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THE COST OF SOLIDARITY: THE SALVADORAN LABOR MOVEMENT IN PUERTO EL TRIUNFO AND GREATER SAN SALVADOR IN 1979 AND 1980

Jeffrey L. Gould

Abstract

This essay analysis the labor movement in Puerto Triunfo and Greater San Salvador in 1979 and 1980. The common ideological bond linking both the port labor movement and the San Salvador movement was a rudimentary syndicalism that had no formal expression either locally or nationally. The evidence presented in this essay suggests that the local and national movements in late 1970s Salvador reflected some of the attitude, technique, and strategy but not necessarily the hope of classic syndicalism. Yet, those ideological forms remained as inchoate expressions. Moreover, the syndicalists of El Salvador labored under authoritarian and increasingly terroristic conditions unimaginable to the founders of the tradition. The arrests, tortures, and assassinations not only provoked militant responses but also imposed the necessity for semi clandestine action that made the full implementation of rank and file democracy —a sine qua non for syndicalism— extremely difficult to achieve. The disjunctions between the syndicalist ethos and formal ideological expressions in the port and in the capital had several consequences. First they led to misunderstandings and alienation between the different groups. But at the same time, these various dialectical interplays between formal and informal discourse, between rank and file and leadership, and between the port and the metropole all played significant roles in the militant rise and expansion of the labor movement. The essay will trace this broader transformation while presenting a detailed examination of the political and social changes in Puerto El Triunfo, a quite distinct history that nevertheless reflected, influenced and paralleled the labor movement as a whole. I will make use of the concept of "desencuentro".

Keywords: Labor movement, El Salvador, syndicalym, organization, repression.

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EL COSTO DE LA SOLIDARIDAD: EL MOVIMIENTO OBRERO SALVADOREÑO EN PUERTO TRIUNFO Y EL GRAN SAN SALVADOR EN 1979 Y 1980

Resumen

Este ensayo analiza el movimiento obrero en Puerto Triunfo y el Gran San Salvador en 1979 y 1980. El nudo ideológico común que unió al movimiento obrero del puerto con el de San Salvador fue un sindicalismo rudimentario que no tuvo una expresión formal ni en el nivel local ni en el nacional. La evidencia presenta en este ensayo sugiere que los movimientos locales y nacionales a finales de la década de 1970 en El Salvador, reflejan algo de la actitud, la técnica y la estrategia pero no necesariamente la esperanza del sindicalismo clásico. Empero, esas formas ideológicas permanecieron como expresión incipientes. Además, los sindicalistas de El Salvador trabajaron bajo condiciones autoritarias y crecientemente terroristas que eran inimaginables a los fundadores del sindicalismo clásico. Los arrestos, las torturas, y los asesinatos provocaron no solamente la respuesta de los militantes sino también impusieron la necesidad de una acción semi-clandestina que hicieron de la implementación de una democracia de los de abajo –una condición sine qua non para el sindicalismo- algo extremadamente difícil de alcanzar. Las grietas entre el ethos sindicalista y las formales expresiones ideológicas en el puerto y en la capital tuvieron severas consecuencias. Primero, llevaron a malentendidos y a la alienación entre los diferentes grupos. Pero, al mismo tiempo, estas variadas interacciones dialécticas entre el discurso formal y el informal, entre los de abajo y los líderes y entre el puerto y la metrópoli todas jugaron papeles significativos en el crecimiento de la militancia y la expansión del movimiento obrero. Este ensayo traza estas amplias transformaciones al tiempo en que presenta un detallado examen de los cambios políticos y sociales en el Puerto El Triunfo, una historia totalmente distinta que, sin embargo, reflejó, influenció y fue paralela al movimiento obrero como un todo. Se utilizará el concepto desencuentro.

Palabras claves: Movimiento obrero, El Salvador, sindicalismo, organización, represión.

In early December, 1980 Noé Quinteros heard a knock on his door. When he opened the door, he froze in panic: it was a well-known death squad assassin. "Sorry to bother you", he said, "but I have a problem at work. They're trying to fire me so I'm hoping the union can help me out". The next day Noé went to see the man's supervisor at Pezca S.A., (the largest shrimp processor in the country) and brought up the case. The supervisor exclaimed, "are you crazy, don't you know who he is?" Noé responded, "that may be the case, but he is still a union member". The next evening, the death squad member knocked on his door again. With less trepidation than the night before, Noé opened the door: "I wanted to thank you for helping me out. I have to tell you —and this could get me killed— but you are top on the list. You have to be out of the country in 24 hours or you're a dead man" (Quinteros, 2013, October). This incident reveals a great deal about the legitimacy of Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera (SIP)[1] throughout the Puerto El Triunfo working class; it also signals how relatively simple it was for the Right to cripple the unions, as the very moment when they were on the verge of fundamentally transforming the lives of their members.

Four years earlier, such a scene was inconceivable to Noé or to his compañeros. This essay charts how such terror became a reality in the El Salvadoran labor movement.

WORKING UNDER SIEGE

On November 10, 1977 some 1 500 Bloque Popular Revolucionario (BPR)[2] activists gathered in the Mercado Central of San Salvador. The military regime had previously blocked their efforts to hold a demonstration in Cuscatlán Park in support of two textile worker strikes. Protected by the swarms of humanity who shopped, worked, and congregated around the Mercado Central, the radical left organization held a "lightening" demonstration and then marched to the Ministry of Labor several blocks away. They blocked off the street in front of the ministry and set up loudspeakers. When some militants saw that security officials were closing the iron doors, they rushed over to occupy the building. Although unarmed, they were able to take one hundred employees hostage including the Minister of Labor and the Minister of Economy. They called upon the Minister of Labor to intervene in favor of the unions and to raise the minimum wage from 6,20 colones to 11 colones (US$4,40) a day. After two days, following the minister's promise to intervene, the BPR activists left the building.[3] Across town, unionized workers occupied US-owned Eagle International, a glove manufacturer, in protest against low wages and anti-union repression. Union militants not aligned with the BPR held three US citizens hostage for 24 hours. The regime's response was immediate. In the words of an US embassy observer:

> These two incidents (the occupations and strikes) were among the factors that caused the government to promulgate the Law of Defense and Guarantee

> of Public Order, which among other provisions outlawed strikes and demonstrations. Steadily growing pressure from the wealthy elite and the military were contributing factors… Labor disturbances thus had been significant factors in the passage of the law. (National Security Agency, 1979, May, p. 4).

The state of siege continued until February 1979. Despite the prohibition on "disruptions of productive activity", workers carried out at least 29 strikes during 1978. The very illegality of the actions tended to push workers towards more militant forms of activity, including in many cases factory occupations. As the same labor observer in the US Embassy pointed out:

> whereas before the usual negotiating method for a union had been to present a list of demands which it would then discuss with management with the idea of reaching a compromise… the tactics of certain unions involved with the BPR or FAPU was to state an initial negotiating position, stick to it, and engage in strikes… [including] the direct takeover of factories and the holding of representatives of management as hostages. (National Security Agency, 1979, May, p. 6).

BPR and Frente de Acción Popular y Unificada (FAPU)[4] activists, according to the same report, offered aid to strikers in unions not controlled by the left and then promoted more militant tactics.

The leftist-led labor movement grew spectacularly in 1979. Most of the strikes involved the defense of the right to organize and an effort to resist the 9% decline in real wages since 1975. Some 80% of the strikes involved a demand to hire fired union militants or to dismiss anti-union management employees. The relative success of the unions created a demonstration effect, and by the end of the year workers had launched at least 103 strikes involving some 30 000 people and far more work stoppages involving greater numbers of workers.[5] Nearly 20% of manufacturing workers engaged in strike activity. Proportionately, after Brazil, the Salvadoran labor movement was the most combative in Latin America. Moreover, if one takes the *toma* as a sign of militancy, then the Salvadoran labor movement followed Argentina and Chile in the early 1970s as the most militant in Latin American history. Despite the advances of the labor movement, at its peak in 1979 at most 20% of the urban working class was involved in union activity in one form or another. Moreover, the construction workers' union, by far the largest with some 40 000 members, remained firmly under the control of a centrist leadership who only infrequently supported the left wing of the labor movement.

Different groups explained the rise in militancy through distinct narratives that varied in their sympathy with workers' rights and the degree to which it affirmed historical materialist principles. The US embassy observers wrote in a language of objectivity, exhibiting basic sympathy with union rights. Moreover, they did not automatically dismiss the BPR and FAPU as "terrorists" which was the usual adjective employed by the country's leading newspapers. Most leftist accounts of the period viewed the growth of the leftist labor movement as the result of the courageous application of correct ideas to proletarian reality. Their narrative was varied and at

times complex. For the sake of brevity it can be reduced to one in which courageous militants combat the forces of repression and management with successful tactics, in turn the result of a scientific understanding of society, that reveal the structures of capitalism and imperialism at the same time as they win material gains for the unionized workers. This essay will examine more closely the causes and qualities of the growth and radicalization of the labor movement. I will suggest that the new forms of consciousness that emerged in the urban working class were indeed radical but they did not necessarily conform to any preconceived ideological notions. Indeed, a close examination of the labor movement in the port and in the metropole presents a murky picture where the terms class, class consciousness, and even union lose something of their coherence.

The common ideological bond linking both the port labor movement and the San Salvador movement was a rudimentary syndicalism that had no formal expression either locally or nationally. Eric Hobsbawm in assessing the usefulness of the term to depict the rank and file insurgency in Britain in the 1970s, stated that the main characteristics of early 20th century syndicalism included the following: an attitude hostile to management and all bureaucracies, including political parties as well as a productivist ethos; a technique that highlighted spontaneous militancy, using any available tactic to hurt the adversary; a strategy that relied upon the spread of strikes, culminating in a general strike; a hope that included a desire for workers' control over industries. The evidence presented in this essay suggests that the local and national movements in late 1970s Salvador reflected some of the attitude, technique, and strategy but not necessarily the hope of classic syndicalism. Yet, those ideological forms remained as inchoate expressions. Moreover, the syndicalists of El Salvador labored under authoritarian and increasingly terroristic conditions unimaginable to the founders of the tradition. The arrests, tortures, and assassinations not only provoked militant responses but also imposed the necessity for semi clandestine action that made the full implementation of rank and file democracy —a sine qua non for syndicalism— extremely difficult to achieve.

The disjunctions between the syndicalist ethos and formal ideological expressions in the port and in the capital had several consequences. First they led to misunderstandings and alienation between the different groups. But at the same time, these various dialectical interplays between formal and informal discourse, between rank and file and leadership, and between the port and the metropole all played significant roles in the militant rise and expansion of the labor movement.

The essay will trace this broader transformation while presenting a detailed examination of the political and social changes in Puerto El Triunfo, a quite distinct history that nevertheless reflected, influenced and paralleled the labor movement as a whole. I will make use of the concept of desencuentro, "an overdetermined linguistic misunderstanding that mutually conditioned a political or social division" (Gould, 2015).[6] This essay will reveal how desencuentros marred the union's dramatic, historic triumphs in 1979.

ON THE ROAD TO LAS MAQUILAS

Salvadoran industry underwent a sustained period of growth in the 1960s, spurred by the import substitution strategy tied to the Central American Common Market; it rose from 13 to 18% of the country's GDP during the decade. Then, Salvadoran manufacturing suffered two blows that affected the development of the labor movement. First, the Central American Common Market unraveled following the Salvadoran-Honduran war of 1969. Similarly, the oil shock of 1973 also adversely affected industry, in particular the cost of industrial inputs rose. US and East Asian companies increased their investments in Salvadoran industry, especially in the intermediate goods and maquila sectors. During the 1970s, US direct investment in Salvadoran industry was US$124 million, most of it in textiles, chemical products, electronics and electric machinery; 75% of the new investment involved joint ventures with domestic partners.[7] The Salvadoran industrial elite almost entirely came from the old agro-export elite. Although originally concentrated in coffee processing plants and sugar mills, this group diversified its investments in the 1960s and was poised to join forces with US investors in the 1970s. Although several scholars have rightly emphasized the political differences between the more progressive agro-industrialists and the more reactionary traditional agrarian elite, the former did not exhibit any particularly enlightened attitudes towards labor unions.[8]

Following the decline of the Common Market, the Salvadoran government invested considerable funds into the creation of a *zona franca* (free trade zone) in the industrial suburb of San Bartolo. This new industrializing strategy did not succeed in significantly addressing the perennial unemployment problem, exacerbated by the rural-urban migrations caused by the massive increase in the landless population. Some forty percent of the urban population suffered from unemployment or underemployment; this reserve army depressed wages and provided companies with potential strikebreakers. In the *zona franca*, labor unions faced tight security, hostile regulations, and even greater managerial power. Thus, only a few of the newest factories were organized. The unions did have a strong presence in other foreign-owned maquila plants outside of the zone. As they would find out, due to the type of machinery employed, typically the owners leave the country with relative ease.

THE VIEW FROM THE PORT

From October 1978 until February 1979, the thousand member shrimp packinghouse workers' union in Puerto El Triunfo mobilized successfully in favor of demands for higher wages, improved working conditions and for the dismissal of oppressive supervisors. This mobilization, in turn, created the conditions for a strike that lasted throughout February and March 1979 and became closely linked with national labor conflicts.

Over the previous six years the labor force had been largely quiescent with the exception of a three-month strike at *Mariscos de El Salvador* the smallest plant in the port (approximately 150 workers) in 1974 and a few one-day strikes in 1977. Thanks to his leadership of the first legal strike in Salvador's history, Alejandro Molina Lara became the key figure in the Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera (SIP). Favorable shrimp prices (US$4,00 a pound in New York) and an abundance of all varieties of shrimp allowed for negotiated wage increases that kept pace with double-digit inflation. Yet labor quiescence during the period also had to do with political and sectoral factors. Most significantly, the majority of workers in the port supported the governing political party, the Partido de Conciliación Nacional (PCN), closely allied to the military. The rightist party consistently won local elections. Indeed, Molina Lara was elected councilman in the port on the PCN ticket in 1972. Many workers also belonged to the rightist paramilitary organization ORDEN[9] that enjoyed a nationwide membership of well over 100 000, most of whose members were campesinos. Sharp sectoral divisions also militated against labor mobilization. The main division was between the mostly female packinghouse workers (1 250 – 1 500 laborers in the port) and the roughly 400 male fishermen. There were also sharp divisions between permanent, seasonal, and occasional plant workers and between male machine operators and female peelers and packers. The political loyalties of the labor force and the structural divisions created formidable obstacles to mobilization.

The SIP leadership devised an effective discourse to mobilize the largely conservative work force against the powerful, oligarchic-owned companies backed by the repressive apparatus of the military regime. We can discern key elements during the period of sustained mobilization that began in October 1978.

Early that month, Molina Lara (then the SIP Secretary of Education) was attending a seminar on trade unionism in Costa Rica. When he returned to Puerto El Triunfo he was angry to learn that SIP had signed an agreement with Pezca S.A. that extended the contract for another year.[10] According to the Labor Code, the union was able to renegotiate a two-year contract after one year, if economic circumstances had changed significantly: in fact, inflation rose to 13% in 1978.

Rather than continue the negotiations, the secretary general Leonel Chávez obtained a commitment from the company to increase the amount of overtime work. That last point irritated Molina Lara and others even more because the company owed a year's worth of overtime pay to its workers, a point not mentioned at all by the company or by Chávez.

In October, Chávez received a promotion in Pezca to auxiliar de jefe de producción, a position that was considered to be an "empleado de confianza", a category that was not compatible with union office. The Junta Directiva therefore demanded and received his resignation.

Two weeks later, Alejandro Molina Lara won election to the vacated post of secretary general with a stunning victory of 500-4, announcing a new phase of labor mobilization in the port that would last through March 1979. The vote expressed

approval of his previous three years in office (February 1975-February 1978) and signaled both a rejection of Chavez and approval of Molina Lara's efforts to nullify the signed agreement with Pezca S.A. to extend the current contract.[11]

Although the leadership of FENASTRAS[12] was allied with FAPU, a radical group very hostile to the PCS whom they considered to be "revisionists", no reference to Chavez's Communist political affiliation emerged in the union discussion. For the SIP leadership and rank and file the problems with Chavez were his weakness in negotiation (*no tenía madera*) and his failure to consult the rank and file. Moreover, the coincidence of his job promotion and his negotiation failure was hard to overlook. A November 13 SIP bulletin stated: "Por Bajas Monedas Nos Vende". Molina Lara called him a "traitor to our cause" and a "hypocritical traitor" who signed the document "behind the backs of the workers" (Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera, 1978).

This language of honor and deceit formed an integral part of SIP's mobilizing discourse. Gloria García pointed out that Pezca's actions and words combined "mockery and trickery" revealing an utter lack of respect for the unionized workers (Subseccional Pezca, 1978, October).[13] Their offer to increase overtime work came when the chacalín (the smallest and most abundant form of shrimp) season, the main source of overtime for the plant workers, was essentially over. In a report on the initial negotiations in San Salvador, another SIP representative, recounted how the company representative, the gerente general, First name Cuellar Morán offered a 5 centavo raise. And then he had the temerity to make fun of them: "And that was how we were gathering up more courage". Union representatives then demanded 2,40 colones a day (US$0,96) and more benefits especially for sick pay. Another union representative then commented on how they had to fight extremely hard because "they had suffered mockery and humiliation even though they were defending their rights" (Subseccional Pezca, 1978, December).[14] On December 14, the SIP team won a major victory: a 1,56 colones per day raise, expanded sick pay, the payment of six months of back overtime pay, and the disciplining of supervisory employees. In hailing the victory one SIP activist referred to the "courage" of the committee (Subseccional Pezca, 1978, December).

The emotion-ladened language of honor and humiliation could sustain patriarchal hierarchy and familial oppression and, at the same time, motivate people to rebel against state oppression. In the port, this powerful trope infused the language of women and men as they faced the same perpetrator of humiliation. Although the meanings of honor and humiliation may have varied, at the very least, both Gloria and her fellow negotiators felt the sting of class superiority and prejudice at the table. Moreover, they conveyed the experience of negotiation as a form of combat. At the table, they battled with words and resisted the linguistic/cultural power of the management team. They felt empowered because the mobilization was such that they could assume that the rank and file was prepared to strike if necessary. As one

militant addressed the local meeting of 295 Pezca workers: "it was you who made the decision to take the necessary measures" (Subseccional Pezca, 1978, December).

Significantly Molina Lara —with seven years of negotiating experience— was absent as he was advising striking quarry workers. Unlike the team, he exuded confidence rooted in a sense of embodying the power of the organized workers; he felt joy rather than humiliation at the table (Molina, 2015, February). Yet, he did share the workers' idiom of honor; recall how he repeatedly accused Leonel Chavez of betrayal of trust and Pezca management of trickery. He also denounced Pezca: "they have mocked the workers' interests" (Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera, 1978). The defense of honor additionally reflected the daily experience of female plant workers who strove to maintain a modicum of dignity in a job in which they were often disrespected for the very nature of the work and for living in a town marked as promiscuous. As one worker put it, "you went to work stinking, you spent the day stinking and you left stinking. But money stinks" (Zelaya de, 2013).

Molina Lara and his male compañeros had to undergo a certain transformation themselves, in particular with regards to their notions of women and femininity, recognizing the need to treat their union sisters as intellectual and moral equals. Similarly, they learned very early in the game from their union sisters that the women could not countenance any forms of harassment on the part of management. Recall that one of the first strikes in Puerto El Triunfo, at Atarraya (the second largest factory) that lasted over a month from December 1971 to January 1972 was ignited specifically over an issue of sexual harassment perpetrated by a high level manager. It is indeed remarkable that women mention at most a handful of incidents of sexual harassment during the entire decade and none reported any for union leaders. This lack of shop floor harassment contrasts sharply with the experience of female workers in other parts of Latin America and of course heightened the prestige of the union leadership.

The defense of rights formed another key node in packinghouse workers' mobilization. A political model based informally on the Mexican PRI had extended rights to workers, enshrining them in the national Constitution and in the Labor Code: the right to organize, the right to decent wages and working conditions and to negotiate and renegotiate contracts, the right to overtime pay, year-end bonuses and vacation pay. Playing on the distance between official discourse and everyday reality, SIP articulated those basic rights within a populist idiom that pitted the workers against the elite and its government (military) allies.

One SIP declaration stated: "Not only the bosses and the state have the right to become rich off of our natural wealth" (Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera, 1978). The declaration continued:

> We understand that we have to sacrifice a great deal and suffer repression and threats, but nothing will come down from heaven… This is the precise moment in which management should tremble because of the combativeness of the Labor Force, because the [management] employees will not be able to handle

> the production of shrimp… Everyone must defend our rights; United we will combat this exploitation. (Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera, 1978).

The meaning of rights here included a right to a fair share of the product. Such an extension and acceptance of rights had radical implications. The amplification of meaning was probably connected to the grudging acceptance by packinghouse workers of the illegal sales by shrimp fishermen on the high seas or deserted beaches. While eventually lining the pockets of high-ranking military officers, those sales augmented the fishermen's salaries up to 400%. It seems that some three-quarters of the fishermen participated in the practice that would eventually become the site of contention not only between the companies and the fishermen but also between the fishermen and SIP. In the words of one female packinghouse union activist: "Well, once they [the fishermen] had filled up the storage tank for the company, they should get what they produced" (Reyes, 2012). There had thus emerged within SIP discourse an elementary notion of a labor theory of value related to rights.

Unionized workers also constantly referred to the "defense of their interests". The themes of honor, interests, and rights were often interwoven. For example, one worker alluded to the "right to defend our interests". Occasionally rights and interests seem to have been used interchangeably, as, for example, when a union militant exclaimed that "the interests of the workers are irrevocable". In this case, the term "rights" would have fit better syntactically in the sentence (Subseccional Pezca, 1978, December). Another lauded "the valor that the conscious workers displayed, recognizing that they were asking for just salary raises and that was how they combatively defended their own interests" (Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera, 1979).

The notion of interests referred to individual and sectoral identities. Indeed, a constant discursive challenge was to try to create a sense of unified interests among a highly segmented labor force in which logical cases could be made for opposing sectoral ones. Thus, for example at a January 1979 SIP meeting, activists tried to mobilize support among the 461 members attending the meeting for an impending strike in Mariscos S.A. to achieve equal pay. One militant urged: "We must struggle to be united so that there will not be divisions among the workers." The next speaker referred to the discontent eight Atarraya workers expressed because the union, after a brief strike, had won a raise and a leveling of salaries in that plant. These workers were "resentful" that other workers now earned what they did. One rank and filer stated, "we should not be egotistical because then we will not win the struggle" (Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera, 1979). In reference to the successful struggles in Atarraya in early January 1979, Molina Lara exclaimed that the union had defended the "interests" of the company's fishermen and won an 18% pay raise for them, "even though they had not supported us in the struggle. Union policy is to support workers regardless of their class" (Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera, 1979). Later Molina Lara commented, "what a shame that the compañero fishermen did not accompany us even though we were fighting for their interests" (Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera, 1979). The invocation of interests was particularly tricky ground

because the interests of the fishermen —given their pursuit of direct appropriation— were not transparent. The Sindicato Agua's acceptance of that *de facto* wage policy proved a strong attraction for the fishermen in Atarraya whose loyalties and affiliations shifted back and forth between the two unions. As we shall see below the notion of interests would become a terrain of *desencuentro*.

Rhetoric was important in at least two regards. The language employed in negotiations was critical as SIP leaders who typically only had primary school educations had to engage in convincing dialogue with highly educated and powerful antagonists. In addition, as suggested above the words had to impact a politically conservative rank and file and convince members to prepare themselves for work stoppages and strikes. Molina Lara and his group extended the meaning of the key terms in part by bringing in speakers from other factories and from FENASTRAS, a union federation that had earned a degree of legitimacy within SIP. In 1972, following an abortive strike sold out by a union leadership tied to the pro-government federation, SIP voted to disaffiliate and became founding members of FENASTRAS. At its inception, it was politically neutral but hostile to government intervention. Yet, over the following years the Partido Comunista Salvadoreño, FAPU, and the BPR all battled for control, with FAPU gaining the upper hand in early 1979. Thus as leaders or activists in their union federation, FENASTRAS militants gained entrée into SIP meetings where they emphasized that rights and interests were collective and could only be realized through muscular solidarity.

SIP leaders deployed the three key terms of mobilization and wove them together through an ethic of solidarity. To achieve honor and respect, and defend rights and interests, packinghouse workers had learned that unity and solidarity were absolutely essential. Yet, as the fissures within the labor force made clear, the achievement of unity involved a daily and complex struggle. Rank and filers had to persuade and cajole their fellow workers, hiding if at all possible their anger and at times their desperation. Similarly, solidarity became another terrain of material and discursive tension. How far could the ethic of solidarity be extended and its meanings expanded?

Molina Lara pushed for greater involvement with FENASTRAS just as the national labor dynamic of labor rebellion and repression was beginning to accelerate. For example, on January 22, 1979 textile workers in San Salvador occupied the IMES plant and held four management employees hostage including two Americans. After a week, the company granted all fifteen of the union's demands. The US ambassador had monitored the occupation closely and at the end of the strike informed President Romero about US displeasure with the tolerance of labor tactics, a mixed message indeed coming from the Carter administration, putatively committed to a strong human rights policy (National Security Agency, February). Just as the ambassador feared, the success of the IMES textile plant occupation emboldened other FENASTRAS unions to engage in similar tactics; the factory takeover rapidly became common practice among its 43 affiliated unions (including locals), justified as a defensive measure against police and military violence and the

use of strikebreakers (called *negreros*).[15] During the first nine months of 1979, there were at least 46 such occupations, including at Pezca.

In late January 1979 Molina Lara's father unexpectedly passed away. On February 1 before the SIP general assembly, the 35 year-old Molina Lara swore an oath before his father's corpse, "I will keep struggling for the working masses". And then he read a message from his mother: "hijo now I know that your compañeros truly care for you and appreciate you because of the way they have treated you today with the death of your father. Now I know you are united" (Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera, 1979). His mother's endorsement of Alejandro's work ratified by the humanity of the rank and file enacted a newly enhanced notion of class solidarity. The next speaker was a union representative of the striking workers from the nearby vegetable oil company PRONACSA, owned by the oligarchic Wright family, the same owners of Pezca S.A. Explaining how the vegetable oil workers had to resist anti-union repression and management refusal to negotiate a new contract, he thanked the SIP members for their donations to their strike fund. Following him, one SIP member after another gave speeches calling for a solidarity strike. Gloria García, for example, told people not to bother striking unless they did it "with all of their heart".

Signifying an endorsement of this expanding notion of solidarity, the assembly re-elected Molina Lara to serve a full term by 475-25 votes. He claimed that he only ran for a fourth term due to the extraordinary conjuncture of national labor struggle, vowing that he would not run again (a vow he felt compelled to break the following year) (Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera, 1979). In another dramatic gesture, Molina Lara changed the location of the swearing in ceremony of the new Junta Directiva from the lake resort in Lago de Coatepeque to the occupied vegetable oil factory, PRONACSA.

Over the next few days, the SIP leadership continued to mobilize for a solidarity strike with the PRONACSA workers.[16] One worker penned a poem of solidarity: "Compañeros no están solos; no vayan a desmayar; y la victoria siempre es nuestra; y siempre la ganaremos" (Pueblo, 1979). At a February 7 meeting, many SIP workers again rose to speak in support of the action. They recognized the common antagonist and how the company had tried to "trick" the PRONACSA workers just as they had done to those of Pezca. Gloria García urged her fellow workers to take the action seriously, not act like it's "un paseo".

The next day, nearly the entire packinghouse labor force in the three plants stopped work. The public announcement of the solidarity strike, signed by two other FENASTRAS-affiliated unions based in the department of Usulután, slightly varied from the discussion in the assembly, without violating the sense of the membership. First, rather than simply express solidarity with PRONACSA, it stated that the action was also in support of striking bus drivers and textile workers. SIP and the other unions demanded "respect for the right to strike on the part of authorities and the businessmen, respect for human rights, and the cessation of repression against the workers' movement" (La Crónica, 1979, February). This call for unity and solidarity would have resonated among the rank and file. The introduction of human

rights rhetoric was increasingly frequent in Salvadoran labor conflicts and in protests against repression and appealed, in effect, to Carter administration policy vis a vis the military regime. In a February 1979 report to Congress, the State Department had placed El Salvador along with Somoza's Nicaragua as the worst human rights violator in Latin America, worse even than Pinochet's Chile or Argentina during the Dirty War. Yet, despite the basic congruence between the message and the sense of the union meeting, the amplification of the specific recipient of solidarity was indicative of the uneasy fit between strictly local concerns and actions and national-level labor tactics, strategies and meanings.

Following the solidarity strike, Atarraya and Mariscos, undoubtedly chastened by the recent strikes, ceded to the SIP demand for the day's wages.[17] Pezca S.A., however, refused to pay for the day, and instead filed a demand against SIP with the Labor Ministry. We have no special insight into the motives of Pezca S.A. However, the Wright family was politically aligned with the Right and perhaps more importantly desired to defeat the incipient unionization of its vegetable oil plant. In any case, the precedent-setting solidarity strike was unacceptable to the oligarchic owners and to many other business people throughout the country.

SIP responded to Pezca's refusal to pay for the strike day by prolonging the job action and escalating its militancy. Faced with the threat of strikebreakers, company security agents, and the National Guard, the union leadership opted to occupy the plant and to hold, at least momentarily, the general foreman and the jefe de personal hostage. SIP broadened its list of demands beyond payment of the strike day to include the firing of the general foreman for anti-union practices and another employee for harassment of a female worker. They also insisted on the reinstatement of fired union militants and announced a general port strike if their demands weren't met (Diario de Hoy, 1979).[18]

Sindicato Agua's response to the SIP strike was one of solidarity in large part provoked by their animus towards the company which had launched a full-scale campaign against fishermen for complicity in the high seas "robbery" and piracy (La Prensa Gráfica, 1979, February). The company had begun to intensify surveillance and to search and arrest artisanal fishermen whom they mistakenly blamed as the pirate merchants (La Crónica, 1979, January).[19] Company spokesmen offended the honor of the fishermen by accusing them of *robbery* and that slur undoubtedly spurred the fishermen to ally, however briefly and informally, with the packinghouse workers. They refused to break the strike by delivering their catch to facilities in the port of La Unión as they had done in past strikes. Instead, the boats came into Puerto El Triunfo with their catch of 150 000 pounds of shrimp. The catch immediately became a cause célèbre. For the two unions, the shrimp could only be processed if Pezca S.A. agreed to their demands; but the workers would allow for the shrimp to be frozen. The company expressed its intransigent attitude —undoubtedly exacerbated both by the plant occupation and their anger at their former allies among the fishermen— by refusing to negotiate and blocking the refrigeration of the shrimp by the

striking workers. After a week, the US$4 million worth of shrimp was dumped into the ocean. Both unions then demanded payment for the harvesting and processing of the discarded shrimp, a demand the company rejected out of hand (El Diario de Hoy, 1979, March).

By mid-February Sindicato Agua began a de facto solidarity strike that included the entire labor forces in Atarraya and Mariscos.[20] Yet, it was a peculiar action insofar as they publicly they claimed they were not on strike but rather the victims of a company lockout.[21] Sindicato Agua's public, vociferous denial that they were on strike is significant in that it signaled a difference with SIP and it also sent an ambiguous message to its rank and file. They were and they were not on strike. Any demands won would either be because of their strike or because of negotiations abstracted from struggle. They practiced and received solidarity with SIP and at the same time they distanced themselves from the packinghouse workers' union. Notwithstanding, Sindicato Agua's ambiguous posture, they made demands on the company in particular for the salaries they had earned on the seas (in addition to the piece rate on the discarded shrimp). They added another demand for Pezca to cease its practice of sending fishing boats back out to sea within hours of docking instead of waiting the contractually stipulated 48 hours. Presumably the company had accelerated the pace of fishing voyages in response to the illegal sales. Sindicato Agua also demanded a US$4 000 life insurance policy and payment to the ten families of those lost at sea in the cyclone of May 1977. Immediately, SIP offered solidarity to the strikers, especially food. SIP, in addition to relying on its own rapidly depleting strike funds, was receiving food aid from Atarraya and Mariscos workers and from FENASTRAS which, at that moment, was embroiled in numerous conflicts in the metropolitan area.

VIOLENCE AND SOLIDARITY IN THE CAPITAL

By 1979, the PCS (Communist Party) had been displaced from FENASTRAS, due in large part to its ineffectiveness, rooted in its dependence on the Ministry of Labor to resolve disputes; its weakness opened space for the BPR and FAPU who wrestled for control over the federation and the expanding labor movement. Although the two groups had different views on how to achieve revolutionary change —with FAPU searching for a multi-class coalition and the BPR adhering to a strategy of "prolonged people's war"— they shared certain tactics, especially the factory toma and the solidarity strike.

Both groups arguably stimulated rank and file democratic expressions. According to Kristina Pirker:

> The politicization of the unions had different meanings: in the first place, break with the daily practices of unions, based in the delegation of powers to representatives and to promote solidarity with other workers among rank and

> file union members; in addition, mobilize urban workers and campesinos in public spaces –the street– to demonstrate worker-campesino unity; and finally, to orient workers… towards the struggle for revolutionary objectives. (Pirker, 2012, p. 71).

As Pirker also recognizes, this particular form of democratizing had its limits. In particular, the use of "vías de hecho" to impose a particular tactic that often involved marginalizing and in effect silencing minority voices.

The growing support for the radical left (referred to at the time as Organizaciones Populares[22] or OP) corresponded to a strike wave that swept the metropolitan area. The US Embassy view was far less hysterical than that of the local press. Rather, their reports emphasized how the BPR and the FAPU involved themselves and politically profited from the strikes. Indeed, in part they blamed employer intransigence for the crisis. Although the embassy observers did not attempt to analyze the roots of employer intransigence, their reports reveal the desire of many companies to defeat union organizing drives and often to break unions where they existed. As noted above, anti-union repression provoked the majority of the strikes during the first six months of 1979.

As employer intransigence delayed the resolution of strikes, funds provided by the OP were critical to their maintenance.[23] Such support allowed them vital contact with union members. Most significantly, they promoted the tactic of factory occupation. Just as the US observers feared, its success in blocking the entrance of strikebreakers and in the high stakes gamble of hostage taking among the management employees, created a demonstration effect. Given prior effective use of strikebreakers —a reflection of mass unemployment— and violent state repression, the factory occupation became seen by many union militants as a necessary tactic along with the solidarity strike. Combining material support for strikes with tactical success, the radical left increased its influence in dozens of unions and factories.

Let us briefly take a look at the key strike in La Constancia and Tropical bottling plants. On February 23rd, a group of unionized workers in one sector of a plant declared a strike primarily to protest a change in work shifts that would let people out at 2:00 a.m. (the workers preferred the status quo, 6:00 a.m.). They also demanded the reinstatement of five union members and the firing of 11 management employees whom they considered to be anti-union.[24] In addition, they demanded a 75% increase in the bonus for night work. By the following day workers had occupied the adjoining plants. Nine management employees remained inside the facilities to observe the takeover and were subsequently taken hostage (La Prensa Gráfica, 1979, March 9). The Labor Ministry declared the strike illegal and ordered workers to return to their labors by March 10 or face dismissal. On the morning of March 10, security forces surrounded the plants, blocking the delivery of food to the strikers. By the afternoon a large crowd of demonstrators organized by the BPR gathered "to express their moral and material solidarity" (FENASTRAS, 1981). Apparently unprovoked, the security forces attacked the demonstration killing seven and wounding

15. In response, enraged workers threatened to burn down the plant. Monseñor Oscar Romero stepped in to negotiate along with the head of the Red Cross. Underscoring the limits of the burgeoning movement, however, the same day hundreds of workers, perhaps one-third of the work force, expressed their opposition to the strike at the Ministry of Labor, demanding to be reinstated and to be paid for the strike days (La Prensa Gráfica, 1979, March 14).[25] The day after the shootings, unionized workers at 27 plants walked off their jobs in solidarity with La Constancia workers and over one thousand electrical power company workers staged two blackouts in the San Salvador metropolitan area and in 10 of the country's 14 departments in support of the La Constancia, Pezca, and PRONACSA workers.[26] This was the country's largest solidarity action since 1967. BPR militants occupied the national Cathedral in support of the La Constancia strikers. On the night of the 13th La Constancia management settled with the strikers acceding to nearly all of their demands.

The solidarity strikes in the capital resounded in the port. To aid the cause of the workers in Puerto El Triunfo, STECEL[27] members engaged in selective power outages that affected Pezca owner, Juan Wright's hacienda, La Carrera, as well as the freezers in the processing plants. The power outages and the solidarity strikes finally brought Pezca to the bargaining table where the company granted most of the two unions' demands, including 90% of the salaries that would have been earned for the processing of the decomposed shrimp and 75% of the strike days (Pueblo, 1979). They also agreed to reorganize administration in such a way that Varela, the gerente de base, would be ushered out. Sindicato Agua received a commitment to indemnify the lost fishermen's families and to finance life insurance policies worth 4 000 colones. Similarly, PRONACSA granted most of the union demands.

On March 19, thousands of electrical power workers walked off the job. Supported by FAPU militants, they shut off power to the nation for 23 hours to demand increased wages and benefits, improved working conditions, and an end to anti-union repression. They also protested the measures that would privatize the industry. Ignacio Ellacuría, a prominent Jesuit intellectual, used the successful STECEL strike as an example of the resurgent labor movement and to explore its broader implications. First, he reminded his readers that for one-third of the nation's population, the blackout was their permanent condition. But, "the situation was new for the powerful… during the 23 hours of blackout the *powerful lost their power*". Along with the poetic flourish, he counseled caution. Reflecting on the expansion of the urban labor movement, he stated: "The working class has rediscovered its power; an important and real, but relative and limited power, a power that needs to be managed with prudence and realism". For Ellacuría, capital and its allies were much stronger and therefore it was urgent to resist the "messianic" notion that "revolutionary conditions" now existed.[28]

FENASTRAS's assessment of the blackout emphasized the coming reaction from the Right: "they are preparing an assault against the most combative and consequential unions".[29] FAPU highlighted STECEL's courageous role in the

strike solidarity movement in order to remind unionized workers that they had the obligation to stand with the power workers as they faced the inevitable reprisals from those "thirsty with vengeance". The STECEL workers, "with generosity and abnegation, they launched class combat, risking their lives and unions for the fundamental interests of the working class that were daily being mocked by the bosses and their servants".[30] They reminded the Pezca and PRONACSA workers that following their victories, they needed to strengthen their ties with the vanguard union, under siege. In direct reference to the influence of the BPR, FAPU also directed a message to the workers of La Constancia-Tropical urging them to break "once and for all with the sectarian positions that are trying to enthrone themselves in [your] union".

FAPU's accusation of BPR sectarianism was reasonable. For the BPR, the strike wave demonstrated the workers' capacity to "destroy in practice the repressive and demagogic measures of the imperialist and creole bourgeoisie and the military tyranny".[31] The new forms of struggle, especially plant occupations had allowed organized workers to compel "respect" of their immediate and "fundamental interests". The culmination of the movement was the victory of La Constancia-Tropical workers, propelled largely by BPR organized solidarity strikes. The BPR downplayed the role of STECEL. In a clear allusion to the influence of FAPU in FENASTRAS, however, the BPR argued that the influence of economicism, pacificism, revisionism and opportunism caused several strikes to drag on. Specifically, they argued that "despite the hermosa solidarity of the pesqueras, the strikes in Pezca and Pronacsa had to confront the deaf intransigence".[32] The BPR statement betrays a distance from the port. It suggests that SIP, supported by FENASTRAS, due to their ideological weaknesses engaged in tactics that somehow prolonged the strikes. Those charges were not convincing: workers occupied both plants, however, and in each case key demands included the removal of management employees and the reinstatement of union members, direct challenges to capitalist hierarchy, hardly economocism.

Yet SIP was largely immune from the desencuentros on the left.[33] FENASTRAS leaders came to a SIP meeting at the end of March to congratulate the rank and file and remind them of their commitment to unity and solidarity. In the context of increasing death squad assassination of union militants, Bernabé Recinos, leader of STECEL, lauded their courage and promised to "offer his life" if it was necessary for the cause (Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera, 1979, March). Others singled out female workers for their bravery and unity. All mentioned the defense of rights and interests.

Several testimonies suggest that the union activists kept the FAPU and BPR militants and the guerrilla left at arm's length. For Pezca local leader Noé Quinteros, the tactical issue was tied to a broader strategic and ideological concern. Referring to the guerrilla group, Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), he stated:

> The ERP came around and offered armed protection to the union during the strikes. Although we were being harassed by the authorities, we could foresee a massacre of the workers if they got involved so we declined the offer. It was the same with FAPU, we accepted their food aid, but didn't allow them to work our

> bases. I told them you know in the future if you guys win, you'll always need workers and you'll treat us like workers. (2013, October).

The elaboration of this proto syndicalist world-view was perhaps unique to Quinteros and to his immediate circle. Yet his vision broadly reflected those of the port rank and file leadership. Their highly attuned sense of solidarity and all of its ramifications did not extend to a sense of commitment to student revolutionaries whom they considered to occupy a distinct class position. These unionists would support the rights of students to protest but would not ally themselves with the radical or revolutionary left. Notwithstanding, their commitment to unrestricted labor solidarity earned them the enmity of both the regime and the right and eventually landed them on the death squad lists.

The aftermath of the strike victory turned bittersweet as some Pezca workers attempted to form a new union. SIP's growing involvement with FENASTRAS, the target of intense hostility from the regime and the press, was probably a factor in the attempt to disaffiliate. Yet, the main issues these workers enunciated were the levying of higher dues (necessary to replenish the union treasury after the strike) and their anger at the dismissal of general manager Varela (linked to the military). Although Molina Lara and his allies won the annual elections by large margins among a rapidly increasing union membership their reaction to the minority of dissidents is instructive in that it revealed embryonic desencuentros. In response to those who sought to form a new union, Molina Lara argued, "we have to raise the consciousness of these compañeros who do not have the sufficient courage to defend their interests" (Pezca, 1979, April). Similarly, Noé Quinteros claimed that those seeking disaffiliation were being tricked by the bosses: "They were showing weakness" (Pezcca, 1979, April). Here again we see the link between the defense of interests and a masculinized sense of honor.

VICTORY IN THE PORT

Although the union achieved its greatest victory in August 1979, dissidence emerged again, in part provoked by desencuentros around the term interest and its political implications. Since the beginning of the decade, the union leadership had attempted to organize the temporary workers in the three plants —some 35-40% of the total work force— and to meet their basic needs, primarily the acquisition of rights to benefits, including access to the national health system, pensions, vacation pay and seniority rights. The growth and increasing strength of SIP surely weighed on the management of the three companies. By mid 1979, despite its fissures, SIP had organized the large majority of temporary workers and white collar employees as well as permanent blue collar workers. The continued vitality of FENASTRAS, despite repression, also probably influenced the owners' decision to capitulate. Finally, August was the height of the chacalín season, a period of potentially high profits. Throughout the month, SIP engaged in contract negotiations and work stoppages in order to win

those rights for the temporary workers (García, 2015).[34] SIP first won at Atarraya and Mariscos de El Salvador. Pezca S.A., which had an entire plant worked by seasonal chacalín workers, was harder to convince. Following a one-day work stoppage and the threat of a general strike, the company caved in, granting permanent status to the 156 seasonal workers of Plant #2 with all the attendant benefits, including social security, vacation and overtime pay. They committed to finding all the seasonal workers maintenance work during the off season. They also agreed to provide them with three pairs of boots and aprons per year. All three companies granted unprecedented 50 centavo (US$ 0,20) an hour raises, in some cases amounting to nearly a 30% raise. In addition, Pezca promised to install a health dispensary (workers suffered an excessive number of cuts from peeling shrimp) and to provide free daycare. Pezca also promised to build a cafetería which was a vital improvement. Previously workers had suffered fainting spells from hunger as no provisions for on-premise lunch or snacks exised; the time allotted for lunch was too short to journey back to one's home. Overall, this resounding strike victory further strengthened the union as its ranks swelled and the level of participation, particularly among women, increased dramatically. Although there was no specifically feminist language in the movement, the victory overwhelmingly benefited female workers, both temporary and permanent.[35] In the words of Gloria García, "it wasn't a question of feminist demands, but our conquests directly helped female workers" (García, 2015).

The August 1979 strike victory was quite remarkable as it came at a moment of intense anti-labor repression and it represented a blow against the logic of capital, a halt in the advance of neo-liberal style management practices, rejecting the segmentation and marginalization of temporary workers. Yet, as in April, union discord put a damper on the celebration. Once again, an increase in union dues was a key source of dissent. Manuel Muñoz, a conservative former leader of SIP, led the group of dissidents who rejected the dues increase. Several argued that the decision was made after the bulk of the membership had left the union hall. Gloria García denied the charge and made it clear that those in the leadership earned nothing from the dues that instead allowed the union to win decisive battles, through strike funds and minimal per diem payments for negotiators. After some debate, the SIP leadership backed a measure lowering the amount from 2% of the salary to 1,5%. The debate about dues prompted Molina Lara and Quinteros to try to recast the understanding of the rank and file about the meaning of interests and solidarity.

Molina Lara exclaimed: "here it is not a question of watching out for interests… here we don't watch out for one's own interests… here we see the problems of all workers in general" (Pezca, 1979, August 30).

SIP staged a large celebration, with many invited speakers from FENASTRAS; planta #2 workers received special certificates registering their permanent status. Molina Lara took the opportunity to offer a more thoroughgoing explanation of the meaning of syndicalism. First, in a rhetorical flourish, he claimed that the union would be necessary until its members no longer needed higher wages or

houses (the lack of adequate housing was a major issue). Next, he exclaimed that, despite their victories the result of hard fought battles, the struggle was not over. As workers, they had to remember the rural workers who earned 4,20 colones a day (25% of SIP wages). Then he recast the previous day's theme: "we have to struggle for everyone not for the good of the individual, if we struggle united then we are functioning as a union" (Pezca, 1979, August 31).

For even if union members had, as it were, been brought up with the idea of solidarity, the notion of intereses propios had been integral to not only their own understandings but also to the public acceptability of union discourse. In other words, official discourse (however authoritarian its political structure) readily accepted the notion of the defense of personal interests in the same way as it promoted the defense of the family. In fact, that was a key discursive prop of the legitimacy of unions in Salvadoran society. The move, however, from individual interests to solidarity —hay que luchar para todos no para el bien propio— was smooth for the SIP leadership and for a significant sector of the labor force, but not for all. The labor movement in the port achieved astonishing victories. Along the way, however, the expansion of meaning of the terms rights and interests, infused with the emotional power of honor and shame, enthralled many but alienated a minority of its membership.

Towards the end of Molina Lara's victory speech, he launched into a scathing criticism of Sindicato Agua who had been recruiting SIP members since April, disenchanted with what they called the "politicization" of the union: "the leaders of the sindicato del sector agua are not worthy of being called compañeros". He underscored a key difference between the two unions. SIP did not discriminate against workers on any basis whatsoever, whereas implicitly he suggested that Sindicato Agua did so on ideological grounds, an anti-left criteria. By the end of the year, the split had reached dangerous proportions. In late November, Molina Lara denounced what he called "piratería en el mar" and added that "we have not been able to stop the loss of shrimp… we are turning in those who take the shrimp… we are going to break their chains" (Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera, 1979, November). Apparently, he subsequently had conversations with the Marina Nacional about the practice. Noé Quinteros (2013, March) believes that what became a price on Molina Lara's head was due, at least in part, to his denunciation of the illegal sales.

In Puerto El Triunfo, late August was a time fraught with hope and anxiety. The historic victory of SIP, combined with that of March, signified a major shift in social and labor relations in the port, as workers began to exercise power over hiring and firing and reversing long-standing discriminatory policies towards temporary workers, as well as dramatically increasing wages and benefits. The victory not only enhanced the prestige of the Molina Lara group locally it added to the luster of FENASTRAS nationally. Yet the victory came with costs. As suggested above, discursively Molina Lara and his group through their own reflections upon their collective practice extended the meanings of "interest" in such a way as to undermine any particularist understanding, that is limited to "propios intereses".

Thus for example, syndicalism now referred exclusively to the unity and solidarity necessary to defend collective interests that included the nation's rural and urban working classes. Given labor successes operating with these expansive meanings, it seems likely that much of the rank and file became conversant with or at least understood these broader meanings. Since April, however, SIP lost some members to Sindicato Agua, largely because of increased dues (Agua's dues were nominal) and the former's identification with FENASTRAS. It is hard to calculate how many of SIP members defected but within Pezca it is doubtful that they represented more than 10%. However, the 50-70 fishermen attached to Atarraya became the focus of increased competition. Finally, the SIP leadership had to turn a blind eye to the increased illegal sales of shrimp among its Mariscos de El Salvador fishermen in order to avoid potential defection or conflict with its rank and file fishermen.

SIP had become a powerful institution in the port, a symbol of a resurgent, increasingly radical national labor movement. Yet both the local and national movements suffered from severe, crippling obstacles —profound desencuentros— that were not clearly visible in the crest of the radical labor wave.

THE DIZZYING DESCENT OF MAY

The regime and rightist response to the labor upsurge of February and March involved numerous disappearances of members of the BPR and FAPU including labor militants. Human rights activists charged the Romero regime (June 1977-October 1979) with 461 executions and some 300 disappearances; the tactic of disappearance was designed to instill fear and anxiety into the families of activists.[36] On April 29, security forces detained Facundo Guardado, Secretary-General of the BPR and four other leaders of the group, causing alarm throughout the labor movement and the left. After several days of fruitless efforts to locate their leaders, the BPR occupied the Costa Rican and French embassies as well as the Cathedral of San Salvador. The regime responded by encircling the embassies with security forces. On May 7, workers throughout the metropolitan region staged a four-hour walkout demanding freedom for the captured BPR leaders; the solidarity action took place in sixteen factories, including the bottling plants, many textile plants, metal workshops, and a furniture factory in addition to the teachers' federation. On May 8, the BPR staged two marches that converged on the occupied cathedral. When the demonstrators approached the cathedral, security forces opened fire, killing 22 protesters; four bystanders and one policeman were also killed and 37 wounded.[37] One of the wounded, a young mechanic commented, "they mowed us down like chickens" (Riding, 1979).[38] Some of the demonstrators were armed with pistols. In a widely diffused video image, amidst a multitude of people trying to escape from the indiscriminate shooting while on the Cathedral's steps, a demonstrator rolls over and points a small pistol in the direction of the torrent of bullets. Despite

government and media national media efforts to attribute the violence to the BPR, *The Voice of America* as well as other foreign correspondents blamed the security forces for initiating the gunfire. Following the killings, workers in 10 plants staged protest walkouts.

On May 11, the same day that a judge freed Guardado, the BPR occupied the Venezuelan embassy. They continued the occupation demanding the release of other prisoners about whom the regime claimed no knowledge.[39] On May 15, FAPU mobilized its supporters in repudiation of the state repression. Activists marched from factory gate to factory gate in the industrial suburb of Soyapango. One FAPU militant recounted the protest in front of the country's largest cookie manufacturer: "In DIANA… the [female] workers closed the gates and gathered together in front of the factory in order to massively join our Frente's mobilization" (Pueblo, 1979, July, p. 8). They shouted slogans such as "Juicio a los Criminales de Guerra" and "Viva la Alianza Obrera-Campesina". Then the police attacked; armed "brigadistas de propaganda" repelled the assault. The group then marched to a shoe factory: "As we walked along the main street of Soyapango, the people waited for us to arrive at ADOC [major shoe manufacturer], when suddenly two convoys of the enemy pounced on the workers" (Pueblo, 1979, July, p. 11). The security forces militarized the entire zone and attempted to block any exit for the demonstrators. The FAPU militants built barricades to stave off the attack and then found refuge in the local Catholic Church.

Although it is difficult to gauge levels and qualities of worker support from this account, the intensity of state repression and the armed self-defense by militants of the Organizaciones Populares (OP) were creating a state of incipient class warfare.[40] Under such conditions, it was becoming increasingly difficult for workers to stay on the sidelines in those factories with strong support for the OP. That same pressure to join the struggle contributed to descencuentros among the rank and file, such as those that occurred in the port, between the rank and file and the leadership. Regardless, the ranks of the OP grew. According to US State Department estimates, in a country of some 4,5 million inhabitants, the BPR could count on 60-80 000 militants (a majority of whom were peasants and rural workers); FAPU had between 10-40 000 militants; the Ligas Populares 28 de Febrero (LP-28)[41] had some 5 000 militants many of whom were peasants in the northeast.[42] The OP, in turn, had ties to guerrilla organizations. During the same month of May, the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL) linked to the BPR contributed to the state of incipient civil war through kidnapping and 20 assassinations including the Minister of Education and the Swiss consul.[43] In late May, the regime declared another state of siege.

The BPR and FAPU not only had to prove their capacity to resist state and managerial repression. They also had to, like any labor activists, "deliver the goods". The latter became an increasingly difficult proposition as domestic and foreign capital flight became a pressing concern. Whereas earlier in the year, struggles centered on the defense of the right to organize and an improvement in wages, benefits and

working conditions, by midyear many labor struggles responded directly to layoffs or to the threat of plant closings.

On June 18 for example, over three hundred workers at IMES, the textile plant that had experienced the toma in late January, occupied the installations in protest against management plans to lay off 80 workers for 50 days (Pueblo, 1979, July, p. 17). By mid July, workers at over 12 other factories were on strike in solidarity with IMES workers and in support of their own demands for a cessation of anti-union repression and for salary hikes to compensate for the 11% inflation rate. In two of the textile plants, US managers were held hostage.

Labor strife continued throughout August and September, despite the state of siege in force since late May. As during the first six months of the year, a plurality of strikes responded to anti-union repression. But some 25% dealt with the threats to closure and layoffs.[44] On August 6, workers from three plants including IMES occupied the Cathedral of San Salvador and fourteen of them launched a hunger strike demanding above all else the reopening of the plants, all of which had suffered lockouts following strikes: "We are more than 1500 families; for the past two and a half months we have been in a desperate situation thanks to the bosses and their unconditional accomplices in the Ministry of Labor".[45]

On August 20, a group of 30 female workers seized the US owned Apex textile plant, and blockaded several executives in their offices. William Boorstein suffered from a heart condition that concerned his family and the US Embassy; the labor activists acceded to the delivery of medicine and food. According to the New Jersey executive, a few weeks before the takeover a delegation of 10 workers presented him with a number of petitions. In response, he alleges to have raised workers' pay from the minimum wage of US$2,80 to US$3,75 and increased piece rates. He also started to pipe in music and increased the workers' allotment of toilet paper. The majority of the company's 325 employees, according to Boorstein, cheered the announcement. Thus, he was surprised when a group of female workers and male guerrillas took over the plant, increasing the list of demands (Santa Fe New Mexican, 1979). The Embassy and others sources make no mention of guerrillas. It is probable, as the Embassy reported, that the toma did involve only a minority of the work force. A large number of workers went to the Ministry of Labor to protest the plant occupation. In any event, the company accepted most of the union demands; Boorstein claims to have escaped, though the strike had already been settled (New York Times, 1979). Later in the year, the company closed down its Salvadoran operations.

The US embassy assessed the labor panorama: "If nothing else, the recent spate of labor disputes demonstrates growing influence of BPR in organized labor field" (National Security Agency, 1979, July 19).[46] In a subsequent communiqué, embassy observers stated that as soon as one strike was settled, the BPR would foment another one and at that moment in late July, they were in control of five strikes where hostages were held (National Security Agency, 1979, July 30).[47]

ON THE RADICALIZATION OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT

There are several key questions that need to be addressed regarding this second major strike wave in 1979. Why did the radical left, in particular the BPR gain so much strength in the labor movement during this period? To what extent did support for the OP indicate a transformation of consciousness? Were the union movements in the factories of the San Salvador metropolitan area substantially different from those in Puerto El Triunfo? How did the experience of the toma affect worker consciousness? What were the limits to continued growth of the movement?

As the analyst Salvador Samayoa (1979) pointed out at the time, the tactical conservatism of the traditional left and centrist leadership of the labor movement and the inoperativeness of the Labor Code combined with the extreme anti-union bias of most companies and harsh state repression to push workers towards more militant tactics. The BPR had a distinctive style of action. On the one hand, they refused any form of tactical alliance with other sectors of the left or the labor movement. On the other, they mobilized non-labor sectors of their organization to actively aid tomas:

> The presence of students, teachers, and peasants inside the factories on strike appears to bother the bosses a great deal as well as the political adversaries of the BPR. The inclusion of political demands in their list of demands also bothers them as do the repeated work stoppages in solidarity with striking workers. (Samayoa y Galván, 1979, p. 595).

Samayoa distinguished the above BPR tactics from those of FAPU, whom they were eclipsing organizationally within the labor movement. FAPU does seem to have accepted a subsidiary role in strikes and unions where they had influence, as the Puerto experience suggests. The BPR's rapid ascent within the labor movement probably did have something to do with its modus operandi of bringing in militants from other sectors to bolster striker morale and deliver necessary supplies. Certainly the BPR's rate of success speaks to the effectiveness of its tactics. More significantly, it was able to expand beyond its initial foothold in the textile industry. As noted above, the textile, clothing, and electronics industries grew rapidly during the 1970. Profit margins were dependent on low labor costs, which foreign capital expected; they were prone to anti-union resistance so as not to incur higher costs. Given the inherent weaknesses of the legalistic approach of the traditional union leadership (including the PCS), the militancy and extra-legal tactics of the BPR found a receptive audience among many rank and file maquila workers.

The BPR's insistence on politicizing labor struggles and involving students, market women, and peasants in the tomas, according to some testimonies, had the effect of creating a festive tone to an otherwise serious affair. Recall that the origins of the tomas were defensive, as security forces arrested strikers or at least forced the entrance of strikebreakers into the plants. Despite occasional attacks by the National Guard to end the occupations, in no cases were hostages harmed, suggesting the symbolic

nature of labor violence; though defensive its coercive quality supplied justification for regime violence. According to a FAPU publication, in addition to its defensive use, the tomas had three primary effects. First, they allowed for a flowering of worker democracy and for a platform to denounce human rights and labor abuses. They also served to push management to negotiate seriously. Finally, they occasionally ended in "partial defeats" (implying without the toma, a total defeat would have ensued).

The entrance of the non-worker BPR activists was apparently greeted with some enthusiasm by factory workers, breaking their sense of anxiety and isolation and allowing for the expression of a sense of power shared by ordinary people in the face of clear cut adversaries —some of whom they held captive—.

In December 1979, Beckman Industries, the owners of the Aplar electronics plant in the zona franca had decided to shut operations due to the prevailing political climate. Workers occupied the plant to prevent the company from removing its machinery and to demand the continuation of operations (Kantor, Nolan & Sauvant).[48] One female laborer who worked with Molina Lara and FENASTRAS recalls of the occupied plant, "we sang. And then we did all work together equally. We cooked, cleaned and performed maintenance on the machinery" (Parada, 2012).

A young laborer at a metal machinery plant, organized into the BPR, recalls joining the occupation at IMES:

> We each took shifts, some of us in charge of security, watching out for threats from the police or National Guard or death squads. I remember feeling a double sensation —it was so exciting to listen and sing along to the revolutionary music— all of the activists and workers socialized. There were kids running around. We were all full of joy. But we were also afraid, anxious… as death squads lurked everywhere. (Campos, 2012).

The qualities of occupations do not seem to have differed significantly under the influence of FAPU or the BPR. In general, the festival-like experience did not translate directly into any notion of workers' control over the productive process.

Unions operating outside of the radical left sphere of influence also employed the tactic of the toma. Between August 7 and September 24, workers occupied 23 plants. BPR and FAPU militants were only involved in half of the tomas. The prevalence of this militant tactic does not necessarily indicate the spread of radical left ideologies. Rather, it indicates a recognition of the bitter reality alluded to above: the rapidly growing unemployed population was ready to break strikes; the security forces would support the strikebreakers; the Labor Code was largely inoperative and the companies refused to negotiate except under duress. Yet worker pragmatism does not account for the whole picture. There always existed the option to do nothing and be thankful to have a job. Moreover, factory takeovers implied huge risks, especially that of violent repression.

Large numbers of workers were becoming radicalized, formally or not. The qualities of that radicalization differed a great deal. Most organized workers recognized the harsh social-political reality and saw themselves as playing a vital role in

its transformation. Put differently, what today seems quaint —the notion of class struggle or even class warfare— had become in 1979 a vivid reality for tens of thousands of workers. That struggle was interpreted in a variety of ways from the syndicalism of the Puerto El Triunfo leaders to those accepting the notion of the working class as vanguard of a popular revolution. Degrees and qualities of commitment to the cause varied among workers depending on factors such as age, labor experience, family biographies, and direct exposure to the BPR or FAPU.

As noted above, the structure of industry posed a sharp limit to the movement's growth as the maquila sector restricted or moved its operations with relative ease. The increasingly frequent labor demand throughout the textile and clothing manufacturing sectors for more "raw material" was indicative of managerial responses to economic and labor pressures. The functioning of the factories hinged on raw materials from abroad. More significantly, in August 1979 four plants closed down alleging labor strife as the prime factor. The government and media directly pointed the accusatory finger at the radical left for its "illegal" actions, since in all four cases workers occupied the plants. By late September, over twenty plants had shut down operations or were on the verge of doing so.

By the fall of 1979, the labor and peasant struggles had reached a crescendo, in a conjuncture characterized by rising inflation and by unemployment above 30% (due to structural causes and capital flight). Perhaps 200 000 people aligned themselves with the OP. The Christian Democratic Party was larger, as evidenced by the massive reception of its leader José Napoleón Duarte upon his return from exile; but also contained a significant left sector. A substantial minority of the population supported the regime and the right. Finally, with the triumph of the Sandinista revolution in July 1979, the US somewhat erratically pushed the Romero regime to modify its repressive policies.[49]

THE LAST CHANCE

On 15 October, 1979, junior officers carried out a bloodless coup, issuing a proclamation that promised structural (including agrarian) reforms, an end to human rights abuses, the abolition of the paramilitary group ORDEN, freedom for political prisoners, the protection and extension of union rights and the democratization of society (Menjívar, 2006, p. 157). The failure of the Junta Revolucionaria de Gobierno (JRG)[50], a coalition of junior officers and progressive civilians, signaled a rapid descent towards a civil war that cost some 75 000 lives. Most analysts and scholars have considered the project doomed from its inception (Menjívar, 2006, p. 135).[51]

On October 16, protesters staged a demonstration in front of the DIANA factory (cookies), in support of workers who had occupied the plant the day before, in protest against the presence of heavily armed private guards in the factory.[52] Security forces assaulted the demonstration, killing one person and then entered the factory

where they arrested 70 workers. They then proceeded to storm four other neighboring factories in Soyapango. In the course of their attacks on the factories, authorities killed five workers and arrested dozens. In a desperate response, workers reportedly attempted to burn two of the factories, including APEX, where Boorstein had been held hostage and which had been occupied for two months.[53] The JRG's strikingly contradictory positions, calling for the respect of union rights on the one hand, and storming the occupied factories, on the other, symbolized the profound division at the core of this new reformist regime that included elements of the moderate left.

The OP sharply rejected the new government, arguing that it was a creation of imperialism. Their protest demonstrations, always protected by self-defense brigades, emboldened the hard line right inside and outside the government. On October 22, troops opened fire on a FAPU demonstration causing several deaths. In response, FENASTRAS withdrew from the Foro Popular a coalition of groups that offered critical support of the Junta Revolucionaria. On October 24, the BPR staged a demonstration that culminated in a takeover of the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Economy. Among the hostages was the Minister of Labor, a member of the PCS (Communist Party). The BPR demands echoed those of the left and of the human rights community: for the freedom of political prisoners and for an accounting of the disappeared. Most of the demands, however, directly addressed the immediate needs of the urban and rural working classes, including a hundred percent rise in wages, highly specific reductions in prices of basic necessities and of specific bus routes, and the provision of drinking water to the entire population.

On October 29, security forces opened fire on a Ligas Populares demonstration in support of the BPR occupation, killing 29 people, mostly peasants from the department of Morazán. Although the government and the right-wing press blamed the radical left group for initiating the shooting, impartial observers witnessed the security forces opening fire first. In any event, the bloodshed added pressure on the government to negotiate with the BPR. On November 6, 12 000 people under the banners of the BPR began a march in support of the occupations. According to the organizers, thousands joined the march en route to the ministries where the occupants filed out of the buildings. The BPR supporters then marched to the National University where they staged a victory celebration. In order to end the occupations, the Junta Revolucionaria agreed to cut inter-city bus rates by 50% and to intervene in two current labor conflicts. The JRG also committed to negotiate indemnification or the reopening of four other factories. The Junta also promised within the 30-day period to enact significant wage increases in the fields and factories and to institute human rights policies, in particular to resolve the issues surrounding the disappearance of 300 people.[54] Shortly after the occupation ended, the JRG did slash food prices. FAPU and LP-28 also agreed, in effect to a one-month truce. November registered a significantly lower level of arrests and street clashes; it also registered very few urban death squad victims.

The negotiated settlement of November 6 represented the possibility for a peaceful solution to the increasingly violent class conflict. The Junta ceded ground in a way that allowed its progressive civilian members to fulfill some of their own goals. The OP consciously phrased their demands in such a way that their real and potential bases would actually improve their social and economic situation. In short, despite the rhetoric to the contrary, the OP were prepared to contest the government on peaceful terrain if possible.[55]

During the next few weeks, security forces refrained from attacking demonstrations. However, the radical right, supported by the agrarian oligarchy, key sectors of the military, and some major industrialists had no interest in playing this game. Although the numbers of death squad victims decreased notably in the cities, in the countryside, violence continued largely unabated. At the same time, the JRG did abolish ORDEN and promulgate a significant increase in the minimum wage for rural workers. Despite the formal abolition of ORDEN, however, the JRG refused to extradite military officers from the previous regime or to prosecute anyone in the military due to pressure from the oligarchic right.

The truce could not hold in large part because the OP and the moderate left members of the JRG, despite shared fundamental goals and some behind the scenes dialogue could not form an alliance, however informal. This impossibility in turn hinged on their different understandings of how fundamental political and social change could be achieved and the role of the OP in such transformations. The overcoming of this desencuentro between the two sectors of the left (the "moderate" sector was much smaller) probably would not have prevented the impending civil war, without a nearly inconceivable intervention by the Carter administration against the hard line rightist elements in the military (Gould, 2015).

Symbolizing the end of the truce, on November 28, FENASTRAS called for a one-day walkout and demonstration in protest against the government. Some five thousand workers joined the march, supporting the demands announced in the BPR-JRG negotiation, highlighting the disbanding of death squads, the extradition and arrest of "los criminales del pueblo" and the demilitarization of numerous factories that had been taken over by security forces since October 15.[56] The Comité de Madres de Presos y Desaparecidos Políticos also joined the march along with numerous students.

SIP represented one of the largest contingents of strikers/protesters, distinguished by their work gabachas (aprons worn to belie press distortions that non-labor elements formed the mainstay of the march). FENASTRAS and FAPU provided busses and close to a thousand packinghouse workers from all three companies participated in the march.

Earlier in the year, Molina Lara had been elected as Secretary of Organization of FENASTRAS. Although not a member at the time, he sympathized with FAPU; Bernabé Recinos, secretary-general of FENASTRAS and a friend was a member. As noted above, Molina Lara strove to keep FAPU militants at arms' length and did not

allow them to participate directly in union activities. Nevertheless, his own position in the FENASTRAS leadership exposed him to certain methods of the radical left that had learned to operate under a constant state of siege. The SIP leadership mobilized support for the protest march as they had done in the past but this time they made clear that all members should participate and that attendance would be taken. Although the pretext was to use the list to demand payment from the company, in effect it was a form of what elsewhere I have called enforced solidarity. Throughout the 19th and 20th century most strikes and other forms of social protest have employed some forms of coercion to push wavering supporters into the insurgent camp and, at the same time, to present a united front against their antagonists. Such tactics of enforced solidarity have often been successful, indeed a key ingredient of many strikes. And yet they always have been problematic. Molina Lara retrospectively calculates that close to one half of the participants might not have journeyed to the capital without the symbolic coercion. In the past, rarely more than a hundred union activists had attended marches in the capital (Molina, 2015, December).[57]

In early December, the BPR called out 3000 working class supporters in thirteen factories in a one-day work stoppage to demand fulfillment of the November 6 accords (in effect the same goals as those of the FENASTRAS march). Once the de facto truce ended, urban and rural workers launched strikes to gain the raises necessary to keep up with inflation and to combat the incessant employer attacks on their unions. To counter the toma tactic some of the larger companies hired heavily armed guards with the result that on occasion there were violent confrontations in the plants.

The end of the truce had immediate repercussions in the countryside. On November 27, sugar cane cutters, organized by the Federación de Trabajadores del Campo (BPR affiliated) launched a strike on 17 haciendas and plantations in demand for higher salaries, more and higher quality food (which often had been inedible), better sanitation, and improved treatment in the fields among other demands. After three weeks, the owners negotiated a settlement that raised wages, improved food rations, provided first aid dispensaries, and guaranteed the right to organize (El Independiente, 1979). The strike effectively carried out one of the promises of the JRG namely to legalize rural unions. Yet the victory was short lived. On 18 December, the National Guard attacked farmworkers who had occupied the large coffee hacienda, El Porvenir, located 50 kilometers northwest of the capital, in demand for higher wages, benefits and better work conditions. Troops killed some 25 farmworkers and captured 16 others.[58] Ignacio Ellacuría, the rector of the Jesuit Universidad Centroamericana who had previously offered critical support to the JRG, commented about the military:

> They have been deceived, once again, by listening only to the voices of the oligarchy. Neither in Congo nor in Berlín [where the Guardia killed striking workers on a coffee plantation in Usulután] did they face guerrillas … they killed 25 and did not find more than a small number of arms; they have killed, then, unarmed people.[59]

The following week, Ellacuría presaged the departure of the moderate left elements from the JRG, when he ironically congratulated the Right on its success in placing the military once again under its control: 'You have defeated those who defended the people, Salvadoran Right. But celebrate quickly, because the civil war is one step closer.[60]

In early January, the moderate left members resigned from the JRG. Simultaneously, the OP sought to unify and to incorporate those on the left who had supported the JRG. The FENASTRAS-led march of January 22 symbolized that new-found unity. The largest demonstration in Salvadoran history, an estimated 150 000-250 000 people marched through the streets of the capital. Snipers opened fire on the marchers, killing approximately 50 people including a female worker from Puerto El Triunfo.

More than one thousand packinghouse workers, a substantial majority of the Puerto El Triunfo labor force, attended the march in uniform. Although Molina Lara had become aligned with FAPU, he envisioned the protest march of January 22 not as a demonstration of the revolutionary left but rather: "It was the expression of workers' power, the power of the organized working class" (Molina, 2012). In short, Molina Lara wished to maintain a sharp division between the union and the revolutionary movement, nurturing the hope for a politics to emerge from the working class that was not directed by middle class radicals. The different interpretations represented another instance of a desencuentro. Consider the distance between Molina Lara's retrospective interpretation of the event as a demonstration of workers' power (shared by other rank and file union activists) and the view of the OP as a demonstration of the force of the revolutionary left.

The tension between revolutionary goals and immediate interests, as we have seen, permeated the left labor movement. In general, both the BPR and FAPU —outside of Puerto El Triunfo— were able to conduct economic struggles effectively following a classic Leninist approach, pushing workers towards "higher political consciousness". And yet, it was not a one-way street. The militants' desire to address the immediate needs of their rank and file led to an important ideological shift away from a Leninist formulation.

On January 21, FENASTRAS issued a statement denouncing "la patronal imperialista's" maneuvers to weaken the labor movement by closing factories and by creating an artificial scarcity of goods such as sugar and vegetable oil in order to blame the labor movement. The labor federation capitalized its response: "OUR RESPONSE TO THE COMPANY'S ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL MEASURES WILL BE TO PROMOTE THE AUTOGESTION OF THE CLOSED FACTORIES SO THAT THEY WILL BE NATIONALIZED".[61]

The call for autogestion —a distinctly non-Leninist demand/strategy— was not a mere rhetorical gesture. Rather, Recinos and another FENASTRAS leader went to the US embassy and engaged in serious discussions, trying to persuade the US State Department to intervene and persuade the companies to either reopen or to

facilitate workers' management of the plants. The embassy negotiator pointed out that FENASTRAS was partially to blame for the departure of the US companies and doubted that they could help remedy the situation (National Security Agency, 1980).[62]

On February 15, the labor branch of the BPR occupied the Instituto Salvadoreño de Comercio. The primary goal of the takeover was to compel the government to address the growing problem of factory closures; twelve had closed in recent months. The agreement committed the government to explore all alternatives to reopen the factories. If those proved unsuccessful, it would compel the companies to indemnify the workers.[63]

The aforementioned Aplar workers continued their occupation through February when, under FENASTRAS supervision, they formed a cooperative. They sent a delegation to Los Angeles to negotiate with Beckman Industries who agreed to allow for the production of potentiometers (a highly sophisticated device to measure and divide voltage in joysticks, for example) (Kantor, Nolan & Sauvant, 2011). Although by the end of the year Beckman had broken the agreement, the FENASTRAS-backed labor experiment was a highly significant departure from Leninist propositions on class struggle for two reasons. First, it proffered an alliance between capital and labor over the means of production whereby workers would manage production while leaving ownership squarely in the control of the company. Second, Marxist-Leninists often scoffed at cooperatives as palliatives to workers that undermined the class struggle.

In short, both in the port and at a national level, we can discern the spontaneous emergence of rank and file discourse that contested existing economic and political power relations. In the case of the port, we can see the outlines of a proto-syndicalist ideology that emphasizes class solidarity. Nationally, faced with the wave of factory closure, Leninists began to break with a view of the revolutionary process that conceived of workers' control over production in a capitalist system as an ideological deviation.[64] These incipient ideologies were the product of the sustained and massive involvement of workers in struggles in 1979 to defend the right to union organization, to decent working conditions, and to employment. They announced the possibility of a new form of labor politics in El Salvador, rooted in the praxis of a significant minority of the urban and rural working class. Notwithstanding, the paramilitary right and its government allies had no interest in letting such a politics develop.

DEATH KNELLS IN THE PORT

Whether viewed as the highpoint of the labor movement or as the zenith of the revolutionary movement, January 22, 1980, represented yet another moment of rupture in relations between the labor movement and the state. In the port, SIP sustained some minor losses to Sindicato Agua due to the political implications of January 22; Molina Lara again had made it clear to his members that if they did not

participate they might get expelled from the union, not quite tantamount to losing one's job but certainly an undesirable outcome. Nevertheless, Molina Lara's group maintained a firm grip on power and countered criticism of its radical leanings with a coherent discourse. He argued to an assembly of 470, days before the demonstration, that the state was assassinating FENASTRAS labor activists who were defending collective worker interests, and therefore "we can't sit stand by and do nothing" (Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera, 1980, January). Similarly, he linked the demonstration to the collective need to "win more benefits from the bosses". Molina Lara in effect argued for identification with FENASTRAS as necessary for the individual and collective interests of the SIP rank and file.

On February 4, over 800 people attended a SIP meeting. Molina Lara offered a eulogy for the martyred Virginia Lidia Cortez, killed in the January 22 demonstration. Following the speech that underscored the links between local and national repression of the labor movement, the union held their annual elections. Despite having promised the previous year that it would be his last term, Molina Lara ran again for the position of secretary general, winning 600-213 (Sindicato de la Industria Pesquera, 1980, February).[65] Molina Lara and his group believed that the stakes were so high, with the country on the verge of civil war, that he was indispensable to the labor movement because of his highly developed skills as a negotiator, his level of legitimacy among the rank and file, and key role in the labor federation with which SIP was allied.

Yet Molina Lara's important role in FENASTRAS brought him unwanted attention. On December 12, 1979, he was with Bernabé Recinos, driving towards a meeting in San Miguel. Outside of the city, soldiers at a military checkpoint stopped and frisked them. Fearful of encounters with death squads, the two men carried pistols. The soldiers arrested them as guerrillas. Word made it out of the prison, and STECEL and FENASTRAS threatened a nationwide strike if Recinos and Molina Lara were not released (Molina, 2012). The unwanted attention continued. In one of two death squad encounters in 1980, Molina Lara was driving to the Puerto after a family visit in Usulután. As he was leaving the city, two pickups with armed men surged ahead to block his path. He managed to swerve into a gas station and then gunned the engine. The car that FENASTRAS had lent him operated with a souped-up motor specifically designed to evade death squads. He was able to elude the pickups and speed past them, outracing them to the port.

Despite two ambushes and three arrests, Molina Lara continued to devote his energies to SIP and FENASTRAS. Molina Lara's position in FENASTRAS ensured that SIP would work with the national labor movement. The Coordinadora Revolucionaria de Masas (the expression of left unity of whom FENASTRAS formed the largest contingent) called for a national general strike for June 24th and June 25th in demand for higher wages and end to repression. Notwithstanding the military's stern warnings and threats against strike participation, SIP members joined an estimated 150 000 urban workers and 100 000 campesinos in a national general strike

on the 24th. Foreign observers calculated that over 80-90% of the work force joined the strike in the metropolitan area (Menjívar, 2006, p. 297). The following day, as if to respond to their humiliating inability to stop the strike, the military massacred between 25 and 40 people near the University of El Salvador, where the strike organizers were meeting.

In Puerto El Triunfo, workers occupied the three processing plants, in order to support the general strike and to protect the installations. SIP did not call out its fishermen on strike due to the logistical difficulties of such a move. Despite the close ties of management with the oligarchy and the regime, no repression took place either directly or indirectly; the companies even paid for one of the strike days (Molina, 2012).

In mid August 1980, once again, the Coordinadora called for a general strike, conceived as potential dress rehearsal for a popular insurrection. Fewer people probably participated in the strike due to the intense levels of repression. Archbishop Rivera y Damas (who replaced the martyred Archbishop Romero, gunned down on March 24), however, considered the action to be a plebiscite, due to the participation of the majority of the labor force in clear repudiation of the regime.[66] Death squad activity intensified against union activists. Sixteen rank and file members of STECEL were gunned down during the strike. In response, the union, led by Recinos, occupied all of the power plants and in a desperate move to thwart the repression threatened to blow up the stations if attacked (Menjívar, 2006, pp. 267-268). Following the strike, the union was crushed and its entire leadership imprisoned (Bollinger, 1987, p. 319). Shortly thereafter, the government forces and death squads drove the rest of FENASTRAS underground.

The reign of terror that vanquished over 11 000 civilians in 1980 largely spared Puerto El Triunfo due to the hegemony of SIP and its tactic of including ORDEN members (connected to the GN and death squads) among its leadership. Recall Noé Quinteros' encounter with a death squad union member. Despite the growing violence, SIP and the shrimp companies continued to behave as if in "normal times." Notwithstanding the terror, the SIP leadership still brought out large numbers of members to its meetings. In June over 500 workers attended a meeting of the Pezca S.A. local and in August, over 1 000 attended a general SIP meeting. As late as November 1980, shortly after the military had unleashed a massive scorched earth campaign to stamp out an incipient guerrilla movement in Morazán, the Pezca S.A. local won a 2 colones per day increase (Subseccional Pezca, 1980). The established pattern of demands, negotiations in the Ministry of Labor, and strike threats continued throughout the blood-soaked year.

By the end of the year, the terror reached the port. Several SIP militants were gunned down during a period that Ovidio Granadeño describes as one of "very brutal repression" (Granadeño, 2012).

Early in the morning, on January 15, 1981, Molina Lara awoke in the labor federation office in San Salvador. Plainclothes agents barged in, tied him up and blindfolded him (Bollinger, 1987, p. 357; Molina, 2012).[67] For three hours they

waited for the arrival of two other FENASTRAS militants so that they could capture other activists as well. A small tank pulled up to the office to carry them off. They were placed in a basement cell of the National Police. For six days, Molina Lara was blindfolded and beaten and given electric shock torture; the interrogators constantly demanded that he turn over names to save his own life. Finally, the Red Cross arrived at the prison and the torture ceased. After another two weeks, he was transferred to La Mariona prison where he helped inaugurate the division of political prisoners (previously all "subversives" were killed). After nearly six months he was released and went into exile.

Gloria García awoke to loud shouts and curses. She glanced at the clock —it was 2:00 a.m.—. Panicked, she warily walked out of her bedroom. Dozens of uniformed masked men had broken into her house. Along with her husband and infant children she watched in terror, as they burned all her photos and papers and ripped open their couch and beds. They screamed at her "¡puta guerrillera!".

Later that day in early August 1981, Gloria, a union activist, walked into the office of Mauro Granados, the plant manager of Pezca S.A. She informed him that she wanted her severance pay —she had been working at the plant for sixteen years—. Granados, whom she had often confronted on the job and at the negotiating table, didn't ask her why she wanted to quit. It was 1981 and all of the other union leaders had either been gunned down or had fled into exile.

"So what are you going to do with the money?".

"Oh, I'm going to sell granos básicos from my home…".

"That sounds like a good idea, put up that store, because otherwise those grains will grow over you".

"What the hell do you mean by that?".

"You know damn well what I mean" (García, 2015).

Gloria García was the last SIP militant to flee into exile. Despite the ties of the shrimp company owners to the far right, no labor activists at the time or subsequently believed that they were in any direct way responsible for ordering the hits. Rather it seems more likely that the death squad actions in the port were part of the national campaign of terror that eliminated over 5 000 union members, between 1979 and 1981.

In July 1981, jailed labor activists penned the following and slipped it to a Dutch journalist: "The Salvadoran labor movement has had to become clandestine because it is the only manner that it can continue living since its union halls have been dynamited and its leaders jailed or executed". Then, commenting on their own situation: "here there are compañeros who have been burned with acid, tortured with electrical shocks… and then the persecution and execution of our family members who visit us in prison increases every day with the object of isolating us from the people".[68]

We can read this brief history of labor insurgency and repression as support of Greg Grandin's argument about counterrevolutionary violence as the midwife of neoliberalism. He writes, "repression severed alliances between reforming elites and popular classes, disaggregated powerful collective movements into individual

survival strategies, extracted leaders from their communities, and redefined the relationship between human beings and society".[69] The labor movements in the port and the greater San Salvador area would reemerge forcefully in the mid-1980s in the context of a brutal civil war that cost 75 000 lives. However valiantly the workers battled employers and the government under unimaginably difficult conditions, the wave of violent repression of 1980 had already denuded the emancipatory potential of the movements.

The labor insurgency that provoked so much bloody rightist resistance was not solely a creature of the radical or revolutionary left, either organizationally or ideologically. Buried within the discourse and practice of the radical labor movement lay the efforts and expressions of rank and filers to achieve a secure and dignified place within a convulsed and highly stratified society. More specifically, as we as saw in Puerto El Triunfo, mostly female workers were capable of reversing the neo-liberal inspired trend towards the flexibilization of labor. Similarly, the rank and file pushed its radical left leadership towards a razor sharp attention to their needs and towards acceptance of experiments in workers' self-management that were anathema to classic Leninism.

The period immediately following the October 15th coup may well have represented an historic missed opportunity for a peaceful solution to the class conflicts that were wrenching apart Salvadoran society. Desencuentros of the kind that divided the port labor force at moments of triumph also debilitated the workers' movement in the rest of the country.[70] The ways in which the OP arrogated representation of the working class negatively affected class cohesion and allowed for the growth of some urban popular support for the Right. Moreover, had the radical left remained more consistently open to a practical dialogue with the JRG, they might have posed a more effective challenge to the homicidal Right who deliberately set out to annihilate all forms of resistance within the popular classes.[71] The transition to neoliberalism in El Salvador may have been inevitable, but the death squads need not have been its midwives. That was a conscious choice by those desperate to hold on to unmediated power.

NOTAS

1 Union of the Fishery Industry (1961), over 1 000 members in Puerto El Triunfo organized in three locals at each of three plants, in order of size Pezca, Atarraya and Mariscos de El Salvador. There was another local in la Unión with several hundred members. Fishermen at Pezca belonged to another union, commonly called Sindicato Agua.

2 Popular Revolutionary Bloc (1975), 80 000 members, affiliated to Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL), guerrilla group.

3 The BPR was the result of a split from the Frente de Acción Popular Unificada (FAPU), founded in 1974. The BPR developed a much larger presence in the countryside; it included a peasant and rural workers' federations.

4 Unified Popular Action Front (1974), 10 000-40 000 members in 1979, affiliated to guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas de Resistencia Nacional (FARN).

5 See http://laborsta.ilo.org/

6 In that article, I suggest the methodological usefulness of the term desencuentros, a Spanish word with greater reach and resonance than the individual English synonyms: a misunderstanding, a disagreement, a disjuncture, a run in, or a failed encounter. The interplay between failed encounters of social movements and linguistic misunderstandings, rooted in class, ethnic, gender, and geographical differences is a fruitful area for investigation. People in two different groups can have different understandings of the same concept that, in turn, may condition different practices in a given historical moment. Obviously thinkers as diverse as Raymond Williams and Sidney Tarrow have developed similar methodological ideas.

7 Often this involved buying existing plants. The only fully Salvadoran dynamic sectors were beverages and cement.

8 See *Coffee and Power*, 1998, by J. Paige, Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press.

9 State founded peasant organization involved in rightist paramilitary activity in 1970s. Over 100 000 members; abolished by JRG in November 1979, but continued under other name.

10 When he had left for the seminar, a union committee had been renegotiating the contract. The previous year, Leonel Chávez, then the Secretary of Organization (Molina Lara was in his third one year term as Secretary General) had commented that he hoped inflation wouldn't increase much since he felt that the union was committed to respect the two-year agreement. Yet, his hopes were dashed as the inflation rate was running 13% in 1978.

11 It is difficult to gauge the percentage of the work force who attended meetings, given that a fluctuating number of workers were "eventuales" or "supernumeraries" that is people who were occasional and not seasonal workers and who did not pay dues to the union. The work force of permanent and seasonal plant and maintenance workers was probably 1000-1100. That said within a year there were close to a thousand attending SIP general meetings.

12 Left-leaning labor federation, founded in 1972.

13 In recognition of her vigorous intervention around the Chávez issue and of her prior union activities, the Pezca local membership voted her onto the negotiating committee, representing the packinghouse workers in Plant II (devoted to chacalín).

14 One negotiator stated that the confrontation was so intense as to drive one of the male negotiators to have "tears in my eyes".

15 All Puerto El Triunfo informants employ this term which originally meant slave traders, but presumably those who facilitate slave drivers (e.g. strikebreakers who aid authoritarian bosses). I have yet to find its usage elsewhere.

16 Here I use stoppage and strike interchangeably although in the Salvadoran context a one day solidarity strike was labelled as a *paro* (stoppage).

17 Payment for strike days was typically a demand. The Labor Code mandated such payment but only in the exceedingly rare legal strikes.

18 *La Cronica* states that they took over the installations, holding hostages a version that some workers agree with but others do not.

19 Interviews with Ruperto Torres, Migdonio Pérez Puerto El Triunfo 2013. The origins of the practice had to do with fishermen tossing non-commercial fish to artisanal fishermen. At least one of those families became involved in the illegal commercialization of shrimp. However, when the companies and government began to harass artisanal fishermen, the business had become far more formalized with high-level military officials at the top.

20 The solidarity action in Atarraya and Mariscos only lasted a few days though the workers continued to offer material aid to the Pezca strikers.

21 See full page paid ads by SGTIPAC in *Diario de Hoy*, 1979, March 2, and *La Prensa Gráfica*, 1979, February 10.

22 Refers to BPR, FAPU y Ligas Populares 28 de Febrero.

23 Presumably the funds would have been funneled from guerrilla groups who had acquired it in prior years through bank robberies and kidnappings.

24 "Viva la Combativa Huelga de los Compañeros de La Constancia y Tropical" Comité Coordinador de Sindicatos José Guillermo Rivas, in Centro Universitario de Documentación e Información, Universidad Centroamericana. La Constancia was the soft drink plant and the adjacent Tropical was the brewery, owned by the same people and represented by the same unión. Here La Constancia refers to both.

25 The rightist paper suggested there were 575 workers at the Labor Ministry.

26 Foreign Broadcast Information Services (FBIS), 1979, March 14.

27 Electrical Power Worker's Union.

28 "23 horas sin poder" in *El Salvador entre el terror y la esperanza*, 1979, March 21, UCA Editores, pp. 158-159.

29 "Todos en Defensa de STECEL-SIES", FAPU, 1979, March, Centro Universitario de Documentación e Información, Universidad Centroamericana.

30 La Clase Obrera Salvadoreña de un salto de calidad" FAPU, 1979, March 16, Centro Universitario de Documentación e Información, Universidad Centroamericana.

31 "Las luchas de la clase obrera enero/marzo" BPR, Centro Universitario de Documentación e Información, Universidad Centroamericana.

32 "Las luchas de la clase obrera enero/marzo" BPR, Centro Universitario de Documentación e Información, Universidad Centroamericana.

33 Although there were some members of the PCS and at least one member of the BPR in the union, no one seemed to care one way or another.

34 Gloria García recounts two episodes in which security forces or death squads attempted to attack her team meeting in San Salvador.

35 By 1980, thanks to the union agenda, the gender wage differential had declined to under 5%.

36 *Waves of Protest: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925-2005 (Social Movements, Protests and Contetion),* 2008, by P. Almeida, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

37 Even the Voice of America blamed the security forces for initiating the gunfire. *El Salvador: entre el terror y la esperanza,* (p. 252), 1979, El Salvador: UCA Editores.

38 Other reports list 19 deaths. Captured demonstrators were tortured.

39 On May 27, the security forces opened fire on a large group of BPR supporters trying to deliver food to the occupiers, killing at least fourteen people.

40 OP was the term commonly employed to refer to the BPR, FAPU and the smaller Ligas Populares 28 de Febrero.

41 Popular Leagues, 28th of February (1974), affiliated to Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), Revolutionary Army of the People.

42 Cite Vaky and state dept., the wide range in the case of FAPU probably was due to a difficulty to separate support for FENASTRAS from support for the OP.

43 BPR, *La alternativa para la Liberación,* "Los sucesos políticos de mayo", Centro Universitario de Documentación e Información, Universidad Centroamericana. The number is culled from the chronology section of the document and includes what might be called combat deaths.

44 Wages were the prime cause of 17%, poor working conditions 11,7%, demand for raw materials 11,7% —based on an analysis of a sample of 14 strikes from July-October—.

45 Comité Coordinador de Sindicatos José Guillermo Rivas, 1979, August, *Boletín Obrero* (5). The Coordinator was named after a martyr and was the labor branch of the BPR.

46 The embassy claimed heavy involvement in 8 of 12 strikes.

47 The message mentions five strikes influenced by the BPR where hostages were being held.

48 One American executive had been kidnapped by a small guerrilla group in September. He was released after the company paid ransom. FENASTRAS aided a brief occupation in early December to demand back pay to 600 production workers and improved safety conditions. The company agreed to the demands but then secretly planned to close the factory and remove the machinery necessary for continued production elsewhere.

49 For a useful summary of US policy during this period, see W. Stanley, *The Protection Racket State*, pp. 128-130.

50 Junta Revolucionaria de Gobierno (October 15, 1979-January 2, 1980), replaced by another Junta led by José Napoleón Duarte.

51 For a discussion of the significant conservative US influence on JRG, see W. LeoGrande, 1998, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, p. 41.

52 Leaflet, October 16, 1979, signed by SIDPA, CIDAI, UCA. The strike also included several demands including a union petition to stage a commemorative celebration of the union's founding which the company had denied. It is unclear how the workers occupied the plant with such a contingent of private guards (apparently former members of the National Guard).

53 Informática El Salvador, Centro de Información y Documentación, Oct-Nov 1979, p 9.

54 "Combate Popular (BPR)", 1979, November 15, Centro Universitario de Documentación e Información, Universidad Centroamericana; *El Salvador: octubre sangriento,* (pp. 72-73), by T. Guerra, 1979, Centro Víctor Sanabria; *The Protection Racket State,* (pp. 157-158), by W. Stanley, 2010, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

55 "Línea Política de FENASTRAS para el Periodo 1979-1980" Centro Universitario de Documentación e Información, Universidad Centroamericana: "[luchamos] por las reivindicaciones de la clase obrera, pero a la vez nuestra plataforma reivindicativa plantea a las mediatas, convencidos de que los objetivos inmediatos son un medio tactico para lograr los objetivos mediatos o fundamentales."

56 "Grandiosa Movilización de la FENASTRAS", 1979, November 28, Centro Universitario de Documentación e Información, Universidad Centroamericana.

57 Of course, busses had not been provided in the past.

58 Foreign Broadcast Information Services (FBIS), 19 December 1979, Agence France Presse reported: "These strike actions coincided with the rural workers' victorious strikes in 17 haciendas and sugar plantations, that had begun on November 27". See *El Independiente*, 1979, December 19.

59 "De nuevo sangre sobre El Salvador", 1979, December 19, *El Salvador: entre el terror y la esperanza, (*p. 744), Centro Universitario de Documentación e Información, Universidad Centroamericana. The week before the army had attacked a cotton plantation arresting an undetermined number of workers.

60 "Rumores de Golpe de Estado", 1979, December 20, *El Salvador: entre el terror y la esperanza, (*p. 746), Centro Universitario de Documentación e Información, Universidad Centroamericana.

61 "Con la Unidad hacia la Liberacion Definitiva", FENASTRAS, 1980, January 21, Centro Universitario de Documentación e Información, Universidad Centroamericana.

62 Bernabe Recinos argued that Beckman essentially was opposed to unionization and that FENASTRAS would guarantee stable labor conditions if they were given the opportunity to operate under the management Salvadoran worker and technician. The Embassy officials lent a sympathetic ear but claimed they could not intervene.

63 Combate Popular (BPR), 1980, February, Centro Universitario de Documentación e Información, Universidad Centroamericana.

64 Most of the OP leadership subscribed to some form of Marxism-Leninism.

65 Cortez had a son who was active in the radical left.

66 Cited in *La Resistencia no Violenta ante los regímenes salvadoreños que han utilizado el terror institucionalizado en El Salvador*, p. 62, by Montes, S., 1988, El Salvador: UCA.

67 The arrest occurred a few days after a bombing in the FENASTRAS building.

68 La Situacion de la clase obrera en El Salvador [kooster collection], Institute for Social Science History, Amsterdam.

69 See G. Grandin, 2004, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Also see D. Levinson, 1994, *Trade Unionist Against Terror: Guatemala City, 1954-1985*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

70 On such desencuentros especially in late 1979, see J. L. Gould, 2015, Ignacio Ellacuría and the Salvadorean Revolution, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, *47*(2), 285-315.

71 Moreover, had the US government remained more true to its commitment to human rights, it might have promoted, or at least accepted such an alliance.

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Factory names

Apex, textile; Aplar, electronics; Diana, cookie and cracker; La Constancia-Tropical, bottling; Imes, textile, and PRONACSA, vegetable oil.

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