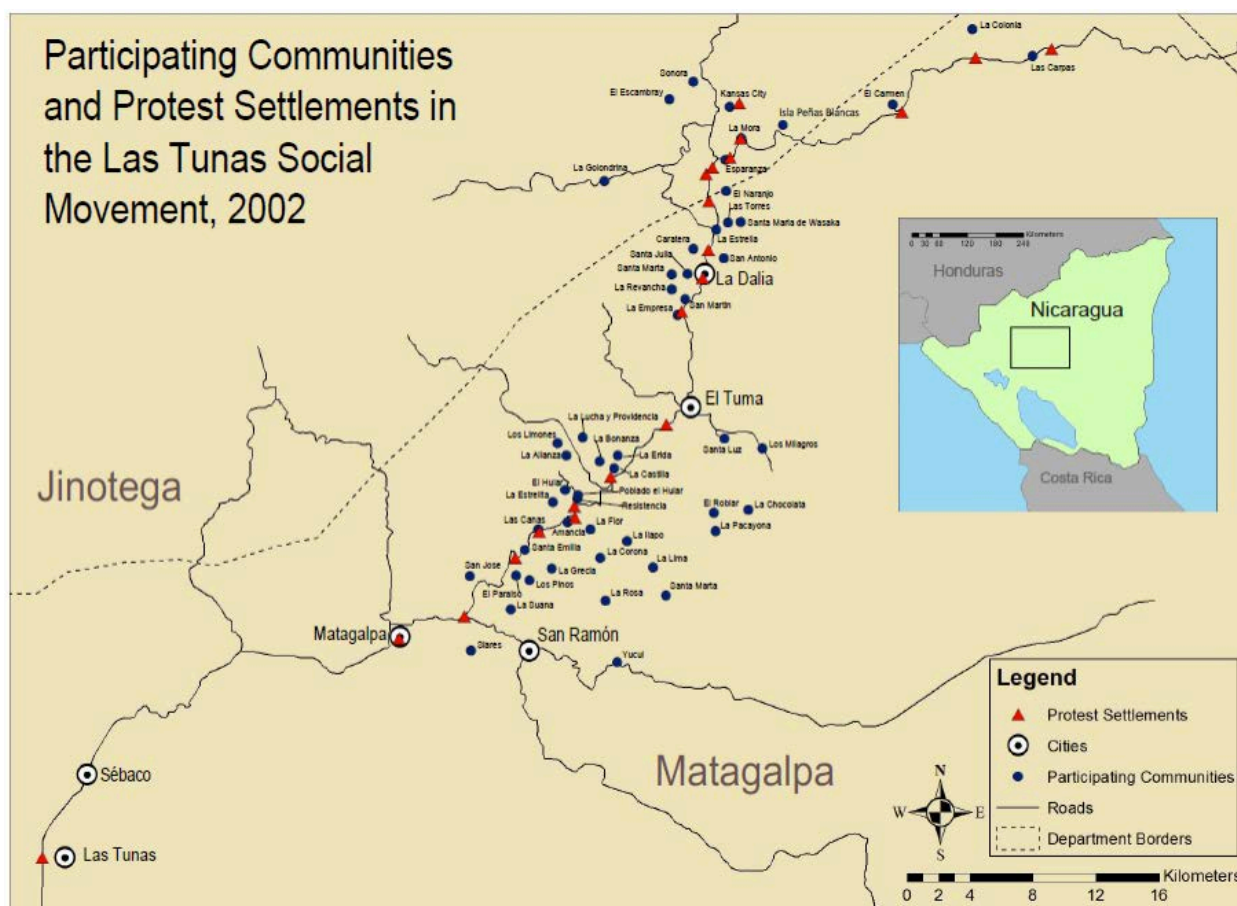
Protest Banner, Rural Workers Association, 2002

Coffee bags were not the only things that were empty as CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI cut wages and turned away workers on APT and other properties. The World Food Program estimated that more than 100,000 coffee workers dependent on seasonal wages in the region would suffer acute malnutrition due to food insecurity. Food insecurity from cut income was compounded by basic grain crop losses caused by two years of drought. Worker households on APT and other properties struggled to meet household food needs, cutting meals, eating foraged bananas, citrus and wild game when available. As workers in my study described, hunger was widespread with some families eating only one meal a day. As one of my informants explained in shocking detail:

We were all hungry. The children were starving. We did everything we could to find food. It was worse than anytime I can remember. It was worse than the war. It got so bad one of my friends shot a howler monkey and we ate it. It got that bad. I am haunted by that. It looked so human. Like we were eating one of our own.

Worker communities faced down the prospects of hunger-based migration, but lack of food wasn't the only cause of displacement. With the liquidation of Interbank's assets and foreclosures on coffee estates throughout the region, many workers were also evicted from the land. And, even in cases where workers were not physically evicted, security forces employed by banks did come to the properties to make workers aware of the foreclosure proceedings and to tell workers to stop foraging on the properties.

Beginning in May 2001, workers began to abandon the coffee estates in search of food, work and shelter, forming makeshift encampments along the highway in the central Matagalpa Valley stretching from the city of Matagalpa to the northeast through the municipalities of San Ramon, El Tuma-La Dalia and Rancho Grande. In addition to the thousands moving to roadside encampments, by July 4, 2001, an estimated 2,000 coffee workers, primarily women, left the estates or worker villages and sought refuge in the city of Matagalpa. The local Red Cross fashioned an encampment in a city park to treat some 850 people with health problems caused by malnutrition (Rocha, 2001) and the regional campus of the National University created an encampment supported by donations from students, faculty and community members to help some 1,200 people with no place to go. Along the highway to the north east, encampments swelled to include three to four thousand people, and still others migrated to Managua and even abroad to seek work in Costa Rica (Rocha, 2001; 2004). By August, 2001 more than six thousand unemployed farm workers formed 18 encampments from Matagalpa to Rancho Grande along the Northern highway.

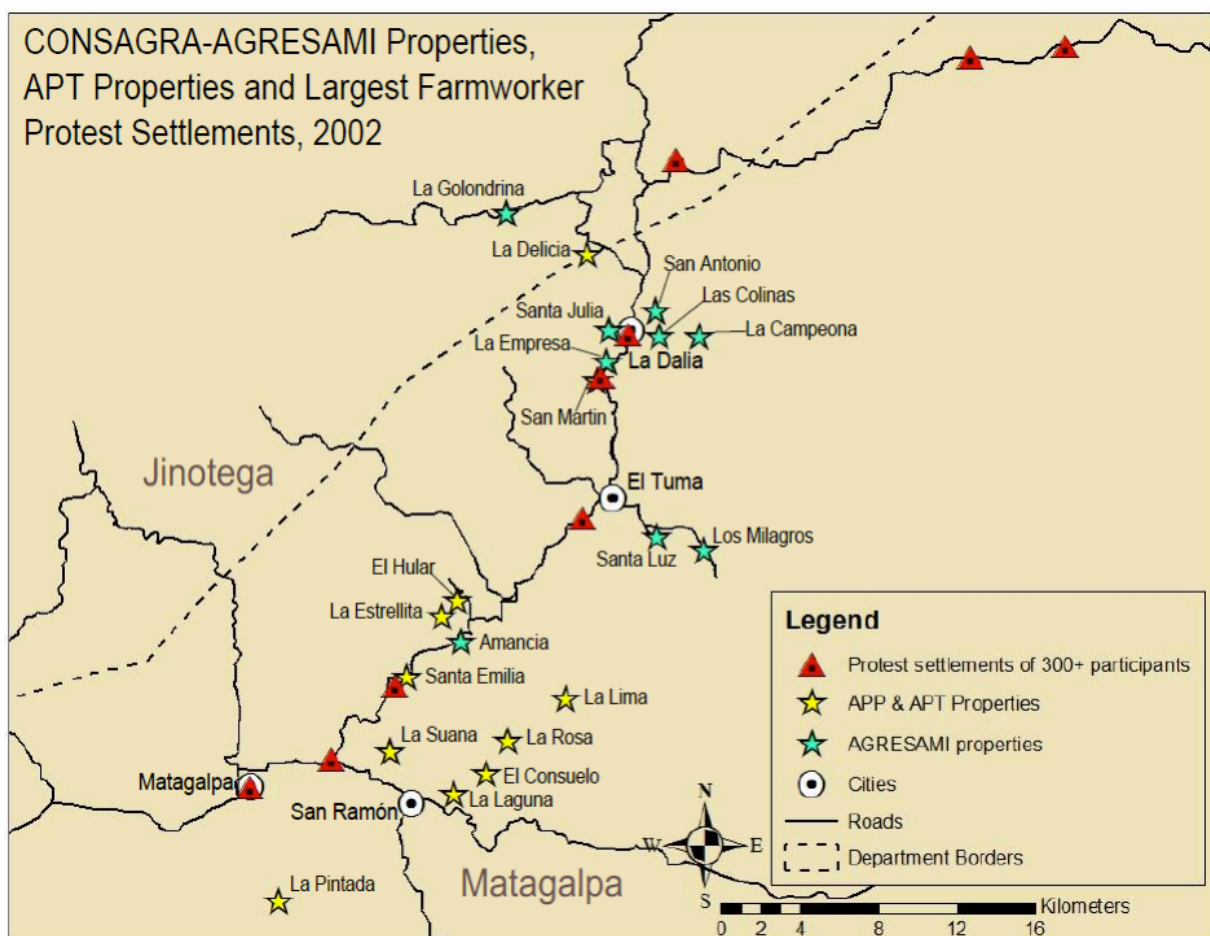


Encampments of landless, unemployed and hungry workers dominated the national and global imaginary of the coffee crisis in Central America and around the world. Makeshift black plastic tents lined the highways giving shelter to homeless workers. There were pictures of children begging, men and women huddled around fires, elderly men and women looking forlorn and poor thin looking women in tattered clothes breastfeeding children. International news media flocked to Matagalpa to report on the devastation, painting a bleak and depressing portrait of farm workers living in a disaster zone. Farmworkers who moved to the encampments due to eviction or hunger saw their situation from a dramatically differently angle than many onlookers from the outside.⁶ For people on the outside, the encampments formed primarily as a means to coordinate food aid. But this explanation missed the root of the problem. It was not just the decline in coffee prices, or unemployment, or hunger. Articulated from their own spatial imaginary, the encampments formed in response to dispossession. Their lack of control over land had reproduced the conditions of their exploitation at the hands of whatever landowner – or land grabber – “forced” them to work for their own survival. The encampments, the hunger, the coffee crisis, the unemployment, were a direct result of their lack of control over land. The majority of working men and women who co-inhabited the encampments came from APT estates and they began to share similar stories of back wages as well as problems of collusion between APT managers and the Centeno-Roque brothers.

⁶ The encampments, while presenting the image of misery or a sense of impermanence to outsiders, were not only so. They were social communities. As one informant said, “the encampments were filled with both sorrow and happiness. We would joke and laugh. We tried to raise the spirits among the most humble of the people. Sure it felt like a war. But there were beautiful times too. There was fighting over boyfriends and jealousy between women. There were fights. It was funny. There were new marriages and divorces. And there were 13 children born in our encampment. The funniest thing is a few of the women joked after that they didn’t know whose child they were carrying. [Laughing] There was joy even in the hard times.”

Farmworker consciousness extended beyond the specific conditions of their displacement. Whether or not farmworkers had connected the dots to CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI, they understood, objectively, through their experience of hunger, unemployment, displacement and homelessness why they were on the side of the road suffering. The domino effect of the decline in coffee prices had revealed once again that farmworkers in the Matagalpa Valley were expendable. “They treated us like we don’t exist, like we were animals,” said Consuelo, a mother of four teenage boys from San Ramon. They didn’t own land, the means of production and survival. And without land they were vulnerable. As Marta, a middle-aged woman with two young children described,

We organized the first encampments out of necessity. We didn’t have food. The children were crying for food, so we went to the encampments. But it was more than that we didn’t have food. We wanted [the state and the landowners] to listen and to fulfill our demands. We no longer wanted to be forced to work on the estates. Many days and nights in this struggle I would cry for this little piece of land where our family could live in peace.



Farmworkers in the encampments described their hunger and displacement as a by-product of repeated dispossessions that extended back through time and were ultimately unresolved by the Sandinista revolution and agrarian reform process. Farmworkers frequently remarked that the Sandinista revolution was unfinished without redistributing land to the landless rural proletariat.

8 Convergence Space: Movement Formation in the Encampments

The encampments were not just refugee camps. They were protest communities. In the encampments, farmworkers came to realize their shared struggle and to launch collective actions to reclaim land. As a leader of the ATC in Matagalpa explained,

A group of women came to us and said, 'we are going to create encampments so that the government can see what is going on. We are going to use this form of resistance to put forward our demands and demonstrate against the government.'

Roughly fifty percent of the farmworkers participating in the encampments originated from CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI properties and roughly 70 percent originated from APT properties. By August 2001, the revelations of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's land grab were circulating through mainstream media and the gossip circles. A picture of the land grab was starting to take shape in the minds of the workers. "We were all so spread apart. We didn't realize how extensive it all was," said one informant. Their sudden ability to communicate with one another about their shared experiences in the encampments generated a new found sense of worker solidarity. Such solidarity had been lost following the post-war period, in the distances between the estates, and due to the decline of active labor organizing in the context of the rise of the relationship between the APT managers and CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI. As one of my informants said,

I saw comrades I hadn't seen since the war. I saw comrades from the ATC. We were together again, scrawny and hungry, in the encampments. [Laughing] We were a mess. But it was good to be together, to see friends in the struggle with us... even if it seemed we were back in the place we started from so long ago.

Seeing friends and comrades sparked a consciousness of shared struggle. Even though the encampments were initially formed as centers for food aid and shelter, their function grew to encompass much more than that. Farmworkers wanted to reclaim the people's property before it was lost again. Their shared experience as coffee farmworkers, rather than peasant landholders, cooperativists or agrarian reform beneficiaries produced a particular spatial imaginary⁷ through which they understood and articulated their struggle.

The proximity of so many workers in these 18 encampments provided a critical opportunity to organize and pressure the government to act on their grievances. Moreover, the organizing experience of the workers inhabiting the encampments was tremendous. Many had been syndicalists in the Rural Workers Association since the 1970s, if not earlier. Others had served in the military during the civil war. Many knew how to organize and were oriented through the Marxist-Leninist ideological framing of the FSLN and the revolutionary struggle. Experienced rural syndicalists began organizing the provisioning and social design of the encampments to ensure order. Building on the experience of guerrillas and military personnel, the encampments were also structured in a platoon style with appointed leadership, political orienteers to provide motivation, rationing of food and water and a range of camp maintenance duties for residents. As a leader from the Rural Worker's Union explained, "It was difficult to maintain the discipline of 5,000 people but we achieved it." While the encampments were composed of and coordinated by ex-military personnel that fought for land in militias just a few years before, syndicalists and women ultimately gained control over the movement strategy and adopted non-violent tactics to build broad based legitimacy for their cause.

The presence and leadership of women in the encampments cannot be understated in their effect on movement strategy. While the experience of many men in the encampments revolved around

⁷ Spatial imaginaries are, as Wolford defines, "cognitive frameworks, both collective and individual, constituted through the lived experiences, perceptions and conceptions of space itself" (Wolford, 2004: 410).

military service, the shared experience of many of the women centered around their work experience as seasonal laborers as well as food provisioners. Their social networks were established through this seasonal work, their household labor and through their relations within churches. While men may have approached the coordination of the encampments like guerrilla columns, the presence of entire families and communities looked nothing like a military unit. Women brought a different perspective on the struggle and the strategy. “It was a battle, but we all weren’t soldiers,” said Soledad, a woman with four children. Women brought pragmatism and peace to the encampments. “We were little communities and we had to account for everyone’s needs and everyone’s abilities. The strategy came from that.” Another syndicalist, Tomasa, remarked that “if we didn’t agree with what the men were advising we would disagree. We outnumbered them so they’d listen. We said we were not going to take up arms. We had to protect the children and the elderly.” Dinora, an elderly woman, claimed that men thought they were in charge but that it was ultimately women who made many of the most important decisions,

We cooked the food. We coordinated the encampments. When we marched we organized the provisions. Women and men shared responsibilities in the movement.

As a result of the participation of both the syndicalist organizers and the engagement of large numbers of women as leaders and participants, my informants suggested that the farmworkers movement did not result in armed conflict or violence. In fact, one of the legitimizing effects of the movement strategy was that it was women leading the movement, often with their children in tow. Women became, in a sense, the face of the movement. As a result, the Las Tunas movement projected a very different image in the struggle for land than past conflicts. Armed violence disappeared and in its place emerged the image of a woman trying to protect her children. It was a powerful symbol of the struggle. The non-violent tactics employed through the image of motherhood engendered strong sympathies with the cause. The presence of women and children in the encampments and later the marches gave the movement legitimacy and what Margarita, an organizer from El Tuma called, a kind of “transcendent” quality,

It was a transcendental cause. We had been abandoned to die, but we would not die. We had to fight.

The material reality of hungry children and hungry women struggling to feed them established some credibility of the movement within the media outlets and created a powerful symbol with which to shame the government. Such attention to the material situation of farmworkers and such a powerful symbolic narrative would have been impossible had the movement been led solely by ex-military combatants.

Women’s leadership and participation in the movement also pressed concerns beyond land into the foreground. While the movement ultimately focused almost exclusively on gaining land rights, women in the movement that I interviewed frequently nested land rights into a range of other demands that included permanent employment, just salaries, educational and health care access. As a woman protestor chanted at the roadblock in 2002,

*We want fair wages. We want health care. We want access to education. We want land to work. We want credit to make the land productive so that we are not always left last. We do not want to be here dehydrating our children in the hot sun, who are hungry for necessity, who are sick for lack of medicine, who are malnourished, who are dehydrated, who are forced to eat salt as if they are orphans... (Excerpt from Film *Imágenes de los Plantones*, UNAG Matagalpa Media, 2003 Translated by Author).*

Women often articulated a diverse and encompassing set of demands. In doing so they also captured the broader context of the situation of workers and called attention to the limits of land alone in resolving their problems. They also highlight three important limitations of the focus on

land. First, the redistribution of land following the Las Tunas Accords would be uneven, with only about 25 percent of the participants gaining possession. Second, many farmworkers would continue to work on the estates, especially seasonally, and therefore fair wages would be critical to improving household income. Many farmworkers had little experience as landholders and lacked knowledge or even motivation to produce on their own land. Moreover, land redistribution was not always gender sensitive and in some cases women were not given the most arable land. Third, land redistribution would not resolve the lack of educational facilities and health care needed to maintain communities. Women saw these inequalities very clearly and consistently referenced them in our interviews.

9 Las Tunas Accords: Land Reform for Coffee Farmworkers

While a range of needs were articulated by women and men in the encampments, the objectives of the nascent farmworkers' movement coalesced primarily around land reform with an explicit requirement to provide land to workers for subsistence production, second around providing short-term employment and food aid to help farmworkers weather the crisis, and third to gain social improvements in housing, schools and health care. As Enrique, an organizer from the Rural Workers Association, said,

We knew what we wanted: a bank of lands which could be distributed to the people. Workers need land if there is no work. There must be an alternative food source or source of income. We knew we couldn't and wouldn't demobilize until the people had clearly assigned lands and promises for the building of homes, schools and health care facilities.

As Enrique makes clear, even as they wanted the state to "promise" to fulfill social reforms, it was access to land that became the non-negotiable focal point of the movement in its negotiations with the government. In particular, given the situation and their knowledge of legal uncertainties and foreclosure proceedings, they would seek to reclaim the previous APP/APT properties, CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's landholdings, and demand that the government create a land bank for landless coffee farmworkers in the region. In a deeper sense they also wanted the state to fulfill the promise of the revolution to redistribute land to farmworkers who needed it. The peace accords in 1990 and the transition from the APP to APT property regime had not resolved the farmworkers' desires for land, but rather had preserved the existing landholding and agro-export model that denied them rights to cultivate, particularly on subsistence-oriented plots. The land grabbing by CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI illustrated the worker's real lack of control over the properties promised in the peace accords. And the coffee price crisis revealed their continued vulnerability as wage workers in a highly unstable agro-export sector.

Farmworkers articulated their demands through the development of an explicit agrarian reform proposal to be carried out at the regional scale. Written by representatives from National Union of Agricultural and Associated Producers (UNAPA) and the Rural Workers Association (ATC) in consultation with workers in the encampments, they established three clear agrarian reform goals. First, they demanded that lands in possession of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI be retitled under agrarian reform law in the names of workers occupying those properties with a 20-year lease. This was feasible since the bankruptcy of the company had left the fate of those lands to be negotiated by state officials. Second, they demanded a new lease agreement and debt relief for APT enterprises managed by the workers due to the coffee crisis and their manipulation by CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI. Third, they demanded that the government establish a land bank with its existing land assets and to construct new settlement projects to house workers in key locations within Matagalpa. Fourth, they called for an emergency employment fund to be created to put 6,000 workers in temporary jobs. Fifth, they called for investments in social development projects in education, health care and housing. And sixth they called for the formation of a regional commission to bring together stakeholders in the coffee sector to establish a long-term development plan.

In late August 2002, in consultation with the ATC and UNAPA, workers in the encampments decided to stage a roadblock to raise the visibility of their cause and to force a negotiation with the government. Three weeks later, they arrived just south of Sebaco in the Department of Matagalpa at highway markers 96km and 97km in the village of Las Tunas. Between September 14 and 16 they blocked the highway in 15 minute, thirty minute and hour long periods to force the government to acknowledge their demands and to facilitate a negotiation. After two days of protest the Bolanos administration sent in a diplomatic team of ministers and appointed a chief negotiator, Alfonso Sandino, Vice Minister of Governance, to review the grievances and come to a resolution with representative civil society organizations. The farmworkers were represented by negotiator Isaac Jaen from UNAPA and the ATC. Also joining the negotiations were other peasant and worker representatives from the UNAG, as well as other government officials such as the Ministers of rural development, education, health and family services, assembly representatives of the FSLN and the mayors of San Ramon, El Tuma, La Dalia and Matagalpa. With three thousand farmworkers surrounding the secondary school in Las Tunas, negotiators spent two days hashing out an agreement to end the protest. In the end, the government agreed to the demands set forth by Jaen, UNAPA and the ATC. The government would offer short-term employment for 6,000 workers, immediately provide packets of food aid and health care assistance to those in Las Tunas, and even conceded to the demand for land. In the Las Tunas Accords, the Nicaraguan government agreed to reassign agrarian reform titles for 18 coffee estates in the names of 2,500 farmworkers. Twelve of the properties redistributed to farmworkers were previously under the control of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI. Six other estates originated from APT properties and two were disputed properties in foreclosure that were occupied by unemployed workers.

10 Conclusion

The history of the Las Tunas movement offers critical insights and contributes a vital case study to the emerging literature on the acquisition of agricultural land by domestic and transnational investors in the global South to produce food, fiber and fuel for the global North. While CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI's land-grab and the formation of its coffee empire was certainly epic, the farmworker's counter movement proved a powerful farmworker response. Mobilizing thousands of landless workers who suffered the dispossession of land and the misery of unemployment and hunger caused by devaluation and disinvestment in the coffee sector, the Las Tunas movement offers an important example of the effects of speculative land grabbing on working communities within volatile agro-export markets and the basis for a resistance movement in response to land grabbing.

Land grabbing does not operate on a static, level or immutable playing field, but rather large-scale land acquisitions like those achieved by CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI are entangled in historical geographies and embedded within much longer histories of land conflict and struggle that are still unsettled. Untangling the history of agrarian reform in Nicaragua was crucial to making sense of CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI. Moreover, understanding how a land grabbing conglomerate such as CONSAGRA-AGRESAMI comes into being as well as how it achieved its hegemonic position sheds light on the social embeddedness of actors driving the acquisition of land. Their knowledge of lucrative properties, relationships with different state and economic institutions and ability to navigate the cultural, political and economic context of post-war Nicaragua was rooted in their historical relationship to the property landscape in Central Nicaragua which enabled them to secure control over land.

The perspectives and potentialities of farmworker movements against land grabbing, I have illustrated, is also crucial. Resistance against land grabbing is not only a politics of defending the lands of the landed, but implicates the landless as well. Land grabbing preys upon existing social

inequalities in land tenure and class structure and yet it is also enabled by them, reproduces them and transforms them. Land grabbing and the history of dispossession in Central Nicaragua created and recreates classes of landless workers. Past and present land grabs create the conditions of their vulnerability by divorcing them from subsistence production and the food security that brings. The perspective of landless farmworkers working for wages on acquired lands highlights the extreme vulnerability and marginalization of these populations in the context of speculative land acquisitions and speculative markets. Coffee farmworkers are a case in point. As the Las Tunas movement participants illustrated, farmworkers dependent on wages to survive understand the effects of land grabbing and post-acquisition agro-export economies as highly volatile and life threatening.

As I demonstrate through the example of landless coffee workers in Central Nicaragua, iterative dispossessions of land from worker communities did indeed serve as the rallying cry to social mobilization by unemployed workers to repossess land and break the chains that force them into wage work. Unemployed workers directed their demands to the state and called for land redistribution designed to ensure that every worker who was laid off, evicted or could not find work, had at least two hectares of land on which to live and work. Such a movement agenda, I argue, had its roots in the material, social and spatial conditions that forced farmworkers to sell their labor in the coffee sector and what ultimately made them vulnerable to food and housing insecurity when they lost their jobs on the farms.

The Las Tunas movement demonstrates the openings for resistance and the hard struggle ahead should these historic inequalities of disposed farmworkers be acknowledged and mobilized around. The greatest achievement of those pursuing large-scale land acquisitions today would be for people to forget history, to take the struggle over land for granted. In Nicaragua farmworkers did not lose site of history. The iterative and repeated instances of land grabbing and efforts to recognize the historic nature of this process made resistance to land grabbing a living struggle among farmworkers in Central Nicaragua. Farmworkers better than anyone recognized the historic nature of their struggle and this engendered strong sentiments about land grabbing and the meaning of land to their survival. The histories of dispossession and the immanence of survival caused by past accumulation made feelings and desires for land resurface. Their past experiences became a resource of hope and possibility in reclaiming the workers' property.

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LDPI Working Paper Series

A convergence of factors has been driving a revaluation of land by powerful economic and political actors. This is occurring across the world, but especially in the global South. As a result, we see unfolding worldwide a dramatic rise in the extent of cross-border, transnational corporation-driven and, in some cases, foreign government-driven, large-scale land deals. The phrase 'global land grab' has become a catch-all phrase to describe this explosion of (trans)national commercial land transactions revolving around the production and sale of food and biofuels, conservation and mining activities.

The Land Deal Politics Initiative launched in 2010 as an 'engaged research' initiative, taking the side of the rural poor, but based on solid evidence and detailed, field-based research. The LDPI promotes in-depth and systematic enquiry to inform deeper, meaningful and productive debates about the global trends and local manifestations. The LDPI aims for a broad framework encompassing the political economy, political ecology and political sociology of land deals centred on food, biofuels, minerals and conservation. Working within the broad analytical lenses of these three fields, the LDPI uses as a general framework the four key questions in agrarian political economy: (i) who owns what? (ii) who does what? (iii) who gets what? and (iv) what do they do with the surplus wealth created? Two additional key questions highlight political dynamics between groups and social classes: 'what do they do to each other?', and 'how do changes in politics get shaped by dynamic ecologies, and vice versa?' The LDPI network explores a range of big picture questions through detailed in-depth case studies in several sites globally, focusing on the politics of land deals.

Reclaiming the Worker's Property: Coffee, Land Grabbing, and Farmworker Resistance in Nicaragua

In this paper I explore a land grabbing resistance movement composed of unemployed coffee workers in Central Nicaragua. Between 1996 and 2000 a private agro-export conglomerate appropriated 60 worker-owned coffee estates previously designated as the Area Propiedad del Los Trabajadores (APT), or the Worker's Property. Following mass protests between 2001 and 2006, worker representatives from the Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (ATC) and government officials negotiated and signed the Las Tunas Accords which provided redistributed land from nineteen of those coffee estates to 2,500 families. Drawing on archival research and interviews with movement participants I argue that land grabbing in the coffee lands of Central Nicaragua was embedded within past dispossessions and triggered memories of struggle against dispossession that provided the moral legitimacy and motivated a movement of farmworkers to reclaim land promised to them in the Nicaraguan revolution.



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