

# The Zero-Sum Game of Early Oil Extraction Relations in Colombia: Workers, Tropical Oil, and the Police State, 1918–1938

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## INTRODUCTION

The history of early oil extraction operations in Colombia resonates with the experiences of other Latin American nations that found themselves in the middle of an imperial struggle for the control of the precious resource. In the early twentieth century, British and US multinational oil corporations, and to a lesser extent Canadian and Dutch companies, came face to face in Mexico, Colombia, Perú, Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, and Chile over the control of oil extraction, export operations, and the development of domestic markets, forcing federal governments to reevaluate nationalist land use policies at the expense of local political interests.<sup>1</sup> The implementation and promotion of the Monroe Doctrine would ultimately leave the future of the Western Hemisphere in the hands of the USA, allowing their corporations to take over the control of the majority of the supply of oil in the region by the 1920s, as the outcomes of World War I forced British companies to abandon their interests in the Americas. Companies such as Standard Oil of New Jersey and Canadian subsidiaries such as the International Petroleum Corporation would reengineer the oil extraction business across the hemisphere, in order to implement

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“self-contained solutions” that allowed them to circumvent the threats that emanated from the internationalization and radicalization of labor; solutions learned from the corporate experiences with oil labor strikes back in Canada and the USA in the early 1910s.<sup>2</sup> This historical research will center on the social and political dynamics that developed between Colombia’s civil society, workers, local politicians, national policymakers, foreign workers and managers, and corporate leadership, as oil extraction operations were set in motion during the early 1920s. The political life of oil workers will be at the forefront of this analysis, and particularly how they reacted to the “self-contained solutions” imported and implemented by Standard Oil of New Jersey through its Canadian subsidiary, Tropical Oil, and in compliance with the permissive and unregulated oil policy structures established by the Colombian government.

In Colombia, the beginning of the United Fruit Company’s banana export operations in 1899 marked the incremental growing presence of US business interests.<sup>3</sup> This was further advanced by the implementation of vertical integration strategies that increased the presence of US interests, capitalizing on the pro-business policies and foreign business incentives designed and implemented by the administration of President Rafael Reyes (1904–1909). Nevertheless, the outreach of the United Fruit Company’s operation would not compare to the magnitude and impact of Standard Oil of New Jersey’s oil operation in Colombia. The vertical integration between Tropical Oil and Standard Oil of New Jersey’s Canadian subsidiary, Andian National Corporation, allowed the US company not only to monopolize the extraction but the transportation and final export of crude oil throughout the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

Before the emergence of nationalist policies that followed the Mexican Revolution, large oil corporations had experienced the privileges of assuming “de facto control of national resources” overseas.<sup>5</sup> The incidents and policies that followed the 1910 revolution made it clear that free market competition in Latin American markets was not an effective business strategy, that there was a need for effective government-business cooperation in order to guarantee the defense of business interests abroad, that there was a need for preserving business-friendly governments in the region, that these governments should be willing to use the power of the state in order to control local workers and guarantee free market policies, and that domestic refining capabilities to satisfy local demand should be tightly regulated and controlled by the foreign business interest.

The most significant lesson of US corporations after the Mexico experience was that effective government-business cooperation had to be

constructed around the idea of national security. The policies implemented in the 1920s for the management of national reserves were instrumental in keeping prices high back home while keeping them low abroad. In the name of national security, US oil corporations agreed to control the production of their local supply in accordance with federal policies, compensating it with aggressive “investments in overseas areas.”<sup>6</sup> By 1929, US direct investment in oil production zones across the Western Hemisphere had increased 250%, thanks to the government-business partnerships that set the tone in places like Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela.<sup>7</sup> These partnerships would set the foundations for the further expansion of the definition of national security. In efforts to protect their investments in South America, and in order to avoid the mistakes made in Mexico, US oil corporations were able to define their investments and foreign capital as part of the idea of national security. From that point forward, any nationalist movement overseas or any physical threat to US foreign interests became a matter of national security. In the case of oil, labor upheaval became the biggest concern, emphasizing even more the importance of strong government-business partnerships across the region.

Founded in 1918, the National Association for the Protection of American Rights in Mexico (NAPARM) would become the institutional pillar for future government-business partnerships.<sup>8</sup> The lobby organization funded exclusively by US oil companies initially pressured the US government to “take whatever steps were necessary” in order to protect US interests, and although they failed to stop the nationalization of the oil industry in Mexico, they did set the tone in South America. There was resonant support “for vigorous protection of American property rights against ‘radical’ policies” across the Washington circles, and the idea that any nationalist initiative represented an attack against US interests became the norm.<sup>9</sup> The challenge was convincing foreign government to share the same vision.

The effectiveness of the initiative would be tested after the 1920s when US oil companies made their way into the region in order to implement their business strategy. This included transplanting Fordist ideas, capitalizing on the deregulated nature of labor and land use policies, drafting and designing petroleum policies to their liking, securing pro-business normative systems that benefited them as well as the political elites in power, and convincing the local government to favor foreign corporate interests over local worker’s rights. Government needed to buy in on the Fordist principles that breaking oil work into small deskilled tasks was good policy,

and that the minimization of labor costs at the expense of constructing a blue collar middle class while maximizing profits for the foreign company was good for nation building and long-term economic development.

Labor uprising remained the biggest threat to corporate interests in South America. The Bayonne strike that had taken place in New Jersey in July 1915 against Standard Oil of New Jersey had prepared management for similar events in South America.<sup>10</sup> In efforts to solve the problems of labor dispute and mitigate the threats, dangers, and destruction experienced that summer, executives from the oil corporation opted to “devise a self-contained solution” that would not only distance workers from unionizing but also allow management to deal directly with workers’ issues, isolating them from the national and international debates that challenged capitalism.<sup>11</sup> These self-contained solutions would then be exported to South American oil fields in the 1920s as part of their business strategy.

Standard Oil of New Jersey and its Canadian subsidiaries transplanted the legislative, judicial, and extralegal means that they enjoyed back in the USA and instituted those same privileges in South America. The same autocratic management strategies that prevailed during the pre-Bayonne era would be replicated across the region, where they found the same “political will” among the local elites.

The frontier-type settlement characteristic of oil operations back in the USA would be replicated. Company towns were constructed with the same intentions of isolating workers from middle and upper management, and exposing them to the same miserable conditions to which American workers were once exposed. With the sweat and hard work of local grunt workers, oil company towns in South America would be constructed in order to create an artificial space between foreigners and locals, a distinctive separation that would also be evident in the worker-management relations that would evolve in places like Barrancabermeja, Colombia.<sup>12</sup>

In 1920, while Standard Oil of New Jersey was instituting an unprecedented labor contract that included no discrimination, collective bargaining via the management-worker internal dispute system, grievance resolution, increased wages, and an Eight-hour work day among other benefits, in Colombia they were working out a deal with the local government in order to replicate the inhumane labor conditions that had led to violent confrontations in places like New Jersey, Colorado, and Oklahoma.<sup>13</sup> The effectiveness of the government-business partnership in Colombia would set the tone for further capitalist expansionists efforts across the region.

## THE COLOMBIAN EXPERIMENT

By 1905, it was evident that there was crude oil beneath Colombian territory. Colombian policymakers had heard the rumors, *Caudillos* in the Santander region had seen the crude bubble effortlessly from beneath the earth, and local entrepreneurs were beginning to piece together the lucrative business opportunity behind this new industrial endeavor. British, American, and Canadian investors were also well aware of some of the deposits, but they held the right end of the stick; they had the capital, technology, market, and the “know how” behind the extraction, transportation, refining, and commercialization of oil. This advantage manifested itself during the initial oil concession negotiations. The De Mares concession would be awarded to Tropical Oil Company.<sup>14</sup> Negotiations between the Canadian subsidiary and the Colombian government would unfold in the absence of a petroleum code, a modern land use policy, and labor regulation. The foreign corporation would eventually become instrumental in the definition and design of the Petroleum Code of 1919, the same legislation that would set the parameters for future oil policy in Colombia. By the early 1920s, an initial energy policy would begin its implementation stage, revealing the social and labor implications behind its biases. Opposition to the 1919 Code and the unfavorable labor conditions established by Tropical Oil would find an initial voice in labor organizing and soon after in the nationalist left. Conflict would unfold between Tropical Oil and the nationalist-labor coalition throughout the interwar years, forcing the national government to take a position on the issue. Government’s use of police force against civilians during the 1924, 1927, 1935, and 1938 labor strikes sent a clear message to the international community that Colombia was a defender of classic liberal ideals. As in the case of gold, petroleum business development and policy eventually favored the interests of foreign investors, limiting the capacity of Colombian nationals to capitalize on the commercialization of their national resources. Labor and populist leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán would mount a strong opposition against the corporatist initiative, but this would come to an end with his assassination in 1948. From that moment onward Colombian oil workers were left politically defenseless against the transnational petroleum forces.

Tropical Oil encountered a force to reckon with, as Colombian nationalists mounted opposition against foreign interventionism that could result in greater loss of sovereignty. There was a strong anti-American sentiment in the air as a result of Washington’s previous participation in aiding Panamanians gain independence from Colombia in 1903, and more

particularly as the revenues from the Panamá Canal began to flow northward. Nationalists gained even greater ground as they found in urban labor groups an ally to oppose the internationalization of Colombia's economy, an issue that threatened the interests of native artisans and producers, and that allowed the left-leaning liberals to challenge the conservatives politically.<sup>15</sup> The government's efforts to establish closer relations with the international system eventually resulted in the outbreak of labor strikes throughout 1918 and the violent incidents of March 1919, which resulted in the death of twenty protesters shot by Colombian soldiers, marking the beginning of the government's reprisal against workers.<sup>16</sup> Liberal activist, Enrique Olaya Herrera, joined the voices of the numerous labor groups that criticized the government for its brutal use of force and the open door policy, calling for social revolution and government accountability.<sup>17</sup>

Petroleum policy, part of president Marco Fidel Suárez's vision of the internationalization and modernization of Colombia's economy, was negotiated under ideological pressure from the left.<sup>18</sup> Activists, leftist liberals, and labor organizers had joined a global socialist movement against this new international political economy initiative that left power and control of national resources in the hands of private corporations.<sup>19</sup> In February of 1919, Barcelona's industry was interrupted by labor strikes that targeted Canadian owned Riegos y Fuerzas del Ebro from which an eight-hour working day was gained.<sup>20</sup> In Canada, the Winnipeg General Strike of March 1919 had paved the way for labor reforms and in the USA numerous strikes unfolded from coast to coast, including the Great Steel Strike of September 1919 that followed the oil uprisings in Bayonne and Oklahoma.<sup>21</sup>

Colombian society had reached an ideological quagmire that transcended the traditional debates of Liberal and Conservative politics. The working class was beginning to carve out its own political space, together with the Socialist and Communist intellectuals that found an ally in the working class and the socially disenfranchised.<sup>22</sup> Sectors of the Conservative Party had branched out into radical isolationists that opposed the internationalization of the national economy. Meanwhile, the Liberals had polarized into mainstream and radical factions.

The internationalization of Colombia's economy, favored by the political status quo, found opposition from both the Left and the radical Right. It was under these social and political realities that the design and development of oil policy unfolded. Such was the juxtaposition of these contradictory realities that the consolidation of the two largest labor unions was finalized while oil concession negotiations between Standard Oil of New Jersey and Marco

Fidel Suárez's administration unfolded. In 1919, the Colombian government would lead the nation into a new era of economic liberalism, awarding the subsidiary Tropical Oil control of subsoil resources in Colombia, and the response would come from below through the consolidation of the *Sindicato Central de Obreros* (Central Worker's Syndicate) and the *Confederación de Acción Social* (Social Action Confederation).<sup>23</sup>

As part of the united voice, the *Asamblea Obrera* (Workers' Assembly) "announced their commitment to social, moral, and economic unity and their inclusion in the international workers' movement," as well as their rejection of traditional partisan politics.<sup>24</sup> This did not detract the Colombian government from awarding the De Mares concession to Tropical Oil. The stage was set, Colombian labor unions would play the role of checks and balances against the foreign corporation in the absence of government institutions or laws that forced the oil company to comply with issues of national sovereignty.

Marco Fidel Suárez's administration was forced to deal with the social and nationalist demands emanating from the left-leaning Liberals and the leftist syndicates, and an inherited nationalist comprehensive oil policy, while at the same time moving forward with the modernization of the state.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, it was forced to negotiate a totally different oil deal than the ones previously negotiated in Mexico, knowing well that the impact of the Mexican Revolution had resonated across the Western Hemisphere. The 1917 Mexican Constitution had become a model to emulate, something that did not favor the interests of Tropical Oil.<sup>26</sup>

This pressure would be reflected in the Petroleum Law of 1919, which was regarded by foreign oil executives as "restrictive."<sup>27</sup> Contrary to the deals obtained by foreign oil companies in México prior to the Revolution, the De Mares deal was taxed at a higher rate and royalties were less generous.<sup>28</sup> Foreign corporations interested in exploiting oil in Colombia were now forced to give up some of their autonomy and face legislative limitations that forced them to be more strategic and efficient in their operation. Perhaps, the most problematic of the constraints imposed by the Marco Fidel Suárez administration was limiting concessions to twenty years, "and providing for state takeover at the end of the term...an innovation favorable to the national government and one that oilmen had not yet encountered on entry into a Latin American country."<sup>29</sup>

It was evident that Colombian nationalists had learned from the lessons of the Mexican Revolution. In essence, the "free exploitation of oil lands" to which transnational corporations were accustomed ceased to exist, at

least on paper. The 1919 policy challenged the status quo of international petroleum businesses.

Nationalists and the working class responded positively to executive decree No. 1255 of June 20, 1919. The decree limited subsoil ownership exclusively to Colombian nationals, and directed newly created government institutions such as the Bureau of Statistics for Petroleum Mines and the Ministry of Public Works to regulate and manage oil exploration across the country.<sup>30</sup> Properly implemented, this decree could subject foreign corporations to Colombian laws, and would regulate their power and influence. The oil boom was hyped by the local media, and the increasing presence of foreign engineers and oil company executives led policymakers and Colombians in general to believe that oil was their ticket to growth, prosperity, and economic development. Colombian media echoed the reports of Canadian and American press reports that the high-grade oil found under the De Mares concession was, according to “trade men,” an industrial and extractive field of great promise waiting to be developed since “great quantities” of oil had been identified across the national territory.<sup>31</sup> Oil was the gateway to modernity.

In December 1919, a watered-down deal from the one initially inherited from the Vicente Concha administration was signed between the Colombian government and Standard Oil of New Jersey, just a month after Congress had approved legislation that awarded Colombian workers the right to strike. The nationalist character of the initial decree, inspired by the Mexican Revolution, was declared unconstitutional by sectors of the Colombian Supreme Court, reversing the nationalization of the subsoil, and awarding Tropical Oil greater power. The Supreme Court would issue a statement that backed the corporatist idea that the development of an oil industry in the hands of foreign interests was healthy for the national economy and that it did not go against the interests of Colombian society.<sup>32</sup>

The Supreme Court’s decision and its pro-foreign business statement represented a direct attack on the nationalists, socialists, and the working class. This legal decision set forth the confrontation between labor and foreign capital in Colombia.

### *Labor Realities at Barrancabermeja*

The initiation of Tropical Oil’s operations in Colombia sheds light on the internal social conflict between agrarian and industrial societies, capitalist business leaders and traditional elites, federal and regional governments, modernization and tradition, secularism and the Catholic Church,



nationalism and internationalism, socialism and capitalism, and conservative paternalist structures that opposed the forces that wanted to break away from cultural, economic, political, economic and social isolationism. Colombian entrepreneurs, professionals, investors, pro laissez-faire politicians, and even sectors of the merchant class favored the internationalization of the economy and welcomed the establishment of foreign-controlled oil extraction operations in the name of modernity. Sectors of the industrial labor force also welcomed the presence of Tropical Oil because it represented jobs and possibly higher incomes. Even rural laborers from the Magdalena Medio region welcomed the new extractive operation because it represented job opportunities and indirect economic development for a region that had always been abandoned by the state.

Conservatives with nationalist and isolationist inclinations rejected the presence of Tropical Oil, paralleling the protectionist argument of Socialists, left-leaning Liberals, and labor unions across the country. Clearly, the country was divided over the issue, however that did not stop the Company from moving forward with their operation since they had the support of the government.

The voice of opposition had no resonance on the final decision to move forward with oil extraction and was silenced by the pressure mounted by oil executives and Colombian advocates interested in capitalizing from this new business initiative. The aftermath of the concession negotiations would reveal that there was enormous pressure from Colombia's business class to finalize negotiations in favor of Tropical Oil.<sup>33</sup>

Foreign investors and engineers were not the only ones interested in the development of an oil industry. Domestic investors were also committed to the development of a business-friendly oil policy that would allow them to take risks on a proven lucrative business. Colombian entrepreneurs were well aware of the wealth-generating machine behind oil drilling in the USA and Mexico, and more recently in Peru, Argentina, Ecuador, and Venezuela.<sup>34</sup> Colombian investors had tried to develop the industry earlier but they lacked the capital and the will to establish joint ventures, plus they did not possess the "know how," industrial capacity, infrastructure, and technology to develop an industry from scratch. Instead, they opted to make money by buying and selling land concessions to foreign investors as in the case of Roberto de Mares and Virgilio de Barco, and in other instances large land owners and regional *Caudillos* opted to sell or rent their land or partnered with foreign investors.<sup>35</sup>

An emerging professional and educated class was also in favor of the presence of the foreign company. In addition to the other contractual requisites previously mentioned, Tropical Oil was obliged to secure at least a quarter of the supervisory jobs for Colombian natives.<sup>36</sup> However, the educated professionals did not have the skill set demanded by the oil industry. Engineers, business, and personnel managers had to be imported from the USA and Canada. Some management jobs did favor native born such as Francisco Escobar, one of the three officers for Tropical Oil chosen by Standard Oil New Jersey in 1916.<sup>37</sup>

Initially, Tropical Oil made an executive decision to import all skilled labor from the USA and Canada. Drillers, tool men, and other trained personnel were hired under very favorable 1-year contract that surpassed any of the labor benefits seen by workers in Colombia or even back in North America.<sup>38</sup> They were paid in dollars at the American pay scale of the time that averaged US\$1407 per year.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the foreign labor force received free health care, the comforts of the company towns constructed for foreigners, “plus transportation to and from the country under at least a one-year contract.”<sup>40</sup>

Colombian workers were not protected by legislation, although they did have the legal right to strike under very strict parameters established under Law 21 of 1920.<sup>41</sup> On paper, workers were also protected by contractual agreements within the concession that demanded that Tropical Oil offer hospital care and medical treatment to all workers.<sup>42</sup> Clause six of the agreement obligated the company to implement oil extractive methods and other scientific and technical procedures that assured the efficiency of the operation and the protection of all workers against explosions and other industrial accidents.<sup>43</sup>

Oil executives, with the help of local authorities, took advantage of workers' lack of organization and awareness of their legal rights, and refused to provide the technical training, benefits, and wage scales to which workers were entitled according to prevailing industry standards. These executives grasped the power and influence of paternalistic social relations in the Barrancabermeja region, and took full advantage of it. The majority of the workers in the region were not unionized and lacked industrial skills, as a result of the nation's low levels of industrialization and the natural geographical dispersion.<sup>44</sup>

Local workers were indispensable because they could deal with the harsh conditions of the Barrancabermeja region, something that could be intolerable for imported unskilled workers.<sup>45</sup> The concession was located

560 km up the Magdalena River, and it lied in an area covered by “dense tropical growth” that lacked housing and transportation amenities.<sup>46</sup> Its riverbank location lacked infrastructure, limiting its access to dirt roads, ferry services, and the sporadic small engine airplane. The region was isolated and distant from urban centers, and constantly bombarded by oppressive heat, humidity, and an unending cloud of mosquitoes. Nevertheless, it would become the epicenter of oil production in Colombia.

Once work got started, it became evident that it was impossible to rely solely on local workers. By 1920, Colombia’s unskilled labor force was therefore in high demand, as the company began to clear the land and construct the infrastructure for subsequent drilling, management, and transportation of the final product.<sup>47</sup>

Colombians were hired as “packers, canoe men, machete and ax men for cutting trails and building roads,” and other semi-skilled workers were hired as carpenters, blacksmiths, and later on as pipe layers and welders.<sup>48</sup> As in the case of Mexico, Venezuela and Peru, oil executives systematically demerited the local worker, just like they had done in Canada and the USA.<sup>49</sup> The locals were “uncivilized” and needed to be tamed; as indicated by company management, Colombian semi-skilled workers were “slow and required a great deal of supervision.”<sup>50</sup> The worker, as part of the untamed wilderness, needed to be civilized by the modern pioneer, the American civil engineer.<sup>51</sup>

Tropical Oil executives decided early on that unskilled workers would not be hired on an annual contract like their imported counterparts, but instead contracted on a piecework basis, since this was culturally acceptable under common labor agreements to compensate for the harsh local conditions.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, salaries needed to be higher than the Colombian standards in order to attract workers to the harsh and inhospitable Barrancabermeja region. Higher than average national salaries for unskilled workers, recruitment of labor from multiple national regions, and the ability to market the myth of hope and prosperity behind the black gold, allowed the company to recruit plenty of labor and develop a disjointed workforce that would find it culturally difficult to organize collectively.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the company took advantage of the “absence of laws and a judicial apparatus to resolve labor conflict” and the Conservative’s desire to please foreign investors.<sup>54</sup> The government’s permissiveness would become the foundation for the replication of the government-business partnerships that at one point had been established in the USA. Although less intimate then back home, the partnership would allow the company to abuse the Colombian worker at their discretion with no accountability whatsoever.

Medellín, the closest urban center, became one of the best options for the supply of unskilled and semi-skilled labor. The Colombian Caribbean coast was also a good recruiting center, particularly since the black population, according to the company, was resilient to the tropical conditions of Barrancabermeja.<sup>55</sup> Together with workers from the Santander region, they joined the local workforce that had settled in the area after the Thousand Days' War (1898–1902), attracted by the “availability of public or unclaimed arable land.”<sup>56</sup>

The threat posed by the independent and radical *colonos* who had cleared, worked, and claimed the unsettled territory and who “viewed the encroachment by foreign or absentee investors with suspicion,” was watered down by the regionalization of the workforce, thus resolving any other threats to the interests of Tropical Oil.<sup>57</sup> But the key to the problem of labor organizing and anti-American sentiment relied on higher salaries.

In 1920, the company calculated that a common laborer should be paid an average of US\$0.60 per day, cargo handlers and other semi-skilled work was set at an average of US\$1.20 per day, and carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, and similar workmen were contracted at an average of US\$2.5 per day.<sup>58</sup> Initially, the company planned to offer a food allowance and housing, and in some instances transportation and lodging, as additional benefits added to the labor agreement in efforts to maintain a steady workforce and avoid turnovers among temporary workers.<sup>59</sup>

These high wages that guaranteed worker's willingness “to go into the jungles of the interior and stay on the job for any length of time” while constantly exposed to malaria, were no match to the US\$3.85 to US\$4.00 per day being earned by the American and Canadian labor force which would eventually enjoy the comforts of a company town inside the Barrancabermeja complex, erected by the sweat and labor of the native worker.<sup>60</sup> Initial benefit plans were revised downwards once the ground was broken and a vast pool of workers was imported, as the managers quickly accommodated to the idiosyncrasy of the local worker.<sup>61</sup>

Tropical Oil's policies marked a clear-cut line between Colombian and foreign workers. Their interpretations of the social, cultural, and intellectual characteristics of local workers justified their labor policies, and the Colombian authorities stood behind these misconceptions. The government did explicitly demand middle management jobs for Colombians under oil legislation, but never any benefits or protections for unskilled or semi-skilled workers. The passiveness of the local and federal government

in matters of labor relations was a clear indication that the government favored corporate interests.

A 1921 report from the United States Department of Commerce indicated that even though it would be difficult “to collect a fairly efficient crew of natives for all classes of work necessary,” their “exacting” character generated a more manageable labor environment for Tropical Oil.<sup>62</sup> Colombian workers, assumed the Department of Commerce, were passive and conformist. They did not demand livable wages, accommodations, meal plans, or any other type of benefits.<sup>63</sup> The company had entered the Colombian market with the idea of replicating the Fordist model of welfare capitalist strategies introduced by Clarence J. Hicks and William Mackenzie King, but they quickly moved away from the self-contained solutions, switching to an autocratic management model tainted by racism and social Darwinism.<sup>64</sup>

It was assumed that feeding arrangements and accommodations only had to be provided to “foreign drill crews” since local workers were usually followed by their women who cooked for them; in fact, the peons, as they were referred to by the foreign personnel, were expected “to put up their own shelters, made of the ever-present bamboo poles and palm thatches.”<sup>65</sup> Why provide them with housing and food, if with a machete they could build their own dwelling in a couple of hours, and with cow hooves, corn, yucca, and plantain their wife could fix a meal.<sup>66</sup>

Drilling camps and even the company town in Barrancabermeja would be segregated between foreigners and locals.<sup>67</sup> In South America, it was the corporative way of establishing a barrier between the civilized and uncivilized. By the mid 1920s, foreign drill crews lived together with managers and engineers, where some of the Colombian supervisory personnel also lived. Next to them, separated by a gated community, were the laborers and semi-skilled workers living in their bamboo and palm-thatched homes.

In the absence of labor legislation, Tropical Oil managers centered their efforts on the construction of infrastructure and facilities that suited the needs of foreign workers unaccustomed to the demands and hardships of tropical climates.<sup>68</sup> In addition to electrification, the construction of housing, entertainment facilities, food stores, and other amenities to which the foreign worker was used to, Tropical Oil established health facilities including the supply of a medical outfit and special equipment to combat malaria fevers, dysentery, and other tropical diseases in each of the camp sites.<sup>69</sup>

There were, however, no preventive policies or safety measures implemented by the company in order to protect local workers from dangerous tasks and accidental risks. Some of the risky jobs included cleaning up the navigational routes of the Magdalena River in order to facilitate the transportation of heavy machinery and the mobilization of personnel, where the worker was exposed to malaria, the occasional venomous snake or deadly alligator.<sup>70</sup> The construction of roads and trails that connected the different oil wells was also dangerous, particularly since these connectors depended on the construction of bridges and embankments across steep mountainous terrain, with no protection or safety measures.<sup>71</sup> Tearing down the jungle with ax and machete in order to facilitate the construction of camps and roads, and the actual exploration and exploitation oil, combined with the exposure to tropical diseases and typical explosions and other accidents of the time made it an unsafe and life-threatening environment.<sup>72</sup>

There was no need for sanitation or safety policies because foreign workers were not exposed to these elements. Geologists, engineers, and managers were, for the most part, protected from the elements and unexposed to dangers, and the same could be said about foreign workers who were limited to exploration, drilling, wildcatting, and the construction of wooden towers.<sup>73</sup> Malaria prevention and treatment was also geared toward foreign personnel, while local workers were left to their own device. The discrimination against the Colombian worker was evident; they were denied sanitary services and facilities, protection against the elements, and safe labor conditions. Colombian workers were defenseless, carrying out their daily work in a region that initially lacked federal or regional state presence, completely at the mercy of the foreign employer.

Tropical Oil's unscrupulous labor policies even generated conflict between local labor and Caribbean and Antillean immigrant labor, because even these black workers were given better benefits and more advantageous labor packages.<sup>74</sup> *Yumecas*, as they were called, were considered reliant workers due to their experience in similar labor conditions, working with banana, sugar, and other commodities in the Caribbean.<sup>75</sup> They were hired full-time, and were offered housing, health, and other benefits that were denied to the Colombian worker.<sup>76</sup> In the majority of cases, they carried out the same tasks assigned to local workers but in some instances, based on their previous experience, they landed skilled jobs in carpentry and welding. They were part of the labor elite and they had the advantage of speaking English, thus allowing them to "easily and directly

communicate with foremen, manager, and engineers.”<sup>77</sup> In response to the labor problems generated from the workers’ complaints, managers even contemplated the idea of resolving the issue by replacing the thousands of Colombian workers with *Yumecas* but the initiative was rejected by Colombian authorities that wanted to avoid a greater inflow of blacks into the country.<sup>78</sup>

Their segregationist policies included importing a Protestant minister from Johnston, Pennsylvania, to tailor to the spiritual needs of the foreign oil workers. Marking a clear-cut line between the company and the local Catholic culture, company executives recruited Reverend A.R. Sweet and his wife, offering him a lucrative deal that paralleled the salary of the “most skilled workmen in the outfit.”<sup>79</sup> Asked by local Pennsylvania media if he considered the new task “intriguing” and “unique,” Reverend Sweet responded that not only was the position a novelty but also the financial reward as well.<sup>80</sup> He explained that he would be working exclusively for the close to 500 Canadian and American workers established in Barrancabermeja.<sup>81</sup> Reverend Sweet would receive for his spiritual services “an increase in salary of about 100% over his Johnston position,” in addition to “a fine home furnished free together with all the up-to-date equipment,” as well all paid relocation costs and “three months leave of absence with all expenses paid to the States after two years on the job.”<sup>82</sup>

Managers and middle management enjoyed the comforts and luxuries, including access to top of the line amenities, all imported into the Barrancabermeja complex to fill the needs of American and Canadian workers. Reverend Sweet’s labor package was common among the foreign workers but uncommon for those residing in North America. Many incentives were offered by Tropical Oil to lure foreign workers. Electrical engineer Roy J. Jones benefited from all paid relocation costs and was able to bring his wife and three sons with him.<sup>83</sup> The company also covered the costs of relocation of the wife of superintendent of drilling Vern C. Petty; it seemed to be a common labor incentive among North American workers.<sup>84</sup> Professionals also received a completely furnished home located within the company town that included a club “and all the unusual amusements, a tennis court, an orchestra, and bungalows with the wealth of fruits and flowers that surpassed northern understanding.”<sup>85</sup>

It was a privilege to be part of a foreign operation like the one managed by Tropical Oil as long as one was foreign. Locals could see the disparities and injustice with their own eyes, watching from their candle-lit somber

homes the electric lit homes of the foreigners resting and entertaining themselves inside their gated community.

While local workers were exposed to drinking untreated drinking water from the Magdalena River that was more like drinking “cyanide, from all the garbage, sewage, and corpses” dumped in it, foreigners enjoyed the benefits of a top of the line filtering plant that provided 16,000 gallons of pure water per day.<sup>86</sup> The thousands of “rough-necks” imported to work in oil camps faced chronic malnutrition, relentless heat and humidity, and “air so foul that it would rot metal and poison food,” while foreigners were nurtured with “fresh refrigerated vegetables and live cattle” regularly shipped to the company town by boat and twin-motored airplanes.<sup>87</sup> Outside the company town prostitution and alcoholism flourished while inside, Fordist discipline prevailed. No foreigner was allowed to “venture outside after dark without his mosquito netting,” all were to “lie down for half an hour before meals and sip hot tea,” all had to consume salt tablets, “alcohol was prohibited,” and so was “fraternizing with anyone outside camp.”<sup>88</sup>

Foreigners had electricity, sanitation, hospitals, and good salaries, while the locals had no amenities; it was night and day, light and darkness. But even under these inhuman conditions, it was hard for workers to react because they were recruited from numerous geographical areas, they were not integrated to the local community, and had no leadership to rely on for guidance except for the Catholic church that interceded on behalf of Conservative interests, favoring the patriarchal system to social control. The rural labor force targeted by Tropical Oil recruiters were initially not in tune with their urban counterparts, they were marginalized, and for the most part disconnected from the ideas of labor organizing and social revolution.

This would slowly change throughout the 1920s as organized labor began to indoctrinate the Barrancabermeja workers on the virtues of Socialism and the rights to organize and demand workers’ rights. After 1921, when the Municipality of Barrancabermeja was created, thus legitimizing the presence of regional and federal authorities, local Tropical Oil workers also petitioned local authorities and the Catholic prefecture of Zapatoca, demanding the fulfillment of concessional labor clauses that required the company to provide all workers with hospital services, drugs, and medical treatment.<sup>89</sup>

A year after breaking ground at Barrancabermeja, Colombian workers were already vociferous about their mistreatment. A 1921 press release spoke on behalf of the workers, indicating that they were dying because of



the company's carelessness, the abandonment of the Colombian worker, and the unlivable conditions to which they were exposed, including housing and sanitation.<sup>90</sup> The report indicated that close to 100 workers had died within a period of 3 months, that many others were suffering from tropical diseases, and that they were being denied medical attention and hospital space.<sup>91</sup>

The sick, and those suffering from work-related injuries were fired after the petition was issued. The hiring process of unskilled and semi-skilled labor became a rotating door. Tropical Oil's reliance on a private hiring agency to carry out labor recruitment removed accountability away from the company.<sup>92</sup> Within the first five years of operation (1920–1925), more than 2000 workers passed through the Barrancabermeja complex and by 1928 that number had reached close to 5000 workers.<sup>93</sup> Tensions between local workers and the Tropical Oil executives escalated throughout the 1920s, as the workers' petitions and demands for greater government intervention failed to change the attitude of their employer. These outcomes inevitably led to the clandestine organization of La Unión Sindical Obrera (USO) in February 1923 and the first labor strike in October 1924.<sup>94</sup>

### *The Reaction of Workers*

For foreigners, Barrancabermeja was a dangerous and untamed jungle but for locals it was home and a place to make a living. Colombian workers saw a very different world than the foreigners; one of injustice, discrimination, and social marginalization. The oil strike of 1924 was focused on demands for improved housing, sanitation, health, safety, and to a lesser degree on increase in wages. It marked the beginning of a history of confrontations between labor and capital that continues to this day.<sup>95</sup> Government's use of force to oppress the Colombian workers revealed that for the state, foreign interests represented the national interest. This incident set the tone for the ongoing confrontation between the radical left and the capitalist government-business partnership in Barrancabermeja.

The marginalized workers found in Raúl Eduardo Mahecha the leadership and cohesion necessary to confront *La Troco* (Tropical Oil). Mahecha became the heart of the October 7, 1924 strike, however, his objective went beyond the advancement of worker's grievances, he was pushing for a greater cause, social revolution.<sup>96</sup> Mahecha was a revolutionary communist activist who had moved to the Barrancabermeja region to help organize the first industrial workers in Colombia. Through his

newspaper *Vanguardia Obrera* that he began to shed light on the abusive practices and injustices of *La Troco*. Soon after his arrival, he became the workers' lawyer and it was through him that oil workers initially reached a labor agreement with the company in January of that year.

Raúl Eduardo Mahecha had called the strike early in September after the company refused to fulfill any of the terms of the agreement. The Minister of Industry, General Diógenes A. Reyes, accepted the terms of the strike after workers had fully complied with the parameters stipulated by Law 21, 1920 regarding conciliation and arbitration.<sup>97</sup> The government requested the workers to extend the deadline of the strike while they negotiated with *La Troco*, but the company refused to negotiate. Minister Reyes reported on October 9 that the company did not comply with the agreement that included increase in salaries, improvement of meals and living conditions at camps, removal of abusive personnel, and more humane treatment of employees.<sup>98</sup> The government was forced to accept the peaceful strike in the hope that the company would fulfill its promises.

According to the company, the strike that began on October 7 when 300 rail and oil workers refused to work was illegal because it did not comply with the laws regarding labor strikes.<sup>99</sup> The company also indicated that oil workers were paid higher than the average Colombian wages (\$1.50 for 8.5 hours work per day) and their well being was being looked after by the company that was generous to the local workers; that the pact established between Minister Reyes and the labor union was merely a proposal that had never been accepted by the company, which dismissed it as political posturing and propaganda.<sup>100</sup> Since there was no pact and the labor union did not officially represent company workers, the foreman had no other choice but to fire them on the spot.

What followed later that afternoon was a demonstration lead by a Venezuelan organizer known as Villeta.<sup>101</sup> About 150 men proceeded to the Infanta camp where they tampered with the water and electrical plants throughout the night.<sup>102</sup> According to company executives, many of the workers were forced to join the strike the next morning including some who were physically abused by labor organizers, nevertheless more than six hundred men gathered in Barrancabermeja.<sup>103</sup>

On October 10, at the request of the company, Minister Reyes called in troops from Medellín to preserve the peace.<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, the company argued that the strike was illegal because it violated Law 21. Workers had violated the self-contained solutions imported by Standard Oil of New Jersey and implemented by the Conservative administration of Marco Fidel

Suárez, which allowed for arbitration but not strikes. Although the workers did approach the company with their notification of the strike through a three-member delegation as requested by the law, the company did not accept the legitimacy of the strike or the petition of the workers.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, the company denied that they had ever signed any type of agreement with the workers earlier that year and that the claims were all part of Minister Reyes' efforts to gain popularity and advance his political career.<sup>106</sup>

By the time the military arrived, the workers had seized Barrancabermeja, organizing themselves in military fashion. Luckily for the foreigners in the company town, the police force, under the command of Coronel Evaristo Aldana, had established a perimeter between the strikers and the company town.<sup>107</sup> On October 11, the conflict escalated further. As the number of demonstrators increased to 3000, the police reported that they could no longer contain the situation. This prompted local officials to urge the company to accept a settlement.<sup>108</sup>

The following morning the strikers impeded other workers from returning to work, blocking the streets and the entrance to the company.<sup>109</sup> Meanwhile, Geo C. Schweickert, representative of the company, pressured the authorities to buy some time while a tank and an additional 100 men arrived.<sup>110</sup> That evening government representative Bernardo de J. Caicedo, working on behalf of Minister Reyes, told Schweickert that the strikers were willing to stop all violence if Mr. Schlesinger and Mr. Meek were fired; with no other choice *La Troco* accepted their resignation.<sup>111</sup> Nevertheless, the company refused to legitimize the strike by not meeting with the workers' representatives, escalating the conflict one more time. Minister Reyes, on his way to Barrancabermeja, demanded that the company negotiate but company executives refused, claiming this would set a bad precedent by depriving the company of resorting to forced arbitration, and trigger future uprisings.

Minister Reyes arrived in Barrancabermeja accompanied by Isidoro Molina, a representative of the Federación Laboral Central (Central Labor Federation), something that irritated the company executives. However, an agreement was reached between Mr. Lehan, manager of the company, and Minister Reyes.<sup>112</sup> The agreement included all the petitions that had been discussed earlier that year; better quantity and quality of food supplied to workers as supervised by a Colombian employee, the replacement of old housing camps, hospital beds and care for the lowest paid workers, the right to annual paid vacation, English and Spanish classes offered to

workers, and overtime paid at 60% higher than the normal wage.<sup>113</sup> The company, on the other hand, did not accept an increase in wages until headquarters back in Canada reviewed the issue.<sup>114</sup> They also demanded that all workers pass through the hiring company before returning to work and that all would be allowed to return to work unless there was legal evidence against them for disrupting the company's operation.<sup>115</sup> The government complied with this petition, emphasizing that agitators and promoters of revolution and violence should be punished by the strictest laws because they represented the worse enemies of the workers, and if allowed to continue with the initiatives in Barrancabermeja, social chaos and clamor for social revolution could easily spread across the nation.<sup>116</sup>

Workers were not pleased with this outcome as hundreds had been dismissed as a result of its implementation. On October 17 they went back on strike, once again under the leadership of Raúl Eduardo Mahecha and two Venezuelan organizers, Reyes and Villate. Strikers confiscated supply trucks that were getting ready to distribute provisions to the different camps, forcing an emergency meeting between Caicedo, Cornel Evaristo Aldana, chief of the National Policy, and Captain García, chief of the Army Brigade that arrived from Medellín.<sup>117</sup> The security officials decided that the use of force was necessary and made plans to arrest the agitators. Mahecha announced that if the government refused to protect the Colombian workers he and other leaders could be assassinated. Soon after he and six other workers were arrested, along with the Venezuelan leftists.<sup>118</sup> Armed with guns, machetes, and sticks, workers confronted the authorities to impede the arrests but these were no match for the military and police authorities. The blood of civilians and workers was shed under the pretext that Mahecha and the 3000 men were marching toward a social revolution, threatening to damage company property, an act that could lead to dire consequences and that threatened national interests.<sup>119</sup> The safeguard of Tropical Oil's interests was an issue of national security as indicated by Minister Reyes, and therefore more military equipment and personnel were sent to the region.<sup>120</sup>

The company had finally convinced the authorities to escalate the military presence to contain the "criminal acts," accusing the police of being "inefficient" and the Mayor of being "useless."<sup>121</sup> Meanwhile, the government took advantage of the opportunity to declare a propaganda war against socialist and other leftist movements. According to the national newspaper *El Tiempo*, 1924 had seen an escalating fervor for working class uprisings, signs of an alarming situation that needed to be dealt with before

it was too late.<sup>122</sup> Company executives claimed that leaders like Mahecha who were using labor strikes to spark a social revolution needed to remain behind bars insisted the company executives.<sup>123</sup> Minister Reyes went as far as saying that the protection of Colombian workers was a humanitarian duty but “the defense of property and security of nationals and foreigners was a patriotic duty.”<sup>124</sup>

Calm returned to Barrancabermeja on October 29 after the company agreed to revise their hiring policy and fulfill the other previously agreed demands. Ignacio Molina, delegate from the recently created Federación Obrera Colombiana, an anarcho-syndicalist organization, arrived in Barrancabermeja to make sure that the company complied with the agreements and to pressure for the release of Mahecha, “the tireless disciple, father of the workers.”<sup>125</sup> With the approval of the workers and the company, Molina established a Federación Obrera claims office in Barrancabermeja that would serve as an intermediary between workers and *La Troco*.<sup>126</sup> Mahecha and the others would remain behind bars in Medellín for the next six months, while close to 1200 would be fired and deported from the Barrancabermeja region.<sup>127</sup>

Operations at Tropical Oil were back to normal by November 1, however, the clash between workers and foreign management would continue until the end of the concession in 1948.<sup>128</sup> More violent strikes would follow in 1927, 1935, 1938, and 1948, replicating the incidents and dynamics of October 1924. Tropical Oil continued to capitalize on the partnership they had established with Colombia’s political elites, converting their extractive operation into an issue of national security that demanded the protection of the State. The use of force and intimidation by Colombian authorities continued as well, while the radicalization of labor escalated in response to the inhumane treatment.

Contrary to the self-contained solutions implemented by Standard Oil of New Jersey after the Bayonne strike of 1915 and their desire to negotiate with workers in order to avoid further violence, in Colombia they continued to rely on the government’s use of force and the criminalization of labor movements. In Colombia as well as in other parts of South America, Standard Oil of New Jersey’s labor practices remained exploitative, inhumane, and tainted with racism and social Darwinism that was fueled by the shared values of the local political and economic elites that ruled these countries. In Barrancabermeja as in Bayonne, the “flagrant alliance of government officials and business interests that promoted profits at all costs

and used force to silence dissent,” eventually radicalized the worker who saw in violent confrontations the only way out from systemic oppression and marginalization.<sup>129</sup>

This struggle continues today, but against Canadian and other transnational oil companies that have followed the footsteps of Standard Oil of New Jersey. Similar clashes between labor and foreign corporations have emerged over the years as the nation further opens its border for the extraction of gold, coal, precious metals, oil, and natural gas. The conflict escalated even more with the implementation of neoliberal policies that intensified the government-business partnership after the 1980s. Now, under the pressures of globalization, policies such as Plan Colombia, have completely legitimized this partnership while delegitimizing the voice of workers. Organized labor continues to be a threat for those in government today as they were almost one hundred years ago, but the struggle continues.

## NOTES

1. For more on oil business expansion in South America see Mira Wilkins, “Multinational Oil Companies in South America in the 1920s: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru,” *The Business History Review* 48, no. 3 (1974): 415.
2. The idea of “self-contained solution” comes from a 1946 labor relations report published by Standard Oil Company of New Jersey; for more detail on the report, see Stuart Chase, *A Generation of Industrial Peace: Thirty Years of Labor Relations at Standard Oil Company (N.J.)* (New Jersey: Standard Oil Company, 1947), 14.
3. Marcelo Bucheli, *Bananas and Business: The United Fruit Company in Colombia, 1899–2000* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 14.
4. Tropical Oil, in charged of the extraction part of the operation, was a subsidiary of Canada’s International Petroleum Corporation, a subsidiary of Standard Oil of New Jersey; Andian National Corporation, in charged of pipeline construction, was another subsidiary of International Petroleum Corporation. For more information on the operation of the Standard Oil of New Jersey subsidiaries in Colombia, see Stefano Tijerina, “A ‘Clear Cut Line’: Canada and Colombia, 1892–1979” (Ph.D. diss., University of Maine, 2011).
5. Jonathan C. Brown, “Why Foreign Oil Companies Shifted Their Production from Mexico to Venezuela During the 1920s,” *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (1985): 362.

6. Stephen Kane, "Corporate Power and Foreign Policy: Efforts of American Oil Companies to Influence United States Relations With Mexico, 1921–1928," in *Antitrust and Regulation During World War I and the Republican Era, 1917–1932*, ed. Robert F. Himmelberg (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1994), 288; for more on the expansionist efforts of US oil companies, see John A. Denovo, "The Movement for an Aggressive American Oil Policy Abroad, 1918–1920," *American Historical Review* 61, no. 4 (1956): 854–876.
7. US foreign direct investment in places like Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela had increased "from approximately \$400,000,000 to \$1,400,000,000 between 1919 and 1929." Kane, "Corporate Power and Foreign Policy," 288.
8. *Ibid.*, 291.
9. *Ibid.*, 292.
10. For more detail on the oil worker's strike, see "5000 Standard Men May Join in Strike," *New York Times*, July 20, 1915, 5.
11. Chase, *A Generation of Industrial Peace*, 14.
12. Described by American media in the 1920s as the uncivilized and jungle-like, Barrancabermeja is a city in Colombia, located on the shore of the Magdalena River, 114 km west of Bucaramanga in the department of Santander. Back in the 1920s, it was a village surrounded by dense tropical jungle with all its native fauna and flora; oil explorers described it as "weird and wild," infested with alligators, snakes, monkeys, and insects. "The Oil Jungles of Colombia, South America," *Titusville Herald*, May 19, 1920, 4; see also "Lima Man in World Wide War for Oil," *The Lima Sunday News*, June 21, 1925, 1.
13. Chase, *A Generation of Industrial Peace*, 20.
14. In order not to "antagonize" the anti-American sentiment in Colombia, Standard Oil of New Jersey strategically entered Colombia with a Canadian flag, taking advantage of that nation's "goodwill" in the international system. John D. Wirth, ed., *The Oil Business in Latin America: The Early Years* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 28.
15. David Sowell, *The Early Colombian Labor Movement: Artisan and Politics in Bogotá, 1832–1919* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 149.
16. Colombian artisans and tailor guilds protested on front of the presidential palace, arguing against a procurement decision carried out by Marco Fidel Suárez's administration. In essence, the government had opted to purchase new military uniforms from United States' manufacturers as part of the 100th Independence Day anniversary, and Colombian workers demanded that these were made domestically. For more detail, see Sowell, *The Early Colombian Labor Movement*, 149.
17. The incidents left 20 dead, 18 injured, and approximately 300 people arrested. Nullvalue, "Sastres iniciaron huelga," *El Tiempo*, November 13, 2010, Bogotá Section.

18. Marco Fidel Suárez was one of the first Conservative Party leaders to move away from regionalism and toward a more holistic and federalist approach to nation building. His administration was hostile toward labor unions and welcoming of the classic liberal agenda.
19. Colombia's socialist movements were more in tune with the ideas of the Industrial Workers of the World and very distant from the Wilsonian ideas of the International Labor Organization that emerged after World War I.
20. Joel Sans, "La huelga de La Canadencia: un ejemplo de lucha y Sindacalismo," *En Lucha: Anticapitalismo y Revolución*, June/July 2009, accessed May 1, 2013, <http://www.enlucha.org/site/?q=node/1438>.
21. For more on these strikes, see Nigel Anthony Sellars, *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World in Oklahoma, 1905–1930* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); Stuart Chase, *A Generation of Industrial Peace*; Steven L. Danver, ed., *Revolts, Protests, Demonstrations, and Rebellions in American History: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011); and Jonathan H. Rees, *Representation and Rebellion: The Rockefeller Plan at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, 1914–1942* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2010).
22. For more information on Colombia's early labor movements, see Sowell, *The Early Colombian Labor Movement*.
23. *Ibid.*, 150.
24. *Ibid.*, 146.
25. In 1918, the José Vicente Concha administration had taken advantage of the De Mares concession negotiations to develop a comprehensive oil policy that included higher than normal tariffs, royalties, time limits on concessions, and that declared "the subsoil the property of the state for both public and private lands;" Marcelo Bucheli, "Canadian Multinational Corporations and Economic Nationalism: The Case of Imperial Oil Limited in Alberta (Canada) and Colombia, 1899–1938," *Enterprises et Histoire* 54, no. 1 (2009): 76; see also Sowell, *The Early Colombian Labor Movement*, 150.
26. Labor groups were also inspired by the 1917 Soviet Revolution, the 1918 Córdoba student manifest in Argentina, the penetration of Marxist thought through local and foreign fiction, nationalist and anti imperialist movements. Jorge Enrique Elías Caro, "Influencias de la Revolución Mexicana en los Movimientos Obreros y Sindicales en Colombia (III Parte)," *Los Nuestramericanos: Su Historia*, November 2004, accessed May 9, 2013, <http://www.centrocultural.coop/blogs/nuestramericanos/etiquetas/movimientos-obreros/>.
27. Wirth, *The Oil Business in Latin America: The Early Years*, 28.



28. For more information on the De Mares concession, see; United States, Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Special Agents Series No. 206: Colombia, a Commercial and Industrial Handbook*, comp. P.L Bell, Trade Commissioner (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1921), 135.
29. Wirth, *The Oil Business in Latin America: The Early Years*, 28.
30. Department of Commerce, *Special Agents Series No. 206*, 134.
31. "Tropical Oil's sale to Standard Oil is closed: Details of deal not fully disclosed, but consideration is placed at \$40,000,000," *Titusville Herald*, January 22, 1920, 8.
32. Caro, *Los Nuestramericanos*, <http://www.centrocultural.coop/blogs/nuestramericanos/etiquetas/movimientos-obreros/>. For more information on the modification of decree No. 1255 of 1919, see Jorge Villegas, *Petróleo, Oligarquía e Imperio* (Bogotá: Editorial Iris, 1975); *Petróleo Colombiano, Ganancia Gringa* (Bogotá: Ediciones Peñaloza, 1976).
33. For more information on the De Mares concession, see Marcelo Bucheli, "Negotiating under the Monroe Doctrine: Weetman Pearson and the Origins of U.S. Control of Colombian Oil," *Business History Review* 82, no. 3 (2008): 529–553.
34. For more on the lucrative South American oil operations, see Wilkins, "Multinational Oil Companies," 422–426.
35. Although centered on the Venezuelan experience, T.S. Stribling's novel *Strange Moon* describes the intricacies of local land owners, peasant farmers, and the representatives of the foreign oil corporations as they dealt with the corrupt legal system, land use policies, and the local bureaucracy. The fictional story speaks to the realities in other South American countries, including Colombia; for more information, see T.S. Stribling, *Strange Moon* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1929).
36. Wirth, *The Oil Business in Latin America: The Early Years*, 28.
37. The other officers were M.C. Treat, F.W. Crawford, M.L. Benedam, and J. S. Weller. Mr. C. Trees was president, George W. Crawford was vice president, and H.C. Reeser was the treasurer. "Tropical Oil Co. has taken big territory," *The Titusville Herald*, June 10, 1916, 7.
38. A few Colombians were hired as skilled labor, particularly "donkey-boiler men" that had already been trained in the river steamer service that operated along the Magdalena River by British and American interests. Department of Commerce, *Special Agents Series No. 206*, 136.
39. *Ibid.*, 136. In 1915, the average oil worker was earning between \$2.50 and \$4.00 dollars per day's work which was less than the money offered for working in places like Colombia; for more detail, see Sellars, *Oil, Wheat*,

- and Wobblies*, 73. For more information on US wages in the 1920s, see *The Value of a Dollar* (New York: Grey House Publishing, 2009), 150.
40. Department of Commerce, *Special Agents Series No. 206*, 136.
  41. The legislation on conciliation and arbitration required the submission of an official memorandum to the Ministry of Industry, indicating the grievances of petitions, the worker's intentions, and the official date of the planned strike. Such policies eliminated the element of surprise from the strike, one of the few strengths held by the workers. "Huelga de Barrancabermeja: Situación de Anoche," *El Tiempo*, October 9, 1924, 3.
  42. Jairo E. Luna-García, "La salud de los trabajadores y la Tropical Oil Company: Barrancabermeja, 1916–1940," *Revista Salud Pública* 12, no. 1 (2010): 147.
  43. *Ibid.*, 148.
  44. For more on the theory of Colombia's economic development and the impact of geography and dispersion, see Frank Safford and Marco Palacios, *Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
  45. Department of Commerce, *Special Agents Series No. 206*, 136.
  46. Wirth, *The Oil Business in Latin America: The Early Years*, 29.
  47. *Ibid.*, 29.
  48. Department of Commerce, *Special Agents Series No. 206*, 136.
  49. Myrna Santiago's *The Ecology of Oil* describes this same reality in the establishment of the oil extractive industry in Huasteca, Mexico; for more information, see Myrna Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900–1938* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). A similar case of social Darwinism is described by B.S. McBeth's research on the early development of oil extraction operations in Venezuela, including the abuse of local workers; for more information, see B.S. McBeth, *Juan Vicente Gomez and the Oil Companies in Venezuela, 1908–1935* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
  50. Department of Commerce, *Special Agents Series No. 206*, 136. Another example of the racism ingrained in the minds of American and Canadian managers is evident in the article "Our New Pioneers in the Wilderness" that talks about the civilizing mission of American civil engineers across the world; for more detail, see C.P.P., "Our New Pioneers in the Wilderness: As Their Ancestor Tames this Continent, so American Engineers Today are Conquering Strange Lands," *New York Times*, December 11, 1927, 7. Santiago in *The Ecology of Oil* also points out this same reality in Mexico, where locals were seen as "less-developed" and "weaker;" see Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil*, 164.
  51. Santiago, 7.
  52. Department of Commerce, *Special Agents Series No. 206*, 136.

53. Nigel Sellars describes how the marketing of high wages and new opportunities attracted a pool of imported oil labor force during the oil boom in Oklahoma during the early 1900s, Myrna Santiago describes how migration of labor became “essential to the enterprise,” and B.S. McBeth also illustrates how high wages attracted black workers from the West Indies and local immigrant workers that abandoned rural work in exchange for higher wages; for more detail, see Sellars, *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies*, 57–77; Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil*, 148–205; and McBeth, *Juan Vicente Gomez and the Oil Companies in Venezuela*, 131–143.
54. Frank Safford and Marco Palacios, *Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 280.
55. Renán Vega Cantor, “90 años después, 10 de febrero de 1923: Fundación de la Unión Sindical Obrera (USO),” in *Petróleo y protesta obrera. La USO y los trabajadores petroleros en Colombia*, ed. Renán Vega, Angela Núñez, and Alexander Pereira (Bogotá: Ediciones Aury Sará, 2009), 4.
56. Luis van Isschot, “The Social Origins of Human Rights: Popular Responses to Political Violence in a Colombian Oil Refinery Town, 1919–1993” (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 2010), 44.
57. *Ibid.*, 45.
58. Department of Commerce, *Special Agents Series No. 206*, 136.
59. *Ibid.*
60. All wages referred to 1920 US dollars; *Ibid.*
61. The higher than average wage strategy implemented by oil corporations followed the same pattern from Canada all the way to Argentina. For more on the impact of oil wages, see Sellars, *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies*, 57–77; Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil*, 148–205; and McBeth, *Juan Vicente Gomez and the Oil Companies in Venezuela*, 131–143.
62. Department of Commerce, *Special Agents Series No. 206*, 137.
63. *Ibid.*
64. William Mackenzie King, who would later become Prime Minister of Canada (1935–1948), was hired by John D. Rockefeller as a labor expert responsible for the investigation of the Ludlow Massacre in Colorado. King and Clarence J. Hicks would develop the Colorado Industrial Plan based on King’s *Industry and Humanity*, for more information, see Danver, ed. *Revolt, Protests, Demonstrations and Rebellions in American History*, 710.
65. Department of Commerce, *Special Agents Series No. 206*, 137.
66. *Ibid.*
67. The development of company towns became a common management strategy among oil corporations around the world, for more on the dynamics of company towns, see Sellars, *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies*,

- Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil*, and McBeth, *Juan Vicente Gomez and the Oil Companies in Venezuela*.
68. Construction included port infrastructure and roads, as well as the transformation of the landscape, removing the jungle in order to facilitate the edification of camps, shops, warehouses, pipeline, railway lines, and infrastructure facilities. Jairo E. Luna-García, “La salud de los trabajadores y la Tropical Oil Company: Barrancabermeja, 1916–1940,” *Revista Salud Pública* 12, no. 1 (2010): 147.
  69. Department of Commerce, *Special Agents Series No. 206*, 137.
  70. An article describes the region as infested with snakes, tigers, and alligators, where the 8-year-old son of an American worker in Barrancabermeja had been “swallowed by an alligator,” while playing next to the Magdalena River. “The Oil Jungles of Colombia,” 4.
  71. Luna-García, “La salud de los trabajadores y la Tropical Oil Company,” 147.
  72. Santiago describes in *The Ecology of Oil* similar situations as Barrancabermeja, where workers were not only victims of racial segregation but also victims of an unsafe environment, where “workers and their families lived in toxic neighborhoods, exposed not only to fire but also to dangerous emissions and effluents from the petroleum plants next door.” Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil*, 6–7. B.S. McBeth also makes reference to the constant fires at Lake Maracaibo caused by oil spill overs, the contamination of fresh water that lead to the spread of diseases among the local communities, and the foreign company’s constant refusal to pay damages to workers “maimed in industrial accidents or to dependents of those killed in similar circumstances.” McBeth, *Juan Vicente Gomez and the Oil Companies in Venezuela*, 141–143.
  73. Luna-García, “La salud de los trabajadores y la Tropical Oil Company,” 147.
  74. Cantor, “90 años después, 10 de febrero de 1923,” 2.
  75. *Ibid.*, 2.
  76. *Ibid.*, 3.
  77. *Ibid.*
  78. *Ibid.*
  79. Special to Tribune, “Johnstown Pastor to be Chaplain of Tropical Oil Firm,” *The Tribune Republican*, January 13, 1920, 2.
  80. *Ibid.*, 2.
  81. *Ibid.*
  82. *Ibid.*

83. "Roy Jones Plans to go to South American Job," *Joplin Globe*, July 24, 1923, 3.
84. "Leaves for New Home," *The Daily Ardmoreite*, April 5, 1923, 5.
85. "Railroad through Colombian Jungle to Obtain Oil," *The Bradford Era*, November 15, 1923, 7.
86. "Battling the Jungles for Oil," *Popular Mechanics Magazine*, May 1941, 734.
87. *Ibid.*, 732–734.
88. *Ibid.*, 735. B.S. McBeth in *Juan Vicente Gomez and the Oil Companies in Venezuela* mentions a different scenario at the oil towns where social conflicts developed as locals and foreigners clashed over disorderly and drunken behavior. McBeth, *Juan Vicente Gomez and the Oil Companies in Venezuela*, 141.
89. Luna-García, "La salud de los trabajadores y la Tropical Oil Company" 147.
90. *Ibid.*
91. *Ibid.* While hundreds of local lives were lost in the early stages of the pipeline construction, only one foreign life was sacrificed, considering that each foreign worker represented an investment of \$700 to the company. "Battling the Jungles for Oil," 121A.
92. Workers at Tropical Oil were hired through an in-house contractor, removing all accountability from the oil company. The use of hiring agencies continues to be an effective management strategy today.
93. Luna-García, "La salud de los trabajadores y la Tropical Oil Company" 149.
94. Cantor, "90 años después, 10 de febrero de 1923," 13.
95. In April 2014, USO led yet another strike against ECOPETROL, the national oil company that took over the operations of Tropical Oil after 1948 as agreed in the DeMares concession agreement.
96. "La Grave Situación en Barrancabermeja," *El Tiempo*, October 17, 1924, 1.
97. The law limited worker's ability to spontaneously strike, forcing them to procedures of arbitration that assigned the state as the mediator between workers and private interests. It was a legal way to remove the power from the worker while at the same time providing them the space to negotiate with the private actor.
98. "Huelga de Barrancabermeja: Situación de Anoche," *El Tiempo*, October 9, 1924, 2.
99. Universidad Nacional de Colombia. "Informe de un Funcionario Norteamericano Sobre la Huelga de Barrancabermeja 1924," *Bdigital*

- Portal de Revista UN*, 2014, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/achsc/article/view/36156>.
100. Ibid.
  101. “Huelga de Barrancabermeja,” 2.
  102. Ibid.
  103. Ibid.
  104. “Ejercito para Barranca,” *El Tiempo*, October 11, 1924, 3.
  105. Law 21 demanded mandatory arbitration for corporations in the areas of transportation (railway and maritime), public aqueducts, public energy, public trash collection, and mining. The company claimed that they were covered under mining and therefore any strike was illegal; for more information, see Universidad Nacional de Colombia. “Informe de un Funcionario Norteamericano Sobre la Huelga de Barrancabermeja 1924,” *Digital Portal de Revista UN*, 2014, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/achsc/article/view/36156>.
  106. Ibid.
  107. Ibid.
  108. “La Situación en Barrancabermeja,” *El Tiempo*, October 15, 1924, 8.
  109. Mauricio Archila Neira and Margarita González, “Informe de un funcionario norteamericano sobre la huelga de Barrancabermeja 1924,” *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura*, no. 13–14 (1986): 319–333.
  110. Ibid.
  111. Ibid.
  112. Ibid.
  113. “La Situación en Barrancabermeja,” 3.
  114. Archila Neira and González, “Informe de un funcionario norteamericano sobre la huelga de Barrancabermeja 1924.”
  115. Ibid.
  116. “La Situación en Barrancabermeja,” 3.
  117. “La Grave Situación en Barrancabermeja,” *El Tiempo*, October 17, 1924, 1.
  118. Ibid.
  119. Ibid.
  120. Ibid.
  121. Archila Neira and González, “Informe de un funcionario norteamericano sobre la huelga de Barrancabermeja 1924.”
  122. “Liberalismo y Socialismo,” *El Tiempo*, October 24, 1924, 1.
  123. Archila Neira and González, “Informe de un funcionario norteamericano sobre la huelga de Barrancabermeja 1924.”
  124. “Liberalismo y Socialismo,” 1.
  125. “Se Excita a los Obreros de Barranca a Continuar la Huelga,” *El Tiempo*, October 26, 1924, 3.
  126. Ibid.

127. Archila Neira and González, “Informe de un funcionario norteamericano sobre la huelga de Barrancabermeja 1924.”
128. Another strike would be set in motion by the workers at *La Troco* in order to pressure both government and the foreign corporation to comply with the contract. From that point forward, the concession was nationalized, yet the conflict remained intact, this time between workers and government.
129. Sellars, *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies*, 8–9.