

MIXED BLESSINGS :
Disruption and Organization among Peasant Unions
in Costa Rica*

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One of the most urgent issues in contemporary Latin America is the popular struggle against rural poverty. Because Latin American states have failed to alleviate rural impoverishment, the poor have undertaken to solve their own problems. One fruitful way of improving their conditions has proved to be forming grass-roots peasant organizations outside state auspices. This approach, however, can bear fruit only under a democratic regime or in states that provide some political space in which peasants can act without being crushed.

One such state is Costa Rica. Its colonial and postindependence experience, which has been unusual for a Latin American country, has fostered an open political atmosphere that is compatible with grass-roots political organization. Disagreement, argument, confrontation, and compromise are not only tolerated but considered normal. The Costa Rican state and the pressure groups confronting it operate within certain unwritten limits, however. Interest groups normally will not escalate their pressure beyond a certain point, and the state does not resort to the worst excesses of repression. Costa Rica's democratic political culture has thus enabled peasants to move to the forefront of contemporary Latin American peasant movements in the vitality of their effort to confront the problems facing peasant farming. Rural movements elsewhere may therefore look to Costa Rica to learn from the experience of the peasants there.

This article will evaluate peasant use of unions in Costa Rica to respond to agrarian crisis. It will examine the effectiveness of the unions in several dimensions: first, in serving their own members; second, in serving the peasant class as a whole; and third, in interacting with the state. Because Costa Rica's institutional structure and political culture is

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comparable in openness and tolerance with that of the United States, observers often assume that organizational action will yield the most effective solution to popular problems. This article, which is based on fieldwork in Costa Rica over a four-year period,¹ proposes to test that assumption by using the theoretical framework provided by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward in their study of popular organization, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*.²

In studying Costa Rican peasant unions, I found that existing theories on peasant political action in the developing world were of little help.³ These theories primarily address individual motivation for action rather than organizational effectiveness. Also, theories of peasant rebellion throw little light on constructive political interaction with the state. As nonrevolutionary organizations operating within a democracy, Costa Rican peasant unions do not fit into the framework of theories about movements seeking to overthrow the state.

While studying rural peasant unions, however, I found repeatedly that Piven and Cloward's insights were true for Costa Rican peasant unions, even though *Poor People's Movements* analyzes urban organizations in a developed country (the United States). I realized that their thesis could provide a useful counterbalance to prevailing assumptions about the utility of organizational action in Costa Rica because Piven and Cloward assert that poor people's organizations are subject to subtle oppression and deliberate or accidental co-optation that renders them less powerful

1. The fieldwork on which this article is based began in 1985 and is still going on. I have conducted interviews with fifty members of UPANacional, forty-four members of UPAGRA, and fifteen members of La Coordinadora Atlántica, many of them several times. With the exception of one person, I have interviewed all previous and present leaders of all three unions at least once and usually several times. I also interviewed local and national officials of the Instituto de Desarrollo Agrario. I have reviewed union and IDA files and documents as well as newspaper accounts of events discussed. During field trips, I have had numerous opportunities to watch the unions in action in such events as blockages, demonstrations, marches, national congresses, and general assemblies to elect officers and decide policy. I have also visited land invasion sites, those in process as well as successfully established communities. In 1985 and 1986, a research assistant surveyed all members of one UPA village (110 persons) and two UPAGRA villages (172 persons). The survey consisted of twelve questions. One of the two UPAGRA villages was part of the UPAGRA-supported invasion community. For more detailed reports on those surveys and their use, see Leslie Anderson, "Alternative Action in Costa Rica: Peasants as Positive Participants," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 22, pt. 1 (Feb. 1990):89-113; and Anderson, "Preceding Post-Materialism: Economic and Non-Economic Political Motivation in the Third World," *Comparative Political Studies* 23, no. 1 (Apr. 1990): 80-113.

2. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

3. Some of the best-known theories of peasant rebellion are found in the following works: Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper, 1969); James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Subsistence and Rebellion in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976); and Samuel Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979).

than democratic rhetoric would indicate. The theory thus alerts researchers to dangers that confront all movements of the poor, urban or rural, in industrial or agricultural societies. In addition, Piven and Cloward's theory could be applied to data from a different context, which would test their assessment of the potential of collective movements.

In essence, *Poor People's Movements* is a comparative study of poor people's protest movements and the organizations they create. Piven and Cloward conclude that poor people accomplish more for themselves before they organize than their organizations win for them thereafter. The authors argue that, given the limited resources and power of the poor, they can win the greatest number of concessions during the early stages of their movements when they resort to disruption and threatened or actual violence, such as riot, and thus create a crisis. Piven and Cloward argue that poor people's organizations blunt the militancy of their movements, thus undermining the power of those they represent.⁴ Yet Piven and Cloward do not consider organizations per se to be automatically counterproductive. Rather, the problematic organizations are those that bureaucratize, tie into the system, and become lethargic, a description that unfortunately fits the fate of most poor peoples' organizations.

In applying Piven and Cloward's thesis, this article will focus on the dangers of co-optation, which is understood as any process through which close ties to the state undermine an organization's effectiveness. Deliberate co-optation occurs when state actors purposefully attempt to undermine the power of an organization. Some evidence of this approach can be found in Costa Rica. More important to this examination of unions is "accidental" co-optation, which occurs as an unintended result of organizational dynamics. Co-optation can also occur among an organization's leadership and its rank-and-file members or among different groups within a union membership. With the dangers of co-optation in mind, it is possible to compare the fruits of organizational negotiation with the results of crisis creation in the light of different levels of state ties enjoyed by Costa Rican peasant unions. My findings show that peasant unions have been less effective than popular notions about the democratic process would suggest yet more effective than Piven and Cloward would predict.

The authors of *Poor People's Movements* are partially correct in their skepticism about the effectiveness of poor people's organizations, as opposed to spontaneous disruption. The cases at hand will show that the fate of the poorest organizational members fits their theory. While unionization has yielded positive results for some members, those gains prove to be insufficient and even counterproductive for others. As the theory

4. Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, intro., chap. 1, pp. 82, 89.

predicts, for those inadequately served, organization renders them less likely to improve their circumstances substantially in the future. Yet even in Latin America, where repression and co-optation are more prevalent than in the United States, grounds exist for greater optimism than Piven and Cloward exhibit. Although disruption has achieved important victories, unions can sustain benefits better for some members through negotiation and dialogue than disruption alone would. In questioning effectiveness, one must therefore ask first, "For whom?" and "In what way?"

The discussion that follows will briefly examine the economic crisis that overtook Costa Rica in the late 1970s to determine how that crisis affected the rural population. Next, the article explores the history, success, and limitations of three peasant unions: the Unión Nacional de Pequeños Agricultores (UPANacional or UPA), the Unión de Pequeños Agricultores de la Región Atlántica (UPAGRA), and La Coordinadora Atlántica.⁵ The effectiveness of these three unions will be evaluated in three dimensions (for their own members, for the peasant class in general, and vis-à-vis the state) and then according to the predictions offered by Piven and Cloward. These unions' experiences also offer revealing insights into the health and strength of the Costa Rican democracy.

ECONOMIC CRISIS AND ORGANIZATION

Costa Rican peasant unions, the reasons behind their formation, and their choice of goals can only be understood in the context of the economic crisis that overtook the country in the late 1970s.⁶ The international price of coffee dropped steadily, endangering small and medium producers whose income did not cover production costs. Many found themselves mired in debt and threatened with losing their land. As the incomes of those dependent on export crops fell, small producers of staple crops also lost money and were unable to cover production costs. Both groups found credit increasingly scarce, expensive, and difficult to repay. By 1989 the crisis had reached its worst extremes. Corn and bean producers could no longer earn enough to justify market production and were farming for subsistence only. Vegetable and milk producers had

5. According to union leaders, fourteen separate peasant unions were operating in Costa Rica in 1987. That number changes periodically as unions come and go. Some may function for more than a year before registering themselves as a union; others may disappear, leaving only their names in the official records. In addition, umbrella organizations with which several unions may affiliate themselves behave like unions in some ways. Political parties may attempt periodically to organize peasants for specific projects. The total of fourteen unions cited excludes umbrella organizations and unions affiliated with any political parties.

6. Lowell Gudmundson argues that the trend has been moving in this direction for decades, although it has reached crisis proportions only in the past ten years. See Gudmundson, *Costa Rica before Coffee: Society and Economy on the Eve of the Export Boom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1986), 55.

been seriously undermined by the dumping of surplus products from the United States. Under the administration of Oscar Arias, Costa Rica began to import food crops that it had previously produced. These developments led Jorge Rovira Mas to conclude in his 1989 study that Costa Rican agriculture is no longer profitable and can no longer support the country.⁷

The deteriorating situation of the small producers aggravated the position of those lower on the socioeconomic ladder. Landless agrarian laborers who depended on small producers watched employment opportunities disappear. Former employers had no extra money to pay hired laborers and stayed afloat only by increasing the intensity of family and personal labor, or what A. V. Chayanov has termed *self-exploitation*.⁸

Increasing scarcity of agrarian employment was compounded by an existing trend toward landlessness that was accelerating. Since 1900, agro-export capitalism in the form of the banana and cattle industries had been laying claim to large tracts of land in Limón and Guanacaste provinces. The cattle industry hires few laborers and has forced many peasant families out of Guanacaste.⁹ The banana industry offers employment opportunities but only for younger people.¹⁰ Unofficial company policy is to fire workers at age forty, thus eliminating the need to pay laborers beyond their physical prime while avoiding the legal requirements and financial outlay of old-age pensions.¹¹ In addition to agro-export demands, rapid population growth has increased land pressure to the point

7. Jorge Rovira Mas, *Costa Rica en los años '80*, 3d ed. (San Pedro de Montes de Oca, Costa Rica: Editorial Porvenir, 1989), 49.

8. The term *self-exploitation* in the context of the peasantry originated with A. V. Chayanov. He uses the term only to connote a peasant family's use of its own labor power, without the Marxist meaning of *exploitation* referring to the cruel and extremely taxing misuse of labor power by a capitalist entrepreneur. Chayanov's theory recognizes, however, that in conditions of economic hardship peasant families may indeed be forced by circumstances to misuse and overuse their own labor power to such an extreme that Marx's meaning of *exploitation* becomes relevant to the term *self-exploitation*. For a new presentation of Chayanov's major work, see *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, edited by Daniel Thorner, Basile Kerblay, and R. E. F. Smith (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

9. For a history of the struggle between the peasants and the ranchers in Guanacaste, see Lowell Gudmundson, "Las luchas agrarias del Guanacaste, 1900-35," manuscript deposited at the Universidad Nacional, Heredia, Costa Rica, 1981; and M. Edelman, "La integración de una región periférica al estado nacional y a la economía internacional: procesos de proletarianización y de recampesinación en la provincia de Guanacaste, Costa Rica," manuscript written for Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, Universidad de Costa Rica, San José, 1980.

10. For a history of the Costa Rican banana industry, including its establishment in Limón province and its later move to western Puntarenas province, see Jeffrey Casey Gasper, *Limón, 1880-1940* (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1979).

11. Philippe Bourgois, *The Ethnicity of Work* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). Bourgois reports that employees work up to ten hours per day and are required to carry bunches of bananas weighing eighty to a hundred pounds while jumping across irrigation ditches, balancing on single-board bridges across them, or wading through ankle-deep mud. The workers are paid according to piecework, which causes them to work harder and faster and "results in premature aging and rapid health deterioration." It is perhaps not surprising that workers have passed their physical prime by age forty.

that new generations may not inherit enough land to live on. Virgin land that might have provided a flight option in the past is rapidly disappearing into agro-export farms or national forests.¹² Overall, landlessness in Costa Rica has tripled in the last thirty years.¹³ Although the country can still boast a higher percentage of small farms than other Central American nations, 60 percent of rural Costa Ricans are landless.¹⁴ Moreover, landlessness is particularly problematic in an agricultural country that offers few alternative employment opportunities. Estimates place Costa Rican unemployment at 23.8 percent in 1982 and 25 percent in 1985.¹⁵

In the 1960s, land pressures created two major trends. The first was a rising number of land invasions in which landless peasants occupied private or state property to convert it into a farming community. These invasions met with various levels of success and continue to be an important political tactic among peasants.¹⁶ The second trend grew out of the Costa Rican government's response to land pressure and land invasions. In the early 1960s, the state established the Instituto de Desarrollo Agrario (IDA), a controversial agency that has achieved only minimal success in redistributing land.¹⁷ Between 1961 and 1983, only sixteen thousand peasants received land.¹⁸ Nor has any marked increase in land distribution occurred since then. In fact, support and funding for the IDA have suffered with the current economic crisis. The IDA's limited success resulted partly from inadequate funds for land purchase and partly from internal political opposition to land redistribution.¹⁹ Although most Costa

12. Biologists and ecologists inform us that Costa Rica, lying as it does between two continents and two seas, offers a larger and more varied collection of flora and fauna than any other country of similar size on earth. Among Third World governments, the Costa Rican state is unusually aware of the need to preserve some of the natural environment for the benefit of biology and the environment. Ironically, this awareness and the positive steps the government has taken toward land and forest conservation have only increased the pressure on dwindling land resources and provided yet another source of competition for peasants.

13. Tom Barry, *Roots of Rebellion: Land and Hunger in Central America* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1987), 150.

14. United States Agency for International Development, *Country Study: Costa Rica, Fiscal Year 1980* (Washington, D.C.: USAID, 1980).

15. Rovira Mas, *Costa Rica en los años '80*, 44 and 150.

16. For a general discussion of land invasion in Costa Rica, its successes and failures, see Mitchell Seligson, *Peasants of Costa Rica and the Development of Agrarian Capitalism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), chap. 5. For the story of specific land invasions, see 107-9; see also Anderson, "Alternative Action."

17. The Instituto de Desarrollo Agrario (now the IDA) began as the Instituto de Tierras y Colonización (ITCO).

18. *Quarterly Economic Review*, supplement, 1984.

19. To date, the most extensive review of the IDA's specific accomplishments is critical of the institute. See Francisco Barahona, *Reforma agraria y poder político: el caso de Costa Rica, transformación estructural* (San José: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 1980), 233, 254-55, 288. Barahona argues that Costa Rica never possessed the political will for land reform in the first place. Others have argued in a similar vein that Costa Rica uses a tactic common throughout Latin America: that of "colonizing" land, or giving away state land and calling it "land

Rican peasants are unaware of the complex political issues involved, three-quarters of the 172 landless peasants interviewed said that the IDA does not represent a solution to their problems. They believe that direct action in the form of land invasion is more likely to result in land-ownership than any venture through the IDA's bureaucratic maze.

The widespread perception among landless Costa Ricans is that the IDA has actually redistributed very little land. Its major contribution has been its identity as an institutional possibility for the landless peasants, one that is largely absent from other Central American nations (excluding revolutionary Nicaragua). The perception is that the existence of the IDA implies rhetorical and official support for land reform, even though the institute itself accomplishes little. By invading land and then calling in the IDA, peasants can cite this official rhetoric in justifying their own position. In this way, they can sometimes force the IDA to fulfill its mandate of land redistribution on a small scale. But neither land invasions nor the IDA have solved the growing problem of landlessness in Costa Rica. Recent studies place landlessness at 46 percent before 1980 and 60 percent in 1985.²⁰

Overall, the Costa Rican government's response to landlessness, the problems of small producers, and the growing economic crisis has been ineffective, and peasants have felt compelled to organize. Popular experience with cooperatives in the central valley²¹ and with unions in Limón province²² provided historical memory in the art of organization. Beginning in 1978, peasants in different regions of the country started to unionize. Since then, fourteen peasant unions have sprung up and become an important part of the national political scene. The unions range widely in size, the largest claiming as many as seventeen thousand official members, and the smallest only six hundred.

reform," but never actually redistributing any private property. See, for example, Helio Fallas Venegas, "La política agrícola en la crisis de Centroamérica," *Estudios Sociales Centroamericanos* 45 (Sept.-Dec. 1987):72. For an alternative assessment of the IDA that concentrates more on its institutional position, see Seligson, *Agrarian Capitalism*, chap. 6 and pp. 162-69.

20. Barahona, *Reforma agraria*, 207; and Barry, *Roots of Rebellion*, 150.

21. Cooperatives are popular in Costa Rica and have provided another experience in popular organization. They offer a means of launching or maintaining expensive projects that an individual could not fund. They also provide a way of distributing profits more widely than private enterprise would allow. Throughout Costa Rica, one finds cooperative banks, cooperative grocery stores, and cooperatively built parks. One of the most successful cooperative enterprises is a sugarcane processing plant in Grecia, Alajuela. During World War II, the Costa Rican government confiscated the plant from its German owners. Instead of falling into private hands, the plant became a cooperative. Jointly owned today by local farmers who are cooperative members, the plant processes both coffee and sugarcane and employs large numbers of landless rural dwellers from the area who are also co-op members.

22. Banana workers in Limón province have the most extensive experience with unions. See Gasper, *Limón, 1880-1940*; and Leslie Anderson, "From Quiescence to Rebellion: Peasant Political Action in Costa Rica and Pre-Revolutionary Nicaragua," Ph.D. diss, University of Michigan, 1987, chap. 2.

All the unions developed in a context of economic crisis and confronted similar problems. All were intent on defending an agrarian way of life in an economy that offers few other choices. Yet important differences have emerged among the unions as they have developed. These differences lie in the problems tackled and in organizational behavior. Peasants in different regions have varying problems, depending on their economic status, the crops they produce, and the vagaries of regional weather. Peasants also deal with different credit regulations and produce for different markets. The nature and extremity of the problems, geographical location, and state response have affected organizational styles, making unity of interest and action very difficult. Nonetheless, as the agrarian crisis has worsened in the late 1980s, the unions have begun attempts to draw together. Although priorities and preferred tactics diverge, the problems suffered are increasingly common and universal. In response, the unions are attempting some united action under the leadership of UPA and UPAGRA.

Closer study of UPA, UPAGRA, and La Coordinadora Atlántica sheds light on popular and mainstream politics in Costa Rica and reveals some of the advantages and disadvantages of different organizational styles. Although UPAGRA is the oldest union studied here, the following section will begin with UPANacional and end with La Coordinadora Atlántica, favoring a more conceptual ordering over a chronological sequence. UPA is the most mainstream of these three unions and exhibits the closest state ties while La Coordinadora is the least mainstream and has the fewest state ties. Co-optation has thus been most problematic for UPA and least relevant for La Coordinadora. Discussing the unions in this order also provides a progression from right to left, UPA being the most conservative and La Coordinadora Atlántica the most radical. UPA merits attention as the largest and most visible union, although several others follow similar political lines. UPAGRA is significant because its positions and tactics have molded union politics for over a decade now. La Coordinadora exemplifies the smaller, more radical regional unions that are now springing up around Costa Rica.

UPANACIONAL, THE NATIONAL UNION OF SMALL AGRICULTURISTS

UPANacional had a dramatic beginning in 1981 but lost much of its vigor between 1985 and 1988, when it moved very close to the state. It is currently attempting to recapture its former vitality while also assuming a position of leadership among all the peasant unions. Although not actually "national" in scope, UPA is Costa Rica's largest peasant union, boasting seventeen thousand members in 1989. Its central geographic location has provided numerical strength and mainstream political atten-

tion.²³ UPA's landed members produce coffee, sugarcane, vegetables, and some milk. Its landless and land-poor members work for landed neighbors who also belong to UPA or combine production with part-time labor on the small farms in their villages.²⁴ UPA is the only union that does not have a primarily regional perspective, a difference with advantages as well as disadvantages. It is also the only union with a permanent office near the capital city of San José.

Initial Efforts: First Organizational Actions

UPA arose out of Costa Rica's economic crisis in hopes of responding to all of the important problems of the rural class. Its attention was directed toward the problems of the landed, however. UPA began in the central city of Cartago among vegetable growers and later incorporated cane and coffee producers from the entire central region. At that time, the price of coffee had plummeted while the costs of production had climbed. UPA members were consequently confronting scarce and expensive credit, substantial debt burdens, and threats of foreclosure. They sought more credit and lower, stabler interest rates. They wanted to export directly rather than having to go through national export houses that skimmed off much of the profit. They needed lower input costs and discount rates (that is, lower rates of taxation) on imported tools and pesticides. Also, they complained that the nationally produced fertilizer, Fertica, was inferior, and they wanted to import fertilizer.

Because landlessness is a widespread problem in the central valley of Costa Rica and the new union needed all the support it could muster, UPA also promised to confront landlessness. Its plan on this front was less specific, however. The official statement of union goals included solving the problem in a way concordant with "the basic dignity of all peasants" but also in a "democratic manner and in accordance with the law." Precisely how UPA proposed to achieve this goal was never described. In an attempt to garner the support of the landless for the new union, UPA leadership emphasized that the interests of landed and landless peasants were the same: if the landed did better financially, they could then employ the landless with greater regularity, a claim that was not entirely hollow in that financial difficulties had lessened employment

23. The union most like UPA is UPAPZ (Unión de Pequeños Agricultores de Pérez Zeledón), which is located in southern Costa Rica in Pérez Zeledón. Smaller than UPA, UPAPZ is less inclined toward a leadership role, but its political position and organizational tactics are very similar.

24. UPA's membership includes landless peasants and those with too little land as well as small producers. UPA offers national health plan benefits to all members. Some landless members view these benefits as at least as important as any production gains made by the union.

opportunities and harvest seasons are major sources of income for landless residents of the central valley.

Once UPA could count on organizational strength and disruptive capacity, the new union petitioned the government for specific solutions to the problems of landed peasants. The state ignored the petition until the peasants went on strike in April of 1982, blocking all highways into San José and paralyzing the flow of foodstuffs. Although the media condemned such "anti-democratic methods" and accused the peasants of communism, the Costa Rican government did not resort to repression. Instead, officials met with union leaders and conceded some of the original demands. From 1981 to 1984, UPA continued its struggle to fulfill the requirements of the original petition. The state frequently failed to keep its promises, and peasants resorted to highway blockages on two more occasions. Each time the government called out the Guardia Civil but did not use force.

Slowly, the union made progress. Policy changes granted UPA members better credit, and interest rates rose more slowly. The threat of foreclosure receded slightly, and coffee and vegetable prices improved. Fertica raised the quality of its product. Over time the union gained more acceptance in the national political scene. Accusations of communism became more subdued, and the UPA secretary general and regional leaders were even granted television time periodically to express union positions.

The Middle Years: Problems of Success

Success also brought problems, however. By 1985 UPA's position vis-à-vis the state had become so comfortable that union effectiveness was compromised. Over time UPA's interaction with the government had brought the union so close to the state that the union was less able to use more disruptive tactics. Members began to charge that UPA had been co-opted. But UPA's move toward the state and co-optation resulted less from specific state efforts than as the accidental outcome of interactive dynamics. In that sense, both the state and the union contributed to UPA's growing impotence.

UPA's numerical strength and success elicited state attention and efforts. Future candidates sought out union leaders to discuss plans for the upcoming term. They gave speeches at union congresses and portrayed peasants as the economic foundation of the nation. UPA's leaders were given ready access to the president, the agriculture minister, and other high-ranking government officials. Such access allowed UPA to present its demands and to be heard without resorting to mobilized action, an infinitely less taxing arrangement. Such amicable relations were symbolized by the state loaning union leaders the money for a jeep

and waiving import taxes, thus reducing the cost by half. Subsequently, the state forgave the loan entirely.

In return, the Costa Rican government pressured UPA to forego destabilizing collective action, and UPA complied. When the presidential hopefuls patronized the union, they also made it clear that they expected no highway blockages to disrupt their future administrations. UPA's leaders, proud of the union's success and its level of acceptance and access, advertised its positive relations with officials and its support of the state. Between 1985 and 1988, UPA did not threaten a single blockage and restricted itself to low-profile demonstrations. In sum, union leaders found it increasingly difficult to confront a state to which the union felt bound and from which it received favors and sympathy.

Ultimately, UPA's closeness to the state, amiable official relations, and strong public support for the government together undermined the union's ability to serve its members and the rural population. In actuality, UPA had sacrificed the right to strike for government access that, over time, could not adequately solve peasant problems. Periodically, union leaders wanted to resort to more assertive tactics in defending peasant interests but felt that the union's hands were tied. By 1985 UPA publicity organizers would admit privately that they had lost power and spoke nostalgically about the past: "We used to be stronger, tougher. In those blockages we brought out eight, ten thousand people and no one went anywhere on the highways. That's not true anymore."²⁵ Although leaders officially boasted of their close ties with the state and portrayed those bonds as a source of strength, some privately admired more militant unions that still resorted to blockages and could still send government officials scurrying to meetings in isolated regions of the country.²⁶ In some situations, UPA's extreme use of rhetoric to underscore state ties expressed ideas that were openly at odds with membership interests. Between 1984 and 1986, UPA adopted some government rhetoric, in particular the glorification of the Costa Rican democracy and private enterprise as the guarantor of all human freedom.²⁷ The administration of President

25. Interview with León Víctor Barrantes, UPA publicity officer, Sept. 1987, in San José.

26. UPA's fate is not unique either to Costa Rica or to unions. Eckstein's discussion of urban unions observes that co-optation is one of the major tactics by which the Mexican state has exercised control over popular groups. See Susan Eckstein, *The Poverty of Revolution: The State and the Urban Poor in Mexico* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 78-79, 86-87, 89, 90, 93-94, 102, and 136. Co-optation has also been a problem for labor unions in Chile and for the major peasant union in Nicaragua. See Alan Angel, *Politics and the Labour Movement in Chile* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 261; and Ilija Luciak, "Popular Democracy in the New Nicaragua: The Case of a Rural Mass Organization," *Comparative Politics* 20, no. 1 (1987):35-55.

27. One national poster proclaims, "La empresa privada hace la libertad" (private enterprise creates liberty). Likewise, official union statements frequently refer to the unique value of the Costa Rican democracy, swear repeatedly to operate only within state definitions of legality, and praise private property. For example, see the program of the Congreso Nacional

Luis Alberto Monge employed deceptive rhetoric about Nicaragua, and UPA followed suit. At one point, UPA Secretary General Freddy Murillo flamboyantly offered to enroll the entire union membership in the national militia in order to be ready to defend the country against aggression from Nicaragua. But when he found that official military incorporation would require the union to forswear strikes and highway blockages forever, he sheepishly withdrew the offer.

Close state ties also undermined UPA's ability to serve the needs of all of its members. Secretary General Murillo, in his enthusiasm for official contact, tended to favor members who made the fewest complaints, particularly the medium-sized coffee producers (a group that happened to include his own family). The union also suffered from divisiveness and conflicts of interest. The original Cartago vegetable farmers claimed that UPA was neglecting the interests of members who did not produce coffee. Meanwhile, smallholding coffee producers also complained that the union had forgotten their interests. The most dissatisfied members began to drift toward smaller, more militant regional unions.

Current Efforts: The Struggle to Return

By February 1988, even UPA's own rank and file had become disgusted with the union's close ties to the state and its correspondingly low level of activism. In a traumatic general assembly, the membership ousted Murillo, the secretary general who had cultivated such close state ties, and installed a new leader thought to be more likely to use disruptive tactics and more willing to confront the state. Although also a coffee producer from the central valley, new Secretary General Guido Vargas had risen from UPA's poorer members and displayed greater sympathy for smaller landowners. Over the next year, Vargas systematically replaced most of those who had surrounded the former secretary general with new, more progressive leaders. The rhetoric and outlook of the union changed substantially.

Vargas has also addressed many other complaints that brought him to power. While Murillo exacerbated the divisiveness arising from diverse interests by insisting on centralized control and favoring more affluent coffee interests, Vargas is attempting to counteract regional differences by encouraging regional responsibility and action at the local level but also by promoting united action on nationwide problems. Since Vargas took office in February 1988, UPA has moved back toward its early militancy and away from the state. The union repaid the state for the jeep and has

de la Agricultura for 1985 and the "Plan de trabajo" for 1987. These publications of UPA-Nacional are available at their main office in San Juan de Tibas, Costa Rica.

refused to accept other such favors. Concerns about co-optation by the state and the need to guard against it are discussed frequently at regional meetings of UPA members. Although the union has not launched another highway blockage, it organized one in October 1988 and came within a few hours of initiating it before the state conceded at the last minute. This particular disruptive threat was notable in that UPA had requested, received, and organized the support of eleven other peasant unions for the blockage. If it had struck, UPA would have commanded highway blockages across the country and in regions where it had no members of its own. This incident was one of the first unified union actions and remains the largest to date. It also marked the beginning of UPA's attempt to lead all the peasant unions and encourage them to work together. Since then UPA has become increasingly supportive in word and deed of the struggles of smaller unions, periodically calling meetings of leaders from all the unions to strengthen contact and plan strategies. Moreover, the worsening agrarian crisis has increased awareness of the need for stronger and more united tactics. Even UPA's more affluent members (like the coffee and milk producers)²⁸ have been damaged by dumping from U.S. producers or by the international market. They too perceive a heightened need to strengthen the union and to use disruptive tactics if negotiation alone cannot protect them.

Looking toward the Future

UPA's future position remains uncertain. Although Secretary General Vargas steered the union in a more hopeful direction, his term expired in February 1990. He does not want to serve again but may be pressured into doing so eventually. The current secretary general, Rogelio Fernández, has been in office only a few months, and it is too early to determine what his leadership will mean for the organization. Although Vargas was clearly in control, he retained union cohesion and strength through methods of compromise, tolerance, and inclusion. He ejected no one from the union and maintained positive relations with his predecessor. Meanwhile, UPA still includes all the more conservative elements that supported Murillo. These elements retain some power, especially Subsecretary General Olman Montero, one of UPA's most affluent members. At present the subsecretary general is kept politely on the sidelines, allowed to participate symbolically but granted no real power. As the office of secretary general turns over periodically, both conservative and progressive union elements will maneuver to get their favorites into power. Thus although UPA has changed its strategy and

28. UPA also includes small dairy farmers. Although they do not rely entirely on farming, they are still small agricultural producers. Many of them farm as well as raise cows.

direction somewhat, the union still tries to maintain the easy access to the state that former Secretary General Murillo won for the union. This effort makes the current secretary general's job a delicate balancing act in that he must be diplomatic but independent, firm but willing to compromise, and generally able to speak all languages to all comers. Vargas balanced these roles successfully; it remains to be seen whether Fernández can do the same.

In retaining some state ties, Vargas recognized that such bonds are a source of strength as well as a potential weakness. On the one hand, they allow the union leadership to accomplish some goals (those least threatening to the Costa Rican state) without disruptive strikes and blockages. The symbolic and actual attention the union receives from the state indicates that the organization has come a long way from the days when it was loudly accused of communism. Between 1985 and 1989, I interviewed forty-five UPA members, and 96 percent of them believe that UPA provides important benefits. Those interviewed more than once did not change their opinions on this basic issue.²⁹ The benefits cited include subsidized prices on fertilizer, insecticides, pesticides, tools, and men's work clothing. Less tangible but equally important, UPA provides a sense of comradeship and mutual support. When communities or subregions have specific agricultural problems, UPA serves as a mouthpiece that can request aid from the state.³⁰ Although UPA has been unable to shield members entirely from the effects of economic crisis, members feel safer belonging to the organization and would not like to see UPA disappear. Moreover, a certain amount of give-and-take is inevitably part of establishing an organization and the repeated interaction between opposing entities.³¹

29. I interviewed thirty-three members of UPA from the central valley region in 1985. These included current and former union leaders at regional and national levels. I spoke with leaders from several levels in Grecia, San Ramón, San Carlos, Cartago, and San José. I also picked two villages in Alajuela, San Luis and San Miguel, where I interviewed 30 percent and 10 percent of household heads respectively. These interviews provided a rank-and-file perspective on UPA. In 1987 and 1989, I returned to interview a randomly selected subgroup of those interviewed in 1985. Only two of the subgroup felt the union provided no significant benefits. In 1985 and 1987, I also encountered UPA members while studying UPAGRA in Limón, and I interviewed five of them. In 1989 I interviewed twelve additional members from Cartago and northern Alajuela, near San Carlos. These in-depth conversations lasted two or three hours and followed a questionnaire that included open-ended and closed questions.

30. For example, in 1988 and 1989 gas emanating from the Poas Volcano ruined the coffee crop within a ten-mile radius. UPA is negotiating with the state to obtain low-interest emergency loans for the smallholders involved.

31. One model of organizational interaction, the "firm model," posits that given consistency of participants, negotiation and bargaining more accurately describe the quality of interaction than confrontation or even strictly goal-oriented rationality. Where actors are likely to meet again, giving a little now in the hopes of getting a little next time becomes a logical aspect of the mutual search for a solution. For a description of the firm model of organizational interaction and an explanation of its applicability to situations of participant con-

On the other hand, close state ties represent a privilege for some union members but a handicap for others. UPA has done best by its landed members but not nearly as well by its landless members. UPA's service to the general rural population has been unbalanced and incomplete. Political proximity to the state and the interests of medium landowners prohibit the union from agitating militantly for land redistribution. UPA's withdrawal from its close state ties between 1985 and 1987 represents a recognition that such ties had undermined the union's ability to serve smallholding members. At present, however, coffee producers still benefit more than any other members, medium landowners more than small landowners, and landless peasants least of all.

In the final analysis, UPA's long-term ability to defend its members may not lie in close ties to the state. Unions can become so thoroughly co-opted that they become instruments of government policy and no longer defend the interests of their membership.³² Because UPA had not blocked highways for more than three years, even its threat of disruption had been weakened prior to the near blockage in October 1988. Certainly the number who turned out for demonstrations was insufficient to block a highway. UPA therefore found it expedient to reacquaint the state with its disruptive capacity, first by organizing the large blockage that never transpired and second by staging large demonstrations that have temporarily paralyzed the center of San José. Members interviewed in 1989 are more satisfied with the union's recent accomplishments.

In sum, UPA initiated its struggle vigorously, began to succumb to co-optation, but now appears to be revitalizing itself and the peasant movement via solidarity with other unions. UPA has become more, then less, then more effective in its service to small and medium landholders. At the same time, it could still do more to serve its members and peasants at large in the central valley. UPA's support of land-invading unions indirectly increases its effectiveness in serving the entire rural class, but UPA itself is still not addressing landlessness in the central valley or among its own members. Unlike former Secretary General Murillo, all the current leaders openly acknowledge the seriousness of landlessness in Costa Rica. The union is now much more sympathetic to the problems of

sistency, see Lawrence Mohr, "Organizations, Decisions, and Courts," in *Law and Society Review* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1976):630, 635-37.

32. Such has been the story, for example, with the mine workers' unions in Zambia. This case, however, is not exactly comparable with that of Costa Rica since the Zambian state has even stronger reasons for co-opting workers: it owns the mines and is therefore the employer of the workers. See Robert Bates, *Unions, Parties, and Political Development* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1971). The national peasant union in Nicaragua, UNAG (Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos) is also in some danger of being co-opted and inadequately representing the interests of its members before the state. UNAG is apparently aware of this danger, however, and is struggling successfully toward greater autonomy. See Ilija Luciak, "Popular Democracy," 49-52.

the landless than it was in 1985. Yet national leaders fear that major attempts at land redistribution are too large a task even for UPA and might well destroy the union. As the UPA public relations manager explained, "We are big and strong but the problem of landlessness is bigger than we are. We can barely keep up with the problems we are already confronting, much less take on that one!"³³ Although national leaders agree, half of the six sectional leaders interviewed felt strongly that UPA should invade land. These three represented areas where landlessness is severe and plot sizes small. They are dissatisfied with UPA inertia on this issue but also recognize that the membership itself is reluctant to use that tactic. Although UPA had become more effective in 1989 than it was in 1985 in serving the landed, it is still less than fully effective for the Costa Rican peasantry as a whole. Any evaluation of its performance must also take this shortcoming into account.

UPAGRA: UNION OF SMALL AGRICULTURISTS OF THE ATLANTIC REGION

In contrast, UPAGRA began a vigorous campaign on behalf of the landed peasantry in 1978 and moved on to a bold struggle against landlessness. After suffering an extremely negative state reaction, the union has resumed its militant campaign against the problems of the landed. As Costa Rica's oldest peasant union, UPAGRA has been a national leader in foresight and understanding of the peasant question.³⁴ Although smaller than UPA, UPAGRA can turn out four to six thousand strikers. Historically more progressive than UPA, it has been less bold than some newer, smaller unions. Yet despite its small size and isolated regional base, UPAGRA's high degree of organization and effective use of disruptive tactics have won it national notoriety.

UPAGRA emerged as the first peasant union largely because the economic crisis was felt first and most cruelly in poverty-stricken Limón province. In this poorest of Costa Rican provinces, peasant producers were barely making ends meet even before the crisis of the 1970s. The producers' profit margin is generally slimmer in Limón than in most other parts of Costa Rica. Because peasant producers in Limón grow staple crops for the domestic market, their products command a lower price than export crops and are subject to state price controls. The problems of Limón's small producers resembled those of UPA's members: scarce credit

33. Interview with Jorge Hernández, public relations manager for UPA, May 1989, San José.

34. UCADEGUA (Unión Costarricense de Agricultores de Guatuso), from Guatuso in northern Alajuela, is smaller and less visible than UPAGRA but resembles it in tactics and political attitudes.

at high interest rates, high production costs and low profit margins, rising debt levels, and threats of foreclosure.

Adding to the problems of small producers in Limón are landlessness, land concentration, and population pressure on the available land, which are more serious there than in many other parts of Costa Rica. The severity of the issue has several origins. First, various populations have poured into the province for several generations, beginning with the banana industry's importation of Jamaicans, Chinese, Italians, Nicaraguans, and native Costa Ricans from other provinces.³⁵ Second, in 1940 the banana industry abandoned its plantations because of the Panama disease, leaving the imported workers behind.³⁶ After developing a disease-resistant plant, the industry returned to Limón, but the local population now far outstrips the employment opportunities offered by the plantations. Third, company policies of early firing make banana work unattractive and farming preferable. One peasant explained, "A man's early years, say twenty-five to forty, are the most important years for starting a farm. After that it becomes much harder to establish oneself on the land. Yet those years are precisely the years the [banana] company takes. Then after you get fired at age forty and just when you are starting to get tired, it's much harder to start a farm, even if you can get some land."³⁷ Former employees and those wishing to invest their youth in something that will yield long-term results make up another portion of the unemployed, landless population in Limón province. Finally, peasants who lost their land in other parts of Costa Rica (particularly Guanacaste) or those who own too little family land in the central valley to support a new generation have also come to Limón in search of farmland. Although for many years Limón represented the agricultural frontier to which the landless could flee, even Limón's absorptive capacity has reached its limit.

The problem of landlessness has been aggravated by the presence of large tracts of unfarmed land. Most such land is privately owned, sparsely used as cattle pasture, or left fallow. The banana companies retain some extra land in case they want to expand, and a small portion of

35. Minor Keith, who first organized the Costa Rican banana industry, found himself handicapped by the same labor shortage that had troubled the Spanish colonizers. Because bananas are a labor-intensive crop, he imported workers but soon became embroiled in labor disputes. See Vladimir de la Cruz, *Las luchas sociales en Costa Rica*, 3d. ed (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1983), 31–35, 47–48.

36. See Gasper, *Limón, 1880–1940*, for a discussion of the temporary demise of the banana industry in Limón in the 1930s. Racism and fear of labor competition during the depression years led the legislature to pass laws restricting blacks (a large percentage of the Limón population) from migrating to other parts of Costa Rica.

37. Anderson, "From Quiescence to Rebellion," chap. 5 of "Peasant Political Action in Costa Rica"; and interview with Luis Palma, peasant farmer, village of El Hogar, February 1986.

provincial land is occupied by national forests. Seeing the apparent surplus of unfarmed land around them, the landless feel the injustice of their situation more keenly.³⁸ Limón's large tracts of unused land have made land invasion a popular political tactic there because it represents possible access to the means of survival for the landless.³⁹ This view holds despite the existence of the IDA. Indeed, IDA inaction may even encourage land invasion because the peasants know that although the IDA will not take the initiative in redistributing land, it may react favorably to a land invasion.⁴⁰

Initial Efforts: Costa Rica's First Peasant Union

Formed as a direct result of the economic crisis, UPAGRA began its efforts to combat the problems of the small producers around the town of Guácimo in Limón. Most farmers were producing corn, beans, and yucca for the domestic market. The peasants wanted more credit at lower interest rates, lower production costs, and higher corn prices. They also sought an end to corruption and unfair pricing at the state processing plant, the only market available to the small producers. Establishing a pattern that UPA and others would later follow, UPAGRA's first step was to present a petition demanding an end to corruption at the state processor and higher corn prices. This petition went directly to the plant officials, who ignored it until the peasants staged a highway blockage that prevented the arrival of any corn at all. The media accused the peasants of "communism" and "anti-democratic activities," but the Costa Rican government did not use force to repress the blockage. Faced with a food

38. In conditions of scarcity and hardship, those who are without will feel a greater injustice and will be more tempted to alleviate their condition when the means they need are clearly visible nearby and are being kept from them only by the actions of others. According to Barrington Moore, the poor reason that extreme inequality and substantial wealth are unacceptable in the face of severe poverty. See Moore, *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (White Plains, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1978), 25, 37–38. This same reasoning underlies Rousseau's political thought as well as the moral economy of the English poor and of the peasant. See Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Mankind* (1754; republished New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), 246; E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd," *Past and Present*, no. 50 (Feb. 1971):69, 79, 131; and Scott, *Moral Economy*, 157, 162–63.

39. Peasants resort to land invasion and squatting all the more readily because the practice has a long tradition in Limón. See Anderson, "From Quiescence to Rebellion," chap. 2.

40. For a discussion of this attitude and the way in which peasants have acted on it to force the IDA to redistribute land, see Anderson, "From Quiescence to Rebellion," 19–22. Costa Rican land invaders typically attempt to attract attention so as to raise the likelihood of success, although in establishing ties with the IDA, peasant groups also run the risk of co-optation. See Seligson, *Peasants of Costa Rica*, 107–14. The Costa Rican pattern contrasts with that in Colombia, where state attention is more likely to result in repression than success and invasions operate secretly as long as possible. See Roger Soles, "Rural Land Invasions in Colombia: A Study of the Macro Conditions and Micro Conditions and Forces Leading to Peasant Unrest," Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1972, 306.

shortage and urban turmoil, the state agreed to eliminate many of its corrupt practices and to raise corn prices. UPAGRA thus scored a significant first victory on behalf of the landed small producers.

The Middle Years: Increased Militancy

As with UPA, UPAGRA's first blockage received widespread support from the landless as well as the landed. Unlike UPA, however, UPAGRA demonstrated a concern for the landless that went beyond vague rhetoric. UPAGRA leaders were acutely aware that the concessions obtained benefited only those who could raise a crop for market. When UPAGRA was approached by a group of landless participants in the blockage who wanted organizational support for a land invasion, the union agreed. In 1980 three hundred landless families invaded a private tract of some twelve thousand acres. They built shanties and planted subsistence crops. The Guardia Civil then expelled them at gunpoint and burned their houses and crops. The peasants reentered the property and reestablished themselves, only to be expelled repeatedly. Thanks to UPAGRA's organizational, financial, and moral support, however, they survived eighteen months of such struggle. Union leaders were particularly useful in mustering contributions and food from supporters in nearby communities and in organizing invasion shifts. Union publicity also legitimated the invasion among the locals, who helped rebuild and replant.⁴¹ At the final expulsion, the authorities jailed a large number of the men without trial. Yet the peasants still could not attract the IDA's attention or support. Finally, UPAGRA bused hundreds of families to San José, where they demonstrated and staged a sit-in at the IDA's central offices. The institute at last agreed to purchase the property and distribute it to the peasants. In overseeing the group, UPAGRA had carefully followed the IDA's own guidelines for eligible land recipients.⁴² Such adherence made the request for land difficult to ignore. Today more than three hundred families inhabit and work this land. As landed peasants, they share many of the problems of other small producers throughout Costa Rica. Most still work through UPAGRA and participate in the

41. UPAGRA convinced local businesses to give or loan the invaders food and money when crops and all possessions were burned by the authorities.

42. When ITCO (later the IDA) was established, it provided legal guidelines for those who could qualify for land redistribution. For example, land recipients were to be peasants (as opposed to urban workers) who had some knowledge of agriculture. They could not have received land from the IDA previously. The guidelines also specified that families with large numbers of children and therefore many hands for farmwork would have a relative advantage in competing for land. Unfortunately, the IDA rarely distributes land and thus uses the guidelines only infrequently.

union's ongoing struggles for better prices, lower interest rates, and lower production costs.

Partly as a result of this invasion, UPAGRA's relations with the Costa Rican government have evolved differently from those of UPA. Although the invasion was successful and broadened regional support for UPAGRA, it damaged the union's relations with the state. The greater poverty of UPAGRA's constituency and its willingness to confront landlessness forced the union to be more militant, as in the invasion. The state, however, is reluctant to respond to such demands and has broken promises to this geographically isolated union that lacks national support. The state's careless attitude has encouraged UPAGRA to use demonstrations and strikes sooner and more often than UPA does. In the context of such tense relations, the state is more likely to respond to such demonstrations with repression. In September 1986, the authorities crushed a San José demonstration with tear gas. One woman was shot (fortunately, not fatally), and the demonstrators sought refuge in the national cathedral. After the invasion, the secretary general (who asked not to be named) left his post for personal reasons but was subsequently arrested, accused of communism, and charged with antidemocratic activities and terrorism. The charges were never proved and the leader was released, but his experience had a sobering effect on other union leaders. Although the media campaign against the union had begun to fade after the first blockage, it renewed following the land invasion and has never let up.⁴³ This unrelenting campaign has persuaded the public beyond Limón province to believe the accusations, thus discrediting UPAGRA's position and isolating its members from public support. The union's weakened position makes it easier for the state to ignore union petitions or break official promises.

UPAGRA also has problematic relations with the IDA. The institute's salaried coordinators of IDA settlements disparage the union among landless peasants, thus discouraging other would-be invaders from seek-

43. The print media have been the most energetic participants in this campaign, particularly the newspapers *La Nación* and *La República*. The years 1981 and 1982, during the height of the land invasion, provide the most examples of this campaign. See *La Nación*, 7 July 1981, 8 July 1981, 17 June 1982, 18 June 1982, and 23 June 1982; also *La República*, 7 July 1981, 22 June 1982, and 25 July 1982. See also the newspapers' coverage of the peasant demonstration in San José on 15 Sept. 1986. In early 1989, UPAGRA initiated a slander suit against the newspaper *La Prensa Libre* and against Sergio Fernández, director of Costa Rica's intelligence agency. Fernández and the newspaper alleged that UPAGRA's leaders had received military training in Cuba, were importing arms from abroad, and were training members to overthrow the state violently. At this point, UPAGRA found a lawyer and sued Fernández for fourteen million *colones* and the newspaper for thirty five million. Over a six-month period, the state tried every conceivable tactic to have the suit thrown out of court but failed. Court proceedings have been delayed repeatedly and were scheduled to begin in July 1990. It remains to be seen what will actually come of the suit. If it succeeds, perhaps future contributors to the discreditation campaign will be more prudent in their accusations.

ing its help. For example, in 1986 the IDA director of the settlement that resulted from the UPAGRA-supported land invasion told me, "UPAGRA is all a bunch of communists. They receive training and direction from abroad. We tell people to stay away from them. But they don't matter anyway. They are dying out because they have no popular support. In a year or two, they won't exist."⁴⁴

Despite these tense relations, UPAGRA has also accomplished much for its landed constituents as a result of its willingness to use disruptive tactics to attract state attention. Until 1987 union benefits included better prices for corn and beans and some opportunity to receive lower-priced fertilizer, pesticides, and tools. UPAGRA also improved access to credit and kept interest rates reasonable. One of its most useful functions has been serving as a mouthpiece in requesting state aid following national or market disasters. The union also provides individual advice about handling credit, market, or debt problems and sponsors training sessions on new farming techniques or how to handle the laws on debt, credit, foreclosure, and land titles. In squabbles between settlers and the IDA, UPAGRA stands in the background, providing a sense of security and a protective hand if necessary. Forty-four members of UPAGRA were interviewed in 1986 and randomly selected subgroups of the same group in 1987 and 1989. Ninety-four percent are proud of the union's success and its militancy. As one expressed this view, "We are the toughest union in the country. We can make the government listen to us. They have to listen!" They believe that UPAGRA does well at defending peasant interests. Like UPA's members, all interviewees said that they feel safer as union members than they ever felt before organizing. As one member commented, "With UPAGRA you know you are never alone [in dealing] with the bank, the [state] processing plant, or the IDA."

Current Efforts: Decreased Militancy

Troubled state relations, especially those resulting from the land invasion, have somewhat limited UPAGRA's ability to serve its constituents and the rural population. Since the original land invasion, UPAGRA has not officially supported another such attempt. Although several individual leaders and the former secretary general serve as unofficial advisors to land-invading groups, such support is given discreetly. UPAGRA recognizes that its public support for land invasion prejudiced its relations with the state. The union now devotes more time to the problems of the landed. As UPAGRA Secretary General Carlos Campos explained, "Land[ownership] is not the solution as long as there is no infrastructure

44. Interview with Marcos Vinicio, IDA coordinator of Negev settlement, Mar. 1986, in Guácimo.

to support the [small] landowner, no credit, no market, high interest rates. Until we solve these problems, landownership has no meaning. Even the hardest worker may end up selling his land because he can't repay his debts after he sells his crop. The people we won land for are so poor that they can barely survive, so land alone is not the solution."⁴⁵

UPAGRA agitates instead for stable markets and credit reform. Without a better credit system, UPAGRA is willing to support only invasions in which peasants agree to establish a cooperative. One former UPAGRA Secretary General, Juan José Herrera, observed, "The small, individual landowner can't make ends meet. The only way an invasion will work is if people pool their resources and farm as a cooperative. When people come to me and ask me to help them organize an invasion, I will help them only if they agree to work the land as a cooperative. Those who don't agree go away and never come back. We have one section where they have invaded and are working the land as a cooperative. It's really beautiful to see."⁴⁶

UPAGRA has never gained the kind of government access enjoyed by UPA, and state pressure has forced it to forgo its most disruptive tactic. In return, UPAGRA's state access has improved somewhat. Relations with some state institutions, such as the Ministerio de Agricultura, are even guardedly positive. At the same time, UPAGRA's ability and willingness to serve its landless constituents and the landless in general has declined. Although UPAGRA presses for cooperative farming, most peasants would prefer to own individual plots. Few cohesive groups have been willing to invade as a cooperative. While UPAGRA's position favoring cooperatives may make economic sense, it does not provide the kind of support that landless peasants prefer. So far, however, UPAGRA leaders have not faced a groundswell of rank-and-file opposition. This greater relative support by members can be explained in several ways. First, UPAGRA's neglect of the landless has not been accompanied by simultaneous neglect of the landed nor by favoritism toward landed subgroups. Second, landless quiescence may stem from the support that invaders can still obtain from UPAGRA, albeit individual and unofficial. Finally, in Limón as in the central valley, the landless are the poorest and least organized. In neither case have they been able to protest UPAGRA and UPA decisions against their interests.

As the agrarian crisis worsened in the late 1980s, UPAGRA found itself less and less able to win concessions even for the landed. Low-level state bureaucrats interviewed in 1989 maintained that the state has become less paternalistic than it was in the early 1980s, now more hard-

45. Interview with Carlos Campos, UPAGRA Secretary General, June 1989, in Guácimo.

46. Interview with Juan José Herrera, former UPAGRA Secretary General, June 1989, in Guácimo.

nosed and neoliberal. Tactics that worked three years ago are no longer successful. In an alternative explanation, UPA's founder and public servants who work for the Ministerio de Agricultura say that UPAGRA resorted to too much disruption too often and that disruption has lost some of its sting. The crises that UPAGRA alone can create are no longer large enough to force state concessions and are just as likely to draw repression or be ignored.

In the past, relations between UPA and UPAGRA were guarded. Each group feared that close cooperation would taint its own reputation and inhibit future action. UPA feared being discredited with the state while UPAGRA dreaded being stigmatized by UPA's complacent image. UPA's former leadership scorned UPAGRA and repeated the media's false accusations. Even privately, some former leaders say UPAGRA is undemocratic. Under the old leadership, however, other UPA leaders admired the smaller, more militant union and respected its ability to command attention disproportionate to its size. Publicly, UPAGRA Secretary General Carlos Campos spoke of UPA with respect. Privately, however, all leaders and some rank-and-file members criticized UPA for having sold out to the government. They held it up as a warning of the dangers of close ties with the state.

In response to state hardening, UPAGRA too has reached out to other unions, regional unions as well as UPANacional. UPAGRA leaders are now devoting more energy to creating interorganizational ties than to unilateral action. In June 1988, UPAGRA organized a blockage that included several other unions and lasted two days. This largest united union action until that time preceded UPA's threatened, multi-union blockage of October 1988. UPAGRA former Secretary General Herrera characterized the June blockage as only mildly successful, however. Fewer than half the peasants' demands were won, and several unions gave up and went home before further concessions could be exacted. But current Secretary General Campos believes that the blockage was a step in the right direction. Thus UPAGRA is still teaching other unions the basics of unified action.

Looking toward the Future

The change in leadership and posture within UPANacional has led to improved relations with UPAGRA. Many of the demands and rhetoric that UPAGRA initiated between 1981 and 1985 have now been incorporated into the official position of UPANacional. UPA's new leadership consults with and learns from UPAGRA in ways that the former secretary general was never willing to do. Indirectly, through growing ties with UPA, UPAGRA is now helping to lead the new union movement toward united action. Although UPA refused to participate in the blockage of June

1988, it invited UPAGRA to participate in the national blockage it organized in October of the same year. UPAGRA's supportive involvement with UPA demonstrates that its leaders now have more confidence in the larger union than before and more trust and respect for UPA's current leadership.

All but one of UPAGRA's leaders confess to being tired. Their organization has fought at the forefront of union politics for ten years and has paid a high price in negative state and public relations. The positions they originally took have now become widely recognized as correct and necessary if peasant farming is to survive in Costa Rica. Although UPAGRA's leaders watch carefully and remain ready to join the action, they are content for now to let UPA spearhead the struggle, at least for a while.

Nevertheless, the major problem of landlessness remains, and some (particularly leftists) criticize UPAGRA's decisions and its effectiveness. Two of its former secretaries general now outflank the union on the left. Some of the most radical peasants, particularly some of the poorest landless, have become disgusted with UPAGRA. They say the union defends its landed supporters without concern for others. In Limón a few of these have turned to a newer, more radical local union that is willing to launch and encourage land invasions—La Coordinadora Atlántica.

LA COORDINADORA ATLANTICA

This new regional union dedicates itself primarily to small-scale land invasions around Port Limón. Because the invasion process usually takes several years, none of those sponsored by this union have yet resulted in land being redistributed to landless invaders. Known as "La Coordinadora," this small union is the most radical of the three examined here, but its newness, militancy, and local orientation and influence make it typical of many of the smaller peasant unions that have surfaced since 1985.⁴⁷ La Coordinadora is very much a developing organization and may eventually become something different from what it is today. Founded in 1985, La Coordinadora began calling itself a peasant union in 1986. Its name implies greater grandeur and strength than it actually possesses, however. In 1987 its membership numbered only four hundred, but it grew to six hundred by 1989. At present, this union operates alone, although it hopes eventually to coordinate all peasant unions in Limón province. La Coordinadora operates far south of UPAGRA's home base in northern Limón province, with its central base in the largest city in the province, Port Limón.

47. Two similar unions are APROAP (Asociación de Pequeños Agroforestaleros) and ASPAS (Asociación de Pequeños Agricultores de Guanacaste) from northern Guanacaste province.

Initial Efforts: Beginning with Militancy

Given the problem of landlessness in Limón, it is not surprising that La Coordinadora developed in response to the needs of the landless. As already noted, landlessness also occupied UPAGRA's attention in its early years but later took a back seat to the problems of the landed. At the moment, landlessness is the only agrarian problem La Coordinadora attempts to address because its leaders' have defined landlessness as the most serious problem in rural Costa Rica.

La Coordinadora provides organizational and moral support to groups of landless peasants who approach the union wishing to invade land. The leaders of La Coordinadora (one of whom was the first secretary general of UPAGRA) are thoroughly acquainted with the history of land invasion in Costa Rica, including IDA regulations. They can guess what kinds of acts and properties are likely to attract the attention of the IDA. They also know which private properties are most valuable and which ones owners might be willing to relinquish to avoid a prolonged fight. Of the invasions supported by La Coordinadora, the smallest involved thirty families and the largest, two hundred. Properties invaded have ranged in size from 100 to 370 acres. When invaders are arrested, the union helps collect food and money to support their families and to pay for legal counsel. At any given time, La Coordinadora might also be attempting the legal defense of as many as thirty invaders and aiding their families economically.

Current Efforts: Influence Expands

As of 1989, La Coordinadora was granting organizational support to four local land invasions simultaneously. All but one of these invasions were still in the early stages when peasant families occupy the land, set up a community, and are expelled by the authorities only to reinvade a few days later. The goal is to create enough disruption and crisis that the IDA will eventually be forced to attend to the matter. One of La Coordinadora's invasions has progressed to the negotiation stage. In 1987 the IDA had agreed to attempt to purchase half of one of the invaded properties. The peasants, the IDA, and the large landowner were negotiating over which part would be sold. This purchase may become the union's first success to date. Once the IDA becomes involved with a group of peasant invaders, their chances of obtaining land increase. The number of groups involved with La Coordinadora evidences the needs of the local landless and the confidence they place in this union. The situation is complicated. No one is willing to call the union a complete success until one or more victories are gained, yet the landless invaders are relieved to have union support. Indeed, many would not dare to attempt an invasion without it.

As would be expected, La Coordinadora's relations with the state are antagonistic. Because of the limited nature of its goals, the union has thus far dealt only with the IDA and the Guardia Civil. The IDA accuses the union of communism and terrorism while the Guardia forcibly expels invading families and jails the men. As yet, however, La Coordinadora is too small and too new to have attracted much media attention. The union has no office and meets each time in a different place. This constant movement makes it more difficult to repress the union or arrest its leaders. Also, the union and its constituency distrust outsiders and meet in a locked room with one member standing watch outside. La Coordinadora enjoys positive relations with other popular groups and nonpeasant unions in Port Limón. These groups help the union by finding meeting places, transmitting messages, and locating funds, food, and temporary homes for families whose men are under arrest.

Looking toward the Future

As the unions have begun to try to work together under UPA's leadership, La Coordinadora too has been drawn into the fold. From 1986 to 1987, UPA leaders knew almost nothing about La Coordinadora and maintained that its members "were all communists." Yet by 1989, UPA was inviting La Coordinadora's leaders to strategy meetings with other unions. Along with UPAGRA, La Coordinadora placed itself under UPA's direction for the blockage in October 1988 that proved unnecessary. Although La Coordinadora's secretary general is wary of UPA even under the new leadership, the union is willing for now to give UPA the benefit of the doubt. Relations between La Coordinadora and UPAGRA are guardedly sympathetic. They have cooperated on one demonstration in San José, and La Coordinadora joined with UPAGRA in the multiunion blockage of June 1988. Nevertheless, the two Limón unions still do not trust one another fully. Current leaders of UPAGRA believe that La Coordinadora is foolhardy. If La Coordinadora should be destroyed by state repression, UPAGRA does not want to share its fate. Furthermore, UPAGRA's policy on land invasion differs from that of La Coordinadora. On the other side, the secretary general of La Coordinadora and leaders of specific invasions think that UPAGRA has "gone soft" and abandoned the landless. The secretary general of La Coordinadora told me, "I don't know what they are doing anymore. They have changed. It doesn't seem like they are doing much at all. I don't know what to think about them. There are still lots of people who have no land."⁴⁸ But in the new atmo-

48. This interviewee preferred to remain anonymous.

sphere of national cooperation among unions, both UPAGRA and La Coordinadora need mutual support and would like to cooperate.

As with UPA and UPAGRA, the future of La Coordinadora is uncertain. By serving an important but neglected sector of the rural population, it risks its own existence. If La Coordinadora were to grow large and powerful but continue using the same techniques, it would probably be subject to state repression. Alternatively, the Costa Rican government may try to steer it in a less disruptive direction by offering concessions in exchange for modified tactics.

THE PARADOX OF ORGANIZATION

Piven and Cloward have argued that poor people's organizations are paradoxical in nature. They ostensibly benefit their members but in reality offer few advantages. My review of three peasant unions illustrates that these organizations indeed exhibit paradoxical qualities that make them less than ideally effective. Nonetheless, the disadvantages of organization appear neither as comprehensive nor as debilitating as Piven and Cloward have indicated.

These analysts have directed their strongest criticisms toward mass-membership organizations that undermine the strength of those they represent. Piven and Cloward argue that as an organization wins concessions for some members, divisions arise within the group, and those who have received nothing lose organizational support and the sympathetic attention of those who have already won.⁴⁹ Thus those who gained little or nothing but remain organizational members are essentially disadvantaged by membership. It is true that as UPA and UPAGRA have grown, stabilized, and become bureaucratized, they have become less militant, more vulnerable to organizational pitfalls, and less inclined to serve their poorest constituencies. Each union has become less willing to engage directly in a struggle against landlessness. In both unions, the landed are more concerned that the organizations focus on their substantial problems than on landlessness. Moreover, landless members of the two unions are now less likely to gain land than they were before unionization. While these landless peasants are now organized and ostensibly more powerful than before, their own organizations discourage land invasion. Despite this paradox, the data analyzed here indicate that union members prefer membership over nonmembership. In their minds, the unions provide enough advantages to merit support. This opinion is not limited to landed members of each union but is also shared by the landless peasants who were interviewed.

49. Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, 72, 84, 85.

Neglect of the landless is related to choices made by each organization among different goals. Piven and Cloward criticize organizations that favor some members over others and allow their own survival to outweigh constituents' goals. Yet union choices among members are part of a legitimate and pragmatic effort to survive and are also necessary when faced with mutually exclusive goals. Both UPA and UPAGRA have chosen organizational survival over maximum service to the landless. Both are caught in a dilemma created by the contradictory and perhaps incompatible needs of different members: they wish to fight landlessness, but they also want to survive as organizations in order to defend the landed. Supporting extensive land invasions might generate a trend that could ultimately jeopardize the property of landed members and their support for the unions. Or it could cause state repression so severe that the unions would be destroyed. Such choices are not made maliciously nor are they deliberately intended to neglect the landless. They may be forced on an organization by its environment and by the diverse nature of its constituents. The examples at hand indicate that making choices among organizational constituencies may be necessary because of their conflicting goals. Nor is it evident that organizational self-destruction would best serve the overall interests of the rural poor in the long run. UPA and UPAGRA have opted for organizational goals that permit their survival, and even so, each of the two unions has had trouble staying alive and effective.

This discussion does not yet apply to La Coordinadora because it has narrowed its membership base to eliminate incompatible goals. Although that position is enviable in some ways and avoids having to choose among constituents' goals, it may be a temporary status and one that entails much less organizational power vis-à-vis the state. Once members of La Coordinadora have completed one or more invasion successfully, it too may face making choices among members or choices among incompatible goals. At such a point, opting for a larger membership might also bring greater visibility and power, possibilities that a small union would find hard to resist.

Piven and Cloward also criticize poor people's organizations for tying into the status quo and becoming co-opted in the process. The examples at hand verify that this tendency is a very real danger for peasant unions, particularly because official attention to a historically neglected class is an almost irresistible lure. The advantages and limitations of state ties pertain most to UPA, which drew closest to the state and was then forced by its membership to pull back. Yet co-optation is a complicated issue. First, limited organizational effectiveness may continue in unexpected ways despite co-optation. While UPA was closely allied to the state, it was not rendered powerless and could temporarily serve some members even better than before. Second, co-optation is neither unidirectional nor irreversible because organizations can pull

back from such ties and reverse the trend. Third, accidental co-optation may result purely from organizational dynamics and interaction among actors (unions and the state) rather than from any deliberate effort at co-optation. This type of influence on organizational effectiveness applies to both UPA and UPAGRA. The daily tasks of negotiation require some decrease in militancy and a willingness to open dialogue and make compromises. Fourth, when such dynamics alter organizational behavior in ways that neglect some members, legitimate reasons remain for such organizational choices, and much may be gained by the organization in the process. This discussion of co-optation is again less relevant to La Coordinadora because it has the fewest ties to the state. Yet its leaders would like to command more state attention and cooperation, and in the future, they may be willing to alter union tactics in exchange for such access.

The experience of all three unions illustrates the power of disruption. Piven and Cloward favor crisis creation and view it as more effective than the organizations themselves. These Costa Rican unions have clearly benefited from creating disorder—indeed, all three established themselves by creating a crisis. The land invasion that UPAGRA supported was successful precisely because it eschewed the bureaucratic and organizational channels of the Instituto de Desarrollo Agrario and resorted directly to disrupting property ownership. Even then, not until the peasants unleashed chaos at the IDA's central offices were their needs for land met. When these unions have drawn back from disruption, they have lost certain kinds of effectiveness. For example, UPAGRA is no longer creating crises—and no longer obtaining land. UPA, in an effort to increase its power, has chosen to remind the state of its disruptive capacity and to enhance that strength through cross-union unity. Only La Coordinadora continues to rely primarily on techniques stressing disorder.

Organization clearly offers advantages, particularly in the Costa Rican setting. First, the country is a democracy where organization is accepted and efficacious. Second, the peasants' goals are reformist, not revolutionary. Many of their demands require them to address the state and be able to negotiate with its representatives. Although crisis creation always attracts attention, many of the gains made by peasants could never have been achieved through spontaneous disruption alone. Third, as members of an organization, many peasants have continued to reap benefits that would have been unattainable without organization. Members acknowledge feeling safer as part of a union. The fact that the poor benefit least does not render the unions' gains negligible. According to Piven and Cloward, the disruptive strength of the poor is also limited. They assert nonetheless that it is the most important power the poor possess in a context of powerlessness.⁵⁰ Yet the Costa Rican story would

50. *Ibid.*, 26. Piven and Cloward clarify their advocacy of disruption within a context of

seem to disprove this claim. Disruption may be the most effective power of the poor in some situations and perhaps the only one that favors them all equally. But it is not the poor's only important power, and in some circumstances, it may not even be their most useful tool.⁵¹

Piven and Cloward's advocacy of disruption seems more relevant to the urban poor than to peasants. Spontaneous disruption, like riot, may be more useful in the close quarters of an urban setting, where the poor and the objects of their anger (such as the state, institutions, welfare officers, or representatives of the law) must live side by side. In the city, it is more difficult for the targets to escape from the rioters. In the countryside, however, disruption can be harder to achieve and to direct. Smaller disruptive groups may be easier to repress when no bystanders are watching. Unless group anger is focused on large rural landowners directly, peasants must carry their disruption to the centers of power in urban areas in order to attract attention (as UPAGRA's invaders did). But it is unlikely that large numbers of peasants will accidentally gather in an urban area.⁵² Riot is therefore a more unwieldy and less constructive tool for peasants than for the urban poor. It is much easier for an organized group of peasants to arrange beforehand to take their disruptive efforts to an urban center. In Costa Rica, even land invaders, who address themselves to other rural dwellers and rely upon crisis creation, find that they must also approach the state if they wish to succeed. In making such an approach, an organization serves them well, as members of La Coordinadora have discovered.

Piven and Cloward's most important conclusion is that the power

powerlessness in an exchange published after *Poor People's Movements*. See William Gamson and Emile Schmeidler, "Organizing the Poor," *Theory and Society* 13, no. 4 (1984):567-85; and the "Rejoinder" by Piven and Cloward, 587-99.

51. Focusing exclusively on disruptive or even organized resistance ignores another dimension of political opposition that is equally important and more useful in certain situations. I refer to everyday resistance, that "prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them . . . : foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage. . . ." See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1985), 29.

52. The usual exception to this rule is market day, when many rural dwellers come to the urban center. Not surprisingly, market days have also been occasions when riot became as useful a tool for the rural poor as for their urban counterparts. As Sidney Mintz noted, "The market was the place where the people, because they were numerous, felt for a moment that they were strong." See Mintz, "Peasant Markets," *Scientific American*, no. 203 (1960):112-22. Markets were also the place where rural consumers came to make purchases. If they considered prices unjust, they would confront that fact in the market, where their concentrated numbers made it seem more likely that protest would be successful. See also George Rude, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964), 37, 40, 47; and Louise Tilly, "The Food Riot as a Form of Political Conflict in France," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2, no. 1 (1971):26, 32.

of any organization ultimately resides in its disruptive capacity.⁵³ They assert that such capacity is greatest among small organizations of leaders and least in mass-membership organizations.⁵⁴ Yet Piven and Cloward understand that organization and disruption are by no means incompatible and that an organization of leaders can enhance crisis creation.⁵⁵ To date, these three Costa Rican peasant unions have retained a good measure of their disruptive capacity. All have retained some effectiveness because they are more than simply organizations. In the final analysis, they can also lead and create disruption and crisis, the events the state wishes most to avoid.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to evaluate union effectiveness from the vantage point of union members, from that of the peasantry in general, and in dealings with the state. The conclusion is necessarily complex on all three dimensions. For some (landed union members), unionization provides a decided advantage. For others (landless members), it offers considerably less. Some unions even mitigate against the fulfillment of landless needs. From the perspective of nonaffiliated peasants, the unions offer a possible source of self-defense and a hopeful example. At the same time, both the defense and the example are limited, imperfect, and generally biased against the very poor. In dealing with the state, the unions have been partially effective in making some gains and commanding some attention. Yet they have also relinquished some strength and neglected the very poor in the process. Thus peasant organizations remain a mixed blessing in Costa Rica.

The article has also sought to measure the success and shortcomings of these unions against Piven and Cloward's predictions about organizations. Their forecast is most accurate regarding the poorest peasants. While the unions have helped the rural poor, the poorest of the poor have gained the least and tend to gain less and less as these organizations mature and stabilize. Furthermore, their union membership makes them feel organized, less powerless, and somewhat protected. In fact, for the

53. Piven and Cloward appear to have some appreciation even of nondisruptive organizations. See, for example, the introduction to the paperback version of *Poor People's Movements*, xiv, xvi, xxi; see also Piven and Cloward, *The New Class War: Reagan's Attack on the Welfare State and Its Consequences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), pp. x, 7. In this latest work, they argue that the poor in the United States will survive the Reagan administration precisely because they have established durable organizations.

54. Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, paper ed., 595–96.

55. For example, the movement Piven and Cloward admire most is the U.S. civil rights movement in its early days, when it was disruptive in an organized fashion but neither entirely spontaneous nor bureaucratized and lethargic.

poorest of the poor, organizational membership mitigates against their acting to meet their most important needs. While the probability of being unemployed may be temporarily reduced, the chances of attaining landed status and its much greater level of security actually declines. This generalization applies to all except members of La Coordinadora Atlántica and similar young unions devoted to land invasion. If peasants are intimidated by potential state oppression and are normally reluctant to act against the state or powerful rural elites, they are even less likely to do so when their own organizations discourage them. Over the long run, the poorest peasants may be better off with spontaneous disruption and without union organization unless the union specifically devotes itself to supporting such disruption, as does La Coordinadora. Thus as Piven and Cloward anticipated, organization itself is a mixed blessing in Costa Rica.

Some of these unions' failures, however, are not due entirely to "organizational ineffectiveness" as Piven and Cloward characterize it. Nonfulfillment of some organizational goals may arise out of the need for organizational survival. Although no organization may be better than a compromising, surviving organization, opinions are likely to differ over the correct choice. Members of the same organization are likely to think differently. Given a responsive government that may be willing to negotiate and compromise, popular groups are better off responding in kind. In considering the needs of the rural poor, particularly in a democratic political context, more grounds exist for optimism about poor people's organizations than Piven and Cloward allow. While the organizations may stop short of the ideal and fall prey to conflicting or incompatible demands, they can still accomplish a lot provided they retain something of their disruptive capacity. These observations hold within a democratic or less repressive system where organization is tolerated or at least not vigorously repressed.

The peasants themselves seem to have reached some of these same qualified conclusions. The poorest members still adhere to their organizations, even to UPANacional. And unorganized crisis creators come to La Coordinadora to ask for organizational help. Such loyalty would be improbable if these organizations were totally ineffective. Far from being deceived into trusting imperfect unions, peasants come to the unions because they know that without unions, they would be worse off than they already are. Tangible results, however small, are better than nothing. Small successes won today are less than ideal and may preclude more permanent changes in the future. Yet among a class more accustomed to loss than gain, greater successes, particularly those that affect the system the way land redistribution does, were hardly guaranteed in the first place. Unorganized, the peasants would be even more defenseless and more neglected by the state than they are by the organizations themselves. They would also be less likely to make even small gains. This

perspective helps explain the recent proliferation of peasant unions in Costa Rica as well as the continuing loyalty of landed and landless peasants to the unions.

In a democracy, citizen participation in politics defines and sustains the political system. Popular organization is one of the best vehicles for such participation. Thus examining popular organization in the form of peasant unions offers unique insights into the Costa Rican democracy, revealing encouraging as well as disturbing aspects. In interacting with the unions and union leaders, the state has resorted to repressing leaders and demonstrations. Elements within the state like the IDA, with the enthusiastic cooperation of the national media, have carried out disinformation campaigns that have damaged the unions internally, regionally, and nationally. The false charge of "communism" has been used repeatedly to discredit those whose needs the state and the status quo would rather ignore. The Costa Rican government has proved so reluctant to deal with the unions that the latter must always be prepared to use mobilized action to attract attention. The state is also willing to use favors and special access to influence and undermine popular organization. All these state actions raise important questions about the nature and depth of the Costa Rican democracy. At the same time, none of these approaches is unique to Costa Rica nor even unusual among democracies.

Other elements of this story offer more positive images of the Costa Rican democracy. Throughout the past decade, state repression of collective action and individuals has been mild when considered in the Latin American context. So far, no one has been killed. Furthermore, organization is legal and not subject to violent persecution. There are few places in Latin America where twenty-five of the most important national peasant leaders could meet in one room, in the capital city, during the day, with doors and windows open in a relaxed atmosphere. Perhaps the most encouraging of all are the developments between 1987 and 1989. As UPA has withdrawn from some of its state ties, the state has not openly attempted to halt the withdrawal nor has it punished UPA for this decision. Most important, no evidence suggests so far that the state is attempting to stop or undermine the efforts at unification and coordination taking place among all the unions.

In the Central American context, the health of the Costa Rican democracy has generated considerable interest. In many ways, the experience of the peasant unions serves as a gauge of the vitality, strength, and depth of that democracy. In the future, the efforts of the unions, the state response, and the success or failure of the peasant movement may well become a crucial testing ground for the Costa Rican democracy.