

**Campeños and Cardenismo on the Mexican Border:  
Identity and Agrarian Reform in Southern Chiapas**

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Can workers and peasants create revolutionary transformation of state institutions and structures through government sponsored reform? More specifically, do government supported labor movements result in the creation of a docile labor force? This paper will examine how campesinos in the southern coffee growing region of Chiapas, Mexico worked for radical social changes during the post-revolutionary reform government of Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s, by influencing the forms and goals of labor organization imposed by the state. Chiapan society in the 1930s was divided into a “white” elite class which controlled economic and political structures, and a lower class of peasants and agricultural workers who often maintained a distinct indigenous culture. Campeños in both Chiapas and Guatemala who lacked sufficient land to meet the subsistence needs of their families supplemented their income by harvesting coffee in the southern region of the Soconusco, while others became permanent workers known as *peones acasillados*. Workers’ wages barely supported their families and many campesinos lived in extreme poverty.

In Chiapas, revolutionary social change began when campesinos aligned with Cárdenas, whose reform policies opened opportunities for the campesinos to organize into labor unions and agrarian committees that pressed for rural reform. The subsequent interaction between campesinos and the reform governments provides an excellent opportunity to explore the negotiation of power between groups who constructed the post-Revolutionary Mexican state. I hypothesize that the campesinos in the Soconusco, in the process of becoming radicalized during the mid 1930s, accepted some limitations on who would be included in the revolutionary process, but gradually developed their own version of labor organization that grew outside the boundaries of what the Cárdenas state defined as acceptable “worker” behavior. In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, campesinos temporarily molded state-sponsored rural unions into

organizations that promoted radical rural reforms. I contend, however, that internal problems such as divisions within campesino organizations, the deteriorating alliance between the Cárdenas state and workers, and the persistent resistance of the landed elite, coupled with the collapse of the coffee economy, undermined campesinos' ability to shape the emerging state in a way that responded to their needs.

The literature on rural labor and agrarian reform in Chiapas generally focuses on the power of the national and state governments that imposed revolutionary change onto workers, who then became indebted to the government for these changes. When the government withdrew their support for rural reform, the peasant and worker movements collapsed. The authors emphasize the structure of worker and peasant organizations, but often the workers themselves and their actions are invisible.<sup>1</sup> Antonio García de León's treatment of campesino labor discusses in great detail the level of repression faced by the workers, yet he does not read into the documents this repression as a response to intense worker activism.<sup>2</sup> By examining workers' behavior as proactive, and not exclusively as a response to government activity, this paper challenges the view of the state as an all-powerful force that controlled campesino movements. A powerful state did not totally direct the activism of the rural poor and did not create completely docile workers. Focusing on rural labor unions and agrarian committees, the most critical institutions that affected the rural poor, will show the dialogue between the state and campesinos as a key factor in creating the post-Revolutionary state.

#### Development and Repression of the Early Labor Movement

The development of coffee plantations or *fincas*, began in Southern Chiapas in the early 1880s with the immigration of German planters who arrived from Guatemala. With their success at growing coffee in the highlands of Guatemala, the German planters sought to expand production and settled on the

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<sup>1</sup>. Thomas Benjamin, *A Rich Land, a Poor People: Politics and Society in Modern Chiapas* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989); and Daniela Spenser, "Soconusco en la Revolución," "Economía y movimiento laboral en las fincas cafetaleras de Soconusco," and "La reforma agraria en Soconusco y la contraofensiva de finqueros cafetaleros," in Daniela Spenser et al., *Los empresarios alemanes, el tercer reich y la oposición de derecha a Cárdenas*, tomo I, (México, D.F.: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>. Antonio García de León, *Resistencia y utopía: Memorial de agravios y crónicas de revueltas y profecías acaecidas en la provincia de Chiapas durante los últimos quinientos años de su historia*, tomo 2, (México, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1985).

fertile volcanic slopes of the Sierra Madre mountains in the Soconusco district of southwestern Chiapas. Other planters from Spain, the United States, and France mixed with Mexican planters, but the bulk of production remained within the control of the Germans. Coffee production in the Soconusco expanded during the economic boom of the 1920s as coffee planters (known as *finqueros*) increased the amount of land in production on their fincas. German finqueros led the coffee boom of the 1920s, producing 53% of the crop on about 34% of the land, closely followed by Mexican, Spanish, and North American producers.<sup>3</sup> In the 1920s, the second generation of German planters maintained their cultural ties to Germany and spoke German, formed their own churches, and even established a German Club in the main regional city of Tapachula. This distinct subculture was reinforced by the continued influx of German immigrants and the tendency of the German planters to marry other Germans and not to intermix with Mexican society in the region. German finqueros hired German immigrants as administrators to run the fincas. These three-year administrative positions were attractive because of declining economic and political conditions in Germany in the 1920s, and many immigrants settled permanently in the region. The existing German elite in the Soconusco incorporated these new immigrants in spite of their lower economic status, and the immigrants often moved up the economic ladder until they could buy their own small fincas. Close ties between the German banks and import houses supported the finqueros by purchasing and marketing the German growers' coffee and by advancing capital to the growers for their investment in the next season's crop.<sup>4</sup>

The finqueros depended on permanent workers to perform the year-round tasks of weeding, pruning, and general caring for the groves. During the harvest, these workers were supplemented by a huge influx of indigenous workers from the Chiapan highlands and indigenous Guatemalan workers, who picked and sorted the coffee cherries in preparation for processing. Planters often complained of labor shortages during the harvest and relied on a labor draft system of "*enganche*" to attract and keep indigenous workers. Labor contractors advanced wages to workers who then promised to pay back the advance by working on the fincas. The extensive abuses of this system resulted in a condition of debt

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<sup>3</sup> . Spenser, "Economía y movimiento laboral en las fincas cafetaleras de Soconusco," in Empresas Alemanas, vol. 11, 247.

peonage for many workers, who could not pay off their debts at the end of the harvest.<sup>5</sup> Living and working conditions on the finca were characterized by company stores (*tiendas de raya*) that sold goods at inflated prices, overcrowded and unsanitary barracks, payment in company scrip instead of Mexican currency, and excessive work tasks. In spite of these difficult conditions, poverty forced thousands of peasants to work on the fincas to supplement their income.<sup>6</sup>

The relationship between the state government and the owners of the coffee fincas in the Soconusco was not one of the landlords controlling the state politically, but rather one of the state government's economic dependence on the fincas. Political control of the state was still fought out between groups in the central region, but the rights to control the wealth of the Soconusco led to big financial rewards for the winners of the state government.<sup>7</sup> Coffee provided a key source of revenue for the state government, often providing 60-80% of all revenue from agriculture and roughly 1/3 of the state's income.<sup>8</sup> In light of the state's dependence on income from the coffee industry, even reform minded governors found it difficult to challenge planters' control of labor in the Soconusco. Land tenure in Chiapas in 1930 reflected the relatively little change that occurred during the revolutionary decades of the 1910s and 1920s. Around 1,500 large fincas (over 500 hectares) controlled 79% of the land, while 15,000 small holders owned only 18% of the land, and 67 *ejidos* (community owned land farmed by campesinos) controlled only 3% of the land.<sup>9</sup> Planters constantly negotiated with the government to keep their taxes low and to prevent government interference in their economic domain. Especially after the decline in coffee prices that started in 1930, the government tried to keep the finqueros satisfied by further reducing taxes and "government interference."<sup>10</sup> It was this hostile environment that labor organizations faced in the early 1930s.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 250-252.

<sup>5</sup> Friederike Baumann, "Terratenientes, campesinos y la expansión de la agricultura capitalista en Chiapas, 1896-1916," *Mesoamerica*, 4 (1983), 30-38.

<sup>6</sup> García de León, *Resistencia*, 171-172.

<sup>7</sup> Spenser, "Economía y movimiento laboral," 240-241; and Benjamin, *A Rich Land*, 182.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, *A Rich Land*, 180.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>10</sup> Spenser, "Economía y movimiento laboral," 253-254.

The collapse of coffee prices in the early 1930s as a result of the international economic depression, worsened conditions for the majority of people in the Soconusco, but increased the power of the larger finqueros by allowing them to consolidate their control over both land and labor in the region. In 1925 Mexican coffee sold for \$0.78/kilo but by 1932 this had dropped to \$0.38/kilo.<sup>11</sup> Small and medium sized producers could not survive the collapse and many went bankrupt or were forced to take loans from larger planters. The slow recovery of the coffee market eventually caused the small finqueros to default on their loans and the owners lost their land to the large landowners. Bruno García Mijares, a large landowner, gave a loan to one man who co-owned his family's land with his brothers and sister. The sister complained that the brother took out the loan without the consent of the other siblings, but the courts ruled that the loan was legal. Due to the excessively high interest rate charged by the planter, the family lost their land.<sup>12</sup>

Workers also suffered under the deteriorating economic situation. The 1931 Federal Labor Law required landlords to pay a minimum wage, but landlords in the Soconusco ignored the state law without any government censure because of the government's reliance on coffee revenues. One migrant worker from the highlands wrote to protest the actions of the finqueros who were supposed to pay a minimum wage of 1.30 peso/day, but only paid the workers 0.30 a day.<sup>13</sup> Workers, who were often paid according to tasks, also protested excessive work assignments (*tareas*) claiming that what was supposed to take only a day to complete often took more than one day or the assistance of the workers' wives and children to complete the task.<sup>14</sup> Because of the declining economic conditions, workers rarely challenged the planters' authority for fear of losing their jobs.

The declining economic position of workers contributed to the resurgence of labor unions in the early 1930s. In the Soconusco, the workers organized clandestinely first under the socialists, then under

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<sup>11</sup>. Ibid., 255.

<sup>12</sup>. Viviana Ramírez to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 27 January 1935, Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Presidentes: Lázaro Cárdenas, (hereafter cited as AGN-LC) 403/41, México, D.F.

<sup>13</sup>. Benjamin, *A Rich Land*, 192; and Spenser, "Economía y movimiento laboral," p. 245.

<sup>14</sup>. Gregorio Vázquez to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 16 December 1934, Finca San Vicente, Archivo General de la Nación, Dirección General de Gobierno, (hereafter cited as AGN-DGG), 5/2.383(5)68, México, D.F.; and Angel Franco, Secretario General, Federación General de Trabajadores to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 16 November 1934, Mexico, D.F., AGN-DGG 42/2.384(5)5699.

the communists, who were influenced by earlier labor movements in the 1920s. The communists, who remained independent from the Mexican Communist Party (Partido Comunista Mexicana or PCM) until 1931, organized the Bloque Obrero y Campesino, and the Sindicato Central de Obreros y Campesinos.<sup>15</sup> With the decline in coffee prices and the declining economic position of the workers, the communists gained support and incorporated over 80 affiliated unions and agrarian committees. These unions were influenced as well by the influx of workers from Central America who fled even harsher labor restrictions in their own countries.<sup>16</sup>

Radicalized campesinos also formed unions independently of the socialist and communist organizers. In one community, the labor organizer was described as an intelligent boy who grew up working on a finca, and was sent to school in Tapachula by his family. While in secondary school in the city, the young man learned about the changes going on at the national level for workers. When he finished his schooling, he returned to the finca and his family, and began to organize workers into a union.<sup>17</sup> On Finca La Alianza, workers met in the coffee groves at night to discuss ways to improve their working conditions and eventually formed a union on the finca.<sup>18</sup> In this way, the impetus for organizing came not only from outside organizers, but also from among workers themselves.

The goals of the unions varied between the leadership and the workers, though the main objectives included enforcing compliance with minimum wage and establishing standardized work quotas. The communist leadership of the unions tended to focus on ideological issues, which did not always agree with the needs of the campesino members. For example, the communists saw agrarian reform and land redistribution as a “detour” from real labor goals of workers taking over the fincas and running them collectively, while most campesinos wanted land redistribution. When local leaders requested permission to use weapons to protect themselves from the repression by the government and finqueros, the national leadership of the PCM denied the request claiming that distributing personal weapons would lead to anarchism! The local leadership ignored the warning of the national group and distributed guns to the

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<sup>15</sup> . García de León, *Resistencia*, 188-189, 194.

<sup>16</sup> . *Ibid.*, 194-195.

<sup>17</sup> . Jacobo Gálvez, interview with author, Ejido El Eden, 12 August 1997.

<sup>18</sup> . José Castañeda Sánchez, interview with author, Ejido Ahuacatlán, 29 July 1997.

campesinos to use for self-defense.<sup>19</sup> In spite of this split on ideological issues, workers saw that the benefits of union membership overrode leadership concerns with ideological issues.

The state government did its best to try to control union development in the early 1930s. In March, 1931, the state branch of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR), along with moderate governor Raymundo Enríquez created the Confederación Campesina y Obrera de Chiapas, (CCOC), as an umbrella organization for rural laborers in the state. The majority of the CCOC members were active in socialist and communist affiliated unions in the Soconusco, although they excluded the indigenous migrant laborers who worked the coffee harvest. For the state, their early organizations were geared towards controlling the workers and preventing or mediating conflicts between capital and labor, which would interrupt the financial flow from the fincas.<sup>20</sup> Governor Enríquez hoped that by supporting organized labor in their conflicts with landlords, labor would support the state PNR.<sup>21</sup>

The alliance between the state government and organized labor quickly deteriorated in the governor's race of 1932. Conservative candidate Victórico Grajales, a finquero from the Central Valley of Chiapas (and former member of the counter-insurgency movement) won the 1932 election. Grajales drastically changed the relationship between the state government and organized labor. He removed pro-labor politicians from political office throughout the Soconusco and imposed his own supporters. More importantly, he took control of the CCOC and made it much more favorable to landowners. In 1933, Grajales named Fausto Ruíz, a former reactionary who also fought against revolutionary change in the 1910s and 1920s, as the head of the CCOC. By doing this, Grajales hoped to make labor submissive to his demands.<sup>22</sup>

During Grajales' tenure as governor, labor faced extremely repressive measures in Chiapas. Along with installing leaders in the municipal governments that were hostile to workers, he allowed these leaders to act with impunity in their repression against workers. In Tapachula, for example, the Municipal President authorized local police and soldiers to attack a workers' demonstration in order

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<sup>19</sup>. García de León, Resistencia, 196-197.

<sup>20</sup>. Spenser, "Economía y movimiento laboral," 240-243.

<sup>21</sup>. Benjamin, A Rich Land, 176-178.

disperse it, and the *Liga Central de Comunidades Agrarias*, a major umbrella organization for worker and campesino unions documented multiple assassinations of union and agrarian organizers.<sup>23</sup> The constant repression led many workers and union leaders to protest to the federal government about the lack of basic civil rights in the state. Rumors of government officials' collaboration with the planters to prevent the spread of union organizing contributed to a climate of militant organizing in spite of the repression. Two prominent landlords supposedly offered a \$6,000.00 peso bribe to the Municipal President of Tapachula for his assistance in preventing the development of unions on their fincas, while another planter allegedly ordered the assassination of a worker who helped to organize a union, then bribed judicial authorities to frame someone else for the crime.<sup>24</sup> Under the Grajales administration, persistent stories of bribes showed that the workers believed they could not redress their grievances through government channels because these channels were controlled by the finqueros.

Grajales used every weapon he could to fight the growing labor movement in the state. According to the 1931 Federal Labor Law, all unions had to register with the government in order to be legal. If the union was not registered, it was not eligible for government protection or intervention in labor disputes and unregistered unions did not have the right to strike. While initially designed to ensure the state support of labor unions, the governor used the law in Chiapas to exclude many unions from legal status.<sup>25</sup> Grajales denied recognition to unions who refused to join the government run CCOC, and targeted their leaders and members for harassment or assassination. Organized labor became an "enemy" to his government.<sup>26</sup> The Labor Arbitration Board, (the *Junta Central de Conciliación y Arbitraje*, or

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<sup>22</sup>. Ibid., 181-182.

<sup>23</sup>. Adolfo Granados V., Comité Ejecutivo de la Liga Central de Comunidades Agrarias del Estado de Chiapas to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 11 December 1934, Mexico, D.F., AGN-LC, 542.1/20 details the murders and arrests of agraristas and union organizers; and Confederación General de Trabajadores to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 16 November 1935 as forwarded in the letter from Esteban García de Alba, Oficial Mayor, Oficina del Presidente to Governor Grajales, 30 December 1935, Mexico, D.F., AGN-LC, 542.1/20 includes the report of the CGT about the dispersal of the workers.

<sup>24</sup>. Adolfo Granados V., Comité Ejecutivo de la Liga Central de Comunidades Agrarias del Estado de Chiapas to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 11 December 1934, Mexico, D.F., AGN-LC, 542.1/20.

<sup>25</sup>. Benjamin, *A Rich Land*, 187.

<sup>26</sup>. María Barragan, Secretario General, Sindicato Mixto de Trabajadores de la Industria del Café, Casa Mijares to President Lázaro Cárdenas, Telegram, 15 July 1935, Tapachula, AGN-LC, 437/120; and Angel Franco, Secretario General, Federación General de Trabajadores to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 16 November 1935, Mexico, D.F., AGN-DGG 42/2.384(5)5699.



JCCA), consistently favored landlords over workers and workers often complained that finqueros bribed labor inspectors to prevent them from writing negative reports about the fincas. A labor inspector could earn more money by accepting bribes than he could make from his salary, so there was no incentive for inspectors to challenge the power of the landlords.<sup>27</sup> The early unions could do little to challenge the findings of the labor inspectors that were presented to the Labor Arbitration Board, which hindered their ability to present effective charges against the growers.

Finqueros also acted against labor organizers, but did not restrict their repression to the leaders. They targeted the average worker who joined the unions, in the hope that by preventing support from the base, they could thwart any new movement. On Finca “El Retiro,” the administrator denied food rations to the peones acasillados because the workers had demanded to be paid minimum wage. Those workers who participated in the union movement on the finca were fired en masse. When workers protested, the government backed the administrator’s claim that the unionized workers were fired because they could not meet their work quotas.<sup>28</sup> Another planter ordered the arrest of the union president, expelled another leader from the finca, and threatened to fire any worker who complained to authorities.<sup>29</sup> Landlords also tried to get troublesome workers deported by labeling them as Guatemalan or simply ordered authorities to fine, arrest or even beat workers in an attempt to intimidate them and prevent workers from organizing.<sup>30</sup>

#### Building the Campesino/Cárdenas Alliance

Organized labor turned to President Lázaro Cárdenas for assistance in fighting Grajales and the planters. As early as March 1934, PNR candidate for president Lázaro Cárdenas toured the Soconusco to investigate the complaints of the workers. He promised the workers that he would bring the revolution to

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<sup>27</sup>. Adolfo Granados V., Comité Ejecutivo de la Liga Central de Comunidades Agrarias del Estado de Chiapas to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 11 December 1934, Mexico, D.F., AGN-LC, 542.1/20; and Benjamin, A Rich Land, 189-190.

<sup>28</sup>. Carmen Carpio, Secretario General, Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Finca El Retiro to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 24 January 1936, Finca El Retiro, AGN-LC, 432/403.

<sup>29</sup>. Alejandro C. Vázquez, Secretario General, Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo, Num. 20 to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 25 July 1936, Finca Santo Domingo, AGN-DGG, 21A/4.

<sup>30</sup>. Angel Franco, Secretario General, Federación General de Trabajadores to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 16 November 1935, Mexico, D.F., AGN-DGG 42/2.384(5)5699.

Chiapas, but by doing so, set himself on a collision course with the state governor.<sup>31</sup> By 1936, the deteriorating situation in Chiapas forced Cárdenas to intervene against governor Grajales. The gubernatorial campaign coincided with Cárdenas' efforts to purge the Callistas from the national government and consolidate his power. Grajales had opposed Cárdenas' choice for the next governor, Efraín Gutiérrez, and had frequently criticized Cárdenas' policies in Chiapas as "irresponsible."<sup>32</sup> Organized labor had abandoned the CCOC and formed the independent Cámara de Trabajo de Chiapas, which was affiliated with the PCM. Throughout the election campaign, Grajales persecuted supporters of Gutiérrez, emphasizing the close ties Gutiérrez had with *agraristas* (supporters of agrarian reform) as destabilizing for the state. When Gutiérrez won the election, Grajales initially refused to turn power over to him, and Cárdenas called in the army to force Grajales out of office.<sup>33</sup> The ousting of Grajales and his allies created an open environment for the emerging labor movement to expand and opened a dialogue between labor and the Cárdenas government that would shape the post-Revolutionary Mexican state in Chiapas.

The impetus for organizing unions after 1936 came from the federal government, existing unions, and a grass roots effort by the workers themselves. Unions that could not register with the Labor Board (JCCA) under Grajales were granted new legitimacy under Gutiérrez. The new governor sought to strengthen the ties between the unions and the government by reorganizing the unions into national confederations. He split the CCOC into the federally affiliated Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM) and the Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC). Even though Cárdenas' agrarian reform policy stated that peones acasillados were eligible for ejidos, the division of the CCOC temporarily left peones acasillados in "no-man's land" because they didn't qualify as campesinos that lived in independent villages and many were not organized into unions.<sup>34</sup> To rectify this situation, the federal government pursued an alliance with the resident workers on the fincas by using the federal Secretaría de Educación Pública's (Secretary of Public Education or SEP) Article 123 schools to build unions from the grass roots.

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<sup>31</sup>. García de León, Resistencia, 197.

<sup>32</sup>. García de León, Resistencia, 202.

<sup>33</sup>. Benjamin, A Rich Land, 189, 193-194; and Spenser, "Economía y movimiento laboral," 256-257.

<sup>34</sup>. Spenser, "Economía y movimiento laboral," 257-258; and García de León, Resistencia, 200-201.

Any finca with more than 20 school aged children was required to support an Article 123 school and the rural school teachers who taught in Article 123 schools on the fincas also became involved in the union organizing effort. Their role, along with teaching the children of peones acasillados on the fincas, was to ensure that the finqueros followed the labor laws and to “orient” the workers about their rights to unionize. They reported violations of labor laws, including the lack of medicines, housing that one teacher compared to “pigsties,” and the mistreatment of workers. The teachers helped workers navigate the bureaucracy to formally organize and register the unions, and also acted as an advocate and intermediary for the workers when they challenged the landlords.<sup>35</sup> The close interaction between peones acasillados and the SEP teachers helped forge an emerging alliance between the federal government and the campesinos.

Two cases show the growing strength of the unions. In 1934, three workers were fired from Finca Badenia for allegedly disobeying the administrator, although the workers claimed they were first denied food rations, then fired because they joined the Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo. When the workers and the union protested, the state work inspector reported that the workers had no complaints and those workers who were fired had disobeyed the administrator. However, the workers were interviewed in front of the *caporal* (work boss for the finca) and allegedly coerced into putting their thumbprints on the inspector’s report without knowing its contents. The three workers who were fired also objected because the inspector never even met with them. They asked to get reinstated to their jobs instead of three months severance pay (which was standard for laid off workers). The union, along with the leader of the usually conservative local PNR, wrote to the governor to push the JCCA to reinstate the workers, arguing that the settlement of the dispute with three months severance pay would make it easy for finqueros to obstruct the

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<sup>35</sup>. Israel R. Vera, Maestro Rural Federal (and eight other teachers from various fincas in the area) to Jefe del Departamento Autonomo Federal del Trabajo, 23 July 1938, Finca Mexiquito, Archivo General de la Nación, Departamento Autonomo de Trabajo, (hereafter cited as AGN-DAT) 262/19, Mexico, D.F.; Alfonso Vargas Espinosa, Secretario de Acción Obrera y Campesina, Sindicato Unico de Trabajadores de la Enseñanza de Chiapas to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 2 November 1938, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, AGN-LC 432/817; and Stephen Lewis, “Revolution and the Rural Schoolhouse: Forging State and Nation in Chiapas, Mexico, 1913-1948” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1997), chapter 6.

development of unions in the coffee region. Their protests were ignored when the JCCA upheld the firing of the workers and gave them 30 days to leave the finca.<sup>36</sup>

Three years later, workers had forced many planters in the Soconusco to sign collective contracts with the various unions. The 1937 collective contract required the landlords to hire unionized workers except during periods of severe labor shortages (the harvest), and to accept the union's right to approve workers. Landlords had to provide resident workers with decent housing, medical care, and access to land for growing subsistence crops (*milpa*) and pasturing animals, as well as provide a meeting location for the union. The collective contract also established standards for work quotas and wages that were applied throughout the region.<sup>37</sup> The advantages of the collective contract can be seen in the case of the workers from the Finca Santa Rita. In January of 1938, the owner of Finca Santa Rita tried to lay off 23 workers, all members of the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Finca Santa Rita, which violated the collective contract the workers had signed with the finquero. When the union presented their complaint to the JCCA, the Labor Board rejected the owner's argument that he lacked the money to pay workers and that he had no choice but to lay off the workers. The JCCA charged the owner with an illegal work stoppage and ordered him to pay "lost time wages" to the workers for the days they had missed.<sup>38</sup> These cases illustrate that in the span of four years, workers who were initially fired by their employers met very different fates and show the advantages of the government/union alliance for the workers.

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<sup>36</sup>. Efraín Velázquez and others to Presidente de la Junta Municipal de Conciliación, 8 August 1934, Tapachula; Ricardo Trujillo G., Inspector del Trabajo, "Acta", 8 August 1934, Finca Badenia, Sixto Moreno, Secretario General, Comité Municipal PNR to Victórico Grajales, Governor, 10 August 1934, Tapachula (on obstructing the unions), Francisco Escobar G., Delegado Regional de la Confederación Campesina y Obrera del Estado de Chiapas to Javier Zepeda, Inspector del Trabajo, 18 September 1934, Tapachula; and Francisco Rhode, Administrador de la Finca Badenia to the President, JCCA, Finca Badenia; Archivo de Concentración del Estado de Chiapas, Colección de la Junta Central de Conciliación y Arbitraje, Finca Badenia, 1934, (hereafter cited as ACCh-JCCA,) Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, Mexico. This archive is just beginning to be organized. At this time, files are labeled by year and the name of the finca (or by subject matter), and the archivists are in the process of sorting the documents into boxes by year.

<sup>37</sup>. "Contrato Colectivo" celebrated between the Parlange Hermanos and the Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo de la Finca El Zapote, 1 October 1937, Finca El Zapote, ACCh-JCCA. This was in a loose bundle of papers which will eventually be sorted and filed by year.

<sup>38</sup>. Gabriel Pére Trujillo, Secretario General, Federación Distrital Obrera de Soconusco to Presidente de la Junta de Conciliación Permanente, 17 January 1938, Tapachula, ACCh-JCCA, Finca Santa Rita, 1938; and Junta Municipal Permanente de Conciliación, "Opina," 21 February 1938, Tapachula, ACCh-JCCA, Finca Santa Rita, 1938.

The favorable environment for workers led to an increase in worker activism and the increasing support for the government by the workers. The Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo, which aligned with the national Confederación de Trabajadores de México, organized peones acasillados on various fincas and sought to force the planters to sign collective contracts, pay the minimum wage, and comply with the national labor laws.<sup>39</sup> Workers made personal appeals directly to Cárdenas for assistance and intervention when they encountered serious problems. When workers on Finca Hannover faced layoffs due to declining coffee prices, they wrote to Cárdenas for “moral and material support” because without his assistance, they could not feed their families.<sup>40</sup> Women also wrote to the president, both to express their concerns about their own jobs in sorting the coffee, and on behalf of their husbands and sons who participated in unions and agrarian committees.<sup>41</sup> On finca Santa Rita, the owner completely stopped production, prompting the workers to petition Cárdenas as “the only salvation [of this intolerable situation]...We direct ourselves with all respect to you, Mr. President, so that you give us your valiant support in order to resolve this anguishing situation.”<sup>42</sup> This view of President Cárdenas as a “rescuer” or “intervener” in times of crisis tied campesinos to the Cárdenas government by giving them the perception that the government would be responsive to their needs. For many campesinos, this became their initial experience that taught them that they had a voice in creating revolutionary state.

### Guatemalans as “the Other”

As a border region, the Soconusco always had supported a wide number of immigrant workers from Guatemala. Many of these temporary immigrants worked on the fincas during the harvests, then returned to their home communities, much like the migrant labor from the highlands of Chiapas. During

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<sup>39</sup>. Fernando G. Cortés, Secretario General, Comité Regional del Partido Comunista Mexicana, “Informe,” 7 June 1938, Tapachula, AGN-LC, 404.1/343.

<sup>40</sup>. Juan B. González to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 15 June 1938, Huixtla, as forwarded in a letter from Prof. C. Mariano Samayoa, Oficina del Gobernador de Chiapas to Presidente, Junta Central de Conciliación y Arbitraje, 16 June 1938, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, AGN-DAT, 262/17.

<sup>41</sup>. Brigida Morales and others, “Las Mujeres de la Finca San Jerónimo,” to President Lázaro Cárdenas, Memorandum, n/d (received by the President’s office 17 May 1940), Unión Juárez, AGN-LC, 432/626 for coffee workers; and María Borraz, Secretario General, Liga Revolucionaria Femenil Campesina del PNR to President Lázaro Cárdenas, Finca El Retiro, 22 July 1940, AGN-DGG, 21A/40.

<sup>42</sup>. Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo, Num. 29, Finca Santa Rita to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 6 June 1938, Finca Santa Rita as forwarded in letter from Florencio Padilla, Jefe de la Oficina de Inspeccion, Departamento de Trabajo to Governor of Chiapas, 21 June 1938, AGN-LC, 432/102.

the 1920s and early 1930s, however, the number of immigrant workers increased, and due to worsening economic and political conditions for workers in Guatemala, the immigrant workers remained in the Soconusco region and established new villages. Landlords often supported the migration of these immigrants because unlike the indigenous workers from the highlands of Chiapas, the Guatemalans paid their own way to the fincas. Also, Guatemalans worked for lower wages and rarely complained about conditions on the fincas because they feared being deported.<sup>43</sup>

The government limited access to who would be protected by the new government/campesino alliance by establishing which people qualified as “Mexican” in this region of immigrants. Many of the campesinos, both Mexican and Guatemalan, did not define themselves by nationality and lacked official documents to prove their country of origin.<sup>44</sup> With the rise of the agrarian and labor reform movement in the Soconusco, national identity became a critical issue and Guatemalans became “the Other” against which the government defined a good Mexican worker. The Federal Labor Office in Tapachula sought to create “organizations [unions] for the defense of workers’ rights...taking care that all members should be accredited as Mexicans, given the palpable problem of the growing number of foreigners that exists in the region...” According to the government, Guatemalan workers enjoyed better treatment and job assignments on the fincas because they hindered labor organizations and competed against Mexican campesinos.<sup>45</sup> Conversely, Guatemalan workers were viewed as troublemakers who provoked problems on the fincas to the detriment of Mexican workers. In one report, the labor inspector claimed that the majority of the members of the union on Finca España were Guatemalans who dedicated themselves to causing difficulties. These Guatemalans complained about excessive work, even though the inspector claimed that they did not work even an eight-hour day, implying that the Mexican workers (who did not

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<sup>43</sup>. Rosa Matúz de Rodríguez, interview with author, Tapachula, 6 October 1997; and Angel Franco, Secretario General, Federación General de Trabajadores to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 16 November 1935, Mexico, D.F., AGN-DGG, 42/2.384.2(5)5699.

<sup>44</sup>. Fernando G. Cortés, Secretario General, Comité Regional del Partido Comunista Mexicana, “Informe,” 7 June 1938, Tapachula, AGN-LC, 404.1/343; Rosa Matúz de Rodríguez, interview with author, Tapachula, 6 October 1997; and Jacobo Gálvez, interview with author, Ejido El Eden, 12 August 1997.

<sup>45</sup>. “Memorandum,” Oficina Federal del Trabajo, #15 to Jefe del Departamento de Trabajo, 7 June 1938, Tapachula, AGN-DAT, 218/11.

belong to the union) worked harder than the Guatemalans did.<sup>46</sup> Both reports by the different government labor officials place Guatemalans as the cause of labor problems, though for entirely different reasons. This illustrates how the label “Guatemalan” could be easily used as a broad slur that served multiple purposes for the government. While understandably wanting to favor Mexican nationals as beneficiaries of reform programs, the government’s labeling of people as Guatemalan and Mexican allowed the state to exclude certain workers from participation in the campesino/Cárdenas alliance.

Both workers and landlords accepted the state’s definition of Guatemalan, although workers protested more often about the competition with Guatemalan workers and did not seem to share the more negative connotations being labeled Guatemalan. Even though unions and agrarian committees often included Guatemalan members, union organizers continued to complain about Guatemalan campesinos that displaced Mexican workers.<sup>47</sup> Union members who worked for Alejandro Córdova protested the use of Guatemalans to replace unionized workers who were laid off due to the economic crisis. Instead of rehiring unionized workers as required by the collective contract, the owner recruited and hired Guatemalan workers, then helped them enter into Mexico illegally. Although the unionized workers recognized the Guatemalans’ right to work so that they could feed their families, the Mexicans objected to the finquero’s actions that violated his obligation to hire Mexicans first.<sup>48</sup>

Planters used the claim “Guatemalan” more effectively than did the unions by asserting that anyone who challenged planter authority was Guatemalan. Finqueros smuggled Guatemalan workers into the Soconusco to work on the fincas, but workers who organized against the landlords or petitioned for ejidos often were labeled as Guatemalan and expelled.<sup>49</sup> Landlords effectively delayed federal ejido grants to campesino communities by claiming that prospective land recipients were Guatemalans, thus

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<sup>46</sup>. Francisco Aguilar M., Inspector del Trabajo to Inspector Federal del Trabajo, 25 March 1938, Tapachula, AGN-DAT, 227/13.

<sup>47</sup>. Alejandro C. Vázquez, Secretario General, Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo, Num. 20 to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 25 July 1936, Finca Santo Domingo, AGN-DGG 21A/4; and Angel Franco, Secretario General, Federación General de Trabajadores to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 16 November 1935, Mexico, D.F., DGG 42/2.384.2(5)5699.

<sup>48</sup>. Francisco López and others to President Lázaro Cárdenas, n/d, 1940, Tapachula, AGN-DGG, 12A/11.

<sup>49</sup>. Angelino Olivara, Secretario Local, SUTICS Num. 20 and others to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 23 April 1940, Finca Argentina, AGN-DGG, 12A/54.

prompting a government investigation of the workers to determine their nationality. Immigration officials rounded up the men of the ejido “Salvador Urbina” and deported them, even though many could prove their citizenship. The campesinos argued that they were deported because the owner of Finca San Vicente did not want to turn over part of his finca that the government granted to the ejido. The families of the men were not deported, lending credibility to the campesinos’ claims that the men were Mexican and that local immigration authorities collaborated with the planters.<sup>50</sup> Another finquero adopted an exaggerated anti-Guatemalan discourse when campesinos he described as “Guatemalan” invaded part of his finca. He argued that the agraristas invaded his land because “they know that I am Mexican and towards all of this country they have a savage racial hatred.”<sup>51</sup> While his language was more extreme, he expressed the rising anti-Guatemalan sentiment sanctioned by the state. He also implied a link between the “racial” group of indigenous peoples and Guatemalan, as opposed to mestizo and Mexican, a point which will be discussed later.

The anti-Guatemalan discourse coexisted with the planters’ continued practice of recruiting Guatemalan laborers for the fincas. Landlords arranged for certificates of Mexican residency and even nationalized many workers.<sup>52</sup> The Guatemalan workers often developed intense loyalty to the planters because of these actions. Enrique Braun, the owner of Finca “Santo Domingo” developed a close patron/client relationship with many Guatemalan workers on his finca. One former resident told me that during the early organization of the union, the workers were deeply divided because they felt that “Don Enrique” was a “very good man,” and many people refused to join the union. Only when it became clear that the finca would be expropriated did many of the Guatemalan workers join the union movement and claimed their nationality as “Mexican.”<sup>53</sup> This flexibility of national identity for many workers gave the Cárdenas state the ability to shape the Guatemalan workforce into the government’s ideal Mexican worker, because the Guatemalans were willing to conform to the state dictated mold of a “good worker.”

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<sup>50</sup>. José Romero and others to Secretario de Gobernación, 26 February 1934, Colonia Salvador Urbina, Cacahoatán, AGN-DGG, 5/2.382(5)57.

<sup>51</sup>. Rafael Mota to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 28 March 1938, Tapachula, AGN-DGG, 8/43.

<sup>52</sup>. Spenser, “Economía y movimiento laboral,” 269-272; and Benjamin, A Rich Land, 205.

<sup>53</sup>. Rosa Matúz de Rodríguez, interview with the author, Tapachula, Chiapas, 6 October 1997.



Not all groups accepted the state's negative definition and classification of Guatemalan. Because many immigrants from Guatemala belonged to various indigenous groups, indigenous workers from the Sierra Madre region on the Chiapan side of the Mexican/Guatemalan border, who lacked their birth certificates or other official papers, could be classified as Guatemalan. Anthropologist Aída Hernández characterized life on the plantations of the Soconusco as a space where ethnic Mam people from both Mexico and Guatemala "dropped" their national identity and simply called themselves Mam.<sup>54</sup> The Mexican Mam had faced severe cultural repression under the Grajales regime, including the prohibition on speaking Mam and the burning of indigenous dress. For them, the fincas became a place to renew their cultural identity.<sup>55</sup> During the Cárdenas years, however, this indigenous identity was seen as Guatemalan, not Mexican.

For many immigrants to the region, the link between indigenous identity and "foreign-ness" became another way for the government to control workers. In one small community, 45 workers signed a letter objecting to their deportation to Guatemala because they were indigenous and the immigration authorities refused to believe they were Mexicans. While admitting that they lacked papers, the workers argued that their parents were "humble Indians" who in their ignorance did not always register their children during the Porfiriato, and even those who were supposedly registered had to struggle with "deficient" civil registries from that era.<sup>56</sup> The campesinos argued that the local finquero objected to the community's petition for an ejido, which was the real reason for the deportations. These protests generally went unheeded by a state that also sought to incorporate indigenous cultures into a national mestizo cultural identity.

#### The Decline of the Campesino/Cárdenas Alliance

The alliance between the Cárdenas state, the reform government in Chiapas, and the workers began to weaken under structural changes in both the coffee economy and the national government.

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<sup>54</sup>. Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, "Historias and Stories from the 'Other Border:' Identity, Power, and Religion Among the Mam Peasants from Chiapas, Mexico, 1933-1994" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1996), 43.

<sup>55</sup>. *Ibid.*, 30.

Cárdenas, under increasing pressure from conservatives, backed away from the more radical points in his political program in 1938.<sup>57</sup> Coinciding with this political change was the further decline of the coffee economy. After the crisis in the early 1930s, coffee rebounded slightly during the mid 1930s. Brazil had temporarily stopped flooding the market with its coffee in 1936 and 1937, but by 1938 it returned to its earlier practices which caused a dramatic fall in prices. The costs of producing one quintal of coffee (1 quintal equals 46 kilos) varied between \$40.00 and \$42.00 pesos, but the market price for a quintal of coffee was \$25.00 pesos.<sup>58</sup> The drop in prices again hit the smaller fincas, but even the large fincas began to suffer under the decline. Unable to get credit from the *Banco de México*, apparently the only bank that supplied credit to the planters, the finqueros claimed they could no longer pay workers or invest in the next year's crop.<sup>59</sup> The situation deteriorated to the point that Cárdenas forced the Banco de México to release credit to the finqueros in the summer of 1938, in order to keep the fincas in production. Governor Gutiérrez wanted to initiate some form of tax relief for the fincas, but couldn't do so without risking a severe shortfall in the state's economy.<sup>60</sup> This time, the recession in the coffee economy lasted until the end of World War II.<sup>61</sup>

The collapse of the coffee economy led the planters to petition the Labor Arbitration Board (JCCA) for permission to "readjust" the number of workers allowed on the fincas. The collective contracts signed by most workers and planters in the Soconusco in 1937 obligated the owner to maintain a previously agreed upon number of peones acasillados on the finca. These peones acasillados belonged to the union and could not be fired or laid off without approval of the Labor Board. Nevertheless, after the harvest in 1937/1938 and lasting until 1940, planters throughout the Soconusco petitioned for

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<sup>56</sup>. José Romero and others to Secretario de Gobernación, 26 February 1934, Colonia Salvador Urbina, Cacahoatán, AGN-DGG, 5/2.382(5)57.

<sup>57</sup>. Benjamin, *A Rich Land*, 219.

<sup>58</sup>. Juan Huthoff, Unión Agrícola Regional de Cafeteros to Governor Gutiérrez, 9 November 1937, Tapachula, AGN-DGG, 6/2/382(5)16030; Ernesto W. Reinshagen to Presidente, JCCA, 7 February 1938, ACCh-JCCA, Finca San Cristobal, 1938; and Spenser, "Economía y movimiento laboral," 274.

<sup>59</sup>. Otto Pohlenz, owner of Finca El Rincón to Presidente, JCCA, 15 January 1938, Tapachula, ACCh-JCCA, Finca El Rincon, 1938; Ernesto W. Reinshagen to Presidente, JCCA, 7 February 1938, ACCh-JCCA, Finca San Cristobal, 1938; and Herbert Luttman, owner of Finca La Alianza to Presidente, JCCA, 17 December 1937, Tapachula, ACCh-JCCA, Finca La Alianza, 1938.

<sup>60</sup>. Spenser, "Economía y movimiento laboral," 273-275, Benjamin, *A Rich Land*, 215.

<sup>61</sup>. García de León, *Resistencia*, 160.

“readjustments” of their labor force, claiming the downturn in the price of coffee made it impossible for them to sustain work on their fincas. Peones acasillados on smaller fincas tended to accept the planter’s explanations for the reduction of the number of workers, and even worked with some planters to negotiate alternating work weeks to maintain the number of peones acasillados while reducing the number of days worked. Planters were expected to maintain worker housing, as well as ensuring rights to *milpa* plots for the workers during the crisis.<sup>62</sup> Workers even agreed to accept suspension of their wages because they recognized that the fincas were in financial trouble.<sup>63</sup> Instead of open confrontation on these fincas, workers began looking for other ways to protect their interests.

On the larger fincas, however, workers did not accept the planters’ attempts to limit either the number of days worked or the number of workers. Peones acasillados from Finca El Retiro protested that the readjustments on the finca not only reduced them to “hunger wages,” but by allowing the readjustment, the JCCA permitted the planter to pass off the costs of the crisis onto the campesinos. The union then requested the JCCA to “readjust” the administrative personnel on the finca because the management could have their salaries reduced without suffering the inability to pay for basic foodstuffs such as lard and sugar.<sup>64</sup> The Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo on Finca Mexiquito complained that they were the only finca in the area that had formed a union and that neighboring finqueros were pressuring the owner of the finca to petition for a readjustment. They claimed that one planter became interested in the readjustments as a way to “teach a lesson” to the workers of the fincas and to instill fear in them so that they did not organize unions.<sup>65</sup> Union members charged the landlords with politically

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<sup>62</sup>. Presidente, JCCA, “Resolución de Petición, Finca El Rincón,” 31 January 1938, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, ACCh-JCCA, Finca El Rincón, 1938; and Francisco Hernández G., Secretario General, Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo, Num. 2, Efraín Poumian, Inspector del Trabajo, and Enrique Josephín, Administrador, Finca La Alianza, “Convenio” 8 January 1938, Finca La Alianza, ACCh-JCCA, Finca La Alianza, 1938.

<sup>63</sup>. Angelino Olivares, Secretario General, SUTICS, to Bernardo Parlange, 6 April 1940, Finca El Palmar (San Agustín Jitotol), AGN-DGG, 12/54.

<sup>64</sup>. Octavio García, Secretario General, Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo, Finca El Retiro, to Jefe del Departamento Federal del Trabajo, 23 March 1938, AGN-DAT 227/13; and Octavio García, Secretario General, Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo, Finca El Retiro to Presidente, JCCA, 21 March 1938, Finca El Retiro (this letter about passing the costs onto the workers), and 28 March 1938, Finca El Retiro (this letter is about the administrator), ACCh-JCCA, Finca El Retiro, 1938.

<sup>65</sup>. Walter Pinto, Secretario General, Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo, Finca Mexiquito, to Presidente, Cámara de Senadores, 1 April 1938, Finca Mexiquito, AGN-DAT, 262/16.

manipulating the situation to their advantage and using the downturn in the coffee market as an excuse to act against unionized workers.

Although the unions challenged these readjustments, they generally lost. The JCCA consistently favored the planters' requests to limit the number of workers and reduce the number of days worked on the fincas, in spite of union objections. More forceful action by the unions also failed. On Finca El Retiro, the JCCA granted the owner a readjustment of workers and the union, the *Sindicato Único de Trabajadores de la Industria de Café del Soconusco* (SUTICS) protested to President Cárdenas. SUTICS argued that the planter fired unionized workers, then circulated a list with their names to other fincas in order to prevent them from getting jobs. The workers, who were unable to find work, warned that "if there is no prompt intervention...we will out of necessity turn to robbery."<sup>66</sup> The union appealed for an *amparo* or legal protection to block the layoffs, then went on strike in August 1939. When the courts refused to prevent the readjustment, support for the strike dissolved. The workers who had been "readjusted" became unemployed and left the finca, while those who remained returned to their jobs. The timing of the strike also may have contributed to its failure because the workers struck in August, before the harvest had begun. The owner had no urgent need to give into the workers demands, and the overall deterioration of the economy made strikes a weak option for the workers.<sup>67</sup> In only two cases did the JCCA even vaguely support the workers. In one, the Labor Board delayed ruling on a petition for a readjustment for almost four months and forced the owner to pay the workers for those months before he was legally allowed to lay off the workers. The planter complained that the only reason the JCCA delayed resolving his case was because he had refused to sign a government approved collective contract with his workers the previous year. The other case involved the planter who had declared a "readjustment" without first petitioning the JCCA. The government forced the planter to rehire the workers he had laid

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<sup>66</sup>. SUTICS to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 28 July 1939, as forwarded in letter from Florencio Padilla, Secretario General, Departamento del Trabajo to the Governor of Chiapas, 9 August 1939, Mexico, D.F., AGN-LC 432/403.

<sup>67</sup>. Werner Meyer, lawyer for Adolfo Giesemann y Cía, owner of Finca El Retiro to Junta Municipal Permanente de Conciliación, 22 January 1940, Finca El Retiro; and SUTICS to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 28 July 1939, as forwarded in letter from Florencio Padilla, Secretario General, Departamento del Trabajo to the Governor of Chiapas, 9 August 1939, Mexico, D.F., AGN-LC 432/403.

off and pay them back wages.<sup>68</sup> While both of these actions favored the workers to some extent, the JCCA also seemed to be concerned with disciplining the planters for defying the government's authority to mediate between the workers and planters.

The workers who lost in the battle over the readjustment of personnel realized that the federal government could not (or would not) protect them from the power of the planters or from the fluctuations in the economy. One ejido member claimed that the government couldn't do anything to help the workers during the readjustments because the government couldn't control the price of coffee.<sup>69</sup> Other campesinos became disillusioned with Cárdenas' inability to help workers maintain the gains they had made earlier in his administration, especially when the planters renewed their efforts to repress the workers. The Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo on Finca "San Rafael" objected to a reduction in the minimum wage that the governor forced them to accept in May, 1938, even though the workers had "been under the lash" for four months because of a readjustment in the number of days worked on the finca.<sup>70</sup> Another major union, SUTICS, wrote to the President about a new wave of repression the planters imposed on the workers, which included the firing of the executive committee of the union on Finca San José Nexapa, refusing corn rations to unionized workers, and refusing to sign a new collective contract.<sup>71</sup> In August 1939, SUTICS appealed to the military officer in charge of the region to withdraw a federal military squadron that "kept order" on Finca El Retiro at the owner's request.<sup>72</sup> The use of military force on the finca showed the deterioration in the government/worker alliance and the weakness of the unions to fight the situation. Unable to threaten planters with strikes because of the weakness of the coffee industry, and abandoned by the Cárdenas government, workers in the coffee region sought to renegotiate their alliance with the government by turning towards agrarian reform.

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<sup>68</sup>. Alejandro Córdova, owner of Finca San Gerónimo to Presidente, JCCA, 22 February 1938, Tapachula, ACCh-JCCA, Finca San Jeronimo, 1938; and Junta Municipal Permanente de Conciliación, "Opina," 21 February 1938, Tapachula, ACCh-JCCA, Finca Santa Rita, 1938.

<sup>69</sup>. José Galindo Figueroa, interview with author, Ejido Ahuacatlán, (formerly part of Finca La Alianza), 28 July 1997.

<sup>70</sup>. Pablo Escobar, Secretario General, Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo, Finca San Rafael to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 14 May 1938, Finca San Rafael, AGN-DAT 181/V/332(727.4)/1s.

<sup>71</sup>. Juan Mérida, Secretario Local, SUTICS, Num. 38 to President Lázaro Cárdenas, March 1940, Finca San José Nexapa, AGN-LC, 432/1222.

Many workers developed alternate strategies to deal with the economic and labor crisis by using their unions to form agrarian committees to petition for land reform. One ejido member explained that the union members did not believe that the landlords could pay the wages that the unions considered reasonable for the workers. Their only option was to petition for ejido land to ensure their own economic security.<sup>73</sup> Leaders of unions now became leaders of agrarian committees and unions petitioned for the expropriation of the fincas to be delivered to the unions so that the campesinos could work them collectively.<sup>74</sup> On Finca El Retiro (the same one where the military had been stationed to keep order), unionized workers threatened to take over the finca and run it themselves. The governor intervened and convinced the workers to step back from their militant stance. The peones acasillados, however, continued to demand the immediate expropriation of the finca, arguing that the owner had fired those involved in the agrarian movement, and that the workers had no where else to go. In the workers' view, the finca already belonged to them because of their years of hard labor on it.<sup>75</sup> Even though the readjustments and the inability of the Cárdenas government to protect the workers had weakened the unions, these cases demonstrate that the campesinos on the fincas had become radicalized by their participation in the unions and actively sought ways to protect their interests. Campesinos persisted in asserting their expectations of the post-Revolutionary state and sought to renegotiate their vision of the state with both the government and the finqueros.

In March 1939, the federal and state government responded to campesino pressure and began redistributing land in ejidos throughout various parts of the Soconusco. The Cárdenas government expropriated almost 8,000 hectares of land from various fincas in Cacahoatán and Unión Juárez, two of

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<sup>72</sup>. Angel Arévalo, Secretario General, SUTICS to Jefe de la 31/a Zona Militar, 2 August 1939, Finca El Retiro, AGN-DGG 21A/40.

<sup>73</sup>. José Galindo Figueroa, interview with author, Ejido Ahuacatlán, (formerly part of Finca La Alianza), 28 July 1997.

<sup>74</sup>. Gonzalo Guzmán, Secretario General, Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo, Finca Santa Rita to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 6 June 1938, Finca Santa Rita, Cacahoatán, AGN-DAT 181/V/332(727.4)/1; Matías Roblero, Secretario Local, SUTICS, Num. 7 to President Lázaro Cárdenas, "Memorandum," 18 March 1940, Unión Juárez, AGN-LC 432/626; and Sindicato de Trabajadores del Campo, Num. 29, Finca Santa Rita to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 6 June 1938, Finca Santa Rita as forwarded in letter from Florencio Padilla, Jefe de la Oficina de Inspeccion, Departamento de Trabajo to the Governor of Chiapas, 21 June 1938, AGN-LC, 432/102.

the key coffee growing municipalities (counties) in the Soconusco and divided it between six ejidos. These ejidos were to be worked collectively by the campesinos, leaving the fincas as essentially large corporate farms. One of the wealthiest landlords, Enrique Braun, lost 3,872.6 hectares in spite of his attempts to protect his land first by spending \$300,000 to bribe officials, then by appealing directly to Cárdenas. Braun offered to divide up his own fincas, but in such a way that would leave the coffee processing equipment, the sawmill, and his house intact. Cárdenas refused his offer, but Braun ended up maintaining much of the machinery on his finca Santo Domingo, until he finally sold it to the ejidatarios in 1940.<sup>76</sup>

This massive redistribution of land silenced many union members who now benefited from ejido grants. Still, the ejidos could not absorb all of the peones acasillados who worked on the fincas. On Finca San Jerónimo, workers were caught in legal limbo because they had requested to be included as *ejidatarios* (members of ejidos) but the government ran out of land to redistribute and the ejidatarios did not receive anything. The landlord, who continued to produce coffee on the remaining 300 hectares of his finca, refused to accept the former peones acasillados/ejidatarios as workers on his finca. He claimed the workers were now ejido members, and as such, he had no responsibility in honoring their status as union members or their collective contract. The JCCA ruled that even though these workers had legal status as ejidatarios, which superseded their rights as workers, the landlord still had to hire union members as peones acasillados on his finca.<sup>77</sup> This case shows that even though the redistribution of land and the subsequent loss of many members weakened the unions, the unions continued to have some success at protecting the rights of the workers.

### Conclusions

Did the alliance between the campesinos and the Cárdenas government create docile workers that accepted state control? This was not the case for the coffee workers in southern Chiapas. While the

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<sup>75</sup>. Lázaro Ávila, Comité Ejecutivo Agrario to the Governor of Chiapas, 4 January 1940, Finca El Retiro, AGN-DGG, 21A/40.

<sup>76</sup>. García de León, *Resistencia*, 212-213.

<sup>77</sup>. JCCA, "Resolución, Expediente San Jerónimo," 20 May 1939, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, ACCh-JCCA, Finca San Jerónimo, 1940.

Cárdenas government made organizing more feasible and less dangerous for workers, the process of organizing had begun prior to his administration. Their experiences of poor working conditions, low wages, and intense government harassment especially in the early 1930s, all provided incentives for campesinos to organize in order to improve their living and working conditions. Once the vehement repression from the state government eased, the union movement developed rapidly. These workers entered into an alliance with government supported organizers (including rural school teachers) that radicalized the campesinos and taught them the “language” of the Revolution, which they used in their negotiations with the government and planters. The campesinos, however, did not rely exclusively on government organizers to sustain their movement. When the Cárdenas state shifted towards a more conservative position, the unions persisted in their radical goals, which often led to conflicts between the former allies.

How successful were campesinos in their attempts to transform economic and political structures to create a Mexican “state” that responded to their needs? The dialogue between the campesinos, the Cárdenas government, and the planters produced a system in which workers gained considerable power to implement rural reforms, though it fell short of restructuring the political and economic system to favor laborers. The creation and enforcement of labor laws, the use of collective contracts, and the ability of unions to successfully challenge planter hegemony all illustrate the empowerment of labor. The massive agrarian reform that was carried out in 1939 also showed the increased strength of the rural poor. However, when faced with structural constraints (such as the economic crisis in the late 1930s), workers could no longer force the government to protect their interests.

The ability of campesinos to create an alliance with the government that protected workers’ interests also pushed the workers into accepting various government restrictions on who participated in their movement. The new alliance excluded labor “troublemakers,” Guatemalan immigrants, and some Mexican indigenous workers by labeling them as Guatemalan. These groups failed to qualify as “worthy” workers in the eyes of the government. Foreigners had no place in the discussion between workers, planters and the government about the changing position of coffee workers in the Soconusco during the Cárdenas regime. Planters took advantage of the discriminatory government discourse to label union



activists as Guatemalans and removed them from the fincas. By allowing government limitations on who would be included in the unions, workers also accepted a weaker bargaining position in the dialogue about the formation of the post-Revolutionary state because they permitted the exclusion of more radical visions of that state.

The economic crisis that affected the coffee plantations also limited the ability of rural workers to influence the dialogue about state formation by rendering ineffective union tactics that allowed workers to vigorously assert their perspectives on how the state should develop. Workers continued to use revolutionary language in an attempt to compel the planters and the government to respond to their concerns, but with the collapse of the coffee economy, strikes became essentially useless and the workers temporarily lost some power to influence the formation of the revolutionary state. The conservative turn of the Cárdenas government coupled with renewed repression by the planters also served to silence labor. The inability of the Cárdenas regime to protect the unions in the 1938 readjustments led to the disillusionment of workers. While somewhat trapped within the labor structure of the state (such as having to register the union and following the rules of the Labor Arbitration Board), the workers increasingly challenged the ability of the government/labor alliance to meet their needs. The unions began to ignore government limits on acceptable forms of protests and gradually developed an independent labor program. Eventually, workers openly challenged government labor policy, which led to a new wave of strikes and worker unrest that affected the fincas in 1946 and 1947.