

The End of “The Good Fight”? Organized Labor and the Petro-nation During the Neoliberalization of the Oil Industry in Ecuador

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INTRODUCTION

Early one morning in August 2003, in a residential area of Quito, hundreds of oil workers from Petroecuador, Ecuador’s state oil company, stood outside the headquarters of the Federation of Petroleum Workers of Ecuador (FETRAPEC). The excitement was palpable. By mid-morning, a group brought out two giant *papier mâché* puppets, the first of Lucio Gutierrez, then President of Ecuador, dressed as a bride in a white dress, and the second of Horst Köhler, then President of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), dressed as a groom in a black tux. Hanging from Gutierrez’s dress was a plastic bottle labeled “oil patrimony.” In Köhler’s hand was a contract and in his breast pocket, dollars. The puppets were meant to bring attention to Gutierrez’s proposal to privatize the operations of Amazonian oilfields in order to secure loans from the IMF. Another group of workers carried a large sign that reads “just married,” and a nearby sign reads “*la boda del año*” (“the wedding of the year”), both referring to how the privatization deal was a marriage of convenience that

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Fig. 1 “The Wedding of the Year.” *Photo credit* Gabriela Valdivia.



weakened state control over the national oil industry, the largest revenue-generating sector in Ecuador (Fig. 1).

Carrying banners of FETRAPEC alongside the puppets, by the end of the morning, the oil workers set out to join one of the largest protests against structural adjustment measures that year. FETRAPEC members marched the streets of Quito alongside indigenous peoples, teachers, university students, middle-class urban residents, and workers of all trades. The streets were alive with colorful banners, signs, and musical instruments accompanying the vibrant multitude. The march ended at the city center, close to the presidential palace. The puppets were set down and a small delegation of workers walked into the congressional building to present their claims. Pressure against oilfield privatization was so strong this time around that Gutierrez' proposal was shelved. In 2005, social movements decrying the negative social outcomes of neoliberal restructuring in Ecuador ousted Gutierrez.

This moment of oil worker mobilization is but one of several instances during the 1990s and 2000s in which FETRAPEC joined forces with other social movements to counter the detrimental effects of neoliberal policies.¹ Though comprising under 2% of the organized labor force in Ecuador,² FETRAPEC's labor politics shaped how the national oil industry operated,

and resisted attempts to restructure oilfield, refinery, and pipeline operations. By August 2015, however, when again thousands of people mobilized to demand the end of neoliberal restructuring, oil workers were conspicuously absent. FETRAPEC, an actor with over 40 years of experience in organized labor mobilization, had all but disappeared from the political map and from public discourse.

Why is the oil worker movement absent from national politics in Ecuador today? An answer could be found in a regional narrative of the relationship between urban labor, capital, and the state in late twentieth century Latin America. During the 1960s–1980s, under socialist and populist regimes, urban industrial labor unions grew in association with state-led industrialization, leading to the institutionalization of labor politics in government, as happened in Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay. A collective consciousness linking identity and industrial work developed during this period.³ Collective labor laws that underpinned the rights to organize, bargain collectively, and strike gained ground during this time of “pro industrial worker” governments.⁴ By the late 1980s and 1990s, Latin American countries moved towards market liberalization and intensifying export-oriented strategies of economic growth. This economic restructuring, often referred to as neoliberalization, called into question the basic tenets underlying industrial labor relations in the region, including models of employer–government–worker relations, forged under earlier economic and political circumstances.⁵ While some governments preserved collective labor laws, they simultaneously abandoned or weakened safeguards in wages, hours, and individual employment contracts. In several cases, urban labor responded by morphing into a force of resistance to the hegemony of market liberalization, specifically, resistance to deregulation that eroded worker protection and disconnected labor power from its human context.⁶ The 2000s then came as the decade of the “return of the state,” through the election of progressive and left-of-center candidates promising greater regulation and economic growth attuned to inclusivity and rights. At this point, labor movements experienced a “crisis of representation.” The dominant models of mass representation, specifically, the populist “left” positions that defined organized labor as an agent of critique and resistance, were disarticulated and eclipsed,⁷ and left-of-center personality-based governments co-opted the discourse of radical change,⁸ minimizing the political agency of the workers’ party, the union, and the workplace.⁹

The Ecuadorian oil labor movement, under the leadership of FETRAPEC, falls within this broad regional description. Oil worker

resistance to neoliberalization stemmed from working within, even nurturing, the hegemony of extractive capitalism under state-led development. In the 1990s, workers developed a collective moral economy of defense of oil as national patrimony, which strengthened their resistance to sector privatization. Former FETRAPEC leaders often refer to this time as “fighting the good fight.” Linking workplace and nation, they not only derived privileges from working in the state oil industry, but also they became national actors. By the 2010s, while their position on oil privatization had not changed, how others saw them, did. President Rafael Correa, elected on a progressive anti-neoliberal platform in 2007, often referred to them as *burocracias doradas* (golden bureaucracies) who had accumulated hefty salaries, benefits, and job security, and got in the way of revolutionary change. In addition, other social movements distanced themselves from FETRAPEC, because they saw them as increasingly disruptive and interest-based. FETRAPEC, it appeared, had not evolved with the times. Their critiques of capitalist imperialism, while initially revolutionary, appeared self-serving at this juncture.

In this essay, we show that this broad narrative on the boom and busts of organized labor is only part of the story. Missing is the situated perspective of the industrial laboring class, regarding the building and disarticulation of organized labor throughout economic restructuring, as well as an understanding of the mechanisms that led to its exhaustion in the 2000s. The oil workers movement was a powerful force and undeniably understood its privileged position to influence the conditions of its workplace, the national oil industry. However, rather than narrowing down organized labor actions and responses as interest-based, which is often the case in the analyses of industrial labor movements of the twentieth century, our analysis brings attention to the contrapuntal dynamics of labor politics. We draw on ethnographic participation in marches; multiple in-depth interviews with eight former Petroecuador employees between 1998 and 2015, including movement leaders in the refinery, pipeline, and administrative sectors of the industry; memoirs written by former Petroecuador employees; and analysis of media produced by the movement and the Ecuadorian state. Bringing these voices to the fore, we argue that today’s absence of labor politics in the oil sector is not the result of an internal inability to get on with the times, but an effect of a sustained grinding against the neoliberalization of the oil sector that structurally exhausted its political agency.¹⁰

To examine the grinding of labor politics and neoliberal restructuring, we follow a “*contrapunteo*” (contrapuntal) analytic. Cuban essayist Fernando Ortiz beautifully illustrates this approach in his book *Cuban Counterpoint*, where he counterpoints the production of tobacco and sugar with nation building in Cuba to explain how the social life of commodities is entangled with the intimate and collective lives of the individuals that are most closely associated with their production.¹¹ Ortiz weaves identity-making, and the cultural exchanges through which macro-ideologies are countered, negotiated, and adapted by individuals to illustrate how they are entangled in the creation of new political economic realities. Similarly, Edward Said favors a contrapuntal approach in his essays on exile to highlight the intertwined histories and perspectives that constitute resistance and hegemony to capitalist imperialism.¹² For Said, a contrapuntal approach represents the polyvocality of the world and, more importantly, a method for recognizing how subject positionality informs perceptions about how the world works and how to act in it. Rather than privileging one master narrative, Ortiz and Said pay attention to both those who are exiled and/or marginalized from politics and those who shape this arena, to contribute a more nuanced analysis of power in postcolonial settings.

We weave together state-making accounts, national imaginaries, and the affective materiality of labor to describe how FETRAPEC members themselves use contrapuntal analytics: how they articulated the oil complex (its fields, pipelines, and refineries) with their own sense of class identity to represent themselves as *national* moral agents. On one hand, workers opposed industry privatization by claiming working class membership in high-risk sites. For them, salaries, compensation, and benefits reflected the profound challenges of industrial work. On the other hand, they also saw themselves as state actors; they opposed the neoliberal restructuring of the industry on the grounds that they were defending sovereignty and national interest. As FETRAPEC leaders publicly declared, their goal was not to undermine state authority or stop the operations of the petroleum industry, but to remind administrations of the state’s moral responsibility toward the nation: to govern petroleum, the people’s resource inheritance, and its rents, for the benefit of Ecuadorians, not foreign interests.¹³ With this dual positioning, they constructed a new political identity that blended laboring bodies, class and national interests together, the individual, and the collective, to produce what we call “petro-citizenship,” an ethical subjectivity that responds to the rights and obligations of two spaces/communities of belonging: a laboring class and a national class.

The essay is organized as follows. First, we provide an overview of how the creation of an oil industry in Ecuador, structural transformations, and rentierism shaped the formation of a national oil worker movement. Then, we discuss how economic restructuring conditioned a new frame of worker consciousness, petro-citizenship, which articulated class and national interests. The third section describes the unraveling of the petroleum movement, elaborating on the counterpointing process of politico-economic restructuring that redefined the conditions of labor and the political identities and strength of unions. In the last section, we place the exhaustion of the oil movement in the current political context of Ecuador.

THE NEW COMPANY AND ORGANIZED LABOR

In 1965, the oil firms Texaco and Gulf, invited by the Ecuadorian government, formed a consortium to explore for oil in the Amazon. In 1968, they located the first commercially viable oilfield in the Ecuadorian Amazon, which they called Lago Agrio 1. This was a transformational moment for Ecuador. Until then, Ecuador had been an agricultural nation and its national revenue depended largely on taxing the productive activities of private landowners. The discovery of significant and high-quality fields would allow the state to derive a source of revenue independent of private landowners. However, because Ecuador lacked its own national petroleum industry, it managed oil exploitation as a landlord: it granted the right to extract oil to foreign firms and these, in turn, paid a relatively low rent for extracting and profiting from the resource. By 1971, 4,096,000 hectares, about 14% of the national territory, had been leased to foreign oil companies.¹⁴

That same year, following nationalist debates and petroleum nationalizations throughout Latin America,¹⁵ a military coup redefined oil industry operations to allow greater state control over oil rents. Ecuador not only would earn rents and royalties from oil's circulation, it would also own all operations. As Ecuadorian sociologists of history Rafael Quintero and Erika Silva point out, "all social sectors, all classes and political parties, all corporations and labor unions—from businesses large and small—as well as labor associations and diverse government representatives centered their attention on how to define this rich resource as a source of 'economic development.'"¹⁶

The most significant move was the nationalization of the operations of the oilfields discovered by Texaco-Gulf, the most productive and

significant at the time.¹⁷ During this period, the first national oil law, the Hydrocarbons Law, was established, which called for a national industry and to more closely regulate the activities of foreign operators, and the first national company, the Corporación Estatal Petrolera Ecuatoriana (CEPE), was created. In the words of the Minister of Natural and Energy Resources, General Gustavo Jarrín Ampudia, “Petroleum is... inalienable Patrimony of the State as established by the Constitution and belongs to thirteen million Ecuadorians, who are its legitimate owners. The government is simply the administrator of the resource and is obligated to provide an honest administration to those owners, who are the present and future generations.”¹⁸ Most foreign firms exited Ecuador at this point, leaving a vacuum in oil operations trained professionals. Texaco remained, however, under a new agreement that allowed it to stay as an advisor and a mentor to the fledgling CEPE until the latter gradually took over oil operations. By 1979, CEPE acquired 62.5% of consortium ownership and, by 1990, became its sole operator.

Coinciding with this period of oil sector nationalization, a series of events strengthened the political agency of oil workers in the new Ecuadorian oil industry. Regionally, organized labor was on the rise among established oil-producing nations. In the 1970s, the Ecuadorian government sent 100 operators to train in Colombia’s Empresa Colombiana de Petróleos (ECOPETROL), in the Barrancabermeja refinery, apparently unaware of the intense labor activism developing there.¹⁹ As one of these Ecuadorian trainees joked in an interview on 10 June 2003, sending the young workers to Barrancabermeja was a “politically irresponsible” move that the Ecuadorian state would regret for the next 40 years: In Colombia “our consciousness was polluted...our perspectives became about revolution, where we saw ourselves as a class with rights and the right to self-represent.”

The first workers’ associations developed precisely out of this cohort of trainees. A former refinery floor manager, interviewed on 14 June 2008, explained that this “nucleus of technicians... mobilized the labor force and marked the vision of what it means to labor for the national petroleum company ... from the refinery, we syndicalized the rest of the labor force to change the terms of capitalism.” A series of small, place-specific unions representing worker needs proliferated as a result, some stronger and more contentious than others.²⁰ These ranged from social clubs to sports federations, to syndicates, and represented the concerns of workers as industrial labor subjects with social reproduction needs (e.g., salary ranges,

vacation and benefits, and the relationship between branch and the worker's social life).

The increasing presence of leftist politics in Ecuador also influenced oil worker politics. In 1971, the main labor organizations in Ecuador—the Catholic-influenced Ecuadorian Confederation of Christian Syndical Organizations (CEDOC), the Marxist influenced Ecuador's Worker Confederation (CTE), and the Confederation of Employees in Semi-State Bodies and Banks (CESBANDOR)—agreed to form the Workers United Front (FUT) to face the growing anti-labor climate in the industrial and manufacturing sectors under the military dictatorship. The FUT called its first strike that same year, calling for a “progressive” and “nationalist” confrontation. For FUT leaders, industrial workers were the actors responsible for transforming society.²¹ Many of the first refinery operators and workers of the petroleum industry identified with this vision and joined the FUT to support demands for better workplace conditions in the industry. As veteran labor organizer Diógenes Cuero Caicedo outlines, workplace conditions at the main refinery were initially deplorable; plant workers often did not have the appropriate security implements to protect them while working under high-risk conditions, and they were often mistreated by administrators.²²

Meanwhile, the oil sector quickly became one of the most important revenue-generating resources in Ecuador, contributing about one-quarter of total government revenue and about a half of its exports. As in many other oil-producing countries, Ecuador assumed a rentier approach to this lucrative sector, where the focus shifted to the administrative redistribution of rents accrued from the sale of oil. Investing little in industrial development or associated productive industries, the Ecuadorian state oversaw a politicized distribution of oil revenues,²³ providing credit to export agriculture and incentives for manufacturing and industry; financing social programs to improve generalized access to education and health; and financing equipment for the Armed Forces. Oil income also allowed a level of economic autonomy from domestic elites, which the state used to strengthen its relationship with citizens via improved quality of life. Throughout the 1980s, jobs in the public sector multiplied; taxes kept relatively low; mega-infrastructural projects built; and subsidies offered for the basic urban services (e.g., cooking gas), all populist strategies to pacify citizen demands, courtesy of oil income.²⁴

PRIVATIZATION AND PETRO-CITIZENSHIP

Just as CEPE was gaining ownership of the oil sector, a debt crisis in 1982 and a significant drop in global oil prices starting in 1983 forced it to adopt a new operational model. The Ecuadorian government broke down the large oil complex into a holding company, Petroecuador, with filial and autonomous state enterprises that managed specific areas: exploration and production (Petroproducción), industrialization (Petroindustrial), and commercialization and transport (Petrocomercial). Each branch was given creative management and economic autonomy over area-specific activities.

As part of the disarticulation of CEPE in the early 1990s, hundreds of workers were fired and transferred to different locations. Workers feared that CEPE's breakup would lead to the loss of the political rights that they had achieved through syndicalization. In this context, the National Federation of State Oil Workers (first FETRAPECEPE and later FETRAPEC), formed in the 1980s by some of the refinery workers sent to train in Colombia, took a prominent role: to represent the class interest of *all* workers. Thus, while workers already belonged to place- and task-specific unions (e.g., maintenance, refinery, pipeline, and storage unions), FETRAPEC functioned as the voice of the *national oil worker* who linked class interests to matters of national security.

FETRAPEC agglutinated class consciousness among oil workers into a form of citizenship where they recognized themselves as members with rights and obligations within the most prestigious and lucrative national industry.²⁵ They were not only a laboring force; as a former FETRAPEC leader described, they were obligated to respond to the historical, moral, and social traditions associated with transforming the resource that fueled the nation's well-being. Thus, while privatization and deregulation alienated labor from its social context, petro-citizenship was a conscious attempt to solidify relations of dependence and co-production with the industry itself.

FETRAPEC cultivated this “petro-citizenship” in two ways: first, on matters of individual social reproduction, which included employment stability protection, remuneration terms, payment hierarchies, subsidies and bonuses, syndical rights, and contract protection; second, in matters of national security, by looking after the universal oil worker, the subject who works for the social reproduction of the collective nation. When workers were redistributed across the complex, they relied on this extended oil subject figure to claim the same workplace rights secured in their original

positions. An oil worker is a national worker, wherever s(he) goes: workplace rights are coproduced with the sovereign rights of the state oil company. As political advisor to FETRAPEC, Ramiro Acosta Cerón, writes, the first clause of the collective contracts that FETRAPEC facilitated always included “the defense of non-renewable patrimony” as the ultimate objective of these contracts.²⁶ Similarly, veteran refinery leader Diogenes Cuero Caicedo writes that the oil worker is not receiving privileges through syndical activities, but requesting recognition for the management and operation of a high-risk sector central to the production of the largest income for the state.²⁷

FETRAPEC leaders and allies visited various worksites, called for general assemblies, and focused on the materiality of labor—how individual bodies toil in the spaces of the oil complex—to educate workers on the need to see themselves as more than just workers. They also produced a magazine, *Revista Petróleo y Sociedad* (Oil and Society) (1994–1998), which showcased the intellectual and material interventions of organized labor throughout the entire oil complex. Through these efforts, they nurtured a “national oil laborer” consciousness that emphasized how the sovereign vacuum created by economic restructuring affected job security and protections workers received as state employees who toil in the high-risk spaces of the oil industry.²⁸ In the Esmeraldas refinery, for example, FETRAPEC leaders talked about the connections between refining oil and refining consciousness.²⁹ As a former FETRAPEC employee described on 28 July 2009, a consciousness of petroleum labor praxis emerged: “those that learn about refining, learn about the economy ... all the possible variables in life are there, in the refining process, in the process of transformation ... this schools you, turns you into a social transformer.” If the labor force was to remain a critical agent in the industry, a former movement leader explained in June 14, 2008, the petroleum worker had to acquire a political vision that extended beyond the traditional spaces of labor and generated support across the industry.

Thus, when the Ecuadorian government proposed to open up oilfield operations to private firms, and partially privatize the refinery and the pipeline in the mid-1990s, organized labor resisted. They claimed that these calls for privatization were a new wave of “primitive re-accumulation” of the nation’s patrimony (Interview, October 21, 2009). Workers believed that disarticulating petroleum and nation minimized their agency, rights, and responsibilities within the industry. In their view, privatization of upstream and downstream sectors would have led to the mass layoffs of

state employees, who would have been replaced by employees of private firms.

Recognizing that privatization raised significant resistance among workers, Petroecuador executives introduced “voluntary resignation,” a form of compensation that offered substantial payoffs for those who agreed to leave the company. Those who voluntarily resigned received thousands of dollars in bonuses and lifetime salaries.³⁰ Others stayed on to fight privatization, using protests, strikes, and the media to question the entire neoliberal economic model. In 2003, for example, several Petroecuador operators went on strike to protest plans for increased involvement of private companies in the country’s oil sector, causing a temporary reduction in flows through Ecuador’s main pipeline. As the Frente Patriótico por la Soberanía Petrolera (FPSN) (a collective of oil workers and allies) put it, a sovereign petroleum policy “starts with the nationalization of petroleum and ends *entreguismo* [selling out resources] and allows the country to restore the rational and sustainable management of its natural resources, so that the revenues derived...are destined to meet the basic needs of the population, as well as restore the productive apparatus of the nation, and do not go exclusively to benefiting the transnational companies.”³¹

Workers actively engaged in civil unrest to oppose privatization, using their laboring bodies to link class consciousness with national consciousness. On October 18, 1995, for example, workers chained themselves to a homemade replica of the nation’s main pipeline, the Trans-Ecuadorian Petroleum Transportation System (SOTE), staged in Quito’s busiest gas station, to raise awareness about its privatization. They entered a hunger strike and even threatened to sever their limbs to emphasize the sacrifice that they were willing to endure to protect the nation’s patrimony. Photographs and editorials in newspapers across the nation documented the strike and helped to generate support for anti-privatization claims.³² The 2-week protest was successful; the government shelved plans to privatize the SOTE. Refinery operators staged similar protests throughout the 2000s. Clad in company uniforms, they lied down in the street in front of government offices and stuck hypodermic needles into their forearms, staining the pavement with their blood. Their goal was to decry how privatization and labor flexibilization in the refinery led the “bleeding out” of the social protections and health of the labor force.³³

FETRAPEC pushed the articulation of laboring bodies and the national body politic further, emphasizing that it was not only the social reproduction of the worker’s body that was on the line, but also the nation’s

sovereignty over its own natural body: oil. For example, FETRAPEC sent public letters to Gutierrez that pointed to the losses to be incurred by the nation if foreign firms were allowed to operate state infrastructure and resources. They stated that because they worked within the intimate, everyday spaces of the industry, they understood how it worked best. Similar letters were sent to Correa in 2007. FETRAPEC critiqued Correa's plan to cede Petroecuador oil operations to foreign companies, which they saw as the continuation of the "old neoliberal project of privatization" that does not have the nation's interests at heart.³⁴

FETRAPEC members often locate their "love" for the movement in this context of citizen action that articulates labor and nation. When asked about their experiences of mobilizing against privatization, for example, leaders described how, in their minds, the physical transformation of oil into the nation's most profitable commodity was linked to the transformation of the national political body. Putting their own bodies at risk, in public spaces, as well as going into hiding for fear of repression and violence, solidified their sense of "fighting the good fight" to keep the nation's physical resource—oil—connected to the nation's political body—the nation. This was a thrilling experience that grounded a consciousness of belonging amongst the oil labor class, and of relevance to Ecuadorian society as a whole. Paradoxically, it is in height of this intense sense of "fighting the good fight," that a decline in the labor movement becomes evident. We turn to this fracturing of oil labor politics next.

THE EXHAUSTION OF THE NATIONAL OIL WORKER

During the 1990s, FETRAPEC conveyed a public image of oil workers as subjects who see the production of oil as interdependent with class interests. "Fighting for" patrimony and sovereignty over oil, in the wake of deregulation and privatization, was the movement's political drive. While FETRAPEC was able to stall the overall restructuring of the oil industry, it was not able to stop other forms of restructuring that changed the structure of labor relations. Below, we describe four interrelated changes in the terms of industrial labor that eventually dismantled FETRAPEC's political capital and exhausted the oil laborer as political subject: the alienation of workers and workplace; the cooptation of the discourse of the left; and the emergence of an anti-politics machine within the movement.

The restructuring of CEPE aimed to decentralize oil operations and open up the industry to create multiple opportunities to insert private capital in the industry. One mechanism to achieve this was to "open up" oil contracts. The nationalization of the oil industry in the 1970s had narrowed down contract types to a few (e.g., services, exploration, etc.). However, in the 1990s, Petroecuador created a variety of contracts that allowed private firms to participate in the oil industry. Services throughout the oil complex that previously had been handled by the state firm were made available to private ones: from oil camp facilities, to laundry services, and to transport and maintenance. This proliferation of contracts was meant to increase the amount of capital invested in the operation of the state-owned company, while allowing the state to cut down production costs.³⁵ However, cutting down costs also affected oil workers. FETRAPEC argued that these reforms did not increase rent efficiency, but that the new contracts created ideological, political, and legal conditions for "hollowing" sovereignty over the national petroleum industry and transforming it into a foreign-controlled one.³⁶

Indeed, the proliferation of contract types translated into labor alienation for state oil workers. A variety of jobs, for example, transport, laundry and food services, camp management, well perforation, and welding, were outsourced through subcontracts with private firms, which brought in new workers to do the work that the CEPE labor force used to do, without collective bargaining protections. Such subcontracting consolidated some of CEPE's worker positions and led to mass-firings. In what seemed like a twisted turn, many of these workers were then rehired work in the same sectors, even do the same jobs, but under short-term contracts that prevented them from participating in organized labor affairs.

The new service contract models effectively minimized the role of the national oil worker. Only those officially employed by the state are protected by unions and can claim national relevance; those who are subcontracted can work alongside syndicalized workers, often perform the same jobs, but are different subjects with different political rights. Thus, by the 1990s, the structures of labor relations and the laws governing such relations had changed in many areas of the oil complex. Thousands of workers no longer had the legal and juridical right to participate in the union. Showing support for labor union activities could easily translate into losing their precarious job positions.

THE COOPTATION OF DISCOURSE

By the late 1990s, Ecuador faced a perfect storm of financial crises, resulting from a banking system collapse, a default on the external debt, natural disasters related to El Niño, and a decline in the price of oil. Between 1998 and 2000, then President Jamil Mahuad initiated fiscal austerity measures to manage the crisis. In 2000, thousands of students, unionists, and indigenous peoples, burdened by and conscious of the costs of neoliberal restructuring, mobilized against Mahuad. Gutierrez, an army colonel at the time, was ordered to contain protestors but instead sided with them, allowing the takeover of the Congress buildings and Gutierrez's temporary installation as one of the leaders in a military-indigenous governing triumvirate of "national salvation."³⁷ Gutiérrez later launched a successful bid for the presidency. His campaign hinged on a nationalist discourse of sovereignty over strategic resources; an anti-establishment ideology; and an economically redistributive, clientelistic approach. In 2003, Gutierrez was elected on this anti-neoliberal, populist platform.

Soon after assuming the presidency, however, Gutierrez agreed to privatize oilfield operations for a renegotiation of Ecuador's foreign debt. FETRAPEC publicly decried foul play; according to a former FETRAPEC leader interviewed on November 24, 2008, Gutierrez's proposal would limit the state's ability to manage rents in favor of Ecuadorians, as prior to the agreement, Petroecuador received 100% of revenues from these fields. To assert their dissent, in June 2003, workers started a slowdown of their activities, which eventually led to an interruption in the functioning of the main pipeline and some refineries. Out of the 9000 Petroecuador employees, 4500 did not go to work as a sign of protest.³⁸ Petroecuador was militarized to safeguard operations and protesting workers were fired. Gutierrez accused workers of interfering with the "natural process of development,"³⁹ and deployed a violent persecution and imprisonment campaign, declaring that workers opposing him were enemies of the state and a threat to the nation's well-being. FETRAPEC members continued to publicly decry privatization efforts, as described at the beginning of this essay, but its leaders went into hiding, fearing for their lives. While workers managed to stall the privatization of the fields, the intense defamation campaigns carried out by the government weakened the public's support for workers. According to a former FETRAPEC leader interviewed on 5 November 2009, by the time, Gutiérrez was ousted in 2005, 60 people

had been fired, accused of terrorism and sabotage, nine of them leaders, and mobilization among the ranks shaken.

Confrontations between organized labor and government continued after Gutierrez’s replacement by Vice President Gustavo Noboa, who shelved oil privatization plans, but also approved a highly controversial pipeline to serve the interests of foreign firms. At this point, the Minister of the Economy, Rafael Correa, who appeared to align with the labor movement’s position, announced his intention to run for president. Correa denounced the environmental injustices associated with foreign firm operations in the Amazon region⁴⁰; annulled the contract of US oil company Occidental due to contractual misconduct; and made evident his support for responsible environmental protection and resource nationalism. In a presidential campaign aired on Radio Luna in 2006, Correa stated that critics “say that *we* [our emphasis] nationalists who oppose [privatizing] politics have a Stalinist vision of the situation. That is completely false ... In truth, *they* have been boycotting Petroecuador, saying that it does not operate well and wanting to sell its oilfields at sickly low prices.”⁴¹

According to an FETRAPEC ally interviewed on July 28, 2009, the labor movement welcomed this nationalist articulation of petroleum sovereignty, though leaders still questioned Correa’s potential as a post-neoliberal candidate. After careful consideration, the labor movement decided to support Luis Macas, an indigenous candidate, declaring their support for a longer history of common struggles and solidarity with indigenous movements. Macas was not a strong candidate, however: he received less than 1% of votes on the first round and thus left the presidential race. The second round of elections put Correa against Alvaro Noboa, a Guayaquil banana magnate and former President of Ecuador’s Monetary Board, with a track record of abuses against worker unions, tax evasion, and privatization. This was a turning point for the oil labor movement: oil workers (and other sectors of the Left) chose to support Correa, because they wanted to avoid Noboa’s presidency at all costs. Correa won the 2007 presidential election with a strong campaign of a “renewed” Left that stood against the “long neoliberal night” of privatizations and denationalizations.

As Ecuador’s president, Correa effectively became the strongest and loudest voice of the Left, temporarily agglutinating the position of a myriad of civil society sectors dissatisfied with neoliberal economics. He eliminated the debt repayment fund and redirected it to public expenditures. He renegotiated contracts with foreign firms to gather a larger percentage of

windfall profits and to reduce the number and type of possible contracts available. However, Correa's nationalist discourse changed soon after, when at a 2008 meeting with the Petroecuador executive board, he threw his support behind privatization.⁴² He allowed Petroecuador to share the operations of Ecuador's most productive oilfields, despite his previous position on oil nationalism. FETRAPEC leaders were among the first to publicly question Correa's policies, saying that was continuing Gutierrez's neoliberal framing, and cautioned that he would bring more "invisible privatizations" (Interview, November 7, 2009).

Correa responded with a heavy hand, aiming to shake the hold of FETRAPEC among oil workers. While movement leaders saw themselves as denouncing Correa's "covert neo-liberalism," Correa re-signified them as "petroleum mafias" that impeded progress. Taking advantage of changes in labor laws that limit who can engage in political activism, leaders became a target in the industry's streamlining. The Correa administration restructured the upper echelons of administration in an effort to bring management under greater state supervision; the semi-autonomous branches, which used to have their own boards, have now been fused again under the centralized supervision of a board of directors. Tellingly, while each branch had a member of FETRAPEC on the board, in the latest board structure, the labor force had no representation.

The Correa administration followed up with an aggressive mediatic campaign that revived the criticism levied in the previous administrations against the *burocracias doradas* of Petroecuador. An *Ecuavisa* news program in 2008, for example, made public that 226 voluntary resignations in Petroecuador amounted to \$31 million dollars of "the people's money." Leaders countered this scrutiny over their activities and called it a state-backed strategy to break down class unity.⁴³ These tactics of denunciation and countering isolated the labor movement from former allies, such as indigenous and environmental movements, which, by 2011, were desperately seeking dialogue, not rupture, with the government. More importantly, the Correa administration successfully appropriated the language and representation of the Left, incorporating well-known representatives of the Left into his political party and leaving out those with more critical voices, such as organized labor. For FETRAPEC, this means the cooptation of the very nationalist and patrimonial ideals that gave meaning to the oil labor movement and left it without a national voice.

During Correa’s administration, many of the most militant labor union leaders were strategically laid off, accused of tampering with the country’s economic development, some labeled as “terrorists” with their lives threatened if they continued opposing the restructuring of Petroecuador. Diego Cano, former president of FETRAPEC, for example, declared in a 2010 radio interview that of the 3800 workers with long-term, direct laboring experience in Petroecuador, over 1000 workers have been fired or retired between 2008 and 2010.

THE ANTI-POLITICS OF THE NEW OIL LABORER

While FETRAPEC leaders had actively and at times successfully stalled privatization in the upstream and downstream areas of the industry, it was not able to end the mass firings of state employees, particularly those with historical memory of the syndicate. With a diminished leadership, fewer workers were willing to put their jobs on the line for nationalist ideals, which effectively disarticulated class and national labor politics in oil worker consciousness. Privatization effectively strengthened an “anti-politics machine”⁴⁴ within the movement that minimized national politics as part of the petro-ethic of workers. FETRAPEC leaders began to understand that “standing up” to the state machine was exhausting their agency, exiling them from the political stage as a failing/flailing force. Moreover, FETRAPEC members asked leaders to bracket attacks on the Correa administration and to treat worker-related issues, like job security and “the right to work,” as a domain independent of national politics, morality, and culture. This conscious disconnecting of class and nation paired down FETRAPEC’s role in the oil industry.

The case of the small fuel enterprise Gasolinas y Petroleos S.A. (GASPETSA) exemplifies this disarticulation. GASPETSA was a fuel refining firm created by a cooperative of state oil workers firms in 1999, under the auspices of the Law of Modernization, which stated that public employees can participate in the de-monopolization and privatization of public enterprises. These workers signed an agreement with Petrocomercial in 2001, under an emergency decree, to manufacture gasoline derivatives for fisherfolk demand in the Province of Esmeraldas, in northwest Ecuador, where the refinery is located. GASPETSA processed the fuel and Petrocomercial distributed it locally. According to GASPETSA, Petroecuador profited from the deal: while GASPETSA applied technical knowledge to mix the fuel for local markets, it was the state company who

sold it. Moreover, according to a FETRAPEC leader interviewed in June 2010, Petroecuador did not apply subsidies, as is the case of all other oil derivatives in Ecuador. Approximately 200,000 artisanal fisherfolk used GASPETSAs services. The contract was renewed in 2005.

In September 2010, the National Secretary of Business Management Transparency accused GASPETSA shareholders (628 Petroecuador workers) of perjury against national interests.⁴⁵ Legendary Ecuadorian cartoonist, Asdrúbal de la Torre, captured this moment of “public ethic” questioning⁴⁶ in a cartoon depicting President Correa smelling “something fishy” in Petroecuador’s labor affairs (Fig. 2). The Secretary of Transparency called GASPETSA’s agreement with Petrocomercial illegal and punishable under the new Internal Regulations of the Labor Code of the Law of Public Enterprises prohibits a state employee from having agreements or contracts with a public enterprise to derive profit when there is a conflict of interest. The Secretary sustained that workers were using privileged information to maintain a contract of derivatives delivery and that GASPETSA shareholders did not declare earnings from their active shares. FETRAPEC, in its role as worker representative, countered that GASPETSA was wrongfully accused; its services were carried out under a signed agreement with Petrocomercial and was fully known by Petroecuador.⁴⁷ Soon after the accusation, Petrocomercial rescinded the agreement.

In all sites of the oil complex, from refinery to storage to oilfields, workers were affected by the accusation. Workers marched daily on the

Fig. 2 President Correa smells “something fishy” going on in Petroecuador. Caricature by Asdrúbal de la Torre, *Diario Hoy* (2010, p. 5).



streets of Quito and Esmeraldas, carrying signs that depicted images of hand palms open-wide and read “oil workers are not corrupt.” They also articulated laboring bodies with the right to work: wearing uniforms and hard hats, the fired workers carried banners that read “*somos manos limpias y trabajadoras*” (“we are clean, laboring hands”). The effort was to showcase a work ethic that is about connection to a job and minimizes the politics of nation. In a 2010 demonstration in front of the Presidential palace in Quito, a technician charged with overseeing pipeline operations and wearing a black shirt with the number “628” (the number of people fired because of their association with GASPETSA), lamented how “politics got in the way of doing work.”

Later, marches turned into a critique of government, suggesting that the firings were a strategy to get rid of Petroecuador’s longest-serving workers. Many of the workers fired had been originally with CEPE. In protests, workers highlighted their plight as citizens under attack: “we are Ecuadorians with families, Mr. President.” Through FETRAPEC, they also appealed for legal protection through the International Commission for Human Rights and the International Court. The next step, according to FETRAPEC, was to begin penal lawsuits against the President of Petroecuador and the Secretary of Transparency, which would allow workers to receive payment for burdens incurred as a result of the accusations. “The firings are unconstitutional and are affecting the honor of many families,” concluded Diego Cano, the president of FETRAPEC.⁴⁸

Sensing the possibility of a disadvantageous outcome, by May 2011, Petroecuador agreed to hire back the majority of the workers affiliated with GASPETSA, under the condition that they desist of legal action against the state firm.⁴⁹ However, they were rehired under short-term contracts, which did not recognize the long-term benefits that they had accrued through their service in Petroecuador. For the affected employees, some of whom had been with Petroecuador for over 25 years, these were devastating news. By 2012, all but about 100 employees had returned to Petroecuador, cleared from the wrongful accusation. As became increasingly evident with this high-profile case, workers no longer talked about resource sovereignty or national struggles. Worker rights centered, again, around the immediate needs of oil laborers as a class, not as a national vanguard in the oil industry. Consciousness of their greater role as defenders of the petro-nation was not mentioned in their counter demands. For now, they were grateful that their “rights and names had

been absolved,” and that they were “ready to give their all again for Petroecuador.”⁵⁰

MUTING THE NATIONAL OIL LABOR SUBJECT

FETRAPEC’s reduction and marginalization were not the last event in the exhaustion of the labor movement. In 2014, the Correa administration proposed constitutional amendments that modified the political agency of all laboring subjects. The 1998 Constitution, influenced by social movements, originally distinguished worker types between *obrero* (limited skills worker) and *obrero calificado* (skilled workers with specialized training). While *obreros* are regulated by the Labor Code, which protects the freedom to syndicalize, strike, and claim collective bargaining, *obreros calificados* and public servants are regulated by the Organic Law of Public Service (LOSEP), which does not guarantee collective bargaining rights. If a worker receives specialized training, and or manages, organizes, administers, or represents the interests of others, s(he) has conducted “intellectual” work and thus is no longer regulated by the Labor Code.

Under the 2014 amendment, workers conducting “intellectual” work (e.g., organized labor leadership) would be recognized as “public servants,” and regulated by the LOSEP. According to the leaders of the traditional labor unions, such as the FUT, these changes in regulation and rights protection violate the fundamental principles recognized under the International Labor Organization (ILO) and amount to a serious retreat in the rights of the laboring class. Implementing the amendments would mean that no state employee could claim the protection of labor rights available under the Labor Code.

In the midst of these contentious amendments, a new labor organization, the Central Unificada de Trabadores (CUT), with close ties to the Correa administration, formed. The CUT vocally supported Correa’s position. Relevant to the oil workers movement is that one of the most public leaders of the CUT, John Reyes, is also the General Secretary of the Petroecuador Committee Workers, the union that replaced FRETRAPEC under the Correa administration. This articulation of government and oil workers is palpable in several television interviews featuring Mr. Reyes. While supportive of amendments, he cautiously claims that oil workers are worried about their future. They are paying attention to how they are recognized in the Constitution and in labor laws, as this affects their personal well-being as *obreros*. Emphasizing the high-risk labor conditions of

industrial workers, Mr. Reyes pointed out that state oil workers should have their own labor code. The LOSEP does not guarantee a series of fundamental labor rights, such as the right to organize as political subjects to protect themselves through collective bargaining, and against the health and environmental risks that come with being an industrial professional. Working with the raw resource, he states and imposes greater risks for the oil worker.

In this twenty-first century contrapuntual relation between the reorganization of the state oil company and oil worker resistance, Mr. Reyes came back to the very arguments and observations that the oil workers movement of the 1970s fought for: the connection between worker bodies and the material conditions of production. Collective consciousness of how bodies interact with oil production and that of the inherent risks of industrial production are the reasons why collective bargaining, the right to strike, and the right to syndicalization must be protected. “This is democracy,” stated Mr. Reyes in an interview in a televised news special in December 2014, “what we want is for the government to check in situ the conditions in which we work...our particularity.” While the new labor organization draws connections between body, identity, and capital, its consciousness is predominantly about citizen rights and the plight of individuals, not about the sovereign rule of the petro-nation. The CUT does not use the platform of the national oil worker as a political subject position.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In August 2015, thousands of people marched from the Amazon to Quito to state their disapproval of the Correa administration. Organized labor called for a national strike, demanding the right of collective bargaining. Diverse sectors mobilized to counter the constitutional amendments proposed by the Correa administration and its political economy of resource extraction. Members of the FUT were present, though not able to gather significant following. The CUT, affine to the Correa administration, was also present, focusing on labor-specific concerns. National level indigenous organizations made up the majority of the opposition, focusing on Correa’s extractivist agenda, and claiming that oil exploitation threatens their right to live a dignified life. FETRAPEC was absent. Only former employees, now removed from Petroecuador for decades, marched alongside protesters, offering support as individuals aligned with the left, not as political

representatives of the oil complex. There was no demand focused on the management of oil rents or on oil national identity or sovereignty. The oil-sovereignty political position was missing; any oil-related concerns publicly expressed were limited to the conditions of labor, such as the risks of working industrial sites. Any connection to the petro-nation was mentioned in relation to protecting those who labor the nation, rather than the other way around, laborers protecting the nation.

This essay counterpointed the emergence and exhaustion of the oil workers movement with the shifting political economy of oil in Ecuador. The counterpointing methodology allowed tracing the trajectories in labor belonging/disarticulation since the 1970s, demonstrating the entanglements of the movement with juridical-legal frameworks, public opinion, and class interest. Organized labor shared the characteristics of labor aristocracy but also combined this with a sophisticated petro-ethic of citizenship that fueled its resistance but also made it vulnerable to the shifting structures of the oil industry. The rise and decline of FETRAPEC is a testament to the organic nature of social movements, and to how their shifting contexts matter to their continued relevance.

It is not possible to claim a conclusion about the fate of the oil labor movement in Ecuador at this point. It is possible to see, nonetheless, that a general retreat in the discourse of the Left has taken place, where “sovereignty” and “state” are no longer part of the vocabulary of organized labor. And that the fragmentation of organized labor as a force of resistance, and its reconfiguration into state-backed actors, will no doubt shape the future of labor politics in Ecuador, as in much of Latin America.

Meanwhile, the national oil industry continues to experience organizational and infrastructural changes, some associated with de-nationalization, others with the Correa administration’s push for alternative sources of energy. More broadly, the cooptation and bounding of the discourse of the Left by the state has repositioned the image of social movements and limited the spaces of dissent and critique. In the current context of declining national oil production and declining price of the barrel of oil, we do not see a decline in labor politics but a search for new political spaces. As Achim Wachendorfer suggests, exiled labor leaders are aiming to form supra-national forms of collective organizing that draw on their common lessons with neoliberal restructuring to reconfigure labor politics.⁵¹ Former FETRAPEC leaders have ventured into these collaborative spaces, though it is still unclear how these new structures can intervene in the deregulated labor structures of Ecuador.

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28. Ibid.
29. Movement members include a diversity of state employees, such as refinery operators, apprentices, floor managers, fuel storage site managers, environmental oversight and commercialization employees, maintenance employees. Understandably, this diversity means that participating in collective decision-making is a challenge. Worker associations use large, general meetings to discuss worker interests. Due to different work schedules and locations of work, only small groups of workers are able to attend assemblies at the same time. When assembly is called, some teams are not able to attend because they are at work or they are just ending their shift. A council of worker representatives was tried in the early 1980s but abandoned as conflicts over political affiliations reproduced more divisions over collective bargaining.
30. These “sweet” enticements appeared at first as a positive gain for the few who agreed to voluntary resignation. But once the payoffs were brought up to public scrutiny by the media, they tarnished the reputation of the entire labor movement, breeding distrust among movement members.
31. The FSNP is a collective that includes labor unions as well as civil society movements, such as the Coordinadora Por la Vida, Coordinadora de Movimientos Sociales, CONAIE, Diego Borja, Movimiento Polo Democrático, and Observatorio de las Energías.
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