

The worker's massacre of 1928 in the Magdalena Zona Bananera - Colombia¹

La masacre de 1928 en la Zona Bananera, Magdalena – Colombia

Jorge Enrique Elías Caro²
Antonino Vidal Ortega³

Abstract

This paper analyzes the reasons behind the Massacre of Workers in the Banana Zone of Magdalena, Colombia, carried out by the Colombian Army on December 6th, 1928. The author describes the dynamics of the International Banana Market and its relationship with the multinational companies and with the Colombian Labor and Trade Union regulations. There is also an analysis of the past history and context of this conflict, which inspired the Nobel Prize Winner Gabriel García Márquez in one of the chapters of his novel “One Hundred Years of Solitude”, and of the manipulation of the information as registered by the Colombian Government and the United Fruit Company.

Keywords: United Fruit Company, Bananeras, Caribbean, press, army, workers.

Resumen

El presente trabajo analiza las condiciones del porqué se presentó la masacre obrera ocurrida el 6 de diciembre de 1928 en la Región Bananera del Magdalena (Colombia) por parte de las tropas del Ejército colombiano, para ello, se hace una descripción de las dinámicas del entorno mundial de la fruta, su relación con las compañías multinacionales y el régimen laboral y sindical en Colombia. De igual forma se hace un análisis del contexto y de los antecedentes del conflicto, así como también de la tergiversación de la información presentada por parte del Estado Colombiana y la United Fruit Company, hechos estos que sirvieron de base para inspirar un capítulo de la novela “Cien Años de Soledad” del Nobel en literatura Gabriel García Márquez.

Palabras clave: United Fruit Company, Bananeras, Caribe, Prensa, Ejercito, Obreros.

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² PhD in History, Master in Latin America and the Caribbean contemporary History, Master in Business Administration, Specialist in Public International Law. Research Professor at the Universidad del Magdalena (Santa Marta-Colombia).

³ PhD in History, Director of the History and Social Sciences Department at Universidad del Norte (Barranquilla-Colombia)

Introduction

One of the main variables – which cannot be neglected- for which Colombia has been on the international news is for the ongoing violent events taking place in its territory and its effect on the population. Among them we have terrorist events, kidnapping, blackmailing and of course, the subject of this work, political massacres and assassination of workers' leaders and union members.⁴

In the Colombian political and social history there are many events that have left a deep mark in their citizens' conscience, especially for their tragic nature, but none of them is so much remembered in literature and history as the one that took place on December 6th, 1928 in Ciénaga, Magdalena, where a numerous group of workers on strike was massacred.⁵ These events were collected in some of the best novels of the Colombian Caribbean⁶ and this has allowed the development of socio-economical and political works elaborated by the most recognized local and foreign historians.⁷ And even today, this continues to be one of the most important episodes of collective memory, because even after more than 80 years it still produces contradictory feelings among the scholars in history; according to Literature professor Joaquín Robles and historian Mauricio Archila,

⁴ Aviva Chomsky follows this trail of tragic events in the book *Linked Labour Histories, New England, Colombia and the Making of Global Working Class*. Duke University Press, Durham and Londres, 2008.

⁵ It is worth clarifying that this was not the first workers' massacre in Colombia, because in 1919 there was one of artisans in Bogotá and another of workers of the Tropical Oil Company along the decade of the 20's See Enrique Valencia. "El movimiento Obrero Colombiano". In Pablo González Casanova (Coordinador) *Historia del Movimiento Obrero en América Latina*. México, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales de la UNAM and Siglo XXI Editores. 1984. pp. 9 -151.

⁶ This event has been narrated in literature: "*Cien años de Soledad*" from the Colombian Nobel Prize Gabriel García Márquez, who was precisely born in Aracataca (Zona Bananera from Magdalena) that same year; "*La casa grande*" from Álvaro Céspedes Samudio; and "*La historia del soldado recluta*", written by the playwright Carlos José Reyes. And in the excellent story "*Si no fuera por la zona Caramba*" from the writer Ramón Illán Bacca.

⁷ Concerning scientific works see Catherine Legrand's *Frontiers expansion and peasant protest in Colombia*, University of New Mexico Press, 1986; Eduardo Posada Carbó "*La novela como historia: Cien años de Soledad y las bananeras*". Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico, Vol. 35, Number 48. Banco de la República. Bogotá, 1998. pp. 1-19; Judith White, "*Historia de una Ignominia: la United Fruit en Colombia*". Bogotá. Presencia Ltda. 1980; Gabriel Fonnegra *Bananeras, un testimonio vivo*. Bogotá, Tercer Mundo Editores, 1980, 1ª edición; Bogotá, Círculo de Lectores, 1987, 2ª edición.

“given the fact that there is still not explicitness, nor consensus on what really happened that night in that far away town of the Colombian Caribbean Region”.⁸

To highlight the vast literature that has been produced by North American historiography, mainly due to the fact that UFC archives are found in Harvard’s Business School. Subjects as the organization of the company, the expansion throughout the Caribbean territories, the relationship between growers and the company, the environmental problems produced in the ecological environment, the building of infrastructure, the migration of workers, etc, have been dealt with, highlighting authors like Aviva Chomsky, Dario Euraque, Jonh Soulari or Marcelo Bucheli, to the specific case of Colombian plantations, among others.

The Colombian Caribbean *bananera* zone area was located in what is now the current department of *Magdalena* in the first half of the twentieth century, and it spread on a plain between the *Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta* and *Ciénaga Grande* with an area of 40,000 hectares. It is located at sea level with an average temperature above 30 degrees Celsius. During the first half of the twentieth century it’s production competed with the one of whole countries of the Caribbean Basin, occupying an important production in the world market; the beginning of its decadence came in the 60's of last century. The exports of bananas started with the initiative of the United Fruit Company which invested in infrastructure to turn certain urban centres into an export enclave. The favourable conditions of production and export were only interrupted by two joints, the Great Depression and World War II.

On November 12th, 1928 a strike was summoned. It had the participation of more than 25.000 plantation workers, who were demanding dignified working conditions. They wanted to put pressure on *the United Fruit Company* to formalize contract conditions of

⁸ For a better understanding of this context I recommend the works of: Joaquín Robles Zabala “*La Reinención de la Historia: una visión macondiana de la masacre de las bananeras*”. pp. 1-6; and Mauricio Archila Neira “*Sangre en la plantación*”. See in: <http://platohedro.blogspot.com/2008/12/sangre-en-la-plantacin.html>. Taken from the net on August 4th, 2009; Carlos Payares González. “Las Moscas del Banano. Memoria de una Epopeya”. In Carlos Payares González *Memoria de una Epopeya, 80 años de la Huelga y Masacre de las bananeras del Magdalena*. Santa Marta. Alcaldía Municipal de Ciénaga. 2008. pp. 447-113.

workers.⁹ It is estimated that there were 150.000 workers devoted to gathering banana crops for the UFC in the Great Caribbean Basin. 16.7% were Colombians. The UFC in the Magdalena banana region exported 10.3 million racemes. Colombia was the third banana producer in the world. Banana exports represented 7% of the total of the country¹⁰ and the largest source of employment in the Colombian Caribbean.¹¹

During the first decades of the last century, the *United Fruit Company* expanded in several Caribbean countries, such as Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Panama, Honduras and Guatemala.¹² According to the data of Catherine Legrand, around 1920, the UFC had 1.383.485 hectares of plantations; it had built 2.434 Kilometres of railways, it had 90 steam boats, known as the Great White Fleet which transported bananas from the

⁹ Marcelo Buchelli “Tras la visita del señor Herbert: United Fruit Company, élites locales y movimiento obrero en Colombia”. In Carlos Dávila Ladrón De Guevara, (comp.): *Empresas y empresarios en la historia de Colombia. Siglos XIX – XX. Una colección de estudios recientes*. Uniandes, Norma, Bogotá, 2002. pp. 737 -770.

¹⁰ Antonio Luís Rodríguez Acosta: *El banano y su desarrollo en Colombia*. Universidad del Magdalena. Santa Marta. 2001. Theodore E. Nichols, *Tres puertos de Colombia: Estudio sobre el desarrollo de Cartagena, Santa Marta y Barranquilla.*, Bogotá, Banco Popular, 1973; Manuel Díaz Granados: *Geografía Económica del Magdalena Grande (1946-1955)*, Santa Marta, Instituto de Cultura del Magdalena, 1996. pp. 284-289; Adolfo Meisel Roca: *La economía de Ciénaga después del Banano*. Documentos de Trabajo Sobre Economía Regional. Banco de la República. Cartagena. 2004; Joaquín Vilorio De La Hoz: *Historia Empresarial del Guineo: Empresas y Empresarios Bananeros en el Departamento del Magdalena, 1870-1930*. Cuadernos de Historia Económica y Empresarial Number 23. Banco de la República. Cartagena. Mayo de 2009.

¹¹ John Soluri: “*Banana Cultures: Linking the Production And Consumption of Export Bananas, 1800 – 1980*”. In Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg: *Banana Wars. Power, Production, and History in the Americas*. Duke

University Press. Durham and London, 2002.

¹² For a better understanding the world situation of the banana business , see Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg: *Banana Wars. Power, Production, and History in the Americas*. Duke University Press. Durham and London, 2002. For the case of Central America we recommend the work of Darío Euraque: *El Imperialismo y Honduras como “República Bananera”*: *Hacia una nueva Historiografía*. Ponencia presentada en la Conferencia de Latino American Studies Association (Lasa). Guadalajara- México, abril 17-19 de 1997; as well as in his book *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic. Region and State in Honduras, 1870 – 1972*. Chapel Hill, Londres 1996; in the *The Threat of Blackness to the Mestizo Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Honduran Banana Economy, 1920s and 1930s*. In Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg: *Banana Wars. Power, Production, and History in the Americas*. Duke University Press. Durham and London, 2002. For the Cuban case, although it was not on banana plantations, but of sugar cane, the dynamics were the same. See the works of Oscar Zanetti Lecuona *La United Fruit Company en Cuba: Organización del Trabajo y Resistencia Obrera*. Santa Marta. Revista “Clío América” Number 4. Universidad del Magdalena. 2008. pp. 238-258; as well as Oscar Zanetti Lecuona y Alejandro García Álvarez: *United Fruit Company: un caso del dominio imperialista en Cuba*, La Habana, Editorial Ciencias Sociales. 1976. for the case of Costa Rica Viales Hurtado *Después del encalve 1927-1950*. Universidad de Costa Rica, San José, 1998.

Caribbean to Europe and the United States.¹³ The economical and political influence of the United Fruit Company was so immense that in 1928 it had 5.636 Kilometres of telegraphic and telephonic cables and 24 radio stations (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Working day with machinery in the banana plantations in Magdalena. Source: Photography Collection of the United Fruit Company, box 31, No. 673. Photography taken on June 4th, 1929. Publication authorized by Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

This research began with the intention of presenting the events from the point of view collected by the local press -a barely used information- and giving to the specialists knowledge of these sources, and how the Colombian national press reflected the impact of the violent event. We do not intend to tell a story of banana exploitation or the *bananera* company itself. What we want to emphasize as a main idea is that not only were banana workers affected, but all the inhabitants of the area as well. We do not intend to create a clash in the points of view expressed by other specialists but to provide previously unknown information that can help complete the vision of the banana dispute, which was forced by both the government forces and the interests of the UFC, and the political unions distorted by radical revolutionary ideas that had a significant share of responsibility of the bloody events.

¹³ Rodríguez Acosta. *El Banano...* op. cit.

A second intention is to present a series of national research works written in Spanish that have had limited distribution in the historiography of Anglo-Saxon scenario and provide interesting results in analysis, reflection and data which we consider necessary to publicize.

¹⁴ (Figure 1)

Previous days to the massacre

Protest started due to the indirect hiring of workers on the part of the company, which decreased costs greatly by not paying legal labour benefits by using sub-contractors. One of the articles of the work agreement stipulated “*all the work details will be in charge of the contractor firm and neither the contractor nor the worker will be workers of the United Fruit Company*”. The company alleged on its defence that the workers did not belong to the company and that abuses were committed by the contracting part. The main objective of the strike was to put pressure on the UFC to force it to comply with the Colombian Labour laws approved in 1915¹⁵, which the *United Fruit Company*¹⁶ avoided to comply since it meant to grant certain benefits to workers.

Several days before the killings, regional newspapers offered a hopeful vision. The daily paper “La Prensa” announced that the strike was being negotiated satisfactorily as a consequence of a communication from Bogotá from the Chief of the Work Office, Dr. Hoyos Becerra, where it was stated that the Ministers of Industry and Government, supported by members of their staff were in the Banana Zone as mediators to find a

¹⁴ For a better understanding of the internal reality of the UFC banana plantations at a global level, see Steve Striffler: *In the Shadows Of State And Capital. The United Fruit Company, Popular Struggle, and Agrarian restructuring*. Duke University Press. Durham and London 2002. Roberto Herrera Soto and Rafael Romero Castañeda: *La Zona Bananera del Magdalena. Historia y Léxico*. Bogotá. Instituto Caro y Cuervo. 1979.

¹⁵ This period was dominated by the conservatives who defended their ideals. Only after 1931 the liberals acceded power. Taken from O. Rodríguez: *Economía institucional, corriente principal y heterodoxia*. Revista de Economía Institucional, 4, Primer Trimestre. 2001. See also William McGreevy: *Historia económica de Colombia, 1845-1930*. Bogotá. Tercer Mundo. 1975.

¹⁶ This work issue was not only present in Colombia, but also in all the zones where the United Fruit Company operated. See in Marcelo Buchelli: *United Fruit Company in Latin America*. Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg: *Banana Wars. Power, Production, and History in the Americas*. Duke University Press. Durham and London, 2002.

solution. The news mentioned that the situation was improving since the superior officials of the government and the workers' delegates *had been able to remain within the law with a remarkable moderation and civilian respect*.¹⁷

Due to the strike, and with the aim of lowering the pressure exerted on the company, it decided to pay the first two weeks of salary of the workers, which it was in debt of paying. It reached the amount of \$30.000 and the company considered it could serve to resist the strike for some more days, especially because commerce had become difficult, sales had diminished 75% and the banks had difficulties collecting debts.¹⁸ . The strike started on the second week of November; by the end of the month, after three weeks the news coming from the government about the imminent end of the movement were contradictory, since the only certainty was that it continued. The strike movement had two commissions of workers: one was in charge of logistics and the other one of surveillance to avoid banana harvesting.¹⁹

This situation caused great losses to all economic sectors, especially to commerce. Almost \$30.000 were the average daily loss suffered by the department, which means that on the average, the month-cost of the conflict reached \$1.000.000.²⁰ This amount would have mostly come from the fruit exports and it would have left a considerable remaining capital for workers.

Another difficulty was the fact that the daily living of the Magdalena towns occurred around the bananas' economy²¹. The most important was to work in a plantation. This fact

¹⁷ "La Prensa". Number 242. Barranquilla, Thursday 29th November 1928. P. 5^a.

¹⁸ *Ibíd.*

¹⁹ Joaquín Vilorio De La Hoz: *Historia Empresarial del Guineo: Empresas y Empresarios Bananeros en el Departamento del Magdalena, 1870-1930*. Cuadernos de Historia Económica y Empresarial Number 23. Centro de Estudios Económico Regionales. Banco de la República. Cartagena. May 2009.

²⁰ "La Prensa". Number 242. Barranquilla, Thursday 29th November 1928. p. 5^a.

²¹ Catherine Legrand illustrates in detail this situation in the chapter "Living in Macondo: Economy and Culture in a United Fruit Company Banana Enclave in Colombia" in the book *Close Encounters Of Empires. Writing the Cultural History of U.S. – Latin American Relations*. Editado por Gilbert M- Joseph, Catherine Legrand And Ricardo D. Salvatore. Duke University Press. Durham and London. 1998.

did not help promote education. The schools in the zone started to be built in the 1930s. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Social conditions of the families living in the Zona Bananera. Source: Photographic collection of the United Fruit Company, box 31, No. 299. Photography taken on April 24th, 1925. Publication authorized by Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

In the 1920s there were 35.000 cultivated Hectares, which represented 57% of the exports of the Colombian Caribbean.²² Small farmers taking part in the strike decided their participation to face the monopoly exerted by the UFC in the commercialization of bananas in the international markets²³, which prevented them from direct negotiations and forced them to seek the intermediation of UFC and secondly, because they depended on the UFC for any credit, risk or marketing operations of their product worldwide, which allowed the

²² Carlos Payares González. “Las Moscas del Banano. Memoria de una Epopeya”. In Carlos Payares González *Memoria de una Epopeya, 80 años de la Huelga y Masacre de las bananeras del Magdalena*. Santa Marta. Alcaldía Municipal de Ciénaga. 2008. pp. 447-113.

²³ Laura T. Raynolds: “The Global Banana Trade”. In: Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg: *Banana Wars. Power, Production, and History in the Americas*. Duke University Press. Durham and London, 2002.

multinational to manipulate prices and to impose producers sale conditions. In order to obtain credit, the company forced them to sign exclusive production contracts for terms not shorter than five years with the purpose of assuring the exclusion of local rivals and guarantee its position as the sole international commercial company.



Figure 3. Storehouse and Administrative general store of the United Fruit Company in Ciénaga. Source: United Fruit Company photographic collection, box 30, No. 643. Photography taken on March 14th, 1929. Publication authorized by Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

In the *Zona Bananera* prosperity depended on the workers' consumption. But the United Fruit had its own administrative offices who sold merchandise with a 20% discount. The United Fruit became a direct competitor of traditional commerce and therefore this sector supported the strike. As a sale strategy the company maintained low prices to keep low salaries during general inflation periods and at the same time it started to pay with coupons, so that the workers could only buy in their administrative offices. (Figure 3)

Merchants from Ciénaga, along with commercial companies from Barranquilla –who were the ones importing merchandise- were the ones who contributed the most to the agitation of masses. It should also be added that starting 1928 the merchants from Barranquilla were exasperated because the steamboats of the White Fleet arrived to their port to sell merchandise from Europe, the United States and the Caribbean Islands. Merchants put

pressure on the workers to include this issue on their list of demands in order to get their support.²⁴



Figure 4. “Indiana” working camp in the banana plantations in Magdalena. Source: United Fruit Company photographic collection, box 30, No. 600. Photography taken on October 10th, 1928. Publication authorized by Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

The conflict would not have been so tragic if for one part, the workers had taken another attitude facing a possible agreement and on the other part, if the government staff would have made a more serious evaluation of the situation. Beside the contract legalization of workers from the part of the multinational company and not from the contractor, strikers also demanded the construction of hospitals and compensation for work accidents. They also demanded the possibility to have access to proper living facilities, because according to the workers, life conditions in the plantations were unhealthy and miserable. According to the testimony of an inhabitant the camp sites were no more than huts where people would sleep in overcrowding, lacking water, latrines...etc²⁵ (Figure 4).

²⁴ Catherine Legrand. *El Conflicto*. ... Op. Cit. p. 194.

²⁵ *Ibíd.* p. 189.

On October 6th, during the Assembly of the Workers Union a list of demands with the following nine points was approved unanimously in the locality of Ciénaga²⁶. 1.) mandatory collective insurance; 2.) compensation for work accidents; 3.) hygienic dormitories and remunerated Sunday leaves; 4.) a 50% increase in the daily pay of workers earning less than \$100 pesos per month; 5.) abolishment of the administrative office stores; 6.) abolition of loans through coupons; 7.) weekly pay; 7.) abolition of the contractor's system; 9.) improvement of the hospital services. As there was no agreement the Government militarized the zone. The newspaper "La Prensa" published the following:

"MORE TROOPS FOR THE BANANERA REGION. We have been informed that the leaving of the Commissioner sent by the Industry Ministry due to the existing conflict between the workers and the company has turned the situation critical. For this reason, the War Ministry ordered the concentration of more troops in Ciénaga. Therefore, yesterday night, a numerous contingent was dispatched from here on a special ship".²⁷

By the end of November the Magdalena Agriculture Society tried to find a solution to the situation. They named a Commission and along with the Chief of the Work Office and the workers' delegates would have a meeting with the UFC since the conflict was affecting everyone's interests²⁸. The multinational rejected meeting the Commission stating that the workers were out of the law. The representatives of the workers left for Ciénaga with the aim of convincing their fellow workers to abandon the region. They also demanded the arbitration²⁹ as a last legal resort.

The workers representatives were backed up by the merchant delegates, small land owners, liberal politicians and union leaders. Among them were the members of the Revolutionary

²⁶ In the book *Memoria de una Epopeya, 80 años de la Huelga y Masacre de las bananeras del Magdalena*, edited by Carlos Payares González there is a complete presentation of the list of demands.

²⁷ "La Prensa". Number 244. Barranquilla, Saturday 1st December 1928. p. 1.

²⁸ A better explanation of the events is found in Jaime Villareal Torres and Jorge Diazgranados in *Sucesos del Magdalena en el siglo XX*. Santa Marta. Presencia Ltda. 1989; Jaime Villareal Torres: *Aquí Santa Marta*. Santa Marta. Empresas Públicas de Santa Marta. 1980.

²⁹ "La Prensa". Number 244. Barranquilla, Saturday 1st December 1928. p. 5^a.

Social Party (PSR) founded in 1927 in Bogotá.³⁰ The strike was also supported by the national and departmental union leaders ascribed to the Magdalena Workers Federation, the Magdalena Worker Union and the General Union of Workers of the Union Society (popularly known as the Yellow Union which integrated railway, port and construction workers of Santa Marta).³¹

The first week of December everything was at a standstill, without a solution. The company hired a steamboat and brought 200 military men and took over the town hall without the mayor's authorization³². To this respect the Ciénaga newspaper "Diario del Córdoba" noted:

*"We do not know who ordered changing the town house into a campsite of troops, but we are certain that the municipality spokesman was not consulted for this illegal occupation. He would have certainly opposed it since there was no alteration of public order according to the norms in force. We see that the procedures here are "manu militari", without any consideration under the obvious alarm of these peoples, panic in society and business."*³³

Military roadblocks were displayed. Trains were searched and the army prevented strikers from using them³⁴. Tension increased and temporal workers started to return to their hometowns. Military pressure blocked the communication systems and the mail, telephones, telegraph and even the press stopped working. The strikers seized the train from Ciénaga to the plantations and they prevented its exit during the day. (Figure 5)

³⁰ Catherine Legrand. *El Conflicto*. Op. Cit. See also Miguel Urrutia. *Historia del Sindicalismo en Colombia*. Medellín, la Carreta. 1976

³¹ In 1918 the railway and the port workers of Santa Marta, Barranquilla and Cartagena had associated to call a big strike. Enrique Valencia: "El movimiento Obrero Colombiano". In Pablo González Casanova (Coordinador) *Historia del Movimiento Obrero en América Latina*. México, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales de la UNAM y Siglo XXI Editores. 1984. pp. 9 -151; Mario Arrubla: "Síntesis de Historia Política Contemporánea" en *Colombia Hoy*. Bogotá. Siglo XXI editores. 1980. pp. 186-221.

³² "La Prensa". Number 247. Barranquilla, Monday 3rd December 1928. p. 5a.

³³ "Diario del Córdoba", Ciénaga, Sunday 2nd December 1928. p. 1.

³⁴ "La Prensa". Number 247. Barranquilla, Monday 3rd December 1928. p. 5a.



Figure 5. Military presence on the railroad of Santa Marta Railway Company. Source: United Fruit Company photographic collection, box 30, No. 621. Photography taken on December 10th, 1928. Publication authorized by Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

On December 3rd, the press was conscious of the extreme situation: *The situation of the Banana Strike is worse than ever.*³⁵ Especially because of the uneasiness caused by the Governor's Office for having called the Army. Any kind of meeting was banned, as it was assumed that they questioned the state legitimacy and stability and the government decisions.³⁶ This measure outraged workers, because some detentions took place in Ciénaga and they were justified by the police since some documents of *an apparently communist campaign* were confiscated.³⁷

From this moment on, American Diplomats started to worry for the security of the American employees up to the point that the Government of the United States sent a ship to Santa Marta for the protection of their citizens as was stated by the US ambassador in Bogotá. He made clear that it was not a war cruise. Anyhow, it was possible to confirm that in the ports of Ciénaga and Santa Marta war ships docked with the aim of reinforcing troops. (Figure 6)

³⁵ "La Prensa". Number 248. Barranquilla, Tuesday 4th December 1928. p. 5a.

³⁶ This violent action of the government was legitimized through the use of competence and functions of the state administrative apparatus. Douglas North: *Instituciones, cambio institucional y desempeño económico*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica. 1993 and in Salomón Kalmanovitz: *Las Instituciones y el Desarrollo Económico en Colombia*, Bogotá. Grupo Editorial Norma. 2001.

³⁷ "La Prensa". Number 248. Barranquilla, Tuesday 4th December 1928. p. 5a.



Figure 6. Docks and storehouses in the Ciénaga Banana Region in 1928. Source: Carlos Payares González' personal collection.

To break the strike, on December 2nd, a military contingent of 300 men arrived to Ciénaga from the interior of the country. The major of the zone considered that these soldiers would be better at facing the situation than those native of the region.³⁸ At the same time that same day some municipalities protested against the disposition of the governor's office. The workers exodus continued, the general situation of commerce aggravated, many commercial houses closed and some of them stopped paying their debts alleging the scarce security conditions and low sales. Similarly occurred with the stores of the UFC which closed due to lack of business activity. There was a total lack of supplies of basic products in the banana zone.³⁹

³⁸ “*La Prensa*”. Number 248. Barranquilla, Tuesday 4th December 1928. p. 5a.

³⁹ *Ibíd.*



Figure 7. Railway activity and its relation with the banana economy and social life. Source: United Fruit Company photography collection, box 31, No. 111. Photography taken on April 27th, 1927. Publication authorized by Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

With the excuse that in Ciénaga the strikers were committing all kinds of outrages, the army seized the train to mobilize troops to the different towns, preventing normal circulation; this information resulted false and the train returned to Ciénaga during the first hours of the next day.⁴⁰ The community remained isolated and without the possibility to use the train as a transportation means. The train was used by the militaries for the surveillance of plantations⁴¹ (Figure 7). The correspondent of the newspaper “El Estado” from Santa Marta submitted an interview with Lazaro Diaz Granados, Magdalena’s Government Secretary:

¿Is it true that a contingent of 300 men has arrived from Antioquia?

- Yes: From the “Nariño” regiment. They were solicited by General Cortés Vargas; they are mostly native from Antioquia. The General has required them because he is afraid that in case of conflict, the Magdalena soldiers, having their brothers or other relatives among the strikers or having been banana workers themselves, will have problems at the moment of taking a decisive position.

⁴⁰ *Ibíd.*

⁴¹ *Ibíd.*

¿Is it true that general Cortés Vargas has been assigned to the Governor's Office?

- General Cortés Vargas has always been under the Governor's Office. If he proceeded on his own, it was because the situation demanded emergency decisions. In this moment, in order to proceed, he will always wait for the orders coming from the Governor. This is the only legal possibility.

¿Do you think the strike will continue for a long time?

- I would not be able to answer that. As it seems, the strike will end when one of the parties involved desists. The terms of a friendly conciliation have not reached a successful way out.⁴²

A State of Siege declaration was expected and this increased tension among strikers who organized collective bodies in different locations to prevent the work of producers. Detentions continued.⁴³ The train detention by the military and the impossibility to take bananas out due to the positions of the strikers and small land owners, the harvested fruit began to rot.

The Workers Union used the newspaper *Vanguardia Obrera* and other pasquinades to inform about their position and to keep public opinion updated. On December 5th, alleging that the strikers had managed to get weapons, the government decreed the State of Siege. This was not made public to the workers and for this reason they became more exacerbated.

A pressure mechanism used to obtain the support of merchants was the fact of creating solidarity to boycott the public market stores and other commercial firms if the transaction was not authorized by the Workers Union. This way, merchants could not sell if they did not have the "permission". To accomplish this policy the union had 5.000 workers acting as vigilantes. This situation led the UFC to ask the government if the State was in condition to protect its interests. The State response was dubious. In its effort to reach an equilibrium

⁴² "El Estado", Santa Marta, Tuesday 4th December 1928. p. 1, Ver también "La Prensa". Number 248. Barranquilla, Tuesday 4th December 1928. p. 5a.

⁴³ "El Estado", Santa Marta, Tuesday 4th December 1928. p. 1; See also in: "La Prensa". Number 250. Barranquilla, Wednesday 5th December 1928. p. 1.

between the pressure of the company and that of the workers, it submitted a communication where it stated that it would analyse the situation and would take the corresponding steps.

The workers' unrest for not feeling the State support led them to radicalization of their protest and since that moment, seizures of banana farms took place in different municipalities. There were confrontations between land owners, the military and the workers. It is worth mentioning the events in Sevilla, where workers detained a group of soldiers.

As the tension increased with this last event the Ministry Council declared general alteration of public order on December 5th,⁴⁴ and gave special faculties to Minister Arrazola to act as a mediator between the parties and positioned General Cortés Vargas as Civil and Military Chief. This intervention was justified by the economic losses of the socio-economic and political system of the nation because it had been estimated that up to that moment the losses exceeded one million dollars and given the fact that the fierce position of the workers had stopped communications and transportations and even there had been seizures in several localities and there was fear concerning the situation of Santa Marta.

The government sent information to the United Press as follows: *“The government has decreed the State of Siege in the Province of Santa Marta where the workers of the United Fruit Company maintain a strike lasting several days. General Carlos Cortés Vargas has been appointed Civil and Military Chief”*.⁴⁵ On the other part, the national press and especially that of the capital announced: *“there has never been a longer and more numerous strike in the country than this of the workers of Magdalena. Thirty-two thousand workers have been in total inactivity for more than thirty days in the banana region, there are no signs that this situation will have a favourable solution”*.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ “La Prensa”. Number 251. Barranquilla, Thursday 6th December 1928. p. 1.

⁴⁵ “United Press”. Report. New York. Emisión time 8:25 p.m. Wednesday 5th December 1928.

⁴⁶ “El Espectador”. Newspaper Editorial page. Bogotá, Wednesday 5th December 1928. p. 2

The Massacre of the workers

Events reached their peak in Ciénaga. The workers had concentrated for a pacific demonstration in the evening of the 5th of December. The Governor Nuñez Roca decreed the dispersion of the demonstration. The workers did not receive this well; they declared that authorities had taken this decision with the support of the UFC and the militaries without the presence of workers' representatives. This made clear to them that authorities were defending the interests of the Company and the local "*bananacracy*" and not theirs as *Colombian workers*. The concentration ended in a protest.

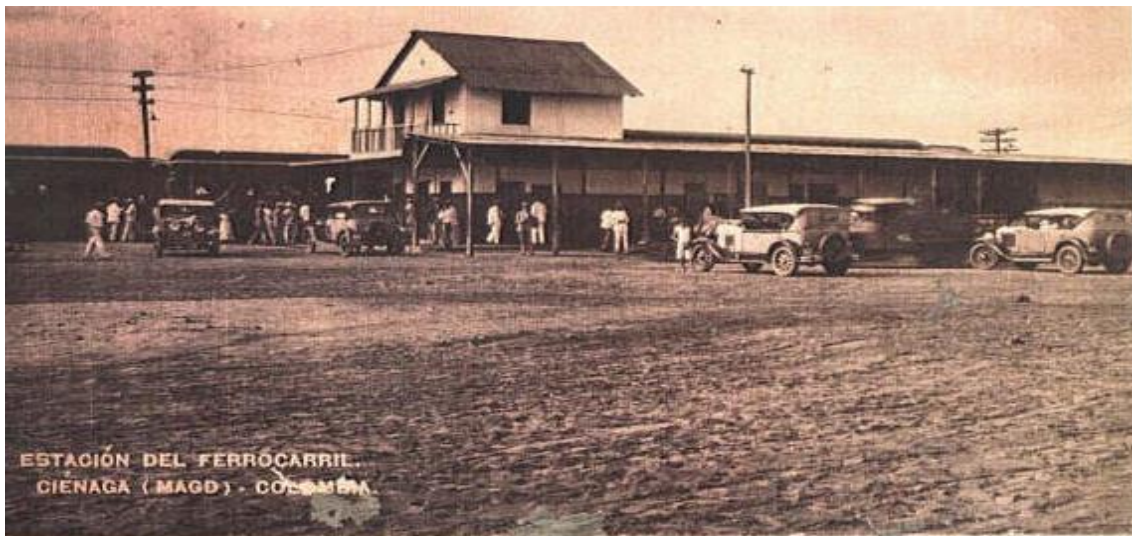


Figure.8 Railway station in Ciénaga, place of the events. Source: Private collection of Carlos Payares González.

The militaries obeyed the orders of the Governor and it was authorized to follow orders and demand the workers to dissolve the demonstration as it was not authorized. (Figure 8). The text was read in the square and at the same time the troop took positions. There were approximately 1.500 strikers in the square.

The army gave the strikers 15 minutes to disperse and the workers' answer was a the massive agitation of the Colombian flags and shouts related to the workers movement. The army responded with drumbeats and the menace to repel the strikers. Three bugle warnings were given, but nevertheless the strikers remained in their positions. A deep silence

reigned in the square and the menace of the army became an unfortunate reality when the shout “Shoot” was uttered. Rifles and machine guns were discharged against the defenceless and unarmed demonstrators. In minutes the ground of the square was tinted with blood.

Once the attack of the army against their own fellow citizens ended, the sight was dantesque. The cadavers, the wounded and their relatives were troubling scenes. These events took place at the dawn of December 6th: a brutal aggression against a workers’ demonstration.

The news invaded the media and the first chronicles appeared with living information about the tragic balance of the events. The first report on the newspaper “La Prensa” from Barranquilla informed of 8 people killed and 20 wounded.⁴⁷ After a week, the same newspaper mentioned 100 dead and 238 wounded.⁴⁸ Meanwhile official sources and diplomatic communications signalled the number of people killed as being 1.000.⁴⁹ This number, and along with other kind of testimonies collected, agree that the number of killings was over a thousand and that the militaries loaded the trains with the corpses and buried them in mass graves in inaccessible areas and up to the present times they have not been localized.⁵⁰

This repression caused a massive exodus of the terrified population. The abandoned the zone and migrated to different parts of the country for fear of military persecution and arrestment. Many of them left their scarce possessions behind.

⁴⁷ “La Prensa”. Number 252. Barranquilla, Friday 7th December 1928. p. 1.

⁴⁸ “La Prensa”. Number 259. Barranquilla, Friday 14th December 1928. p. 1.

⁴⁹ Aviva Chomsky, *Los hechos de la masacre de las bananeras*. Lecture “Coloquio Internacional 80 años del Conflicto de las Bananeras, Commemorating an event of economic and social history beyond magic realism”. Santa Marta. 5th December 2009.

⁵⁰ See the already cited works of Katherine Legrand and Aviva Chomsky.

The post-conflict and disinformation on the part of the Colombian State forces and the United Fruit Company

National and international media widely covered this event. Both the UFC and the government tried to manipulate the information to protect their image. The press echoed and broadcasted the sometimes biased news, informing about “*combats*” between the army troops and the “*revolutionaries*” and that as a result of these combats, 8 “*bandits*” were killed and 20 were wounded. The War Ministry insisted that “*in Magdalena there was no strike, but a revolution*”.⁵¹

Other newspapers such as “La Prensa” from Barranquilla, issued their edition of December 8th in red characters as a reference to this event that brought mourning to the entire country and as a symbolic commemorative act.

Referring to a communication sent to the *United Press*, the War Ministry informed officially that in the attack of the strikers against the troops there had been 8 dead and 20 wounded and that in order to control the revolutionary outbreaks against state order, the immediate mobilization of more troops had been ordered. They would arrive from cities of the interior of the country. It also emphasised the position of the government that the workers’ situation in Magdalena was delicate and that vigorous decisions had to be taken in order to solve this issue. It also informed that beside Ciénaga, other localities had to be intervened.

The Times from New York informed in a biased and extended way that the turmoil in the Colombian Banana Region was provoked by Mexican incendiaries, who had led the process of the Mexican Revolution, two decades earlier. It also gave details about the aspects of the banana strike that were consequences of the expiration of the Barco Concession.⁵²

⁵¹ “*La Prensa*”. Number 252. Barranquilla, Friday 7th December 1928. p. 1.

⁵² “*The Times*”. New York, Friday 7th December 1928. p. 1.

At the same time the UFC issued a press communication to the New York agencies and the worldwide correspondents declaring: “*the difficult situation experienced during the past days in the Colombian banana region, where the company has valuable interests, has quite improved in the last 24 hours and the dispatches sent from the scene, give rise to expectations for a prompt solution of the conflict surged between the workers and the company which ended in an extended strike of revolutionary nature*”.⁵³

While the American press provided biased information, trying to defend the multinational interests and that of their government, the national press analysed the situation with greater objectivity. The daily newspaper “El Tiempo” from Bogotá commented in an extended note that most of the claims of the strikers were righteous improvement of working conditions. Nevertheless, due to its conservative position, the editorial stated that they did not agree with the strike since they considered that the workers had a bad leadership and they made the leaders responsible for what had happened. They reminded the authorities that force is not the supreme reason as the only system to solve a conflict since violence⁵⁴ is not a valid option to impose certain vindications.⁵⁵



Figure 9. Engineers’ dormitories and machine rooms destroyed by demonstrators in Sevilla (Magdalena). Source: United Fruit Company photographic collection, box 30, No. 620. Photography taken on December 10th, 1928. Publication authorized by Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

⁵³ See report of the *United Press*. New York, viernes 7 de diciembre de 1928.

⁵⁴ The state security forces in Colombia have always defended particular interests over the labour interests of the citizens. Eduardo Sáenz: *La ofensiva empresarial. Industriales, políticos y violencia en los años 40 en Colombia*. Tercer Mundo.- Uniandes. Bogotá. 1992.

⁵⁵ “*El Tiempo*”. Editorial. Bogotá, Friday 7th December 1928.

In response to these events and as a protest for the massacre, several offices of the United Fruit and the railway were set on fire and destroyed. The hard situation caused by the army repression and the lack of jobs led to the assault of the company's stores where people seized food. (Figure 8, 9)

*“It is not about fixing anyhow a difficult situation, it is about avoiding more critical events in the immediate future. Therefore we need a wise, prudent, political Colombian, who does not forget the circumstances regarding the conflict. Someone who does not forget how the United Fruit Company manipulates the political and civil life of Magdalena and who does not think it indispensable to send troops for hunting workers as animals. Someone who will not be hard and inflexible with them and subordinated and honey mouthed with the company agents”.*⁵⁶

After the massacre, the workers who managed to escape emigrated to other areas of the region and new versions of the events started to become public. It was the version of the defeated. This version informed the public opinion about the concentration in the Ciénaga square and not in farms as had been informed by authorities to justify the fact of not being able to notify the exact number of deaths.⁵⁷

On December 10th after a convulsed weekend, the headings announced *“the revolutionaries’ flee in stampede to the Sierra Nevada;”*⁵⁸ *“government troops completely defeated the strikers”*; *the War Minister informs that there were more deaths during the last combats*”. In general, the press informed about a revolutionary movement which confronted the military forces and that the army was responding with rigor, but that there had not been any excess on their part. The banana zone was returning to normal, as well as the train service between Ciénaga and Santa Marta and the steam boat service between Ciénaga and Barranquilla. They also informed that since public order had been re-

⁵⁶ *Ibíd.*

⁵⁷ *“La Prensa”*. Nr. 253. Barranquilla, Saturday 8th December 1928. p. 1.

⁵⁸ *“La Prensa”*. Nr. 254. Barranquilla, Monday 10th December 1928. p. 1.

established, businesses had already opened and that the exodus of the population had ended.⁵⁹

General Cortés Vargas issued a decree through which the revolutionaries of Magdalena were declared *a gang of outlaws*. The decree consisted of three articles and in one section, as a justification, it was stated that the rebel strikers committed all kinds of outrages: arson in public and private property, pillage, interruption of telegraphic and telephonic communications, destruction of railways, assault of citizens who did not agree with their communist and anarchist doctrine. This was the justification for decreeing the martial law to give security to citizens and to re-establish public order. On the other hand the workers' leaders and accessories should be prosecuted to face their responsibilities. And to finish, the public force was authorized to use their guns.⁶⁰

At the same time troops were sent to avoid the surviving strikers' flee to the Sierra Nevada and the Department of Atlántico. To accomplish this all the towns neighbouring the banana zone were alerted. Numerous detentions occurred and the prisoners were sent to Ciénaga to be judged by a Martial Court.⁶¹

The context of the events

With the establishment of the State of Siege all inhabitants of the zone were required safe-conduct for mobilization and in the case of travelling to other departments, a passport was needed. It is worth adding that passenger mobilization was not only controlled by the army; the strikers prevented boats from leaving the Ciénaga docks using pressure groups.

Travellers coming from Barranquilla, for example, would bring their passports because Ciénaga was located in another department, but to travel to Santa Marta they needed a safe-conduct. Copies of these documents, the internal for the State of Siege and the external for

⁵⁹ “*Diario del Córdoba*”, Ciénaga, Sunday 9th December 1928. p. 1.

⁶⁰ “*Diario del Córdoba*”, Ciénaga, Sunday 9th December 1928. p. 1.

⁶¹ “*La Prensa*”. Number 254. Barranquilla, Monday 10th December de 1928. p. 1.

leaving the zone were reproduced by the newspaper “La Prensa” for the general information of the community.

After the massacre the strikers dispersed. The Civil and Military chief of the Zone, issued more than 700 passes to go out of the banana region. Most of the travellers were headed to Barranquilla by steamboats or to Santa Marta by train.⁶²

In an interview for the newspaper “La Prensa”, the poet Gregorio Castañeda León, -who could leave the area in conflict one day after the massacre- stated:

*“When I arrived to the station in Ciénaga on Wednesday, most of the strikers were concentrated there. They had posted a national flag, a red flag and a poster of the Liberator Simon Bolivar between the rails. On one of the walls of the station there was a big cartel with characters saying “For national sovereignty – Soldiers for the oil pirates, not for Colombian workers ”.*⁶³

He continued saying that on the station there was a camping site and a folk band interpreting joyful music. All they knew in Ciénaga was that the strikers were trying to prevent workers from cutting bananas in the plantations. But that day at sunset, a group of about 200 demonstrators detained the steamboat “La Paz”, belonging to the Ciénaga Fluvial Company. The boat was leaving to Barranquilla and some producers of the fruit were on board.

Among the banana producers – with their families – were on board Atilio A. Correa, Ramón García, Juan B. Calderón, Mario Charris and Adolfo Ramón Henríquez. They were forced to leave the boat as they were representatives of the local elite and belonged to the “bananacracy” families, the wealthiest of the area. The wealthiest banana producers were descendants of old aristocratic families of Santa Marta with Spanish roots, who had mixed with foreign merchants coming from Barranquilla, most of them Italian, French, British,

⁶² “La Prensa”. Nos. 253 y 254. Barranquilla, Saturday 8th and Monday 10th December 1928. p. 1.

⁶³ “La Prensa”. Number 253. Barranquilla, Saturday 8th December 1928. p. 1.

German, Dutch or Syrian-Lebanese. Additionally there were the families Dávila, Goenaga, Campo Serrano, Diazgranados, Salcedo, Riascos, Bermúdez, Noguera and Vengoechea. According to Catherine Legrand these families developed an almost symbiotic, mutually benefiting relation with the United Fruit, which favoured them to obtain important political positions at local and national level such as mayors, governors, department secretaries, judges, senators, chamber representatives, school directors and even ministers. For this reason, their administrative decisions always benefited the company and in return, the company always gave them a preferential status.

The poet continued his testimony:

“...that same night, at eleven thirty, the government issued a decree to avoid disturbances of public order. At one fifteen in the morning the troops in the square tried to disperse the demonstration and after the three usual counts, guns silenced the demonstrators. About eleven dead and 35 wounded were left behind. After this event, the workers in panic escaped immediately to the banana zone. As a result, on Thursday there was absolute calm in the downtown area. There was no store opened and no transportation. Everybody was shocked inside their houses as the Civil and Military Chief of the regiment, General Cortés Vargas was getting ready to leave with all his troops to the localities of the Zona Bananera”⁶⁴. He dispatched a brigade of 25 armed men and one captain in each train wagon.⁶⁵

He added:

Yesterday (Thursday) there was no one on the street. When I left, the people on the streets could be easily counted. There were no more than ten. I had to get a passport to get on board and travel to Barranquilla. The boat was not allowed

⁶⁴ “La Prensa”. Number 253. Barranquilla, Saturday 8th December 1928. p. 1.

⁶⁵ Esta última parte reforzada por otro pasajero que llegó a Barranquilla, huyendo de los disturbios de la región

*to leave until it was carefully checked by the Civil and Military Chief in charge of the town, Captain Aurelio Linero”.*⁶⁶

Final Considerations

The standstill of activities and the workers’ struggle were not the only events to highlight in this episode of the History of Colombia; they were also the dark political practices which followed as a consequence of the strike. Different policies were issued for entrepreneurs, farmers, merchants and finally, another one for workers. All the actors involved tried to demonstrate the public opinion that they were right, especially for the interests at stake. Each one of them tried to make the others responsible for the tragic events. For example the Commerce Society of Ciénaga, an organization that at first supported the workers on strike and later abandoned them, argued that they did it to leave them free to act.⁶⁷ This serves to show that what really mattered was a confrontation of interests and that each faction was defending theirs.

The banana business caused prosperity and an increase in population. This transformed towns like Ciénaga and Santa Marta, which had European style hotels, restaurants, banks, small manufacturing factories, service companies, as well as stores selling all kinds of products. At the same time, new towns appeared due to the economical activity as was the case of Río Frio, Orihueca, Guacamayal, El Retén and the famous Aracataca, where the Nobel Prize García Márquez was born.⁶⁸

Reality was distorted by the parties involved and each actor changed his/her version and above all, there were many facts silenced by the official version.⁶⁹ Therefore, as a shield against responsibilities for telling the truth, many versions were told in order to have an approximation to the real events and based on that, try to solve many of the hypothesis

⁶⁶ “*La Prensa*”. Number 253. Barranquilla, Saturday 8th December 1928. p. 1.

⁶⁷ “*La Prensa*”. Number 242. Barranquilla, Thursday 29th November 1928. P. 5^a.

⁶⁸ This is why his stories are filled of realism, especially because they show a “Macondian” condition as he denominated it himself.

⁶⁹ Bernardo Tovar: *La historia al final del milenio*. Bogotá. Universidad Nacional de Colombia. 1994.

about the events that appear even today. For this reason, as researcher Catherine Legrand said in her article “Conflicto de las Bananeras”, historians have the task to explain what happened and the significance and meaning of that strike.⁷⁰



Figure 10. Living facilities of the United Fruit Company staff in Santa Marta. Source: United Fruit Company photographic collection, box 76, No. 106. Photography taken on March 1924. Publication authorized by Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.

The political manipulation of the state of the real information about the events was so obvious, that using pressure mechanisms forced the media to misinform and distort reality. The only real fact is that in order to satisfy the interests of the UFC the armed forces of the government indiscriminately assassinated a group of workers who were only demanding the improvement of their life conditions⁷¹ (Figure 10).⁷²

For all these reasons we have modestly tried to go over this episode since the facts known along with what has been previously exposed can be grouped in two opposing stories, written by witnesses of the events from their own perspectives. For one side we refer to the

⁷⁰ Catherine Legrand. *El conflicto...* op cit. p. 183.

⁷¹ For this situation of pressure exerted to governments of developing countries by multinationals, see Malcolm Rutherford: *Institutionalism Between the Wars*. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 34(2), 291-303. 2000 and also: *Understanding Institutional Economics: 1918-1929*. *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 22(3), 277-308. 2000.

⁷² Catherine Legrand. *El Conflicto...* op. cit.

narration left by General Cortés Vargas⁷³ who was in charge of the military repression and the defence of the company and the entrepreneur's interests, and on the other side, those of union directors and leaders of the workers' movement Alberto Castrillón⁷⁴ and Ignacio Torres Giraldo.⁷⁵ The distortion of events was one of the reasons why García Márquez wrote his novel *Cien años de soledad*. Without being aware of it, he made people believe that what appeared in his story was true. This is why these contexts can not be mixed, and paraphrasing Alan Knight "historical narratives are equivalent to fiction texts; they belong to different genres".⁷⁶ This is why our position has been different, especially because the information presented in this work was taken directly from sources, in spite of their partiality. This is why we consider our task has not concluded⁷⁷, and almost a century later, away from villains and heroes, we can say that there is a better understanding of what happened on December 6th, 1928 in Ciénaga Magdalena.

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⁷³ Germán Vargas Cortés: *Los Sucesos de las Bananeras. Historia de los acontecimientos que se desarrollaron en la Zona Bananera del Magdalena 13 de Noviembre de 1928 al 15 de marzo de 1929*. Bogotá. Imprenta La Luz. 1929.

⁷⁴ Alberto Castrillón: *120 días bajo el terror militar*. Bogotá. Tupac Amará. 1974.

⁷⁵ Ignacio Torres Giraldo: *La Cuestión Sindical en Colombia*. Bogotá. Letras del Pueblo. 1973.

⁷⁶ Alan Knight. *What Price The Past. An Inaugural Lecture Delivered before The University Of Oxford on 18 November 1993*, Oxford, 1994, p. 32. Taken from Eduardo Posada Carbó. "La novela como historia: Cien años de soledad y la matanza de las bananeras". En: "*Desafío de las ideas. Ensayo de historia intelectual y política en Colombia*". Medellín, Banco de la República, Fondo Editorial Universidad EAFIT, 2003; p. 253.

⁷⁷ Gabriel Fonnegra called this silence a political syndrome, still present, to mask the the party interests of conservatism, who was dominating the state spheres in those times.. Gabriel Fonnegra *Bananeras, un testimonio vivo*. Bogotá, Tercer Mundo Editores, 1980, 1ª edición; Bogotá, Círculo de Lectores, 1987, 2ª edición. The conservative hegemony in Colombia must not be left aside. It started in 1886 and ended on February 9th 1930, when a liberal, Enrique Olaya Herrera won the presidency and defeated a political party charged with fatal decisions. To better understand the political conditions and decisions In Colombia during the period of the Conservative hegemony, see the work of Eduardo Posada Carbó: *Limits Of Power: Elections Under the Conservative Hegemony, 1886-1930*, en *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 77:2, (mayo de 1997). Pp. 245-279. In this same direction see Jorge Orlando Melo: "La República Conservadora (1880-1930)". En *Colombia Hoy*. Bogotá. Siglo XXI Editores. 5ª. Edición. pp. 52-102.

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