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Colombia's Nationwide Campesino Strike Takes a Toll

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Colombia is still coming to terms with a nationwide campesino strike, the first in recent history, that dragged on for 19 days, affected all sectors of the economy, and resulted in a painful number of deaths and injuries.

The strike involved permanent roadblocks along dozens of routes and caused serious supply problems in the country’s principal cities. The events were triggered by a crisis that has left hundreds of families in financial ruin and is prompting a gradual exodus from rural areas.

The campesino protesters blame their problems on the free-trade agreements (FTAs) Colombia signed in recent years with both the US and European Union (EU). They say the trade agreements allowed for an influx of foreign products against which Colombians cannot compete. Colombia’s treaty with the EU, for example, applies to 9,745 products, 97.2% of which now enter the country tariff free. Before the FTA went into effect, Colombia imported just 1,469 EU products. Not only are the 8,276 additional products exempt from any kind of trade barrier, they are also unnecessary, the protestors say.

Worse still, claim small-scale potato farmers in the east-central department of Boyacá, is that "these treaties established an intellectual-property-protection regime that prevents farmers from planting local seeds, obliging them instead to use seeds that have been genetically modified by large multinational companies."

The winds of change unleashed by the protests have swept away the old leadership in the country’s agricultural producers’ associations, which had accepted the FTAs without informing rural workers about what exactly the deals entailed. In their place, new organizational structures have emerged under the banner Dignidad Agropecuaria (agricultural dignity).

Organizers called off the nearly three-week strike on Sept. 10 after the administration of President Juan Manuel Santos agreed to freeze a 2010 resolution known as la 970, which required the destruction of Colombian seeds. The government said it would also consider adopting new insurance and loan programs and establish mechanisms to stop contraband. The current "peace," nevertheless, is precarious.

Resolution 970 at root of conflict

Rural Colombians have been grappling with Resolution 970 for the past three years. For the country’s urban population, however, the issue had been of minor importance. As one reader of the daily El Tiempo commented, la 970 was "their problem," something for campesinos to worry about. All of that changed beginning on Aug. 19, when campesinos launched their strike and forced Resolution 970 to the national forefront.

Fueling the debate was a documentary film by journalist Victoria Solano. The film shows state officials destroying a large quantity of rice in Campoalegre, a municipality in the central department of Huila, known for producing the country’s best cereal grains.
"It would be painful but at least understandable to see the authorities destroy tens of thousands of kilos of food under the pretext that it is not fit for human consumption. But when it's being done because those same authorities are preventing small-scale rural farmers from saving the seeds from their harvests in order to plant them and are punishing those farmers, that's just an absurdity which few people understand," an analyst with the Bogotá-based magazine Semana wrote on Aug. 24.

"That is what the documentary La 970 revealed," the author went on to explain. "It showed how a group of officials from the Instituto Colombiano Agropecuario (ICA), guarded by shock forces from the Policía Nacional, seized 62 tons of rice seeds from approximately 20 different Huila-area campesinos to destroy the seeds in a landfill."

The ICA claims most of the seeds in question were "illegal" or "uncertified" by its technicians and thus represented a phytosanitary risk. As the Semana article explains, however, the problem goes much deeper than that. The magazine says the incident offers evidence of a David-versus-Goliath-type conflict that has been waging the past two years between campesinos and large multinationals. Driving the conflict is the intellectual property of certified seeds. "In the agricultural world there are two types of seeds: the native ones, which the local people have used for generations, and the certified ones, which have been genetically modified by multinationals like Monsanto, Dupont, and Syngenta," the article explains.

**War on traditional seeds**

Roughly 15% of all seeds sold in Colombia come from the multinationals. Local seeds were in common use and did not face any direct pressure until 2010, when the government implemented Resolution 970 at the insistence of the US. Colombia and the US signed an FTA (NotiSur, Jan. 14, 2011) toward the end of the administration of President Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010).

At that point, open season was declared on Colombia’s traditional seeds, which the ICA took to calling "pirate seeds." Seizures, like the one in Campoalegre, followed. Government figures indicate that 32.7% of Colombians are undernourished. And yet, since 2010, the ICA has destroyed more than 4,200 tons of rice, potato, corn, wheat, cotton, pea, barley, and bean seeds.

Most people agree that certified seeds, when planted on a large scale, can be very profitable. Some farmers, nevertheless, feel trapped by the invention. Cotton growers in the northern department of Córdoba are a case in point. "We've been trying to explain to the ICA for the past two years that the modified Monsanto seeds don't work here," said Alejandro Polo, chief technician with the cooperative Coopiagros.

The ICA general manager Teresita Beltrán has spent the past two years trying to explain, in as many ways as possible, that "970 isn't an attack on local seed, nor does it criminalize the campesinos who use them." She admits, however, that local seeds "can only be planted for personal use and in areas no larger than 5 hectares." The resolution, in other words, condemns campesino families to go hungry.

**Country in solidarity with campesinos**

Urban-based Colombians reacted with indignation upon learning that the country’s historically peaceful campesinos had launched an indefinite protest. Bogotá quickly became an epicenter of solidarity, even as the strike caused the capital—home to roughly 8 million people—to suffer shortages. City residents organized almost daily events and protests against Resolution 970.
The government reacted by militarizing the capital and ordering a curfew. Katalina Vázquez, a correspondent for the Uruguayan weekly Brecha, described the curfew in a Sept. 6 report: "After 8 p.m. the city streets are left in the hands of military patrols, and thus the repression affects everybody, indiscriminately."

The Secretaría de Gobierno's human rights director Andrés Idárraga reported that on the night of Aug. 30 alone, 14 minors were taken to the police station in Bogotá’s Bosa district. "They all had head wounds," he said. "Two had their shoulders dislocated. One woman said she had been run over by police motorcycles. In the hospital, one teenage girl told us police agents had thrown her from a vehicular bridge."

Videos published on the Internet showed "police smashing windows, damaging [building] facades, stealing people’s cell phones so that they couldn’t record the excesses, and beating journalists from behind," Idárraga explained.

In a Sept. 13 communiqué titled "Santos’ Answer Was Repression," participants in the Cumbre Nacional Agraria y Campesina—a summit organized by the strikers—offered a dramatic inventory of police brutality during the 19-day strike. "There were 12 deaths, four disappearances, 660 cases of human rights violations, 262 arbitrary arrests, 485 injuries, 52 cases in which protest leaders were threatened and harassed, and 51 indiscriminate attacks on the population," the press release reads.

The government stayed quiet on the matter. President Santos, who was forced to change five of his Cabinet ministers as a result of the impasse, later acknowledged that the days of the strike "were the most difficult of my period in office." By the time the strike ended, Santos’ approval rating dropped to just 21%, his lowest level since assuming the presidency in 2010, according to a Gallup poll.

One of the other noteworthy things about the strike was the diversity of actors involved. White, mestizo, and Afro-descendent campesinos, Nasa indigenous people, and other ethnic minorities joined the protest, as did artisan miners and even truck drivers. In many cases, participants—even if they were not originally opposed to the FTAs—adopted the issue to align themselves with the movement. Coffee, potato, sugar, citrus, milk, grain, onion, bean, sugar, cotton and flower producers—all of whom operate on a small or medium scale—joined the Dignidad Agropecuaria strike.

One of the new leaders to emerge during the protests was César Pachón, an agricultural engineer who represents the groups Dignidad Papera and Dignidad Cebollera in Boyacá. Pachón said the unexpected solidarity that emerged among all the different sectors resulted from a combination of factors: "The devastating effects of the FTAs, high input prices that have increased production costs, the total freedom afforded to imports, and the absence of an agricultural policy that protects small and medium-sized farmers from the voracious multinational seed makers."

Many believe the protests will continue, even though the strike is now over. An analyst from the conservative daily El Espectador recently described the events as "the painful birth of a new creature that has been gestating for the past 50 years."