

SIBLING RIVALRY ON THE LEFT AND LABOR STRUGGLES IN COLOMBIA DURING THE 1940s*

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Abstract: On the Colombian Left during the 1940s, little differentiated the rank and file of the Communist party from the left wing of the Liberal party. Individuals commonly moved back and forth between the two groups. Animosity was rampant among leaders, however, as shown by the clashes between the principal compañeros and Jorge Eliécer Gaitán's left-Liberal populist mobilization. As this rivalry played out in the Communist strongholds of the union movement, it became apparent that a large portion of the organized working class (perhaps a majority) supported Gaitán even though their leaders dismissed him as a fascist. Workers, organized and unorganized, clearly demonstrated their belief that Gaitanismo was a radical movement of change despite the fact that it arose within the traditional party system.

As Tolstoy observed, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own fashion. No exception to this observation was the Colombian Left of the 1940s, which bound closely related but hostile groups in unhappy kinship. Few clear distinctions could be drawn between Communists, socialists, or left-Liberals. Yet despite the overlaps among these factions, their leaders held each other in mutual contempt. Thus the ambivalent struggles between Gaitanismo, the left-Liberal populist mobilization led by Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, and "indigenous Communism" can be best understood as a case of sibling rivalry on the Left.

In this confrontation, the Gaitanistas ultimately outmaneuvered their brethren in the Partido Socialista Democrático (PSD), the official name of the Colombian Communist Party in the mid-1940s. Because Colombian Communists were often indistinguishable from their left-Liberal competitors, they defined themselves only with great difficulty. Colombians are famous for their attachment to their traditional parties. No less important, Communist advocacy of an internationalist program in an

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intensely nationalistic country in a patriotically charged era during and after World War II allowed forces within the Liberal party to commandeer the traditional Communist agenda. Finally the disastrous refusal of PSD leaders to support Gaitán seemed absurd to most Colombians on the Left and even to many of the Communist faithful. Gaitán—an activist labor lawyer, Bogotá city councilman, departmental assembly deputy for Cundinamarca, congressman, senator, cabinet minister, and mayor of Bogotá—led a political movement of national scope that is generally recognized as a watershed in the Colombian collective experience. Gaitanismo was the pivotal political movement in the raucous twentieth century in Colombia. It represented the culmination of the left-Liberal tradition of popular political mobilization that permeated Colombian development following independence.

Gaitán's independent run for the presidency between March 1944 and May 1946 exposed many cracks in Colombia's traditional political culture and social fabric. Gaitán lost the election and split the Liberal vote, giving the Conservatives the presidency for the first time in sixteen years, but he demonstrated the depth of his multiclass movement. Decisively eclipsing a splintering PSD in 1946–1947, Gaitán proved himself the popularly anointed leader of the Colombian Left—and shortly thereafter, of the Liberal party itself. Gaitanismo was cut short, however, when Gaitán was mortally wounded outside his office in downtown Bogotá on 9 April 1948 by a lone gunman widely believed to have connections to the Colombian elite. Gaitán's assassination and the subsequent brutal suppression of Gaitanismo dramatically transformed the left-Liberal tradition. These events initiated a troubling and violent political process that has not yet ended.

Contrary to common opinion, what was astonishing about Gaitanismo was not the movement's set of weaknesses but its strength.¹ Some would argue that populist and multiclass political phenomena are inherently "weak" in comparison with more homogenous movements. Yet the Gaitanistas' accomplishments in mobilization were impressive. Different classes (all identifiably "subaltern") were united by Gaitán's message of amplified Liberal social and economic programs combined with a political system that would be more popularly oriented. This message resonated with popular demands for *justicia social*, *democracia*, and the completion of former President Alfonso López Pumarejo's "Revolución en Marcha."²

1. The consensus position seems to be that in the 1930s and 1940s, the popular political challenge to Colombia's oligarchic democracy (dominated by the old Liberal and Conservative parties) was "weak": the Communist Party was small; rural society was dominated by smallholding; Colombia had experienced "limited urban growth"; and the country had received little European immigration. See Christopher Abel and Marco Palacios, "Colombia, 1930–58," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, edited by Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 8:592.

2. On the ideology of Gaitanismo and its connections to the Liberal Left, see W. John Green,

Although Gaitanismo drew from various social strata, the urban working classes (including artisans and wage workers) played a central role in Gaitanista mobilization, as did many landless rural workers. The fact that Gaitanismo sounded serious overtones of class struggle was clear to Gaitanistas challenging Colombia's oligarchic democracy—and to the *oligarquía* itself.³ Gaitán's dichotomous vision of a struggle between the *país político* (the political nation) and the *país nacional* (the real or true nation), between the oligarquía and the *pueblo*, reflected the class reality embodied in Gaitanismo. Such a statement does not deny that Gaitán's conceptualization belied the complicated interclass alliances that Gaitanismo involved. While the *pueblo* was made up mainly of the "popular classes," its composition was not determined exclusively by a shared relationship to the means of production. Yet Gaitanismo's drive arose from something approaching class conflict. For most Gaitanistas, the dynamic struggle between the *pueblo* and the oligarquía was that between the "productive masses" and the owners of political and economic power.⁴

No doubt exists about the depth of popular support that Gaitanismo enjoyed. The point of contention is how this popular support should be interpreted, especially regarding the working class. Some observers have gone so far as to deny that organized workers participated in the movement. More have bowed to the orthodox interpretation holding that Gaitanismo, while based on popular support, disoriented the working class and was ultimately bad for workers. This article will demonstrate why such ideas need to be reconsidered.

A large portion of Colombian organized workers, along with the majority of the unorganized working class, appreciated the utility or even the necessity of political alliance with Gaitanismo. Realizing that the small size of Colombia's urban and industrial working class precluded the possibility of a viable working-class party, workers supported Liberal political movements like Lopismo in the 1930s and Gaitanismo in the 1940s. Given such structural weakness as well as the enduring strength of the Liberal party arising from its vibrant left-Liberal tradition, working-class allegiance to Gaitán was both logical and predictable. Such an understanding demystifies the outcome of the political and union struggles between Gai-

"'Vibrations of the Collective': The Popular Ideology of Gaitanismo on Colombia's Atlantic Coast, 1944–1948," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 76, no. 2 (1996):283–311.

3. Eduardo Sáenz noted that industrialists in Medellín and Bogotá carried on a dogged struggle with Gaitán over his campaign against protectionism in the name of the Colombian consumer. Sáenz even hinted that they had the most to gain from his assassination. See Sáenz Rovner, *La ofensiva empresarial: Industriales, políticos y violencia en los años 40 en Colombia* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1992), chaps. 6–8.

4. I provide an expanded discussion of the social composition of the movement, as well as its radical economic and political aspects, in my recent manuscript, "Superior to their Leaders: Gaitanismo, Left Liberalism, and Popular Mobilization in Colombia, 1928–1948."

tanismo and the PSD. Gaitanismo demonstrated that radical movements of change could arise within the traditional party system. It was clear that workers understood this possibility in the realm of organized labor struggles, where large numbers of workers followed Gaitán despite their union leaders' hatred of him.

ORIGINS OF THE STRUGGLE

Gaitanista left-Liberalism vied with the Colombian Communist party almost from the beginning. Although both movements could trace their origins back to the 1850s and earlier, they matured during the escalating social conflicts of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The central event of their early years was the watershed banana workers' strike against the United Fruit Company operation in Magdalena in 1928–1929. The strike was organized by the Partido Socialista Revolucionario (the PSR, the direct predecessor of the Communist party), but Gaitán usurped the repressed strike as his vehicle for entering the collective consciousness of left-Liberal Colombians. The Communists never forgave Gaitán for this indignity.

The strike resulted from years of tension between the United Fruit Company and its workers in the "banana zone" and from a determined organizing drive by anarcho-syndicalists and the PSR.⁵ The Conservative government intervened by deploying troops, calling a state of siege, and carrying out the infamous massacre at the coastal town of Ciénaga in the early hours of 6 December 1928.⁶ Recently elected to the lower house of congress, Gaitán decided to go to Ciénaga for a theatrical "investigation" in July 1929. During his return up the Magdalena River to Bogotá, he stopped

5. The 1928 strike may be the most-investigated labor event in Colombian labor history. See, among others, Richard Sharpless, *Gaitán of Colombia: A Political Biography* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978), 56–61; Miguel Urrutia, *The Development of the Colombian Labor Movement* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1969), 99–108; Judith White, *Historia de una ignominia: La United Fruit Co. en Colombia* (Bogotá: Presencia, 1978), 73–102; and Roberto Herrera Soto and Rafael Romero Castañeda, *La zona bananera del Magdalena: Historia y léxico* (Bogotá: Caro y Cuervo, 1979).

6. Estimates of the number of strikers killed still vary widely, from eighty to one hundred in Sharpless, *Gaitán*, 57, to fifteen hundred in Alberto Castrillón R., *120 días bajo el terror: La huelga de las bananeras* (Bogotá: Tupac Amaru, 1979; first published in 1929), to over two thousand in White, *Historia*, 100. Gabriel García Márquez and Alvaro Cepeda Samudio have immortalized the strike in fiction in *Cien años de soledad* and *La casa grande*. But as Maurice Brungardt has pointed out, historians have yet to sound the depths of the repressed strike's influence on Colombians. See Brungardt, "Mitos históricos y literarios: *La casa grande*," in *Deficciones y realidades: Perspectivas sobre literatura e historia colombiana*, edited by Alvaro Pineda Botero and Raymond Williams (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1989), 63. Eduardo Posada Carbó, however, has addressed the problematic nature of García Márquez's "historical interpretation" in "Fiction as History: The *bananeras* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30, pt. 2 (1998):395–414.

in numerous cities and towns to recount his findings, drawing large crowds along the way. While still on his boat at Barrancabermeja, Gaitán told a gathering that he had come “as a witness to the most miserable slaughter the country has ever seen.” In response, several in the crowd jumped into the river to meet him.⁷

Once back in Bogotá, Gaitán launched his so-called debate on 3 September before packed congressional galleries and an attentive press. For fifteen days, he enthusiastically pelted the government with invective and scorn. His speeches demonstrated the culpability of United Fruit and implicated the Conservatives in the killings while drawing attention to himself. As one Gaitanista later maintained, “Gaitanismo began with the defense that Dr. Gaitán made of the victims of the *zona bananera*.”⁸ Gaitán’s exploits were followed in Bogotá by the crowds who accompanied him home each evening but also by Colombians throughout the country. Writing from Barranquilla “in support and admiration” of his campaign in Congress, one woman claimed that Colombians cheered him on because of their frustration with “the domination of the *gringos*” and the mockery of justice.⁹ At thirty-one, Gaitán was catapulted into a position of authority within the Liberal party on the eve of the 1930 presidential election, in which a divided Conservative party lost power for the first time since 1885. Thus at the birth of the “Liberal Republic” (1930–1946), Gaitán had already established himself as “the future Messiah” of the Colombian working class.¹⁰

Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, Gaitán was active on the Liberal Left. Although he quit the official party between 1933 and 1935 to organize his short-lived Unión Nacional Izquierdista Revolucionaria (UNIR), he soon returned to the party and served as congressional representative, senator, city councillor and mayor of Bogotá, Minister of Education, and Minister of Labor. He was also the most prominent labor lawyer of the day. When serious organized labor conflicts erupted in the 1930s and 1940s, Gaitán was often called in to be the union’s advocate.¹¹ Ignacio Torres Gi-

7. Interview by Mauricio Archila with Erasmo Egea, who worked for Tropical Oil from 1924 to 1935, in Barrancabermeja, 19 May 1985. Egea went on to say that because of Barranca’s isolation, Gaitán brought the first real news of the strike. The author thanks Mauricio Archila for access to his interviews.

8. This point was made by Heliodoro Cogua P., a smallholder in the Valle del Cauca in the 1940s, a lifelong Gaitanista, and former guide at the Casa Museo Gaitán in Bogotá. Interview with the author, Bogotá, 17 May 1990. The point was confirmed repeatedly in the correspondence found at the Archive of the Instituto Colombiano de la Participación Jorge Eliécer Gaitán (hereafter AICPG).

9. Carmela Ramos P. to Jorge Eliécer Gaitán (hereafter JEG), Barranquilla, 27 Sept. 1929; and AICPG, v. 0091 “Adhesiones y quejas Atlántico.”

10. Heliodoro Linares U., “Helius,” *Yo acuso: Biografía de Gaitán y Fajardo, diez años después, 1948–1959* (Bogotá: Iqueima, 1959), 59.

11. As noted by Mauricio Archila in *Cultura e identidad obrera: Colombia, 1910–1945* (Bogotá: CINEP, 1991), 285.

raldo, apostle of the early Communist party and no advocate of Gaitán (the most threatening rival on the Left), has pointed out Gaitán's repeated "failures" in strike negotiations in Medellín and Cali.¹² Torres Giraldo ignored, however, the significance of many unions' habit of turning to Gaitán to look after their interests.

UNIR and the Communist party represented competing currents of popular mobilization in the early 1930s that were eventually displaced by the official Liberal party.¹³ Liberals delivered their most devastating blow to such popular movements by usurping much of their program. The nine years between the end of UNIR and the dramatic rise of Gaitanismo represented an interlude in which Liberal governments enacted reforms that were eventually ignored in practice. In his first administration (1934–1938), President Alfonso López Pumarejo instituted the "Revolución en Marcha," which focused on state intervention and constitutional reform. Via state welfare, expanded male suffrage, benevolent dealings with workers, and education and agrarian reform, López won the support of large portions of the "popular classes," including the leaders of organized labor and those of the Communist party. The revolution endured the "pause" under President Eduardo Santos (1938–1942), which actually began under López in 1936. López's return to office in late 1942 did little to alleviate the situation, however. Racked by scandal and opposition, López withdrew from the presidency permanently in 1945 in favor of First Designate Alberto Lleras Camargo.

As the bulwark of controlled mobilization and orchestrated "revolution," López set the stage for more radical movements. The roller coaster of emotions and hopes produced by Liberal reform fueled the spectacular rise of Gaitanismo. The eclipse of López Pumarejo and the hopes he represented, combined with growing disillusionment and discontent among groups that had not benefited, permitted Gaitán to present himself as Llopmismo's logical alternative and successor.

PAINFUL FAMILY TIES, NATIONALISM, AND "FASCISM"

Scholars of Gaitanismo have overlooked its kinship with the Colombian Communist party, investigating the two movements in virtual isola-

12. Ignacio Torres Giraldo, *Los inconformes: Historia de la rebeldía de las masas en Colombia* (Bogotá: Latina, 1967), 4:1105–1112.

13. For discussions of other movements in the early 1930s, see Daniel Pécaut, *Orden y violencia: Colombia, 1930–1954*, 2 vols. (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1987); Charles Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America: Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986); Archila, *Cultura e identidad obrera*; Abel and Palacios, "Colombia, 1930–58"; Catherine Le Grand, *Frontier Expansion and Peasant Protest in Colombia, 1830–1936* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986); Medófilo Medina, *Historia*

tion.¹⁴ Herbert Braun ignored the relations between Gaitanistas and Communists. Richard Sharpless devoted one paragraph to their relations in the 1940s, noting the Communist portrayal of Gaitán as a demagogue.¹⁵ Yet this contentious relationship explains much about the relative weakness of doctrinaire Communism in Colombia and about the significance of nationalism and Gaitán's supposed fascism.

Charles Bergquist has argued that it was not a failure of leadership that debilitated the Left and the organized labor movement but rather widespread access to land, the means of production in Colombia's coffee economy. In his critique of the work of left-Liberal (and Gaitanista) Antonio García, Bergquist has argued that García erred "by making Colombian history appear more revolutionary than it actually was. He explained the failure of popular reform forces to effect meaningful social change primarily as a result of reactionary ruling-class conspiracies and betrayals of the masses by their erstwhile reformist leaders" (1986, 279). According to Bergquist, such interpretations "exaggerate the historical strength of the left, distract attention from the basic causes of its weakness, and rationalize opportunistic political positions and strategies that hurt rather than enhance the long-term political potential of popular forces" (1986, 279). Bergquist has contended that García argued in *Gaitán y el problema de la revolución colombiana* "against the weight of historical evidence" by interpreting "the political process that culminated in the Violence at mid-century as an aborted social revolution."¹⁶ The core assumption of Bergquist's position is that Gaitanismo was neither radical nor collective in nature, nor was it part of the Left.

While Bergquist's argument concerning the significance of landownership in some regions of Colombia contains much truth, good evidence exists to support many of García's claims about the revolutionary nature of Gaitanismo.¹⁷ It is also clear that PSD leaders greatly weakened their cause by opposing Gaitán (a fact officially recognized in later years by the Colombian Communists). If one defines the Left in Colombia only in

del Partido Comunista (Bogotá: CEIS, 1980); and Medina, *La protesta urbana en Colombia en el siglo XX* (Bogotá: Aurora, 1984).

14. This statement pertains more to the English-language works on Gaitán. Among the important exceptions in Spanish are these key works on the Communist party during this period: Medófilo Medina, *Historia del Partido Comunista*, 506–11; Daniel Pécaut, *Orden y violencia* 2:395–407; and Renán Vega Cantor, *Crisis y caída de la República Liberal* (Ibague: Mohán, 1988), 186–98. Yet even these works do not stress the interconnectedness of the Left.

15. See Herbert Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). Sharpless, however, records rank-and-file support for Gaitán in working-class neighborhoods of Bogotá and pro-Gaitán defections in Cartagena, citing a letter from "Juan Manuel Valderama" (really Valdelamar) in *Gaitán of Colombia*, 125.

16. Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America*, 279.

17. See Green, "Vibrations of the Collective."

terms of the Communists, then it seems to have been weak in the 1930s and 1940s. But if the definition is broadened to include Gaitanismo and the left-Liberal tradition it represented, then the picture changes considerably.

Colombian left-Liberals and Communists exhibited predictable tensions over questions of ideology, although most Colombian socialists and Communists were not well versed in the works of Marx or other luminaries of the socialist canon. This situation and the analogous evolution of the left wing of the Liberal party helped blur the relationship between Communists and left-Liberals in Colombia and obscure the revealing overlaps within their ranks. Individuals often carried many political labels simultaneously—leftist, Lopista, Communist, and Gaitanista.¹⁸ Finally, because Communists in Colombia threw their lot in with the *Revolución en Marcha*, they had trouble distancing themselves from the political establishment. Ironically, despite the Communists' generally pro-López posture, the Liberal party never extended more than token acceptance. Ultimately, Colombian Communists stood too close to Liberalism for their own good.

Nor is the relationship between Communists and left-Liberals apparent only in retrospect. U.S. State Department analysts recognized at the time that the "development of the Communist party" coincided with "the period of Liberal government," and that the Communists' grasp of leftist ideology was incomplete.¹⁹ From the beginning, it was evident that the areas of Communist strength in the Magdalena region, the Valle del Cauca, and Tolima and Cundinamarca were also left-Liberal areas. One U.S. State Department official went so far as to claim that some of Colombia's "alleged Communism is in reality nothing more than a pronounced Liberalism which, as elsewhere in Latin America, is denounced by the Conservative element."²⁰ While Gaitán's followers did not view him as an enemy of private property, religion, or the family, he was nevertheless known as an advocate of "left-Liberalism" of a "socialist tendency," under which economic relations could be regulated.²¹ Gaitán was therefore identified with the Left and with Communists.²² This association even rubbed off on some of his decidedly non-Communist supporters.²³

18. When, for instance, one lifelong Gaitanista was asked about relations between Gaitanistas and the Left, he responded that the Gaitanistas themselves "were leftists." Author's interview with Heliodoro Cogua P. in Bogotá, 17 May 1990. Many instances of "dual citizenship" as Communist and Gaitanista will be discussed in the text.

19. "Communist Activities in Colombia," 16 June 1943, U.S. State Department (hereafter SD) 821.00B/92.

20. Memorandum, 1 Feb. 1938, attached to Despatch no. 1991, 8 Jan. 1938, SD 821.00B/67.

21. So argued Gaitán's campaign biographer, Milton Puentes, in *Gaitán* (Bogotá: ABC, 1945), 37.

22. U.S. Embassy Circular no. 21, Bogotá, 15 Feb. 1944, "Report on the Communist Party in Colombia," SD, Foreign Service Post, Record Group 84. Gaitán was listed along with Gabriel Turbay as an influential leader often associated with the Communists.

23. José María Blanco Núñez, the Liberal Gaitanista named governor of Atlántico after the

Despite the many historical connections between left-Liberals and Communists in Colombia, the normal state of relations between Gaitanistas and the PSD in the 1940s continued to be rivalry, as in the 1930s. Their relationship developed under conditions of flux in which the allegiance of the urban working classes was not held definitively by any single group.²⁴

Given the lack of differentiation between Communists and Gaitanista left-Liberals as well as the intense competition in building their respective mass followings, it is not surprising that Gaitanistas played the trump card of nationalism. Juan Manuel Valdelamar, one of Gaitanismo's most astute leaders on the coast (and a Communist leader as well), argued that Gaitanismo's "national character" was a major reason that both the PSD and the oligarquía feared it.²⁵ While the Communist party was fixated on the international defeat of fascism, the Gaitanistas effectively used nationalism as a mobilizing agent, turning the Communists' inconsistent internationalism into a handicap.²⁶ After several abrupt shifts in party line, the PSD ultimately adopted a policy of cooperation and alliance with anyone willing to join the fight against Hitler, dropping the most radical portions of their domestic programs and moving perilously close to the oligarquía. As Gaitán was gearing up for his run for the presidency, the PSD seemed preoccupied with foreign policy.

Nationalism has been important in all populist movements but in Colombia, isolated and given to entrenched party loyalty, it was especially pronounced.²⁷ Most Colombians identified more with the Liberal and Conservative struggles than with communist and fascist ones.²⁸ In the 1930s,

election of 1946, recalled that in April 1945, his friend Gustavo Solano said to him, "If this is not the last straw . . . , that you too have become a Communist and support Gaitán." See Blanco Núñez, *Memorias de un gobernador: El nueve de abril de 1948, antes, durante y después* (Barranquilla: Banco de la República, 1968), 69.

24. In Santa Marta, for example, both Communists and Gaitanistas were making inroads into the Liberal flock, especially among young people. See Jacobo Pérez Escobar in Retén, letter to *El Estado* of Santa Marta, 11 Sept. 1945, p. 1.

25. Juan Manuel Valdelamar to JEG, Cartagena, 17 April 1945, AICPG, v. 0053 "Cartas Bolívar."

26. As U.S. State Department observers noted, "Prior to the outbreak of the European War," Colombian Communists "confined their propaganda on international political questions" to a general pro-Soviet stance "and a strongly anti-Yankee-capitalist line." But the pro-Soviet (and seemingly pro-Nazi) position of the PSD during the Soviet-Finnish hostilities at the beginning of the war, for example, weakened their organization because such a stance was "precisely opposed to that of the overwhelming majority of the Colombian people." Anti-communism, "formerly associated with reaction in the popular mind, became a perfectly respectable Liberal profession. . . ." See "Communist Activities in Colombia," 16 June 1943, SD 821.00B/92.

27. On Communists' disadvantages vis-à-vis the Liberal party and Gaitanismo on the question of nationalism, see Pécaut, *Orden y violencia*, 2:400–401.

28. For a good example of this phenomenon, see Ramón Manrique, *Bajo el signo de la hoz: La conjuntura del comunismo en Colombia* (Bogotá: ABC, 1937), 66–68.

the Communists opined that the notion of *la patria* was merely a bourgeois construct, a stance that made them “citizens of the world” and brothers to all workers. This claim offended the national pride of many otherwise sympathetic Colombians.²⁹ The idea that “the worker has no fatherland” seemed absurd to many on the Colombian Left.³⁰ At the same time, Liberals consistently characterized their Communist rivals as being too close to the Soviets and essentially “foreign.”³¹ Liberals and Gaitanistas claimed that Communist activity, perpetrated by “agents of Moscow,” was “outside the law.”³² Gaitanistas in Ciénaga called the Communist party “a sickness” emanating from the “putrid corpses of Marx and Lenin.”³³ Augusto Durán, Secretary General of the PSD, supposedly attacked anyone who did not pay homage to Soviet doctrines.³⁴ Gaitán himself was hardly above inciting fear of Communist activity as dangerous intervention in the life of the patria by a “foreign organization.”³⁵

The Gaitanistas’ successful appeals to Colombian national identity led the PSD to return fire with claims that Gaitanismo was really a variety of “fascism.” Like Juan Perón in Argentina, they argued, Gaitán attracted only the “backward masses.” They pointed to the seeming alliance between Gaitán and the rabid leader of the most reactionary sect of the Conservative party, Laureano Gómez, who gave Gaitán coverage in his newspaper, *El Siglo*, in a successful attempt to split the Liberal party. Communist elder Ignacio Torres Giraldo has maintained that Gaitán could not have been anything other than a “candidate of Conservative manipulation,” suffering from the “delirium” of “an overestimation of his national prestige” (1967). In the same vein, one labor leader continued decades later to deny any rebellion in the rank and file against the political decision to support the official Liberal candidate, Gabriel Turbay. Those who voted for Gaitán were not the organized workers but rather the pueblo “in its common denominator.” Gaitán, he argued, was simply “a fascist.”³⁶

29. *Ibid.*, 16–17. Manrique called himself a friend of many Communists, a Liberal “of the blood,” and a “child of the Revolución en Marcha,” 141–43.

30. “La propaganda comunista,” *La Tribuna*, 7 Mar. 1938, p. 1.

31. In the 1960s, a leftist intellectual faulted the Colombian Communists of the 1930s and 1940s for their excessive attention to international events “at a decisive moment in Colombian history.” According to José Gutiérrez, they were so “isolated from reality” that they ignored their own country’s situation in favor of a “Soviet illusion.” See Gutiérrez, *La rebeldía colombiana* (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 1962), 39–40.

32. *El Mitín* (Cartagena), 28 Jan. 1936, p. 1.

33. Letter from seven “fervientes admiradores y compatriotas” to Gaitán, Ciénaga, 21 June 1945, AICPG, v. 0011 “Cartas Magdalena.”

34. *El Estado*, 1 Feb. 1943, p. 1. The *comunistas criollos* were called “unconditional instruments of Moscow” who agitated against religion. Letter from Santiago Pozo to the editor of *El Estado*, 10 Jan. 1946, p. 1.

35. *El Estado*, 26 Apr. 1946, p. 3.

36. See Torres Giraldo, *Los inconformes*, 5:1396, 1401. Interview by Mauricio Archila with

Throughout late 1945 and into 1946, the Communists pounded Gaitán in speeches, memoranda, and their party paper, *Diario Popular*, as a demagogue and a threat to the Colombian working class. Augusto Durán declared that the masses that followed Gaitán did so because he had “a powerful throat.”³⁷ Resurrecting the title of Fermín López Giraldo’s 1936 anti-Gaitán polemic, the Communists called him “the naked apostle,” a representative of the most reactionary forces of Colombia. In their view, Gaitán disoriented the working class by camouflaging his hatred of the people with phrases that appealed to their interests.³⁸ Gaitanismo was nothing more than “demagoguery and lies.”³⁹ As Durán commented in a speech in Barranquilla in September 1945, “Hitler and Mussolini also deceived the people with the demagoguery of moral restoration.” Gaitán was simply Laureano Gómez’s front man,⁴⁰ “the screen” hiding anti-democratic reaction.⁴¹

In the end, however, PSD (and elite Liberal) efforts to brand Gaitán a fascist failed spectacularly.⁴² Most workers recognized Gaitanismo as a radical leftist mobilization that was distinctly Colombian.

GAITANISMO AND THE WORKING CLASS

The Colombian working class has traditionally been described as “weak.” Daniel Pécaut, leading proponent of the weakness thesis, has provided some of the most insightful work on Colombian workers in *Política y sindicalismo en Colombia* and *Orden y violencia*. Charles Bergquist furthered the idea of the relative weakness of organized labor in Colombia in *Labor in Latin America*. Mauricio Archila questioned this general contention somewhat in *Cultura e identidad obrera* but fell back on it in explaining working-class attachment to López and Gaitán. Colombian workers of the 1940s, in contrast with their more robust cousins in Argentina, Brazil, and

Roberto Insignares, onetime director of the river workers’ federation, FEDENAL, in Barranquilla, 14 June 1986. As has been pointed out, the Colombian Communists have long since publicly declared mea culpa concerning their injudicious opposition to Gaitanismo.

37. From the report by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) “Summary of Communist Activities in Colombia, January 1947,” 5 Feb. 1947, SD 821.00B/3–1047.

38. “El apóstol desnudo,” *Diario Popular*, 28 Aug. 1945, p. 2. See Fermín López Giraldo, *El apóstol desnudo, o dos años al lado de un mito* (Manizales: Arturo Zapata, 1936).

39. “Contra los obreros y el progreso de Pereira se unen godos y gaitanistas,” *Diario Popular*, 23 Jan. 1946, p. 3.

40. *Diario Popular*, 28 Sept. 1945, p. 2; *El Nacional* (Barranquilla), 28 Sept. 1945, p. 1.

41. “Gaitán, mampara de la reacción,” *Diario Popular*, 5 Sept. 1945, p. 2.

42. For an expanded discussion of the problems in interpreting Gaitán as a fascist, see W. John Green, “Guilt by Association: Jorge Eliécer Gaitán and the Legacy of His Studies in ‘Fascist’ Italy,” in *Strange Pilgrimages: Travel, Exile, and Foreign Residence in the Creation of Latin American National Identity, 1800–1996*, edited by Karen Racine and Ingrid Fey, forthcoming from Scholarly Resources.

Mexico, played a modest economic role in their society. The Colombian economy remained largely agrarian and tied to coffee. Among the working class (the mass of urban and industrial workers), wage workers and artisans constituted only a small portion of the overall population, with organized labor a much smaller part. Yet the working class's central role in the Gaitanista mobilization assured it a significant degree of active political influence in the 1940s.

Some Colombianists have simply denied the connections between Gaitanismo and the working class. Herbert Braun has argued that the working class was "not at the forefront of Gaitán's struggle." He conjectured that it may have been "too closely tied to López's reforms of ten years before."⁴³ But Gaitán had inherited the *mística* of Alfonso López Pumarejo as champion of the working class.⁴⁴ Most of Braun's conclusions on the social base and class nature of Gaitanismo rest on his interviews with the Gaitanista inner circle, in which the rank and file and the working class were conspicuously absent. Braun explained that his interpretation of Gaitán and Gaitanismo came from Gaitán's "writings and speeches, from his actions, and from what I learned of him in interviews with some of his closest followers."⁴⁵

Of Braun's sixty-eight interviewees, fifty-one can be identified by social category: twenty-five were political insiders, lawyers, intellectuals, activists, or their wives; three were doctors; four were policemen; two were soldiers; four were journalists or photographers; four were priests; two were store owners; and six could be described as workers or organizers (including a fireman and a chef). Of the other seventeen, eleven are referred to as "Gaitanista sympathizer," "Gaitanista, participant in the Bogotazo," or "eyewitness." Several could have been workers but were not identified as such. Given Braun's statement that workers did not participate much in Gaitanismo or the Bogotazo, he may have inadvertently downplayed their presence in his own data. He certainly did not seek them out. If Braun had consulted sources closer to the popular base of the movement, he might have drawn different conclusions.⁴⁶ For many hard-core militants, the essence of Gaitanista Liberalism was understood to be "the working people."⁴⁷ Ob-

43. Braun, *Assassination of Gaitán*, 115.

44. In the minds of the working class, Lopismo and Gaitanismo were not mutually exclusive, as demonstrated in Mauricio Archila's interview with Ramón de la Hoz, a union leader active in Barranquilla, in Barranquilla, 14 Apr. 1986.

45. Braun, *Assassination of Gaitán*, 6.

46. Braun's study focuses on elite elements and aspects of Gaitanismo, and therein lies its considerable value.

47. Directorio Municipal Liberal Gaitanista de Baranoa, Atlántico to JEG, 25 Mar. 1946, AICPG, v. 0091 "Adhesiones y quejas Atlántico." Here they were clearly paraphrasing the left-Liberal patriarch General Benjamín Herrera's 1922 statement that workers and campesinos were "carne de la carne y hueso de los huesos del liberalismo." A similar dynamic was

servers of this persuasion equated the pueblo with workers.⁴⁸ For many, the oligarquía or país político of Gaitán's dichotomy represented all the corrupt privileged castes, while the pueblo or país nacional represented "the honorable workers."⁴⁹

Problems also arise with the implication in the weak workers thesis that Colombian workers were not a significant source of pressure on the status quo. Bergquist is on solid ground in stressing the crucial importance of individualistic smallholders in Colombian history. But his lumping of these "coffee workers" as a less than radical part of the working class, without distinguishing between independent smallholders and rural proletarians, is problematic. Coffee workers on the large estates of western Cundinamarca and eastern Tolima who lacked access to their own land as well as landless workers in the Atlantic coastal region did not fit Bergquist's pattern of Hobbesian individualism. These areas were Gaitanista, left-Liberal, and Communist strongholds. Rural workers, who often thought of themselves as "proletarios," habitually wrote in support of Gaitán.⁵⁰ Archila ended his discussion of the post-López labor struggles with the failure of the 1945 river workers' strike. He recognized Gaitán's influence but argued that Gaitanismo was a "debilitating influence" on working-class organization in weakening its "class identity."⁵¹ Yet Archila's earlier analysis pointed to a radicalization of struggle once the mediating presence of the beloved President López was removed. In reality, this interpretive trend is shifting. In a forthcoming study based on extensive archival work, Gary Long focuses on radical artisans (also solidly Gaitanista) and attacks the weakness thesis directly by stressing their central importance to Colombian history in the 1940s. Although artisans were slowly being pushed out of ex-

evident in Argentina under Juan Perón. Daniel James has argued, "'The people' frequently were transformed into 'the working people' (*el pueblo trabajador*): the people, the nation and the workers became interchangeable." See James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946–1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 22.

48. One example is Gilberto Henríquez Gil, who hailed Gaitán as the supreme leader of the Left. See letter to JEG, Barranquilla, 16 Apr. 1945, AICPG, v. 0091 "Adhesiones y quejas Atlántico."

49. Cited here is Braulio Henao Blanco commenting on Gaitanismo in *Diario de la Costa* (Cartagena), 23 Sept. 1945, p. 3.

50. Sociedad de Agricultores J. E. Gaitán, Turbaco, Bolívar, to JEG, 23 Apr. 1944, AICPG, v. 0026 "Cartas adhesión." Rural workers and smallholders, who were not mutually exclusive on the coast, wrote to Gaitán for assistance in their struggles to obtain land titles. Representative letters are from "21 agricultural workers" to JEG, Barranquilla, 29 Sept. 1947, AICPG, v. 0043 "Cartas Atlántico"; and from Manuel Eleuterio and Felipe Romero to JEG, Sincelejo, 2 June 1947, AICPG, v. 0060 "Cartas Bolívar." Finally, problems also arise in blurring the cultural divide between rural and urban.

51. Archila, *Cultura e identidad obrera*, 425. Similar conclusions can be found in Pécaut, *Orden y violencia*, and Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America*.

istence, their radical traditions of mobilization had carried over from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to great effect and may have intensified as their situation became more precarious.⁵²

Gaitán understood the importance of the working class and paid close attention to working-class issues. He was, after all, the most famous labor lawyer in Colombia. For example, he purposefully held his *viernes culturales* (Friday radio chats) at an hour when workers could listen. At the beginning of 1944, newly appointed Minister of Labor Gaitán made his famous tour up and down the banks of the Magdalena River, a month-long swing. His stated purpose was to gain firsthand information on the “conditions of life and work of Colombian workers and to discuss a general labor code with union leaders” (Almario Salazar 1984, 120). The tour put him in contact with river workers, railroad workers, tobacco workers, and oil workers, among others.⁵³ Even before his appointment, Gaitán’s years of high-profile activity in working-class issues was evident to the pueblo.⁵⁴

In fact, Gaitanista leaders overtly targeted workers in the movement’s organizational drives. Samuel Guerrero, a white-collar employee, labor leader, and Gaitanista, habitually distributed campaign literature among unions in Cartagena and posted fliers in “strategic spots throughout the city, where workers pass by.”⁵⁵ Adriano Rangel, a left-Liberal politician and Gaitanista, routinely visited workers’ neighborhoods and union halls in Barranquilla, distributing Gaitán’s newspaper, *Jornada*, and leaving petitions in barbershops for the customers to sign when they congregated to talk politics.⁵⁶ Thus the official organization cultivated working-class interest and involvement in the movement and encouraged the view of Gaitán as the “only clear hope of the working class.”⁵⁷ José María Córdoba, Gaitán’s campaign manager, claimed that the country had “suffered

52. Gary Long’s forthcoming book is based on his dissertation, “The Dragon Finally Came: Industrial Capitalism, Radical Artisans, and the Liberal Party in Colombia, 1910–1948,” University of Pittsburgh, 1995. The book will be published by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

53. See Gustavo Almario Salazar, *Historia de los trabajadores petroleros* (Bogotá: Cedetrabajo, 1984), 120. Almario argued that Gaitán was wooing organized labor successfully until that moment dominated by Lopistas and Communists.

54. On this point, hundreds of letters and newspaper articles could be cited. Workers in Barranquilla praised Gaitán for his defense in the Senate against the Labor Ministry’s attempts to restrict the right to strike. See, for example, Manuel Mosquera, president of the Sindicato de Voceadores de Prensa y Revista de Barranquilla to JEG, Barranquilla, 11 Feb. 1943, AICPG, v. 0091 “Adhesiones y quejas Atlántico.”

55. Samuel Guerrero of the Federación de Empleados de Bolívar to JEG, Cartagena, 15 Mar. 1945, AICPG, v. 0053 “Cartas Bolívar.”

56. Adriano Rangel to JEG, Barranquilla/b, 20 Feb. 1945, AICPG, v. 0091 “Adhesiones y quejas Atlántico.”

57. José María Córdoba to Pedro Romoña y demás firmantes, Quibdó, Chochó, 17 Dec. 1945, AICPG, v. 0070 “Cartas despachadas, t. II.”

greatly due to the idea that government must be composed solely of 'intellectuals.'" Gaitanismo included "honorable working people," not just the intellectual oligarquía.⁵⁸

Perhaps the best evidence of Gaitanismo being a working-class movement was its strength in areas traditionally associated with workers. Urban Gaitanista zones tended to be areas of working-class concentration. One worker called Barranquilla "the workers' city" and claimed that it "was totally Gaitanista."⁵⁹ The same might be said of Bogotá, Cali, Ibagué, Pereira, or the decidedly proletarianized oil city of Barrancabermeja. Barranca began to move decisively into the Gaitanista camp after the oil workers' strike was broken in 1938.⁶⁰ Their support was dramatically affirmed in Barranca's tenacious Gaitanista uprising following Gaitán's assassination on 9 April 1948.⁶¹ Yet not all working-class areas were strongly Gaitanista. While Gaitán had significant support in Medellín, it seems that industrial workers there were not consistently in his camp. Several reasons can be cited for this situation. First, anti-Gaitán union leaders in Antioquia exerted considerable control. Also, Medellín was a traditional Conservative party stronghold, which undercut left-Liberal influence in that city. Finally, many workers in Medellín were reportedly under the thumb of paternalistic employers. Yet as Gary Long argues, even Medellín displayed mass support for Gaitán, much of which had to arise from the working class.⁶² Despite the atypical situation in Medellín, Gaitanismo was well represented in working-class areas.

Another crucial indicator of the working-class appeal of Gaitanismo was its ability to attract workers traditionally affiliated with the Conservative party. In Ciénega many in the "Conservative masses" supported Gaitán's effort.⁶³ In Barrancabermeja, the Conservatives were solidly Gaitanista.⁶⁴ An electrician writing from Barranquilla admitted to Gaitán that he had not ceased to be a Conservative but that Gaitán was nonetheless a great influence on his political spirit and should be president for a thou-

58. José María Córdoba to Abelardo Salgrad y demás firmantes, Mariquita, 5 Dec. 1945, AICPG, v. 0070 "Cartas despachadas, t. II."

59. Interview by Mauricio Archila with Cesar Ahumada, union leader at the Bavaria Brewery in Barranquilla, 1936–1938, and later of FEDPUERTOS and FEDETRAL, Barranquilla, 19 May 1986.

60. Gustavo Almarío Salazar provided a detailed and powerful account of this process in *Historia de los trabajadores petroleros*, 120–27.

61. See Apolinar Díaz Callejas, *Diez días de poder popular: El 9 de abril 1948 en Barrancabermeja* (Bogotá: El Labrador, 1988).

62. Personal conversations with the author; see also Long's forthcoming book.

63. Agustín Novoa Pinzón to JEG, Ciénega, 1 Apr. 1946, AICPG, v. 0011 "Cartas Magdalena."

64. Interview by Mauricio Archila with Roque Jiménez, white-collar employee of Tropical Oil Co. and leader of FEDETRAL, in Barrancabermeja, 15 Jan. 1985.

sand reasons.⁶⁵ José María Blanco Núñez found great support for Gaitán among the “popular elements of Barranquilla’s Conservatives” (a euphemism for Conservative workers?). They reportedly came to his office “frequently and spontaneously” to proclaim themselves in favor of Gaitán. Many claimed this was only a Conservative tactic to split the Liberals, but Blanco Núñez thought this interpretation unlikely.⁶⁶ Given the overwhelming strength of the Gaitanista Liberals in Atlántico, this supposition seems reasonable.

Gaitán’s reemergence on the national political scene as a presidential candidate was met with enthusiasm by many workers. Even in 1945, the events of 6 December 1928 in Ciénaga retained their significance for “the proletariat of Colombia.” The “bloody bodies of machine-gunned workers” inspired “the first cry of protest demanding justice and attention to social problems.”⁶⁷ In the banana zone, the workers never forgot that it was Gaitán who raised his voice to denounce the massacre.⁶⁸ But workers in other parts of Colombia also remembered “the hero of the banana zone” as the “defender of the proletarian class.”⁶⁹ In the months preceding election day, a profusion of organized and unorganized workers wrote to Gaitán to pledge their votes and support, despite the opposition of their union and political leaders.

The correspondents included bus and cab drivers, foundry workers, bakers, barbers, tailors, electrical workers, textile and other factory workers, brewery workers, petroleum workers, rural wage workers, mixed workers’ unions, railroad workers, and river workers.⁷⁰ Most praised

65. Victor Cuesta Fonseca to JEG, Barranquilla, 14 May 1945, AICPG, v. 0091 “Adhesiones y quejas Atlántico.”

66. Blanco Núñez, *Memorias*, 76.

67. *El Estado*, 6 Dec. 1945, p. 3.

68. Gustavo Pernet Miranda to JEG, Barranquilla, 11 June 1945, AICPG, v. 0091 “Adhesiones y quejas Atlántico.” Miranda told of his business trips to the zone and the reverence with which workers evoked Gaitán’s name.

69. Federación de Empleados de Bolívar to JEG, Cartagena, 7 Sept. 1944, AICPG, v. 0026 “Cartas adhesión.”

70. Gaitán received pledges of support from (among others) the Comité de Barberos Gaitanistas of Bogotá, 16 Jan. 1946; the Sindicato Obrero de la Fábrica de Fósforos “El Ruiz,” Bogotá, 1 May 1946; “Las suscritas empleadas de la Tipografía Prag,” Bogotá, 10 May 1946, AICPG, v. 0054 “Cartas Bogotá.” Also Sastres and Barberos of Duitama, 20 Jan. 1946, AICPG, v. 0019 “Adhesiones Boyacá”; Comité de Trabajadores de Antioquia Pro-Defensa Social y Económica, 15 Sept. 1945, AICPG, v. 0016 “Adhesiones y quejas Antioquia”; Sindicato Ferrocarrileros de Nariño, 31 Mar. 1944, AICPG, v. 0050 “Cartas Nariño”; Sindicato de Obreros Sastres, Ibagué, 2 Feb. 1946, AICPG, v. 0052 “Cartas Tolima.” Also the Gremio de Choferes de Barranquilla, 12 June 1945; Asociación de Fundidores Independientes del Atlántico, 22 Sept. 1945; Sociedad de Barberos de Barranquilla, 31 Mar. 1946; Junta de Trabajadores de Panadería de Barranquilla, 23 Apr. 1946; Acción Dept. Obrera Sindical Independiente, Barranquilla, 27 Sept. 1945; Frente Obrero Gaitanista, Barranquilla, 25 Nov. 1945; Obreros de la Fábrica de Tejidos “Filtta,” de Barranquilla, 30 May 1945; all in AICPG, v. 0091 “Adhesiones y quejas Atlán-

Gaitán as “the authentic representative,” “defender,” or “savior” of the working class. After the election, workers wrote to affirm their continuing faith in him in familiar language. They hailed him as the “authentic representative” and “defender of the proletarian classes” and peasants.⁷¹ Workers evidently “continued at the fore” of Gaitán’s movement.⁷²

THE MAIN BATTLEGROUND: UNIONS

Within the organized labor movement, the intense confrontations between Gaitanistas and Communists revolved around two axes: competition between PSD and Gaitanista organizers for leadership of the union structures; and Communist labor leaders’ struggles with the Gaitanista base of many unions. In 1945 the PSD outmaneuvered Gaitán and his followers in leadership struggles in the general federation. This is the level on which discussions of the rivalry between Gaitanismo and the PSD have focused in the past, studies in which “unions” equalled “workers.”⁷³ But among the rank and file of organized workers, Gaitán and the Gaitanistas effectively challenged the Communists on their home turf within individual union organizations, something PSD leaders were slow to recognize.

The PSD undoubtedly scored its most impressive conquest during the 1930s in the area of union federation leadership, a fact that qualifies the assertion that they were completely absorbed by foreign affairs. Summing up the range of Colombian Communist activity in 1943, U.S. State Department officials noted, “probably the most important effect of Communism has been in the field of labor organization.” The years of the Liberal Republic had witnessed a “tremendous expansion of labor unions, under the

tico.” Also Comité de Barberos Gaitanistas, Bogotá, to Dirección Nacional Gaitanista, 16 Jan. 1946, AICPG, v. 0054 “Cartas Bogotá”; from 800 workers in Curazo, 11 Sept. 1945, AICPG, v. 0074 “Cartas políticas”; from the Sociedad de Agricultores J.E.G. de Turbaco, Bolívar, 23 Apr. 1944, AICPG, v. 0026 “Cartas adhesión.” From Enrique Cárpo in representación de la Compañía Colombiana de Electricidad, Santa Marta, 30 Sept. 1945; and Los trabajadores de la Compañía Shell, Fundación, Magd., 16 Feb. 1946, AICPG, v. 0011 “Cartas Magdalena.” From the Sindicato Fluvial de Subsistencia, Barranquilla, 26 Mar. 1946, and the Comité Central Gaitanista de Montecristo, Barranquilla, 28 Mar. 1946, both in AICPG, v. 0043 “Cartas Atlántico.” From the Comité de Acción Política de Miembros del Sindicato Fluvial de Subsistencia “Pro-Candidatura del Dr. JEG,” Cartagena, 10 Mar. 1944, AICPG, v. 0053 “Cartas Bolívar”; and from “los empleados y obreros” of the Bavaria Brewery in Santa Marta, *El Estado*, 15 Apr. 1946, p. 1.

71. Sindicato de Profesiones Varios to JEG and Heriberto Rodelo V. to JMC, Sevilla, 6 Sept. 1946, AICPG, v. 0011 “Cartas Magdalena.”

72. Sindicato Unificado de Empleados y Obreros de la Compañía Colombiana de Electricidad, División del Atlántico, to Doña Amparo Jaramillo de Gaitán, Barranquilla, 31 Dec. 1946, AICPG, v. 0012 “Cartas Atlántico, 1946–47.”

73. In his well-argued examination of the “union question,” Pécaut relied on the *Diario Popular*, *Jornada*, *El Tiempo*, *El Siglo*, and the pronouncements and speeches of Gaitán and Durán. See *Orden y violencia*, 2:402–7.

sympathetic eye of a government" that had "leaned heavily for its votes upon the lower-income brackets. . . . The most striking aspect of labor organization . . . from the point of view of political and social change" was not the individual unions but the general organizations, especially the Confederación de Trabajadores Colombianos (CTC). According to the U.S. officials, the Communists "bent every effort" toward "the penetration of the central union authority, and similar general labor meetings."⁷⁴ While the CTC was composed of Liberal, Catholic, and Communist unions, the Communists were perhaps the most powerful block within the federation. Gaitanistas in Cartagena accused Communists in Bogotá and elsewhere of exercising a "miniature dictatorship of the proletariat" in the leadership structures of many unions and of enforcing a union "dictatorial system" in Barranquilla.⁷⁵

Many union activists therefore viewed Gaitanismo as a chance to create or enhance "union democracy."⁷⁶ Meanwhile, Gaitanista leaders naturally believed that their most important goal in the realm of organized labor was challenging the PSD's dominance of the CTC. They saw somewhat encouraging signs of possible success. In the river town of Calamar, Bolívar, for example, two unions were operating in 1944: the organization of the stevedores, portworkers, and navigators with three hundred members and the "Estivadores" with thirty-five. The newly formed Comité Gaitanista claimed half the membership of the first union (including its president) and all of the second, although among the stevedores, "anarchy" and "indiscipline" prevailed.⁷⁷ The Gaitanistas nonetheless faced serious Communist opposition. One of fourteen hundred river workers in Barranquilla who supported Gaitán's candidacy in 1945 wrote to him detailing Communist efforts against Gaitán. Luis Lobo Mora, a Communist representative of FEDENAL (Federación Nacional del Transporte Marítimo, Fluvial, Portuario y Aéreo) in the CTC, was a well-known enemy of Gaitanismo. Also, Carlos Arturo Aguirre, a Communist director of the Riocaja division of FEDENAL, frequently lectured unions and labor organizations throughout Barranquilla on the grave danger to the "popular classes" of a Gaitán presidency. The writer assured Gaitán, however, that the majority of river workers, especially those with "class consciousness," were Gaitanistas.⁷⁸ In

74. "Communist Activities in Colombia," 16 June 1943, SD 821.00B/92.

75. Juan Manuel Valdelamar to JEG, Cartagena, 9 June 1945, AICPG, v. 0053 "Cartas Bolívar"; and Víctor Duarte Otero to JEG, Barranquilla, 27 Sept. 1945, AICPG, v. 0091 "Adhesiones y quejas Atlántico."

76. Justo Ortiz Quiñónez to José María Córdoba, Cartagena, mid-1947, AICPG, v. 0060 "Cartas Bolívar."

77. Antonio García Llach to JEG, Calamar, 14 July 1944, AICPG, v. 0053 "Cartas Bolívar."

78. Luís Absalón Gómez to JEG, Barranquilla, 20 May 1945, AICPG, v. 0091 "Adhesión y quejas Atlántico." For further evidence of Aguirre's hostility, see Adriano Rangel to JEG, Barranquilla, 20 Feb. 1945, same volume.

late 1945, the Communists in charge of many union directorates in Barranquilla reportedly tried repeatedly to discredit Gaitán's campaign. As a result, many Gaitanistas withdrew to create their own organizations.⁷⁹

On the eve of the disastrous FEDENAL strike of river workers in 1945, the Gaitanistas attempted to take control of the CTC at its seventh national congress. José María Córdoba, Gaitán's campaign manager, made clear the Gaitanistas' desire to remold the CTC. Requesting information on Gaitanista strength among unions in Ciénaga, he described the goal as sending Gaitanista delegates to the CTC to "dislodge the comrades" who had taken control.⁸⁰ The Gaitanistas failed in this objective, however. As Daniel Pécaut noted, the Gaitanistas were strong among the railroad workers, telecommunications workers, and drivers.⁸¹ They were also strong among petroleum and river workers. But such influence was not enough to shake up the Communist leaders of the CTC, who persuaded Liberal labor leaders to hold the line against "fascist manipulation." In a secondary plan, the Gaitanistas even attempted to set up a rival labor confederation, the Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores, which rapidly imploded.⁸² But the Communist victory in the CTC was proved hollow by the failure of the broken FEDENAL strike.

Communist leaders in both the PSD and the CTC never came to grips with the Gaitanista sympathies of many unions. This discrepancy has endured in the historiography of the Colombian labor movement. In *Orden y violencia*, Pécaut generally perceived Gaitanismo and the union movement as separate entities. He granted that Gaitanistas wanted to influence organized labor but portrayed them as an alien influence. Meanwhile, Medófilo Medina contended that Gaitán disregarded "the necessity of union organization" in preference for mass "spontaneity" that he could control with his "charisma."⁸³ Yet as Juan Manuel Valdelamar explained, the Communists' "nightmare"-turned-reality was the existence of a huge militant and independent-minded Gaitanista sector of the organized working class.⁸⁴ In Barranquilla and the surrounding countryside, workers and

79. Such was the case of Víctor Duarte Otero, president of the fledgling Frente Obrero Gaitanista, who wrote to JEG on 25 Nov. 1945, AICPG, v. 0091 "Adhesiones y quejas Atlántico."

80. José María Córdoba to Dr. Julio Dangond Ovalle in Ciénaga, 9 Nov. 1945, AICPG, v. 0070 "Cartas despachadas, t. II." In answer, the organizers reported that they were sending two delegates of the local chapter of the National Road Workers Union to do Gaitanista missionary work. See Julio Dangond Ovalle to José María Córdoba, Ciénaga, 26 Nov. 1945, AICPG, v. 0011 "Cartas Magdalena."

81. Pécaut, *Orden y violencia*, 2:402. He noted Gaitanista strength principally in Cundinamarca and to a lesser extent in Valle del Cauca. Pécaut overlooked the Atlantic Coast at this juncture.

82. *Ibid.*, 404.

83. Medófilo Medina, *Historia del Partido Comunista*, 509.

84. Juan Manuel Valdelamar to JEG, Cartagena, 14 Aug. 1944, AICPG, v. 0053 "Cartas Bolívar."

peasants followed Gaitán often as not in opposition to their leaders.⁸⁵ As Córbova later asserted, the “poorly led” CTC members never caught on that the proletariat, mostly still unorganized, perceived Gaitán as their “only salvation.”⁸⁶ On Valdelamar’s tour of the river ports in March 1944, he “felt the pulse of the unionized workers” and drew the following conclusions. In general, the unions affiliated with FEDENAL and the CTC continued to follow the line set at the congress in Bucaramanga the year before, agitating for the return to power of Alfonso López Pumarejo. Yet beneath the surface, most workers all the way down the river to Barranquilla and Cartagena favored Gaitán’s candidacy. The anti-Gaitán line pushed by the Communist leadership in its memoranda and the *Diario Popular* was rejected, even among the party faithful.⁸⁷

Similar splits between union leaders and the Gaitanista ranks emerged throughout Colombia. In Ibagué the president and secretary of the “Casa del Pueblo,” which claimed to speak for the city’s unions, asserted that workers there did not support Gaitán. Yet the radical artisan tailors’ union there argued that “thousands” of workers in the department of Tolima were standing up to “worker caciquismo” and these “pseudo-leaders of the workers” by supporting Gaitán’s campaign.⁸⁸ In the department of Nariño, the railroad union created a Comité Pro-Candidatura Gaitán, even though their organization could not officially endorse him because the national organization had not done so.⁸⁹ In the municipality of Santa Marta, Gaitanista politician and judge Dionisio Rincones Ponce believed (perhaps optimistically) that at least 70 percent of the workers were Gaitanistas and that almost all were unionized. Among the “peasants,” he estimated the pro-Gaitán element at closer to 90 percent. And more than half of the department’s municipalities had Gaitanista directorates. In Rincones Ponce’s view, “The influence of the *caciques* notwithstanding, the great majority of the workers and peasants” of Magdalena were Gaitanistas.⁹⁰ In Sevilla, for example, more than one hundred pro-Gaitán workers and peasants formed their own organization, the Sindicato de Profesionales Varias. They joined together to represent the interests of workers and peasants as

85. Ramón de la Hoz recalled, “eso fué un fenómeno.” Interview with Mauricio Archila, Barranquilla, 14 Apr. 1986.

86. José María Córdoba, *Jorge Eliécer Gaitán: Tribuno popular de Colombia* (Bogotá: n.p., n.d.), 43.

87. Juan Manuel Valdelamar to JEG, 29 Mar. 1944, AICPG, v. 0074 “Cartas políticas.”

88. Sindicato de Obreros Sastres de Ibagué to JEG, 2 Feb. 1946, AICPG, v. 0052 “Cartas Tolima.”

89. F. Ortiz B., president of the Sindicato Ferrocarrileros de Nariño, Tumaco, to JEG, 31 Mar. 1944, AICPG, v. 0050 “Cartas Nariño.”

90. Dionisio Rincones Ponce to JEG, Santa Marta, 19 Nov. 1945, AICPG, v. 0011 “Cartas Magdalena.”

yet unorganized or poorly served by the CTC.⁹¹ Thus while Communist leaders held off the Gaitanista attack at the top, they lost ground among the rank and file of organized workers in many unions.

THE FEDENAL STRIKE OF 1945 AND THE ELECTION OF 1946

The Magdalena River workers enjoy legendary status among Colombian workers because of their powerful mobilizations during the 1930s and 1940s.⁹² Their successes arose from the river's strategic role in the Colombian economy and the resultant leverage that river workers wielded to their own advantage. The Magdalena River connects the coastal regions to the highland interior and provided the main means for coffee, Colombia's major export and lifeblood after 1910, to find its way to the world market. Any work stoppages along the river immediately became national crises. The river's pilots, shipwrights, sailors, mechanics, and stevedores exerted profound influence on the Colombian labor movement and national politics.

The workers of the Magdalena are also central in Colombian labor history because they were the only ones who ever imposed a closed shop on their employers, forcing owners of the ships, shipyards, and docks to hire only laborers affiliated with FEDENAL unions.⁹³ The river workers thus became one of the most powerful organized-labor groups in Colombia, along with the workers in Bogotá and Medellín, who boasted the nation's highest degree of unionization via their federation. Finally, the river workers' experience is considered crucial because government suppression of their achievements in 1945 has generally been interpreted as a disastrous setback for the Colombian working class.

While singularly well-placed to enforce their demands through

91. Horiberto Rodelo V., secretary of the Sindicato de Profesiones Varias de Sevilla, Magdalena to José María Córdoba, 25 July 1946, AICPG, found in v. 0051 "Cartas Tolima, Santander 1947."

92. A good starting point for information on the Magdalena River workers is Mauricio Archila Neira, *Barranquilla y el río: Una historia social de sus trabajadores* (Bogotá: CINEP, 1987).

93. The reality of a river workers' federation took form during the mid-1930s. Workers from older artisan-led organizations dominated the early executive committee of the federation. For a list of unions affiliated with FEDENAL and the year they were established, see Gobierno de Colombia, *Sentido y realización de una política social* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1939), 111–16. The union leaders forced the government to urge the companies to the negotiating table after a four-day strike paralyzed the river in June 1937. In July government arbitrators oversaw the signing of a pact between the companies and the federation's forty-two unions, making a closed shop a reality on the Magdalena. See *Tierra*, an early organ of the Communist Party, 27 May 1938, p. 9. Less than a year after its foundation, FEDENAL had with government assistance taken a firm grip on the river's labor market. Anyone wanting a job had to join an affiliated union first.

strikes, river workers were eventually overshadowed by the river's inevitable eclipse by roads and rail. The river workers' strength was already waning when they achieved their fabled closed shop under FEDENAL in 1937. But their weaknesses and eventual decline in numbers and strength did not preclude highly effective patterns of struggle. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the river workers proved adept at political and shop-floor maneuvers. While they occupied a forceful position to exert pressure on their employers, the river workers sought governmental intercession to sustain successful shop-floor struggles. The river workers helped bring about López's labor policies of the 1930s and benefited from them when they ultimately led to FEDENAL's closed shop. When their power to control the river's labor market was smashed in the strike of 1945, the workers of the Magdalena again showed their understanding of the connections between union organization and mobilization in national politics. Defeated on one front, the river workers opened another by swelling the ranks of Gaitán's radical populist movement. As in their conquest of the closed shop, their actions after the broken strike of 1945 highlighted the necessary links between shop-floor struggle and political action.

López's brief return to the presidency and his early withdrawal symbolized the change of fortune that FEDENAL and the river workers would experience following the war when the river's centrality as a means of transportation came under mortal pressure from the northern railroad linking Barranquilla to the center of the country and the growing network of national roads.⁹⁴ By 1945 the river workers' organizational vitality was declining, despite the fact that FEDENAL remained the most powerful federation within the CTC and the symbol of organized labor.⁹⁵ This decline and the unstable political climate made it an inopportune moment for the federation to flex its muscles. Yet the Communists in charge of FEDENAL felt that their patience and cooperation during the war years deserved reward. The federation again demanded that companies observe the closed shop mandated by the pact of July 1937 and that they raise salaries, which had not been adjusted since 1942.⁹⁶ Federation leaders took heart that the country was experiencing other significant labor actions at that moment.⁹⁷ PSD leaders were confident that FEDENAL would prevail again.

94. See Donald S. Barnhart, "Colombian Transport and the Reforms of 1931: An Evaluation," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 38, no. 1 (1958):1–23.

95. The decline of their position was indicated by the fact that by 1938, the unionized railway workers outnumbered FEDENAL workers fifteen thousand to ten thousand. See *Tierra*, 14 Oct. 1938, p. 3. In 1945 FEDENAL counted only eight thousand members, and the 1947 union census showed only five thousand. See Pécaut, *Orden y violencia*, 2:421.

96. Medina, *Historia del Partido Comunista*, 492.

97. *Ibid.*, 476. The major strikes involved the Monserrate textile workers in Bogotá, the railway workers of the Pacific, and the miners of Segovia.

The strike began on 17 December 1945 and immediately became a confrontation between the Communists in FEDENAL and the state.⁹⁸ Acting President Lleras Camargo refused to negotiate with the strikers. He called the strike an action against the government and eventually declared it illegal. Liberals in the government attacked unionized river workers as a “privileged sector” of the working class that was abusing its “advantages.” The PSD, which considered the strike a critical encounter, quickly found itself isolated from its left-Liberal allies. Key Liberal federations of the CTC condemned the strike and offered their support to the government. FEDENAL itself fractured internally when several of its main unions refused to participate. The strike collapsed and ended on 4 January 1946. The Ministry of Labor allowed the strike breakers to retain their jobs and be incorporated into the existing unions, effectively ending the closed shop that FEDENAL had achieved nine years earlier. The demise of the closed shop did not end worker mobilization in the Magdalena River valley, however. A single broken strike, albeit a major one, did not take away their leverage. The river workers’ struggles from 1930 to 1945 had shown them the connections between shop-floor action and political action. These lessons made their participation in Gaitanismo second nature.

Gaitán’s status among the workers of the Magdalena was not fortuitous. For years, Gaitán had been busily building support for his movement by paying special attention to the cities and towns of the Atlantic Coast and the Magdalena River valley. Skilled and unskilled river workers gave Gaitán ample support for his independent campaign. In 1944 “three unions in the industry of river navigation” reminded him of the consideration he had shown them while he was Minister of Education, help they would not forget.⁹⁹ Unions pledged that their members would charge into the fray with Gaitán *a la carga!* This slogan became his rallying call.¹⁰⁰ The Sindicato de Lancheros Portuarios y Navegantes de Barranquilla supported his attempt to initiate a “democratic system” at “a critical moment for the working class.”¹⁰¹ In Puerto Berrío, the stevedores were totally devoted to the Gaitanista cause.¹⁰² In reality, river workers were simply following the general trend within the movement for autonomous mobilization.

98. For more detailed accounts of the strike, see Renan Vega Cantor, *Crisis y caída de la República Liberal*, 148–61; Pécaut, *Orden y violencia*, 2:416–23; and Archila, *Cultura e identidad obrera*, 365–70.

99. Carlos J. Moreno of *Protesta Liberal*, who acted on the workers’ behalf, to JEG, Barranquilla, 11 Mar. 1944, AICPG, v. 0091 “Adhesiones y quejas Atlántico.”

100. Gilberto Henríquez Gil, secretary of the Unión Sindical de Trabajadores Ferro-Marítimo del Atlántico, counted many other unions supporting the movement. See his letter to JEG, Barranquilla, 13 Oct. 1944, AICPG, v. 0091 “Adhesiones y quejas Atlántico.”

101. Sindicato de Lancheros Portuarios y Navegantes de Barranquilla to JEG, Barranquilla, 15 Mar. 1944, AICPG, v. 0091 “Adhesiones y quejas Atlántico.”

102. *Diario del Pacífico* (Cali), 5 Mar. 1946, pp. 1, 3.

Throughout Colombia, supporters formed “Comités Gaitanistas” to sustain the campaign. Many of these entities were made up of professionals and educated workers. Others were composed of “poor workers,” like the one in the river port of Honda, where only one member could read.¹⁰³ Many of these workers belonged to unions that lacked legal recognition and were not officially affiliated with federations like FEDENAL.

Such worker support for Gaitán came at the expense of the official Liberals and politically bankrupt Communists. In spite of the rough handling they had received during the FEDENAL strike of 1945, the Communist leaders supported the official Liberal candidate, Gabriel Turbay. While the PSD continued to talk tough, promising that in future struggles with FEDENAL the government was “not going to have it as easy as they did” in 1945,¹⁰⁴ the Communists were well aware of their weakness relative to the Liberals. Gaitán himself had not supported the FEDENAL strike, largely because of the influence of his Communist rivals. He nevertheless kept the Liberal reaction at arm’s length and retained his following among the river workers, as shown in the presidential election of 5 May 1946.

The outcome shocked the Liberal “notables” and their allies within the PSD leadership. Conservative candidate Mariano Ospina Pérez won the election with 565,000 votes, while Turbay came in second with 441,000. Gaitán trailed not far behind with 359,000 votes. Most significant was the fact that Gaitán carried the urban masses decisively. He won most urban centers and departmental capitals, including Bogotá, Barranquilla, Cali, and Cartagena (four of the five largest cities in Colombia) as well as Santa Marta, Neiva, Ibagué, and Cúcuta. He narrowly missed carrying Popayán, a traditionally Conservative stronghold.¹⁰⁵ Gaitán also won Bogotá and Santa Marta with 57.5 percent of the vote cast, Cartagena with 65.9, and Barranquilla (epicenter of the river industry) with a whopping 71.1 percent.¹⁰⁶ Gaitán scored poorly in Ospina Pérez’s hometown of Medellín, a Conservative party stronghold. Although Gaitanismo in Antioquia had

103. Fidel Murillo to JEG, Honda, 3 Aug. 1945, AICPG, v. 0052 “Cartas Tolima.” He named the members of the committee, which included a typesetter, a baker, a brazier, a vendor, a barber, and a carpenter. Although Murillo complained that they had to struggle with the Communists and the Liberals for mass support, he later wrote of union backing in Honda. Six of the unions possessed official recognition, or *personería jurídica* (the city had fourteen unions in all). One was the Union of the Stevedores of the Magdalena, which was “totally Gaitanista.” See Honda, 14 Nov. 1945, AICPG, v. 0052 “Cartas Tolima.”

104. The quote is taken from a speech made by Lobo at the fourth Congreso Nacional of the PSD in 1946. See FBI “Report on Communist Activity in Colombia to the Division of Foreign Activity Correlation,” concerning PSD member Luis Alfredo Lobo, Bogotá, 14 Oct. 1946; SD 821.00B/11–2146.

105. Colombia, Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, “Tendencias electorales, 1935–1968,” *Boletín Mensual de Estadística*, no. 221 (Dec. 1969):111–13.

106. Pécaut, *Orden y violencia*, 2:394.

suffered from incessant bickering among its leaders, the movement had a noteworthy following even there.¹⁰⁷ On the northern coast, Gaitán enjoyed outright majorities in the departments of Atlántico (52.8 percent) and Bolívar (50.4 percent) and won the majority of the Liberal vote in Magdalena, Cundinamarca, Huila, Cauca, Valle del Cauca, and the intendency of Meta.¹⁰⁸

Gaitán's enemies within the Liberal party realized that even with Liberalism's entire political machine turned against him, they could not crush Gaitanismo. They had to embrace it or doom the Liberal party to division and impotence for the foreseeable future. The election showed that while Gaitán owned the cities, the Liberal machine still controlled the countryside, where the majority of Colombians still lived in 1946. The election was nevertheless a watershed in Colombian history, the most serious threat to the preeminence of the Colombian political elite in living memory. Gaitán's independent candidacy had finally forced Liberal leaders to recognize his political strength.

DISINTEGRATION OF THE PSD

As Gaitán took control of the Liberal party, the PSD flew apart, splitting into at least three rival Communist organizations led by Augusto Durán, Gilberto Vieira, and Diego Montaña Cuéllar. This rupture was due largely to the inability of the old leadership (thanks to Durán's personal disdain for Gaitán) to admit the Gaitanistas' victory in mobilizing a powerful leftist movement. Durán was not alone among Communist leaders in this myopia. PSD militant Hector Molina Rojas, union leader in the 1950s and Gaitanista sympathizer in the 1940s, recalled that many in the party simply could not get beyond their personal distaste for Gaitán's "demagoguery." They tended to dismiss the Gaitanistas in a flippant manner, as did one party leader who made a vulgar play on the words of Gaitán's rallying call "a la carga."¹⁰⁹ Yet despite the Communist leaders' all-out campaign, Gaitán's showing in the presidential election of 1946 proved decisively the impotence of the PSD. They were reduced to calling for what one U.S. State Department observer termed "a Popular Front" of Communists and Gaitanistas, in a "union of all democratic forces . . . to defeat the Conservatives in the March 16, 1947 elections of Senators, Representatives and Departmental Deputies." While "the Communists sought in vain to win

107. Evidence from the AICPG, v. 0016 "Adhesiones y quejas Antioquia," demonstrates that simple election returns are not the only indicator of the depth of Gaitán's support. Electoral fraud undoubtedly affected Gaitán's showing in Medellín, where the Turbayista machine controlled the Liberal party.

108. Anita Weiss, *Tendencias de la participación electoral en Colombia, 1935–1966* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional, 1968), 90. See also Pécaut, *Orden y violencia*, 2:394.

109. Interview by the author with Héctor Molina Rojas in Bogotá, 20 Sept. 1994.

Gaitán's followers," the "bitter hatred felt by top Communist leaders" for Gaitán, especially by Durán, had not abated. In private the PSD continued "to revile him as an irresponsible demagogue."¹¹⁰ Yet Gaitán enjoyed significant support among rank-and-file Communists and rogue leaders who believed that Durán was "entirely too aloof from the people" and had "forgotten that he was a laborer and a product of the Magdalena River."¹¹¹ After the election, river workers reaffirmed their status as Gaitanistas and followers of the "savior of Colombia,"¹¹² while the official Communist party rapidly slipped into temporary oblivion.

The Communist party line immediately after the election, according to the U.S. State Department, was that "the masses that follow Gaitán" were "sincere" and had to be won over. According to the State Department's informant within the party, "Gaitán himself, on the other hand," was still seen as "an out-and-out demagogue, slightly demented," who suffered from delusions of grandeur. Communist leaders finally recognized the Gaitanista masses as "of the same character as the Communist masses" and believed that they "could be easily won over once Gaitán has been exposed as an instrument of the Conservatives to keep the Liberals divided. . . ."¹¹³ But one confidential report pointed out, "Gaitán's attitude toward the Communist masses is similar to Durán's toward the Gaitanistas: Gaitán hates Durán but seeks to win over the Communist masses." This situation greatly complicated matters for PSD leaders because sudden changes in the party line brought considerable confusion. According to the same FBI report:

A great many members of the PSD had written to Sec. Gen. Durán declaring that in view of the fact that the PSD alone had no chance to win in their areas, they were going to vote the gaitanista ticket, having been "sincerely invited" to do so. These letters placed Durán in a very difficult position, and the way out he chose—permitting the party to support Gaitán's ticket in certain areas—has served only to increase the confusion in the PSD ranks, which . . . "do not understand the sudden variations in the party line: in the presidential elections Gaitán was declared anathema by the party, and now his position is to be supported."¹¹⁴

Valdelamar noted smugly that just as the Communists originally attacked

110. From the FBI report "Summary of Communist Activities in Colombia, January 1947," 5 Feb. 1947, SD 821.00B/3-1047.

111. FBI "Report on Communist Activity in Colombia to the Division of Foreign Activity Correlation," concerning PSD member Alvaro Pío Valencia, Bogotá, 12 Nov. 1946, SD 821.00B/12-2746.

112. Dago Barbaza of the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Regularización, Canalización, Dragados y Puerto del Río Magdalena y sus Afluentes (affiliate of the CTC) to JEG, Barranquilla, 5 June 1946, AICPG, v. 0012, "Cartas Atlántico, 1946-47."

113. From the FBI report "Summary of Communist Activities in Colombia, January 1947," 5 Feb. 1947, SD 821.00B/3-1047.

114. *Ibid.*

López as a demagogue but on seeing his mass following abruptly began to support his “revolution,” now they wanted to ally with Gaitán, whom months before they had denigrated in apocalyptic terms.¹¹⁵

It was lost on no one that the Gaitanistas “had not come to the Communist door, but rather, vice-versa.”¹¹⁶ During the elections of March 1947, “the Communists made almost all the concessions, and the election results proved that Gaitán had stolen many of their votes.” Adding injury to injury, in August 1946 the CTC also imploded, resulting in a stalemate between Communist and Liberal unions in which “two rival committees were established” although “neither side was able to obtain official, legal recognition.”¹¹⁷ The Gaitanistas gleefully chronicled Diego Montaña Cuéllar’s withdrawal from the Communist party in March 1947. Accompanied by “numerous” worker leaders, Montaña Cuéllar made “grave accusations against Durán and Vieira” for their campaigns of personal ambition that had wrecked the party. In an interview with *Jornada*, he stated that the PSD no longer represented the authentic aspirations of the Colombian working class.¹¹⁸

It should be emphasized, however, that for some time, many important Communists had also been key Gaitanistas. One of the best representatives of such duality was Juan Manuel Valdelamar, a Communist party leader and union organizer throughout the 1930s and 1940s. In 1936 the Liberal newspaper *El Mitín* (Cartagena) reported on a rally where he spoke against “Yanqui imperialism” and the bourgeoisie, themes he had expounded on “for many years.” Analysts at the U.S. State Department included Valdelamar on a list of Colombian Communist party members “and their known activities” in 1947. They characterized Valdelamar in this report as “Indian, age about 34, formerly a barber, once accused of theft, an acknowledged leader of the Communist party but expelled in May 1944. Very intelligent and very dangerous.”¹¹⁹ At one time, Valdelamar was president of the Cartagena chapter of the Communist party and a member of the national directing bodies of both the PSD and the CTC, serving as secretary general of the latter. In 1942 he ran afoul of the CTC leadership while representing the federation to the river workers of the Magdalena. Appar-

115. Juan Manuel Valdelamar to JEG, Cartagena, 20 Feb. 1947, AICPG, v. 0061 “Cartas Bolívar y Nariño.”

116. From the FBI report “Summary of Communist Activities in Colombia, January 1947,” 5 Feb. 1947, SD 821.00B/3–1047.

117. From Dispatch no. 2551, “Colombian Communist Party,” 1 July 1947, SD 821.00B/7–147. Pécaut concludes that the PSD and the CTC were too close to the Liberal establishment and lost contact with the base. See *Orden y violencia*, 2:406–7.

118. See *Jornada*, 28 and 29 Mar. 1947.

119. “La manifestación comunista,” *El Mitín*, 27 June 1936, p. 1; and “Membership, Activities, and Designs of the Communist Party in Colombia,” Hernán C. Vogenitz, American Consul in Cartagena, 11 Apr. 1947, SD 821.00B/4–1147.

ently advocating a more militant line of action than the federation, he “violated his instructions” and committed “union indiscipline,” acts that led to his dismissal. The PSD commended his ouster, stressing that union discipline was necessary to defend worker interests with “Nazi subs off the coast terrorizing our cities.” The Communists kicked him off their board and out of the party.¹²⁰ But even after he was expelled from both the CTC and the PSD, Valdelamar remained an important leader of his union in Bolívar and eventually found his way back into the PSD. By the early 1940s, he was carrying on a lively and informative personal correspondence with Gaitán, whom he backed with few reservations. Valdelamar was not an isolated example.

Healthy evidence also existed of Communist rank-and-file sympathy for Gaitán. In Cartagena Samuel Guerrero reported having spoken to various “militant members” of the Communist party there who were “disgusted” by Durán’s opposition to Gaitán’s candidacy. Guerrero correctly predicted that if Durán and the other leading *compañeros* continued, “contrary to the political principles of genuine Communism,” to oppose the “popular candidacy” of Gaitán, they would soon split the party.¹²¹ In Santa Marta, Eduardo Octavio C., a Gaitanista telegraph operator with a penchant for writing letters to major newspapers, lived next door to a Communist union hall. He was “a good friend” of Carlos Arias and José Russo, prominent members of the departmental and national Communist organizations, and he regularly took them copies of *Jornada* to read. One afternoon in early 1945, sitting with Russo outside his house, Octavio asked if the PSD’s reluctance to back Gaitán was not “a deathblow to their political aspirations.” Russo reportedly looked around uncomfortably and declined to answer.¹²² One Communist militant and labor organizer active in Barranquermeja in the 1940s later remembered popular displeasure among party members over PSD support for Turbay because “the mass of the radical oil workers were Gaitanista.” Those sympathetic to the Communist party therefore took a dim view of the party’s decision to favor Turbay, “candidate of the oligarquía.” From that point onward, the party’s influence dwindled considerably.¹²³ In April 1946, representatives of the PSD traveled to Barranquilla to encourage support for Turbay but faced serious opposition from rank-and-file Communists.¹²⁴ Barranquilla union leader Ramón de la Hoz, commenting on FEDENAL and the PSD’s support of

120. *Diario Popular*, 6, 7, and 9 Mar. 1942.

121. Samuel Guerrero to JEG, Cartagena, 27 Mar. 1944, AICPG, v. 0053 “Cartas Magdalena.”

122. Eduardo Octavio Cotes to JEG, Santa Marta, 8 Apr. 1945, AICPG, v. 0017 “Adhesiones Magdalena.”

123. Interview by Mauricio Archila with Jorge Mateus, 5 Sept. 1985.

124. *El Liberal* (Bogotá), 12 Apr. 1946, p. 1.

Turbay, expressed a common sentiment that it was a disaster for a party of the Left to support the candidate of the oligarquía and thus appear unrevolutionary.¹²⁵ Communist militants active in Barranquilla at the time remembered the support for Turbay as “absurd politics” because “the proletarian masses were with Gaitán.”¹²⁶

A telling defection from the Communist party was that of Carlos Giacometto del Real, a prominent Communist leader from Magdalena. He exemplified the general overlap common on the Colombia Left, having been a Communist, a Lopista, and a Gaitanista almost simultaneously.¹²⁷ As he wrote to Gaitán in July 1947, he abandoned the ruins of Communism to enter Gaitanismo, the only movement “capable of confronting reaction.”¹²⁸ After the presidential election of 1946, such defections became more common.

As Giacometto del Real pulled out of the party, he spelled out the deficiencies of Colombian Communism, “for which there are no solutions.” Colombian Communist leaders had come to view the party as an institutional base for personal power and influence. Short of a social revolution in the United States, nothing could shake them from their idle life as high-living “functionaries,” subsidized by the working class. In Giacometto del Real’s opinion, little of substance separated Durán, Vieira, and Montaña Cuéllar. Their battles were simply power struggles that failed to advance the cause of the Colombian revolution. The three competing Communist parties had sunk into a morass of endless infighting and expulsions, denying them any hope of relevance. When Giacometto del Real had joined the Communist party in 1937, he had not supposed it to be composed of “a chorus of archangels,” but at that time it seemed the most legitimate advocate of justice. This was no longer the case. Giacometto del Real now believed that the only viable course of action for “an honest Communist” was to join the Gaitanistas. Therefore he and “numerous ex-members of the PSD” were organizing the Acción Colombiana to work within Liberalism to assist Gaitán in taking back power because “if we are Marxists, we should also be realists.” Gaitán was the undisputed leader of Liberalism and of the masses. They were aware that Liberalism encompassed “tremendous forces of reaction,” but it also contained progressive elements and represented the most viable catalyst of struggle.¹²⁹

The PSD simply bet on the wrong horse, although that was not im-

125. Interview by Mauricio Archila with Ramón de la Hoz, Barranquilla, 14 Apr. 1986.

126. See the interviews by Mauricio Archila with Bernardo Medina, 13 June 1986; and Andrés Barandica Troya, 15 Apr. 1986, both in Barranquilla.

127. See how he welcomed López to Santa Marta in 1944, in *Vanguardia*, 14 Feb. 1944, p. 1.

128. Carlos Giacometto del Real to JEG, Santa Marta, 31 July 1947, AICPG, v. 0017 “Adhesiones Magdalena.” Giacometto went on to say that he published a small Gaitanista labor periodical, *Atisbos*. Gaitán answered his letter, welcoming him to the Liberal party.

129. “Carta política” by Carlos Giacometto del Real to JEG, originally sent to Armando Barrameda Morán in Bogotá, Santa Marta, 26 July 1947, AICPG, v. 0017 “Adhesiones Magdalena.”

mediately clear. The PSD collaboration with López and support for the *Revolución en Marcha* had paid off. Through the alliance with the establishment Liberals in the 1930s, the PSD created its stronghold in the nation's labor organizations and especially within the CTC. But the party paid a heavy price. Antonio García has argued that the Communists remained the creatures of López, even during the "black period" of his second administration when Gaitán was the "true leader" of the people. They fell prey to their own "terrible myth" concerning the accomplishments of the *Revolución en Marcha*.¹³⁰ In July 1945, PSD leaders were still plugging another left-Liberal, Darío Echandía, in *Diario Popular* as the only hope of Liberal salvation because he would continue the work of López. They seemed to be in a state of denial concerning López's abandonment of the Left. They were also blind to the divisions among the CTC leadership and the strongly Gaitanista rank and file of many unions.

When the PSD finally admitted the depth of Gaitán's support, it was too late. The party suffered politically for first opposing, then supporting Turbay, while its leaders lost credibility for opposing Gaitán and then supporting him. Ironically, as Gaitán moved closer to the Liberal establishment after 1946, he gained the Communists' grudging support. Because the division between the Communists and the Gaitanistas was as much a matter of tactics and personalities as of true ideological differences, Colombian Communists could make no definitive claim to leadership of the Left.

CONCLUSIONS

The evidence presented in this essay challenges several basic assumptions long held by historians studying the Left and labor history in Colombia during the 1940s. First, many largely unrecognized connections flourished on the Colombian Left, especially between left-Liberal Gaitanismo and the PSD. This association originated in the long and interrelated histories of both movements. These relationships resulted in Gaitanista sympathies among both rogue PSD leaders and a significant portion of the party's rank and file. Second, contrary to many assertions, much of the organized working class supported Gaitán. Others have noted this phenomenon, but its implications continue to be ignored. This finding is significant for the first point because the connections on the Left played themselves out in the union movement during the aftermath of the 1945

Giacometto declared Gaitán to be "el capitán del pueblo." His group fought for unified Liberalism, an autonomous union movement, and peasant leagues. It also sought to make Conservative workers aware that their real enemies were not the Gaitanistas but rather the Liberal and Conservative oligarquía. Letter from Carlos Giacometto del Real to *El Estado*, 19 Feb. 1948, p. 5.

130. Antonio García, *Gaitán y el problema de la revolución colombiana* (Bogotá: MSC, 1955), 42.

FEDENAL strike and the 1946 presidential election. Finally, the disintegration of the PSD in 1947 is only now being recognized as the direct result of the close relationship between Gaitanismo and the PSD and its losing struggles in this sibling rivalry. While these points are clear, their interpretation is the real challenge.

Other historians of the Magdalena River workers have ended their analyses with the broken strike of 1945. The incident has been almost universally lamented as the decisive end of the radical popular mobilizations that began in the early 1930s and a grievous wound to the working class from which it did not recover until the 1960s. Gaitanismo has been widely ignored by labor historians or condemned as not really a popular mobilization. The argument that Gaitán “disoriented” workers has not moved beyond the PSD and CTC party line of 1945–1946 that Gaitán was a fascist. The fact remains that a large portion of the organized leftist working class was Gaitanista. “False consciousness” and related concepts are poor explanations, and little is gained when historians and intellectuals scold workers for supporting figures not considered worthy.

The case of the river workers begs some questions. What was the nature of the working-class’s weakness? Was the working-class really an “orphan” in the post-López period, as Archila has claimed? The working-class alone was indeed weak, but Gaitanismo helped its members transcend that weakness. In joining multiclass Gaitanismo, workers enjoyed and enhanced the movement’s political strength, which found its power in inclusiveness. Given their relatively small numbers in Colombian society, organized workers had little choice but to pursue their interests through political alliance with the urban middle classes. This union may not have been ideal, but it was not the product of manipulation or faulty class consciousness. To condemn working-class participation in Gaitanismo seems preposterous because from 1945 to 1948, the movement offered the best hope to date of actually obtaining the promises of reform.

Charles Bergquist ended his short discussion of Gaitanismo in *Labor in Latin America* with the observation that Gaitán took the major cities in the election of 1946 but “came in third,” implying that his movement was finished or insignificant.¹³¹ Gaitanismo, however, overcame serious opposition and represented a key episode in Colombian history. While few clear distinctions could be made among Communists, socialists, and left-Liberals, the struggles between Gaitanismo and the PSD proved to be a painful rivalry for progressive forces in Colombia during the 1930s and 1940s. This relationship explains much about the relative weakness of “the Left” in Colombia. The PSD was weak not merely because of widespread access to land. Communist leaders were overly concerned with international issues,

131. Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America*, 357.

vulnerable to nationalistic attacks, too closely associated with the Liberal establishment of the López years, and blind to the divisions among the CTC leadership and the strongly Gaitanista rank and file of many unions. These leaders were simply outflanked by the Gaitanistas. The PSD found itself eclipsed and absorbed by a rival leftist movement that was indigenous to Colombia.

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