Resisting abandonment:
An ethnography of oil workers' resistance to political violence and capital accumulation in rural Colombia

By Andrés Gómez T

2016
Abstract

Colombia is the worst country to be a trade unionist in the world. Approximately 3,000 workers have been assassinated in the last 30 years, the state, paramilitary organizations and some multinationals being responsible for most of the murders. This fact highlights the importance of researching the mechanisms of mass violence against trade unionists including the mechanisms on part of the trade unionists that keep trade unionism alive. Because of the importance of studying power and resistance as part of social change, this thesis presents an ethnography of political violence against the labourers and the trade unionists that work for Pacific Rubiales Energy in the department of Meta, with focus on how those trade unionists resist such violence with an open resistance to both political violence and coercive capital accumulation. I state that the trade unionists, by adapting their list of demands to the locals' social and environmental needs, overstep corporatist trade unionism allowing them to break the social and physical death imposed by the state, the mafias and the multinational. I argue that the trade unionists' open resistance not only allows them to continue their social struggle and to challenge the violence exerted against them, but permits them to modernize a country that sustains a semi-feudal structure beneficial for the multinationals, the mafia barons and the economic and political elites by challenging their corrupt and murderous relations.
Este trabajo lo dedico a quienes destinan su vida a exigir justicia social y dignidad, y especialmente a quienes les han arrebatado su vida al hacerlo.
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**List of Abbreviations**

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACMV</td>
<td>Self-Defence Forces of Meta and Vichada</td>
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<td>AUC</td>
<td>United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAF</td>
<td>Colombian Armed Forces</td>
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<td>CAJAR</td>
<td>Lawyers' Office José Alvear Restrepo</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEPAL</td>
<td>Economic Commission for Latin America</td>
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<tr>
<td>CINEP</td>
<td>Centre for Communal Research and Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>COP</td>
<td>Colombian currency, pesos</td>
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<tr>
<td>COLEX</td>
<td>Coplex Petroleo do Brasil</td>
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<tr>
<td>DAS</td>
<td>Administrative Department of Security</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECOPETROL</td>
<td>Colombian Petrol Company</td>
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<td>ESMAD</td>
<td>Mobil Anti-riot Squad</td>
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<td>ENS</td>
<td>National School of Unionism</td>
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<td>EPL</td>
<td>Popular Liberation Army</td>
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<td>FCSPP</td>
<td>Committee for Political Prisoners</td>
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<td>JAC</td>
<td>Communitarian councils</td>
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<td>M19</td>
<td>19th of April Movement</td>
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<td>NPU</td>
<td>National Protection Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>OAS</td>
<td>Organization of American States</td>
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<tr>
<td>PASO</td>
<td>Project for International Accompaniment and Solidarity in Colombia</td>
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<tr>
<td>PNUD</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRE</td>
<td>Pacific Rubiales Energy</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRT</td>
<td>Workers Revolutionary Party</td>
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<td>REDHER</td>
<td>Network of Brotherhood and Solidarity with Colombia</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>UP</td>
<td>Patriotic Union party, political party</td>
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<td>SIJIN</td>
<td>Judicial Police</td>
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<tr>
<td>TROCO</td>
<td>Tropical Oil Company</td>
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<td>USO</td>
<td>Oil Industry Union</td>
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<td>UTEN</td>
<td>Union of Workers in the Energy Industry</td>
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I

Introduction

This thesis is an exploration of resistance on the part of trade unionists against both neoliberal accumulation and political violence. Here is presented the people's and worker's actions of resistance, meaning their agency in the midst of neoliberal trade and political violence against trade unionists and social movements in rural Colombia. Here, I address how collective action encourages social change and creates spaces and situations that foster social movements and propel their agendas. In this aspect this thesis differs from James Scott’s (2008) analysis of resistance. The author states that:

In the long run, and in certain circumstances, the peasantry and the working class do have "the means to change" fundamentally their situation. But in the short run- today, tomorrow, and the day after- they face a situation that very sharply restricts their real options (ibid: 247).

Scott's analysis takes as point of departure his work in the 1970s in Kedah, Malaysia, where despite the resistance enacted in the form of strikes and revolts, land was not in the hands of the peasants. “The few opportunities for land and work remaining to Sedaka's poor depend today, as always, on the sufferance of the wealthy” (ibid), concludes Scott who affirms that strikes and revolts obtained concessions but it is the “stubborn” and concealed resistance in everyday life, “the truly durable weapons of the weak” (ibid: 303). In this thesis, resistance is not an action where resisters change “fundamentally their situation” in the long run, fighting hegemony, questioning the superstructure and concealing their actions. Here, resistance is not a symbolic but rather an active action performed by trade unionists in rural Colombia, people that have openly challenged an oil multinational within a context of violence against trade unions. For instance, I reflect on how inhabitants and workers have challenged the attempt on part of the multinational of eliminating trade unionists -revealing fundamental changes in workers’ lives in the short run.

Open resistance against open violence

The approach to active and open resistance is presented in the following story of one of the participants of this work, a person that saved his life within a process of resistance. The story also serves as an introduction to the nature of the problem: the oppression and the subversion of orders on the part of people's collective action.
Camilo Acero is a young lawyer that works for the Oil Industry Union (USO) in Meta. He considers himself an oil unionist despite the fact he is not an oil worker. I was finally able to meet him during a demonstration for the conservation of water resources and against oil extraction in the tropical savannah. By that time, thousands of capybaras had died of thirst in Casanare, the adjoining department that also produces oil and shares an ecosystem and history with Meta, the department where I conducted this research. Surprisingly, we hold our conversation at the end of the cultural activities that close the demonstration, the protest having been carried out during the early evening because of the high daytime temperature of the city of Villavicencio, and to avoid studying and labouring hours interfering with the demonstrators’ willingness to participate. It was unusual for me to have a conversation about political violence in the street at that time in the day, Villavicencio having been taken by force and blood by paramilitary forces that still exert their power in the city. Camilo told me that evening as we sat on a cement bench that he had received death threats several times and he had no security detail, bodyguards, or a bullet proof SUV car like other unionists, just cunning, attentive eyes.

The last time Camilo received a death threat it was not in the form of a threatening phone call nor an intimidating, rustical obituary like before; the threat was closed to being fulfilled by hired assassins that tried to assault during a speech he had given to the inhabitants of the neighbourhood “El Paraiso” in the municipality of Puerto Gaitán, Meta in 2013. - “You are the lawyer of the USO, you are the person we have to kill”, said one of the hitmen as he approached. Camilo stopped his intervention about rejecting the conditions the oil multinational Pacific Rubiales Energy (PRE) was offering through the Union of Workers in the Energy Industry (UTEN). Camilo considers he is alive because some workers and inhabitants stood in the way of the suspected assassins while some other workers made him jump on a motorbike in order to leave the area.

Camilo is one of the Colombian unionists that has received death threats because of his activities as a unionist. The country is infamous due to the assassinations, torture, forced displacement, death threats and imprisonments against unionists. According to the National School of Unionism¹ (ENS), since 1986, approximately 2,855 unionists have been killed in Colombia. Moreover, from 1991 to 2005, 3,035 unionists were given death threats and 128 had been abducted (ENS; 2005:1). Colombia is by far the most dangerous country for unionists.

¹ The National School of Unionism (ENS) is a recognized NGO that is consulted by international agencies as source of reliable information regarding trade unionism situation in Colombia.
From slavery to free labour

Violence against workers is a historical issue. During colonial times, indigenous people were harshly mistreated to the point that slaves were necessary: populations decimated in numbers due to forced labour, persecution and disease – situations that persist in different and similar ways. However, the different indigenous communities were not the only ones that endured the Spanish oppression. After the European invasion of the Americas more than ten million people were kidnapped in West Africa and shipped to the Americas during the course of 300 years. During that time Cartagena city (Colombia) became one of the most important ports of the slave trade in South America. Most of those that were kidnapped and turned into slaves were subjected to the cruelty of slavery and those who could escape founded “Palenques”, villages in the midst of the forest where they had autonomy and could defend themselves from colonial powers after independence from landowners.

It wasn’t until 1820 that Colombia achieved independence from the Spanish crown, but exploitation would continue in the form of a semi-feudal country like most of the countries in Latin America (Steenland; 1975). After its independence, “La Hacienda” became the inheritance of colonial power, large farms owned by aristocrats acting as feudal lords over the inhabitants of their lands: Afro descendants from West Africa, indigenous people and all kind of poor whites and mestizos. This system made it possible for the young country to continue developing an economy based on agriculture and mining. Taussig in his book “Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America”, using Colombian records as sources, states that the rich aristocrats in the south of the country profited from slavery in their mines and lands until 1852. That year the owner of the Hacienda, El Japio, had to accept the loss of the anti-abolitionist war and continue using the hand labour of the former slaves. “In January 1852, the hacienda Japio and its subdivision of Quintero had prepared for the transition by institutionalizing a new category of workers, the concertados: afro-descendants who, in return for a small plot of a few hectares, worked a certain number of days on the hacienda. Just before abolition, some 40 percent of the adult slaves had become concertados” (Taussig; 2010: 48). The economy changed because of political turmoil and the free peasantry reluctance to work for the owners of several haciendas in the south of the country, affecting the plans for adapting capitalism in Colombia on behalf of the elites. “Mercantilism and slavery had given way to attempts to create a free market. Yet, the ex-slaves could not be forced into wage labour. Refractory tenants, the convulsion of incessant civil war, and the restricted nature
of the export market made large-scale commercialized agriculture untenable” (Taussig; 2010:57). This situation affected the national economy and the country offered foreign capital in the possibility of having large productive lands and exporting tropical products like the banana. Indeed, the country also gave mining concessions and land titles to mining companies like the Chocó Pacifico Mining Company. The UK company owned more than ten kilometres in the department of Chocó and extracted platinum from 1916 to 1926 without paying any royalties (Leal; 2009:150-164). Foreign capital did not change mistreatment against Afro communities and indigenous or poor whites, nor the unequal relationship between central capitalistic countries like the US or UK and periphery capitalistic countries like Colombia.

**Massacre as a paradigm for multinational-state action**

The paradigm of Colombian state treatment of citizens that work for foreign multinationals is a massacre. In 1928, in the Caribbean municipality of Ciénaga where the United Fruit Company—today Chiquita Brands—had enormous banana plantations that remain to this day, the Colombian General Carlos Cortés Vargas, according to conservative calculations (BLAA n.d.), ordered the assassination of 300 unarmed workers. The attack took place at 1:30 AM while the labourers – mostly Afro- were sleeping in the main square on December 6th. Other estimations assure the extrajudicial death penalty cost the lives of more than 1,000 people among workers and some of their relatives. The military, according to folk narratives and García Márquez’s novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, filled train wagons with thousands of bodies whose destination would be the Caribbean Sea, the endpoint for both the striking workers and their families.

By 1913, the hegemonic rule of the company was already acknowledged by France; a French diplomat assured the company controlled “90% of the banana region, the hand labour, the commerce, the roads and the train, all practices sanctioned by the Colombian government” (BLAA n.d.). The banana strike was formed by more than 20,000 workers and it was the consequence of people’s response to poor salaries, miserable living conditions and the imprisonment of those that did not want to sell their lands to the multinational. According to one politician from the conservative party that tried to advocate on behalf of the workers, the executives from United replied that an increment in salaries would encourage them to ask for more. The multinational did not accept and waited for the military to declare a curfew that later transformed into the massacre (Gaitán; 1929). After the massacre, workers conditions worsened; the general responsible for the massacre signed a deed on 29th December 1928 that decreased the workers’ wage and falsely praised the company regarding group insurance, accident compensation and rest days (Ibid).
Workers conditions have not substantially changed over 100 years. Assassinations, threats and forced displacement have had ups and downs but it never stops; nonetheless, today it is not as lethal as two decades ago:

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<td>Homicides</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>140</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2,885</td>
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Source: National Union School - ENS

According to the Centre for Communal Research and Education (CINEP), selective killing, death threats, torture and forced displacement have decreased, but the impunity is still high (CINEP; 2008). According to the ENS, by 2009, 98.3% of the cases of violence against unionists remained in impunity (ENS; 2009). For the NGO, impunity comes from “silence, misinformation and unknown perpetrators” (ibid: 24). By 2009 there was only 22% information about the author of the crimes against unionists in the General Prosecutor Office (ibid). In those matters, the ENS database about perpetrators is far more complete. For the NGO, the guerrillas are responsible of 349 cases of violations against trade unionist between 1986 and 2009, 3.4% of total aggressions during that period. The ENS also states the different paramilitary forces are responsible for 2,433 cases during the same 23 years, 65% of the total while the Colombian Armed Forces (CAF) are responsible for 8.2% of total aggressions against unionists during the same period (ibid: 26).

According to the ENS, violence has been directed to several unionist organizations, in particular these three: the workers of the industrial agriculture sector (SINTRAINAGRO), 840 of its members were murdered between 1986 to 2009; the Teachers Colombian Federation (FECODE) is in second place, 830 of its members were assassinated during the same period; and the third one is the USO, with 115 of its affiliates assassinated during the same fatidic years for trade unionism in Colombia (ibid: 21-24).

**Organization of this study**

This thesis consists of seven chapters that account for the articulation between the state,
paramilitary and PRE in Puerto Gaitán, how they all made it possible for the company to transfer surplus from oil workers and how trade workers affiliated with the USO resist such articulation.

Chapter 2 introduces narratives about the relation among violence, neoliberalism, extractivism and internal enemy doctrine and how those narratives inform holistically the anthropological approach that uses developments in political economy and state terror to focus and analyse the actions of resistance from a Foucauldian development.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used in this thesis, presenting the relation between rationalism -as an epistemological foundation- with the anthropological approach. In addition, it presents some considerations regarding participant observation and doing fieldwork at home and in a violent setting with participants that have been subjected to legal and illegal violence.

Chapter 4 the chapter presents how PRE obtained the oil license, the relationship with the right-wing illegal army and how the community, the state and the paramilitary are organised. At the end of the chapter, PRE’s reduced capital expenditure is briefly analysed, how it obtained cheap oil via corruption and legal and illegal violence and how the sovereign power exerted by mafia barons made it possible for the Colombian oligarchy to control Puerto Gaitán and foster the oil industry.

In Chapter 5, an analysis is presented concerning the interdependent understanding workers had of Pacific Rubiales Energy and the oil business, why they engaged with the USO and how they started to challenge the sovereign and disciplinary power exerted by legal and illegal armies and the private and public institutions. The chapter also accounts for trade unionists’ life stories and the different understandings they have about working conditions before the first strike in 2011 and afterwards.

The previous chapters make a characterisation of the actors and the initial analysis of the social agents in an interdependent relation, thus, they are a sort of introduction to the analysis of power and resistance in chapter 6 and 7. The chapters present an analysis of resistance as an intertwined and ongoing process and they describe in depth how illegal and legal powers affect trade unionists’ agency and the relations of the USO with its supporters, grassroots organizations and popular movement’s relations.

Chapter 8 presents the conclusions and describes the active, heterogeneous and adaptive resistance techniques on part of the workers against the abandonment of a semi-feudal sovereign
power.
II

Narratives of political violence

Violence against labourers, adverse to trade unions in the oil sector, during neoliberal times have been topics that different anthropologists have addressed. In terms of the relation of Third World countries with central capitalistic countries via neoliberal trade, David Harvey’s (2007) contributions are significant and they are based upon his understanding of neoliberalization which is defined “either as a utopian project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism or as a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (ibid: 19). Accumulation as primary objective of neoliberalization is taken into account in this thesis but along other contributions that are necessary to consider. For instance, the responsibility of the oil complex with human rights and environment issues. In that terrain, Watts (2005) summarizes the situations of Nigeria, Burma and Colombia, among others, as follows: "almost invariably, oil and gas operations are defended and secured by some combination of foreign, state, or private security forces [...] It is no accident that virtually all foreign oil companies operate out of highly defended paramilitary compounds and that any oil installation will have police and military posted outside their facilities (the question is how do they operate" (ibid: 9.19). In this thesis the articulation of the multinational Pacific Rubiales with mafias and both local and national authorities is presented. However, the purpose is to conduct an ethnography of resistance rather than only an ethnography of oppression and state terror (Kurtz; 2001). In order to incorporate the narratives of political violence against trade unionists in a study of resistance it is necessary to use analytical tools, those tools are the concepts proposed by Lilja and Vinthagen (2014) regarding resistance. Their concepts are linked in an oppositional level with the concepts of sovereign power, disciplinary power and biopower developed by Foucault and they are presented at the end of this chapter.

In this chapter there are three narratives presented: one addresses the macro level of violence against trade unionists in Colombia, the second one describes the historic violence against trade unionist in the oil sector in Colombia, and the third narrative focuses on the consequences of violence in neoliberal times against oil workers and trade unionists. These three narratives allow for the examination of political violence from a holistic approach. The second part of the chapter examines the anthropological stands regarding anthropology of political violence and state terror, how neoliberalism is addressed and how the analytical concepts of resistance are articulated.
State violence against trade unionists

The reason for the anti-unionists violence according to Nuñez, Pereira and Vega (2009), is the labour conflicts, the Colombian war as a driving force is excluded as reason. “The violations have taken place in moments where labour reclaims had risen and not as consequence of the armed conflict; hence, the unionists are not casual or collateral victims of the armed conflict” (ibid: 390), the authors assure. They explain paramilitary violence as follows: “The paramilitary violence pretends to destroy workers’ organizations, to impede their mobilization, to deny their petitions and reclaims and to impose the relaxation of laws, those that are related to terms of employment” (ibid: 388). They understand violence against trade unionists as a coordinated enterprise: “a deliberated, strategic and systematic action that obeys to specific interest that seek to annul the unionists’ actions about reclaims and the defence of labour rights” (ibid). Persistence in time of anti-unionism violence is analysed similarly by the ENS. The NGO explains the social phenomenon as something that is neither war-related nor collateral but systematic and politically grounded to the point that it encompasses judicial prosecutions and extrajudicial executions:

This situation [the existence of a human rights crisis of the Colombian trade unionism] consist in an attempt to exterminate trade unionism in the country, which has remained sustained over time and embodied in thousands of victims, and has finally set an anti-union pattern that shows different types of violence ranging from legal order proceedings to the physical extermination (ENS; 2009:22)

It is indisputable that the Colombian state has taken part in the assassination of unionists through action and inaction. According to the ENS, the state is responsible for 8.2% of murders committed between 1986 and 2009, but the State has sanctioned paramilitary forces to commit crimes such as the systematic killing and threatening of unionists. One example of this murderous relation was denounced by the Organization of American States (OAS) through the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) report of 2008. That year the OAS assured that trade unionist had been illegally targeted by the finished Administrative Department of Security (DAS), the state secret police body that provided information to paramilitary forces (CIDH; 2008). The complicity of the army, the navy and the police with hitmen and paramilitaries to persecute and kill trade unionists is well documented in the Peace and Justice tribunals (Fiscalía n.d.) that follow the peace process with the paramilitaries during Uribe’s presidency in journalistic investigations (Verdad Abierta) and scholarly analyses (Arvelo; 2006). Undoubtedly, most of the trade unionists killings in Colombia are related to the duet formed by the paramilitary and state armed bodies.
The thesis of Nuñez, Pereira, Vega, and the ENS is that the Colombian state has used illegal armies and the Colombian Armed Forces in order to target unionists as a specific group within the Colombian population in order to diminish their capacity during strikes. The thesis, despite being accurate, is problematic: it means the assassinations of trade unionists are not related to the war stages in Colombia. However, Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, during the debate about the banana massacre in the Colombian Parliament in 1928, demonstrates that the general said the workers were communists, an ideology that was fiercely persecuted by the Defence Ministry of that time, Ignacio Rengifo, and something that provoked the massacre (Gaitán: 101-103). Moreover, the president of that time, Miguel Abadía, congratulated general Cortés because of the massacre. It seems the Russian revolution had echoes in Colombia’s political action by then. Today, both state and paramilitary forces have used “the guerrilla” and the “troublemaker” stigma referring to the unionists in order to legitimate murderous violence and judicial persecution against labourers; thus, pointing at unionists as guerrillas or violent groups is one of the causes for the violence against them. Undoubtedly, anti-left ideology has motivated state terror during Colombia’s history.

The stigmatization outcast the unionists from the moral responsibility of Colombian authorities and fostered the state terror unionists have faced for decades while indoctrinating part of the population. It is not surprising to find Colombians that think trade unions are synonyms for companies’ bankruptcy; ironically, all the people I have met and express such an idea about trade unions fail to cite one single case. In addition, in contemporary times, as Hristov (2009) details in his book -“The Paramilitarization of Colombia”- the Colombian Armed Forces (CAF) have extended the understanding of the internal enemy and both the military and police intelligence is focused not only on factual combatants but “members of social movements and organizations such as labour unions, peasants, indigenistas, and women” (ibid: 37), among many others.

In summary, my point of departure is that surplus extraction and political violence are intertwined in Colombian state violence against trade unionists. It means that Colombian armed and judicial bodies, right-wing oriented armed organizations and multinationals have long worked together favouring accumulation of capital via political persecution. However, despite vicious violence against trade unions, labourers do not give up what is ultimately an act of resistance against accumulation and violence. Organized labourers stand to claim better working conditions and demand human rights observance from the state and multinationals.
How is it possible for a union to continue the social struggle against capital extraction and political violence? This first question regarding trade unionists social agency in the form of resistance leads me to the purpose of this thesis, (1) to account for trade unionists social relations regarding both the oil extraction concession given to the multinational Pacific Rubiales Energy and (2) the historical selective killing of trade unionists in Colombia.

Oil and violence

At the end of the XIX century, the world found in oil: light, warmth, a substance useful for thousands of industrial processes, but mainly the petrol, used since to set in motion not only billions of civil vehicles but also war and policing machinery. The importance of controlling oil was understood early on by the United States, a country that right after WWI sought to control the oil production and managed it well. In 1900 the US produced 42.7% of worldwide production (Vega et al: 88). However, US oil was not only pumped on US soil. The idea of controlling oil production made the US go beyond borders and it first turned to South America with the sanction of US president William Taft in the early 1900s (ibid). Not many years later, the Standard Oil Company – today’s Mobil, via the Tropical Oil Company (TROCO) – started to ship oil from Magdalena Medio to Barranquilla in the Caribbean using as oil Enclave the port city of Barrancabermeja in Santander, Colombia. The Colombian state granted a concession to the Standard Oil Company, Rockefeller’s multinational that controlled exploration, extraction, life and death between 1916 and 1951 in Magdalena Medio, the Colombian region where oil flowed naturally from the earth.

The oil mining concession made the opening of the country to liberal international capital a reality and contributed to the development of capitalism through oil derivatives that now exist almost everywhere. The economic and political trade took place a few years after several post-independence civil wars and continued during the civil war called “La Violencia” and the beginnings of the 60-year contemporary war. Indeed, oil extraction kept going in the midst of a period of upheaval. However, the history of oil and violence in Colombia did not only start with mistreatment of labourers and fierceness against workers’ organizations, but the annihilation of one indigenous tribe, the Yariguí. This indigenous nation was exterminated between 1860 and 1950. First, the extraction of both quina and tagua meant an invasion into Yariguí territory. The clashes between adventurous settlers and natives took place between 1860 and 1910, a time in which the indigenous population decimated in numbers from 15,000 to 2,000. Workers were given rifles and troops were sent to guard workers from well-aimed arrows that could not resist fire weapons. The indigenous persons who survived the killings and fled to the forest found the jungle inhospitable
and many died because of dietary changes and diseases. Once the oil company entered into the area, the Yarigui’s fate was sealed. The state and the company paid people and workers for “reducing” and “rehabilitating” the natives to that area while the clergy depicted them as savage cannibals. By the time the TROCO started the exploitation, 1,000 Yariguis remained but in 1950, when Rockefeller’s company returned the Mares concession to the Colombian state, there was not a single Yarigui left (Vega et al; 2009:43-58). The annihilation of the Yarigui was a structural annihilation that started well before the multinational entered into the area but it is undeniable that it was during the TROCO times that the genocide was completed. Capitalism, the economic and political model that influenced social action and social change did not stop but enhanced the annihilation. The Colombian state and the company reduced and pushed the Yarigui to the jungle, allowing the state to easily declare the Yariguís’ lands as empty soil. These procedures ceded the entire territory to the TROCO, granting the company freedom from competitors that could have entered into agreements with the landowners. The total destruction involved bureaucrats, the clergy, businessmen, settlers’ participation and the armed forces; thus, the complete extermination might not have been planned in full detail but it was definitely sanctioned by the state and the company.

Clearly, violence was a means to secure extraction at the detriment and extermination of the Yariguí while ensuring the continuous flow of oil from Colombia to the US. Since that time, violence and mining extraction are planned projects that together secure profits in the oil business, but those plans are not only designed against unwanted indigenous people but also workers. Once the TROCO started degrading living conditions and implementing segregation and bad salaries among many other issues, the labourers began organizing to demand fair treatment in different strikes. The answer was detentions, massive firings, persecutions and killings since 1924. However, the social fabric rose during those strikes to the point that solidarity among settlers, prostitutes, local businessmen and labourers enabled the oil workers to form the USO in 1923 (Restrepo; 1999) (Vega, et al; 2009). The USO became so strong, especially in Barrancabermeja city, that years later the trade union pushed the TROCO to return the Mares’ concession to the state which coincided with protectionist policies in South America and the industrialization of the country. Consequently, the state formed the first Colombian oil company in 1950, the Colombian Petrol Company (ECOPETROL).

**Violence and neoliberalism**

In contemporary, neoliberal times the assassination of oil trade unionists in Colombia and some of its consequences have been studied from an anthropological perspective by Lesley Gill (2009)
(2011) who conducted extensive research in Barrancabermeja. The oil port became the city with the first oil refinery in the country and transformed into an industrial city. Gill’s work is related to labour unions weakening because of violence and the “neoliberal restructuring of the economy and the erection of a violent surrogate state” (2009: 314). Gill demonstrates that several labour unions in the city were tied to social movements that offer solutions to marginalized populations in terms of infrastructure and public services, among many other things that involved the participation of civil society (ibid: 315). She also states that paramilitary forces and the state “pushed workers to renounce their union membership and accept coercive buy-out deals” (ibid: 318), what resulted in the decay of social movements, working instability, extreme forms of neoliberalism, fragmented solidarity and “have deprived working people of the coherence required to make history [which] facilitated the accrual of wealth by an unaccountable group of drug traffickers, neoliberal entrepreneurs, and agro-exporters” (Gill; 2011:67,68). Gill’s conclusions are based on the analysis of the weakening of a city that based its social life on solidarity and civil society participation by the mass killing of union leaders and the actual extermination by force of several trade unions.

This interesting approach tells us about the consequences of coercive violence against populations that resisted neoliberal economic practices enacted by the State and the consequences of the disruption and weakening of trade unions as a social agent that contributed to such acts of resistance. However, it lacks the voice of the trade unionists regarding social action during paramilitary assassinations, suggesting an inquiry into resistance that may contribute to work surrounding the anthropology of violence. In addition, the analysis of Gill does not take into account the adaptation of neoliberal multinationals to the social conditions.

The history of violence during oil extraction in the early 1900’s in Barrancabermeja and Magdalena Medio, and Gill’s brilliant depiction of neoliberal restructuring of the economy through violence committed in same city one century later, makes it plausible to conceive violence and extraction as planned projects that are both sanctioned by the state either in capitalist or neoliberal economies. Therefore, in Colombia state terror against trade unions is as old as the republic and it benefits from the extractive business. Consequently, in order to account for both (1) the oil workers and the USO social relations in Meta during the concession granted to Pacific Rubiales Energy and (2) the historical threatening and killing of USO leaders, it is necessary to conduct an ethnography of Colombia’s state terror and its relation to extractive capitalism in neoliberal trading. Here, violence and extraction are understood as interdependent projects that are related to economic and political objectives, and in the case of violence against USO trade unionists in Meta, both comprise several organizations such as PRE, sub-contractors, the state bodies and paramilitary forces.
Anthropology of political economy and resistance

Now that the scholarly discourses have been introduced, it is necessary to present the anthropological approach regarding the central aspects of the thesis. Here, the anthropological stances used are based on the existing research on political economy and its connection to violence and neoliberalism regarding resistance.

Political economy

This thesis is an anthropology of political economy and an ethnography of resistance to political violence. According to Donald Kurtz in his piece “Political Anthropology: Power and Paradigms”, political economy in contemporary anthropology “remains a vital paradigm for exploring the agent-driven politics of dominant and subordinate social categories in different kinds of political systems” (2001: 15). On the other hand, the ethnography of state terror is defined by Kurtz as part of the “post-modern paradigm” and states that, in general, “postmodern exemplars rely on resources from literature, philosophy, and semiotics, among other fields, albeit with some pattern and rational end purpose in mind to construct their ethnographies”. The author also states that postmodern writing is a reaction against the modern tradition in anthropology concerning the self-proclaimed objective truth of anthropologists. This thesis does not focus on literacy skill and genre as a way to include the voice of the “others” and walk away from modern “objectivity bias” like postmodern anthropologists do, according to Kurtz, when writing ethnographies of state terror, but it is definitely addressing the effectiveness of state terror and workers resistance as a vital element in understanding social change. Following Marx, it is considered here that it is necessary to resolve the contradiction between the material forces of production and the social relations of production to account for social change (Marx in Kurtz; 2001:116).

Here, the anthropology of political economy and the ethnography of Colombian political violence against USO trade unionists are combined because both are situated within the realm of political anthropology and both are useful in order to achieve my purpose: to account for the mechanisms of power related to (1) political violence and extraction and (2) trade unionists’ social action in terms of resistance. Thus, this ethnography describes the mechanisms that make possible the articulation between state terror and oil extraction as a social phenomenon that take place in neoliberal trading and how trade unionists faced such articulation. Therefore, the ethnography of state terror studies the relation among violence, neoliberalism and resistance using USO trade union social action as a case study in the context of the oil concession granted to PRE in the Meta department.
Here, violence as social phenomena is understood like any other social action and finds support in the argument of Paul Richards: “War, like peace, is organized by social agents” (2005: 3). The author states that in anthropology it is necessary “to place war back within the range of social possibilities, as something made through social action, and something that can be moderated by social action, rather than viewing it as so exceptional as to require ‘special’ explanatory effort” (ibid). Accordingly, here political economy is used as the theoretical ground that makes it possible to account for organized violence and follows Jansson’s development about “the ethnography of political violence and state terror” (2008). The author asserts that to omit to inquire within the political economy paradigm about “the functionality of terror, particularly of terror as a means to endow agents with an attribute instrumental to their role in the extraction of surplus from others, limits the possibilities of accounting for the very object of the research” (ibid: 3). Jansson’s contribution relies on the theoretical and empirical demonstration that “neither terror nor surplus extraction operated independently on how people accommodate and give meaning to their experiences of them”, during cocaine production in Putumayo, Colombia (ibid). This research uses the former political economy premise as a point of departure, not to corroborate Jansson’s contribution to the anthropology of political economy but to build upon it: People do not only accommodate and give meaning but resist interdependently both terror and surplus extraction.

Here, the ethnography of state terror and resistance tells the story of organized workers, the inter-subjective experience of the genocidal violence they have endured; how they resist Colombian terror practices in order to seek both better material conditions of living and the construction of another societal model. Hence, trade unionists are considered in this project as active agents rather than powerless victims, which contributes to the anthropology of violence. Guterson, in the state of the art he presents about anthropology and violence (2007), affirms that in recent years a trend is developing to study from a phenomenological point of view “fear as a way of life”. In other words, the study of how people are controlled by armed forces, how society is permeated by terror and recently the perpetrators of such control and the transnational links in between (ibid: 162). This research encompasses all the previous elements but focuses on resistance practices in neoliberal extraction through a political economy narrative of tyranny and resistance.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism was implemented in 1991 in Colombia. Remarkably, despite the war between the state and several guerrilla groups, the adaptation of Milton Friedman’s ideas did not mean the use of force like in Chile; on the contrary, it was part of the peace dialogues with the Popular Liberation
Army (EPL), the 19th of April Movement (M19) and the Workers Revolutionary Party (PRT) guerrillas. The dialogues between the different insurgencies and the Colombian state materialized in the Constitution of 1991. The Magna Carta changed the protectionist Colombian policy carried out since 1952 while opening the participation of civil society in the political life of the country.

Colombia allowed foreign capital to enter the country in the 1870s, the same decade in which slavery was abolished. Extractive mining and the hacienda system allowed multinationals and landlords to keep profiting from the primary sector and the exploitation of labourers and peasants. However, the 1929 crisis and WWII ruined the prices of basic products and industrialized countries like the US and post war European states decided to close their markets to foreign manufacturers. Latin America’s response was to adopt the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL) recommendation regarding so-called structuralist economics. Colombia adopted such economic policy in 1952, during the period called “La Violencia” (1946-1957), a civil war that reinforced the latifundia in the country and made peasants expand the agricultural border and seek better opportunities in the main cities and the haciendas that seized the lands of those that were dispossessed (Pérez; 2004). Consequently, the county experimented an expansion of both agricultural and industrial wage labour (Vega et al). The nationalists move in 1952 allowed the country to withdraw the oil Mares Concession from the TROCO and made possible to fund ECOPETROL; in addition, the state also funded the steel company Acerías Paz del Río, which together with ECOPETROL are the only heavy industries Colombia has ever had. In summary, the state took the road of acting like an entrepreneur and financed what the private initiative could not achieve due to a lack of financial muscle. The results: a small heavy industry and the strengthening of the light industry. Conversely, the narrowness of the internal market favours monopolies the state attempted to regulate with no success because of rampant corruption. This context made it possible for neoliberals to argue that Colombia needed to seek free markets in the globalized world. Such discourse did not take into account the equilibrium of the relation with central capitalist countries that seek markets while protecting their own. Therefore, the insurmountable distance between the Colombia incipient industry and the industry already developed in US and Europe after the reconstruction of WWII went unacknowledged.

In this thesis, neoliberalism is addressed in terms of the state relation to extraction and violence and uses as a framework of analysis concepts developed by Harvey in relation to privatization, financing, management of crisis, rights, state redistributions and environmental degradations. The analysis comprises these elements as they are related to USO social action. The trade union addresses social consequences of neoliberal trading and oil exploitation, the
implications of dealings between states and companies, the affectations in the environment and impacted populations and they also participate in other social agendas.

**Resistance**

The persecution that Camilo and the USO have endured has also been experienced first and second hand by thousands of trade unionists in Colombia, workers that resist neoliberalist practices and the systematic attempt to exterminate trade unionism in Colombia; otherwise trade unions would have been destroyed long ago. However, how do organizations that have been targeted for almost one hundred years, like the USO, continue?

Vinthagen and Johansson's (2014) sociological understanding of resistance may provide an answer to that regard:

> There is no reason to think that resistance would be less complex (or less controversial, contested or debated) than power. However, we are convinced that it is now necessary to take the step from the somewhat compartmentalized research on (everyday) resistance and a separate, vast field of power research, and bring them together. This step will be necessary if we want to understand human agency and its limitations, if we want to understand the links between structure and agency, and how the combinations of power/resistance shape historical social change” (ibid: 16).

Both authors take as a point of departure Foucault’s dissertations about power in order to account for resistance practices; therefore, they elaborate a framework that accounts for types of resistance and tension within and against sovereign, disciplinary and biopower. This framework is useful because it makes it possible to organize the formerly introduced analytical concepts in the ethnography in terms of power and resistance to state terror in contemporary times.

The dialogue is stimulating. For instance, the authors define sovereign power as follows: “[it] is violent, forbidding and punishing, stops and limits certain behaviour by forcefully repressing it and/or commanding other behaviour […] as it demands absolute obedience, strategies involved are to do what is illegal or undermine the sovereignty of power centres” (Vinthagen and Lilja; 2014: 122). The authors see resistance to such violence as prone to “rebellions, disobedience and political revolutions” (ibid). There is no need to state that the description of sovereign power matches the relation between state and trade unions in Colombia, but it is not the same with the types of resistance: no political revolution is attempted, at least not by the use of weapons or violence. However, such fierce power exists against labourers and there is a response. Here, trade unionists’
resistance is understood in terms of civil disobedience; therefore, the individual and collective response of workers regarding state terror is taken into account, in order to see participants’ agency in individual and collective actions. Therefore, we observe different levels of engagement with resistance actions.

For the authors, following Johnston, disciplinary power “shapes and normalizes subjects and defines deviating from the norm as abnormal and then uses corrective or therapeutic techniques to fix it” (ibid: 109). Regarding this form of violence, they affirm that resistance contrary to this form of violence may “openly or covertly” (ibid: 122) refuse to participate in self-disciplinary techniques “which normalize subjects according to the norm”. The possible consequence of adapting via resistance to the very object of resistance is acknowledged by the authors: “This could involve challenging the very means of disciplinary power, for example, negotiating punishments and rewards, which form our practices in something new” (ibid). Here, this type of power and resistance is related to workers and trade union negotiations with the state and the multinationals at various levels and stages including armed forces, legal or illegal.

The last form of power and resistance in Lilja and Vinthagen’s framework is biopower, defining it as being “interested in the body of the population and social engineering in which the health, longevity, energy or vitality, stability and growth of social life is in focus”. For the authors, resistance is different as they define it as something performed by groups: “Resistance to biopower engages with the main techniques of biopower through, for example, the creation of resistance cultures. Resistance can be carried out though a multi-centred or heterogeneous body of resisting subjects. This kind of resistance tries to avoid being managed by acting differently and by cultivating a different set of values, practices and institutions”. It is here, in this part of the analytical framework that the USO becomes the social agent in this study, one that possesses a history that has influenced workers and social organizations alike as to the decisions of state bodies, armed groups and multinationals’ determination.

**Research question**

In summary, the scholarly discourses and the anthropological developments presented previously inform the analytical concepts proposed by Lilja and Vinthagen. Consequently, the use of such analytical tools became the structure of the ethnography of state terror and resistance. For instance, people do not only accommodate and give meaning but resist interdependently both terror and surplus extraction what creates tensions with the sovereign power, generate disciplinary changes within workers and inhabitants and consequently contest biopower. Thus, the classifications help to
depict workers’ agency regarding oil extraction in the biggest oil field in Colombia and the relation
workers have regarding legal and lethal bureaucracy and Colombia as a neoliberal state. On that
account, my contribution to anthropology and especially to an anthropology of political economy is
an ethnography of workers’ resistance against violent anti-unionist actions and the agents that exert
such resistance in neoliberal trading.

An ethnography of the resistance against the extra-economic compulsion in neoliberal times
in Colombia is a study of the correlation of forces between organized workers and the illegal and
legal forces sanctioned by the state and the multinationals. Therefore, the ethnography must respond
to empirical questions: how do the multinationals, the Colombian state and the paramilitary
articulate their relations to each other in order to transfer surplus from oil workers to
multinationals?, and how does the USO resist such relations?
III

Method

Epistemology

I am Colombian and I have conducted research on violence right after I finished my undergraduate studies as a philologist in 2007. I have since worked as a journalist covering aspects of the Colombian war, the social movement’s agenda and both human rights and environmental violations caused by illegal armed actors, legal armed bodies and multinationals. My interest in these issues has influenced my decision to reflect upon workers’ resistance. I have long since been interested in the potentiality of accounting for civilian agency (Gómez; 2014) and this focus originates from my job. Continuously reporting about gross human rights violations, political violence and human and environmental calamities causes a sort of despair in both readers and writers. Even friends that work with similar issues told me that they sometimes avoid well informed reports about gross human rights violations in the country because they are too overwhelming. I worry because I considered those descriptions as narratives that foster a sort of no-hope vision for a country at war. Since then, I have focused on identifying a rhetoric of possibility and social action that attempts a path towards social change.

This option is also a rational response regarding engaging with violence and not only an idea. In Maček’s words, this is a form of “containing communication” (2014), a strategy to cope with the emotions caused by being exposed to mass violence. The author states, after reflection upon teaching a “Mass Violence” course in the master program of Genocide and Mass Violence at Uppsala University, that overwhelming experiences “numb the audience and put them into a state of detachment and non-involvement” (ibid: 21). Maček states that empathy is not the objective, neither is it to engage mass violence with emotional detachment. On the contrary, Maček suggests it is necessary to find “a way of moving from being emotionally overwhelmed to a more reflexive and theorized way of understanding and containing this horrible experience” (ibid). Here, the way I would approach such an objective is by accounting for the USO’s resistance against political mass violence and extra economic compulsion.

Researching about rebellious social action makes it possible to account for social change tensions; a theoretical and methodological way out of victimization. It is my belief that shedding
light on selective political violence may inform the mechanisms for selective violence to happen in Colombia and how social organizations foster the social fabric under political violence pressure; in other words, the importance of such organizations placed under political violence. Here, the implications of resistance as method are later described in the strategies and techniques used during fieldwork.

Regarding method, Bernard (2006) defines it as having three meanings: the epistemology, the strategic methods and the techniques (ibid: 2). At the epistemic level, the scholar points out that there are two philosophical principles to subscribe to: rationalism or empiricism. Here, the previous discussion about resistance is part of my epistemological stand. Considering that I am interested in the causes and effects of both power and resistance as part social change, this project subscribes to a sort of rationalism that seeks to identify causal mechanisms for power and resistance and takes as point of departure that reality “awaits our discovery through a series of increasingly good approximations to the truth” (ibid: 3). However, it is not considered the positivistic stance that uses deductive logic and quantitative methods “to seek generally applying regularities” as Payne and Payne critique (2004: 170). Here, the approach to positivism is different and follows Payne and Payne’s definition of it: “realism assumes only the existence of a social world external to the researcher which can be accessed through the sense and research” (ibid). Nonetheless, in order to account for the social world of oil workers’ extra-economic compulsion and resistance a paradigm or theoretical perspective is necessary to describe and explain selective mass violence and resistance. Here, materialism is the paradigm that is used to describe and explain such a social world and it is defined, following Russell Bernard, as follows: “materialism stresses structural and infrastructural forces—like the economy, the technology of production, demography, and environmental conditions—as causes of human behaviour.” (2006: 79). This paradigm is consistent with the initial questions: How do social actors articulate their ideas to each other to transfer surplus from workers to multinationals? How do trade unionists resist such an articulation?

**Participant observation**

Following Russell Bernard, after making a choice about the epistemological grounds, it is necessary to select one or more strategies: “whether to do participant observation fieldwork, dig up information from libraries and archives, do a survey, or run an experiment” (2006: 3) Here, the strategy used to collect data is participant observation.

During my time in Colombia I observed unionist activities in Bogotá, Villavicencio, Puerto Gaitán, Puerto Triunfo and El Porvenir. I observed diverse activities: judicial hearings of a trade
unionist that was in jail, grassroots activities and demonstrations. Conversations I held with inhabitants of the areas where I conducted my fieldwork with the trade unionists were also taken into account, using them as a contrast with other data. More data provides context and information regarding how trade unionists are perceived. Therefore, not only trade workers were taken into account but also other inhabitants like peasants, secretaries, receptionists, peace observers, natives and other social organizations. How did I accomplish this?

For Russell Bernard, participant observation “involves immersing yourself in a culture and learning to remove yourself every day from that immersion so you can intellectualize what you have seen and heard, put it into perspective and write about it convincingly” (2006: 344). Russell Bernard understands that it requires time:

Anthropological field research traditionally takes a year or more because it takes that long to get a feel for the full round of people’s lives. It can take that long just to settle in, learn a new language, gain rapport, and be in a position to ask good questions and to get good answers.

Yet, what about participant observation when there is little time? Regarding this aspect he argues that “it is possible to do participant observation in just few days” if you “already speak the native language and have already picked up the nuances of etiquette from previous experience” (ibid: 349-350). As a Colombian, I share the culture and I am able to speak the language and recognize subtle nuances and jargon. Moreover, I have been in contact with unionists before and I am not a complete stranger to the USO; hence, it was easier for me to intellectualize, during the little time I had with the trade unionists, what my senses pointed out as relevant for my research. How did I fulfil this? I returned to my home. Nevertheless, before I continue with the description of the field and fieldwork, it is necessary to make my role during this fieldwork clear.

Russell Bernard identifies three different roles: “(1) complete participant, (2) participant observer, and (3) complete observer” (ibid: 347). Russell declares that the first one involves deception while the third involves following people around and recording their behaviour with little if any interaction (ibid). During fieldwork I adopted the third role. All trade unionists I contacted were informed of what I was doing and I was able to take photos, record audio clips and take fieldwork notes while I followed them on the journeys I was invited to attend. In summary, it is possible to argue that my type of participation is what is referred to as naturalistic observation. I did not manipulate or create the environment. I only followed my participants whenever I could.
**Coming back home**

My fieldwork was definitely a coming back home anthropological endeavour, and it provokes issues related to my inter-subjective experience as a Colombian journalist that is now doing anthropology from Sweden. Some participants in this research have experienced different kinds of violence like assassination attempts, continuous death threats and judicial persecution. I have myself faced grievances from legal and illegal armed actors as journalist, so I can relate to participants experiences; however, mine are also different. I am not an oil worker and I am not circumscribed to a geographic situation. Here, I want to stress that any research on political violence presents serious ethical and methodological implications, especially when the participants have endured violence in a country at war for years.

**The field**

The ethnographic fieldwork for this research was carried out twice, in cities and rural areas of Colombia. The first visit took place during February, March and early April 2014. The second time I visited the same cities in February 2015. The cities visited were Bogotá, the capital city of Colombia, but I spent most of my time on both occasions in Meta. The department is located in the Colombian eastern tropical savannah and is divided into four regions: The Ariari in the south, an ecoregion together with Caquetá. The second one is the capital city, Villavicencio, which is four hours by car from Bogotá. The third one is the Andean foothills “piedemonte andino” and the fourth region is found along the Meta riverbed and comprises the settlements along its hydrographic basin, the region where I conducted this research. In the last national census of 2005, Meta had an estimated population of 713,772 inhabitants: 358,314 men and 355,458 women (SGC). Today Meta consists of twenty-nine municipalities and its surface measures 86,635 square kilometres, the size of Azerbaijan or Austria. The department is located in the east-centre of Colombia and shares borders with five other departments: the north-west with Cundinamarca and the north with Boyacá; the west with Huila and Tolima; and finally the north with Casanare and the south with Guaviare.

In Meta I stayed in Villavicencio and Puerto Gaitán Municipality, the latter the place where the Canadian oil multinational Pacific Rubiales Energy (PRE) extracts 25% of Colombia’s oil. One of the main oil camps is Campo Rubiales, a site where 9,000 to 12,000 oil workers live, work and enable the production of 250,000 oil barrels per day. Two trade unions affiliate the workers. One of them is the oldest oil worker trade union in Colombia the USO, and the second option is the UTEN, a newcomer with no experience in the oil sector. The USO and national and international NGOs have denounced assassinations, arbitrary detentions, and labour slaughter of oil workers that work
for Pacific Rubiales Energy and were former USO members. In addition, the area where the project is being implemented has been controlled by the paramilitary for decades.

Puerto Gaitán, formerly dedicated to agricultural and livestock economic activities is nowadays an oil municipality that also produces palm oil and has a pine monoculture. In addition, it is still under the influence of paramilitary forces. Puerto Gaitán is the largest municipality of Meta, its surface measures 17,499 square kilometres, and the main political and administrative urban area where I conducted interviews and participant observation is also called Puerto Gaitán. I also conducted participant observation and some interviews in a village within Puerto Gaitán municipality that is called Puerto Triunfo in 2014. The hamlet is very close to the oil dwells and it is the entrance to PRE oil extraction infrastructure. In 2015, I was able to travel with one of the trade unionists to the village El Porvenir, a little hamlet that is found in the middle of the vast oil camps. On both occasions I was able to record both graphically and via audio clips and field notes trade unionists’ social action in different activities.

I stayed in the field for a limited period. The unionists have meetings all the time or were in faraway places already; therefore, the cancelling of an appointment is not a surprise. In addition, there is little time available when conducting anthropology of violence. I did not stay in the same place but I came and went in a fashion that may seem excessive now but will become clear in the coming pages. However, despite the participants’ time restrictions and the decision to avoid staying too long in one place at a time -a necessary security measure- rich data was produced. I designed my participant observation and interviews in terms of the social relationships, and the sampling was not circumscribed to one place. The unionists’ social action is not linked solely to one fixed area but many spaces, for instance: the headquarters of the USO in Bogotá; the offices the USO have in Meta; the tribunals where some unionists are judged; the collective negotiation courses; the trade unionists’ actions in oil towns and hamlets that are close to oil wells and oil refineries; the streets were trade unionists demonstrated. Thus, the field was multi-sited.

The field sites where I conducted this ethnography are as important to each other in terms of the trade unionist practices of resistance as to the formulation of the research. The relationship of trade unionist practices in Bogotá, Villavicencio, Puerto Gaitán, Puerto Triunfo and El Porvenir are as important in accounting for labourers’ resistance practices as it is for the trade labourers in terms of the relationships among them and towards the state and the multinationals. In addition, the importance of the different sites in relation to the unionist resistance practices relies on the differences among the sites. Bogotá as capital city is different from Villavicencio and they both are
different from the hamlet of Puerto Triunfo, not only in terms of infrastructure, but in terms of the state’s monopoly of violence and how illegal armies and the multinationals exert their own political and armed power. Bogotá is a 9 million people and mafias profit from the city but it is not controlled by PRE and the mafias present in Meta. Villavicencio is not as controlled by paramilitary as Puerto Gaitán and definitely not by PRE. However, Puerto Gaitán has an active presence of paramilitary forces and the absence of active engagement from CAF regarding this situation. In addition, Puerto Gaitán is part of the power axis that kept the lord of the emeralds Victor Carranza when he was alive: Villavicencio, Puerto Lopez, and Puerto Gaitán. Therefore, the social relationships between trade unionists and the state and PRE are similar but not the same, making the different sites important in terms of the problem.

**Fieldwork in a violent setting**

Any research conducted in a violent setting must have a risk analysis in order to apply security protocols, techniques that Jeffrey Sluka (2012) also recommends to anthropologists that engage danger during fieldwork (ibid: 287-288). For instance, one must identify “the degree of danger” and “potential sources of danger” (ibid: 287) for the participants and the researcher prior to beginning fieldwork and with respect to its duration. The evaluation took into account the characteristics of different cities where I conducted participant observation and the participants of the research; moreover, what actions would “exacerbate” and “ameliorate” possible risks were also taken into account along with plans of protection and escape if necessary (ibid). In general, the armed actors identified as potentially dangerous were paramilitary forces and the CAF. The guerrillas were not in the equation as no insurgency had control or could dispute the areas where I conducted the research. However, once in El Porvenir in 2015 I realized the nearby department of Vichada was close by, where the 16th, 39th and 44th FARC-EP fronts operate. The potential dangers from the paramilitary forces depend on the city, town or hamlet I visit, the same situation pertaining to the CAF.

In summary, according to the evaluation of this risk analysis, the city of Bogotá (where I started the fieldwork) would be the least risky. Bogotá is a metropolis with more than 8,000,000 inhabitants that is not completely controlled by illegal armies; furthermore, I know the city quite well and I count on safety nets like national and international human rights advocates, international press freedom organizations and lawyer’s offices for protection. For any kind of anthropology of violence, it is important to have safety nets. In the capital I met journalists, university professors and USO union members, people that are related to the research topic and help me to establish contact with university professors, union leaders and civil society actors in Villavicencio and Puerto
Gaitán. The objectives of holding such meetings were both to “seek out people with direct experience in the area” in order to “discuss potential dangers” (ibid) and to obtain a connection with someone who could vouch for me in Villavicencio and Puerto Gaitán. Following Sluka’s recommendation, in Bogotá I contacted prestigious USO leaders so the “snowballing” strategy would be more effective in terms of securing interviews. In addition, possible participants would trust me through this connection as the topic is a sensitive one (Sluka: 288). The technique was proven worthy.

According to the security evaluation, Villavicencio was not as safe as Bogotá and the risk would increase both because of contact with the unionists and the characteristics of the city. In the city I was in contact with a unionist who had been menaced several times, thus, it would have been easy for people that have the unionist put under surveillance to spot me. Moreover, people who have collected material that evidences PRE’s mistreatments of unionists and the environmental affectation the oil exploitation is causing in Meta have been robbed. As a result, I already knew that there was an intelligence network that was working against those who reported the transgressions committed by PRE, something that endangered both the participants and myself. In summary, the possible danger in Villavicencio was that my material could be stolen, as had already happened to members of the Network of Brotherhood and Solidarity with Colombia (REDHER) after an ethical trial against PRE. For that reason, I decided to change my hotel regularly. However, changing my hotel was not the only technique I used in order to protect my photographic, audio and written material. All data was downloaded to my computer in order to encrypt it and send it to a personal cloud; thus, I protected my research participants and the research itself as much as I could in addition to the previous security measures. I stayed in Villavicencio in order to collect interviews and conduct participant observation but also to rest from Puerto Gaitán municipality, a place that presented risks. Due to the fact that the city embodied these minor but existent risks, I would call a dear colleague of mine every 24 hours. This person would activate warning alerts using the networks previously mentioned if necessary, a security measure that was observed in Puerto Gaitán.

Puerto Gaitán was the municipality where I would face the most risks. The urban area of the biggest municipality of Meta county is a small town where the paramilitary forces in collusion with the CAF have been responsible for gross human rights violations in past years. Today, the paramilitary forces and the CAF are allegedly responsible for drug trafficking, selective killing and harassment of social movement participants in both the urban and rural areas. I stayed most of the day at the hotel, leaving only in the early evening to have a small walk around the town and have little conversations, as part of my participatory observation, in small fast food restaurants and other
shops. In addition, the participants only had time for the interviews during the early evening. I avoided pubs and like places because they are frequented by the paramilitary and I would definitely call attention to myself because of my appearance. The interviews were conducted in the participants’ houses and my hotel room for privacy. I did not stay longer in Puerto Gaitán as a security measure; in places where danger was likely, it was best not to stay for too long in case I was noticed by the paramilitary. Hence, I travelled back and forth to Puerto Triunfo, Villavicencio and Bogotá randomly. Because I was not able to arrange a meeting with oil workers in the hamlets closed to the oil wells, I could not travel to the rural Puerto Gaitán during the planned fieldwork. Nevertheless, two days before coming back to Sweden -in 2014- I found myself travelling to Puerto Triunfo with one of the most respected and, unfortunately, threatened leader of the USO in his own car, Rodolfo Vecino. Surprises were always welcomed. In Bogotá, when I thought everything was finished, the USO contacted me about a demonstration taking place in Puerto Triunfo the next day and they offered me the opportunity to travel with the USO national leaders to El Paraiso, a village that can be considered as the gateway to the oil fields.

I have travelled with USO members during strikes and demonstrations and I have faced authoritarian harassment and physical assaults before, so I was already prepared for those situations. However, the question concerning how people manage to live with bodyguards and bulletproof SUVs because they have survived an extermination that directly affects relatives and dear ones still occupies my thoughts– case of Rodolfo Vecino, the former president of the USO. In addition, Puerto Triunfo has faced harassment in the road that connects the Carranza axis. As I have done before in my professional career as a journalist, I relied on the unionists’ expertise, the bodyguards’ ability and the bullet proof SUV.

In 2015 things were different. I travelled to Villavicencio and I followed the same schema I observed in 2014. Be that as it may, the place, the company and the participant observation were different, something that enriched my collection of data, thoughts, photographic record and reflections. I could interview one worker that lived in exile in Chile and come back. I also conducted participant observation of trade unionists’ activities, especially those performed by Héctor Sánchez, a trade unionist that has endured persecution, prosecution and jail. Despite harassment, the social leader visits hamlets and workers to talk about laws, people’s and workers’ rights and listens to their complaints and doubts. In addition, I could travel in the region that is located in the midst of the oil fields where I could observe the power relations between private and national security forces and everyone else (workers and non-workers), including the relations between the company and peasants, trade unionists and police.
**Techniques**

**Interviewing unionists**

Several unionists have participated in this project by consenting to share their experiences. Some names have not been changed because they emphatically asked me not to conceal their identities. Although, not all the participants choose to participate in the same way, some preferred to remain anonymous. I was conscious of the importance of getting to know trade unionists and oil workers of different genders and generations and from different areas of the country; however, it was not possible for me to get in contact with female oil workers because women are inside the facilities most of the time, an area I could not enter. In addition, the USO is formed by men only. The participants are then mostly men from different regions and socio economic backgrounds but most of them come from rural areas and have experienced forced displacement and some type of violence related to the war. Most of the interviews were semi-structured. I decided to use this type of interviewing technique due to the lack of time of the participants. As said before, national and local trade unionist representatives travel all the time as part of their duties. Thus, as Russell points out, semi-structured interviewing is ideal for situations in which “you won’t get more than one chance to interview someone” (2006: 212), as it was in my case. The interviews proved to be efficient and adequate because they allowed me to maximize what little time I had with the participants. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were chosen because this kind of interviewing technique allows me to have control over the conversation and at the same time it contains a “freewheeling quality” that allowed me “to follow new leads” (ibid); thus, the guide I had in mind prior to the interviews was expanded and complemented. In addition, the interviews provided reliable “comparable qualitative data” (ibid), allowing me to contrast the answers provided by all the participants.

The interviews asked for their life stories but focused on their lives as unionists, their experiences with the USO and PRE, and how they understood the violence exerted against unionists. On this point, it is worth noting that I was cautious and reflective about my empathy towards participants’ stories. Firstly, I share societal insights because we are all Colombians; in addition, we have all suffered at the hands of state violence to a certain extent. Thus, I preferred not to mention my own experiences before or during the interviews in order not to influence the narratives. Moreover, during the interviews I was careful not to jump to conclusions in order to avoid the imposition of my interpersonal views on theirs, something that could have changed my questions and focus. On the other hand, I was careful about what Antonius Robben (2012) nominates as ethnographic seduction and empathy during ethnography on violent conflicts:
If, on the one hand, seduction disarms our critical detachment and thus debilitates the gathering of cultural knowledge, then, on the other, our empathy in research on violent conflict may be hindered by our awareness of the protagonism of our interlocutor [...] ethnographic seduction sidesteps empathy and detachment. The Socratic dialectic that bring us even closer to the truth, the positivist model of an oscillation between inductive and deductive steps through which falsification becomes possible [...] ethnographic seduction reduces communication and knowledge to appearance (Ibid: 178-179)

It was difficult to sort out my own empathy with the protagonists not to mention the seduction of my own ability to relate to their stories. I asked critical questions as much as I could in order to avoid being “led away from the depths of culture to its surface in an opaque inter subjective negotiation of cultural understanding” (ibid: 178). Paradoxically, my experience was proven to be useful. “Seduction wins over appearance” (ibid: 180), aptly assures Robben, and being in contact with the unionist culture reduces the illusion of the appearance, and similarly, experience and knowledge of the participants’ culture makes it possible to critically look upon argumentation as a rhetorical instrument of persuasion. The self-monitoring technique allowed me to be critical of myself and to identify my own bias and possible impositions of my own interpersonal cultural understanding on the topic, allowing me to be critical of the ethnographic seduction and persuasion during participants’ narratives.

The self-monitoring technique is also useful to reflect upon my ability to relate to the trade unionists’ experiences. I have also endured grievances but those are as different as they are similar; thus, I can relate with some, but there are others that are not mine. Mistaking this is what Maček calls, following Wordhart, “false empathy” (2014: 11). Maček proposes that to avoid this false empathy, researchers may follow Harrison and Westwood’s suggestion that “we should train ourselves in ‘exquisite empathy’,” which enables us “to get very close without fusing or confusing the client’s story, experiences and perspective” (ibid). I call that exquisite empathy critical relatedness or critical empathy.
The first time I travelled to the tropical savannahs of Arauca was in July 2011. I was in a humanitarian caravan that could not reach its planned destination: the oil fields of Rubiales, a place where thousands of workers were demonstrating against poor conditions and low salaries. That day repression was evident. First, a biker joined us for a while and later vanished onto the road between Villavicencio and Puerto Gaitán. A few minutes later a huge operative of cops on motorbikes stopped only our buses and conducted an illegal registration of all our identities for more than two hours. The activists and rights defenders started to blockade the road as a way of protest and only then did the police return our IDs. During the journey, while I was looking at the huge monocrop of non-native pines in several parts of the Villavicencio - Puerto Gaitán road, I wondered how it was possible for PRE to enter such area. What happened with the settlers and their economies? Where did the settlers come from? Do the locals work for the company? How is PRE related to the armed
actors and the police? When the caravan finally reached Puerto Gaitán it was late and the organizers decided not to expose anybody and did not continue the 167 kilometres left. They feared an attack during the night in the vast flatlands where several paramilitaries still operate. That day I could not get answers to all my questions. While some workers gave speeches and interviews about the precarious conditions, subcontracting consequences, and the non-employment of locals and police violence, the constant surveillance of helicopters, police units and bikers that never took off their helmets increased. Once the trade unionists finished the speech in the park where they demonstrated, the caravan returned to Bogotá and workers and residents continued an everyday life struggle. One might think that it was a vast performance of disciplinary power: the police helicopter representing a machine designed for a panoptic view of the trade unionists and the units of land in order to closely examine the demonstrators, making it possible to monitor those meant to be disciplined. However, the meticulous examination and individualization of leaders is more about sovereign power than disciplinary power as I demonstrate in this work, power that makes it possible for the company to reduce capital expenditure.

Because of the lack of time and different sources, my colleague and I decided not to write until a next visit. In that moment I was working as a journalist but I was also moving to Sweden to study Mass Violence and Genocide studies at Uppsala University, therefore I thought I would not answer those questions in depth. Fortunately, I was able to return for some months in 2014 and 2015, on both occasions as an anthropologist conducting participant observation. During those months, I could finally meet people and got informed about my concerns. Moreover, the purpose for such questions changed. It is not about the context for a new insight into the trade unionists’ struggle; here, it is about power, reduction of capital expenditure, resistance and social change. However, this cannot be answered without previously accounting for the history of the municipality, an area that once became a refugee for peasants that fled from violence and poverty and decades later transformed into a centre for drug trafficking, dirty war, counterinsurgency warfare and oil extraction business.

**Puerto Gaitán**

Meta was settled before the Spanish invasion by several indigenous communities like the Guahibo, the Guayabero, the Wanano, the Pijaos, the Achawa, the Sikuane and those who transit the large savannah that Colombia shares with Venezuela, a geological formation named by the oil industry and geologists as the Oil Orinoco Belt. In 1920, the savannah called “Los llanos” started to be colonized in the areas where the indigenous used to transit and live. In Puerto Gaitán municipality,
half of the population is indigenous, a result of immigration waves. For three decades people that escaped from both the successive civil wars that devastated the Colombian Andean area and the generalized poverty found a place to live in Meta. Some founded Puerto Gaitán and stayed in the town by the river Manacacias which is a tributary of the nearby river Meta. Héctor Sánchez, a trade unionist leader that arrived in Puerto Gaitán in 2005, was surprised by the fact that Puerto Gaitán was at least a century old. “I thought this town was a product of the oil extraction but this town must have been funded more than 100 years ago because 80 – 90 years old people have died in the town, people that lived all their lives here”.

In the early 1950s the newcomer’s escaped from the civil war called “La Violencia” (1946-1957). Most of those that had to flee to Los Llanos, communists or liberal dissidents of the party, found refuge. The persecuted and their families formed self-defence organizations in the grassland plains of Meta and Caquetá, which formally announced the formation of the FARC-EP guerrillas on 20 July 1964 (Arenas; 1999). Puerto Gaitán did not belong to that part of the periphery of the department and did not have state or guerrilla presence. Live was tough, people lived from their subsistence crops and some cattle, goods they could not easily sell or exchange because of the bad condition of the roads. Consequently, people used rivers for travelling and settling, transit and shipment, especially the Rivers Manacacias and Meta which are streams people still use to interconnect with the Casanare and Vichada departments.

Puerto Gaitán was a place where the state had no presence; therefore, Colombia did not integrate the region into the political and economic bureaucracy developed in other areas like the Andean zones. However, that absence of a determined form of power abruptly changed once Colombia entered the drug trafficking business. People’s hard life in Puerto Gaitán changed in the mid-1970s. Marijuana and coca crops brought the drug trafficking phenomena to the region and attracted people from neighbouring villages and departments. The wage labour became useful for settlers that escaped from the violence of past decades and the drug capos that began to buy vast acres of land as a way to launder drug money, cultivate coca, build illegal runways and demonstrate power. While some of those errant workers managed to buy lands already adequate for agriculture, others cleared plots, built houses, cultivated coca, grew vegetable gardens and started families.

In 2014 I met Rafael*, a participant who describes himself as part Sikuane, part Sábila and part white. He was ten years old when the illicit crops boom brought lots of money to the municipality. He was living in the urban area of Puerto Gaitán with his parents but his family owned some land close to the town. Rafael acknowledges that during the early 1980’s mafia lords walked into the town and he remembers Carlos Lehder, a mafia capo who offered the Colombian
government to pay himself the Colombian international debt to the US in exchange for tranquillity. Rafael says Lehder was a star every time he arrived in town. However, Rafael highlights that the mafia capos that actually controlled the area were the drug traffickers Gonzálo Rodríguez Gacha alias “El Mexicano” and Víctor Carranza -Gacha’s partner in the emerald business in the nearby Boyacá department (Cepeda; 2014). That’s what Rafael remembers his dad and other people speaking about at home at that time. Gacha was a member of the Medellín Cartel and conducted a war against the state along with Pablo Escobar, both dying from attempted escape (Gacha in 1989 and Escobar in 1993). In the early 1980s the inhabitants of Puerto Gaitán had already lost their tranquillity. Rafael says that assassinations began once the boom initiated. “Money and strangers with bad things in their heads put this town upside down”, says Rafael.

The absence of power made it possible for the mafia to rule the economy, life and death. However, the mafia capos did not have an army by then, only hitmen which made them vulnerable in terms of the monopoly of power and violence they had achieved in Puerto Gaitán, a situation the guerrilla rapidly took advantage of.

**Cocaine, guerrillas, paramilitary and oil**

During the early years of drug trafficking the FARC-EP was not present in the region; the armed organization entered first in 1984 and began to tax the cocaine chain of production, oil palmers, oil extraction and other sorts of businesses. The guerrillas entered with the 16th and 39th fronts, both structures arriving from Vichada and forming part of the Oriental Block of the insurgency (Verdad Abierta; 2013). Gacha grew tired of the taxes and the loss of territorial control and therefore became associated with entrepreneurs, politicians and sectors of the army in order to form a paramilitary training camp in one of his haciendas in Puerto Boyacá -the so called “capital of paramilitarism in Colombia” in 1987. In the camp, the retired Israeli colonel, Jair Klein, trained troops and future commanders in counterinsurgency techniques and dirty war (Verdad Abierta; 2012). The people trained in that camp were immediately used in the dirty warfare against the Patriotic Union party (UP) and afterwards against the guerrillas. For the mafia capos, left oriented people were part of or sympathized with the leftist guerrillas, especially with the FARC-EP (El Turbión; 2011).

Regarding the fate of the UP militants in Colombia, the United Nations Development Programme (PNUD) affirms the following: “Drug traffickers, conservative and liberal regional factions, counterinsurgency divisions, and sectors of the military forces made possible the annihilation, mainly in Meta” (PNUD; 2010:12). Puerto López, Puerto Gaitán and El Castillo were the municipalities in Meta where the UP won mayors, governors and council positions in 1988.
Same municipalities endured most of the paramilitary violence in Meta and the whole country. Rafael remembers the assassinations: “In 1985 they began and in 1989 more and more […] we called them [the murders] ‘Los Masetos’”. Between 1986 and 1988, 300 militants were killed in Meta. Despite the death of Gacha in 1989, the assassination of UP militants and social leaders continued across the whole country. In two decades, approximately 5,000 militants were killed, including two presidential candidates and 13 members of parliament.

In summary, the inhabitants of Puerto Gaitán went from being a people without any centralized power to being subject to the restrictions of the mafia, which became a sort of incipient sovereign power with a bureaucracy of violence and trafficking that facilitated the capos to ship tons of cocaine to the European and the US markets. However, due to the lack of a powerful armed force they could not resist the FARC-EP which easily achieved control of the area and exerted political and economic control that disciplined the inhabitants regarding the economy and the politics. Fear existed, executions existed but the fear of the guerrilla was different from the fear of the population regarding paramilitary forces. In Putumayo (Gómez; 2014) and Meta people say the guerrillas investigated more and abused the inhabitants far less despite the taxes and kidnappings.

Carranza and Gacha developed an army that targeted left oriented leaders in guerrilla domains (Cepeda: 2014) (Verdad Abierta; 2013), a situation that favoured the Colombian oligarchy to focus on both disallowing any left oriented party to participate in politics since independence and war against the insurgency that was holding large territories in Colombia, as well as nurturing its war machinery via the cocaine economy taxing. The will of the sovereign power -the Colombian oligarchy- materialized via the mafia capos and their private armies, social agents that acted as barons who executed with a contemporary display of theatrical power civilians before fighting the guerrillas and after the FARC-EP was pushed back to Vichada.

**Connivance between oil companies and paramilitary**

In 1982, ECOPETROL found oil at 167 kilometres from the urban capital of Puerto Gaitán. Since then the road is the same: a fabric of red dust in dry seasons that pollutes everything and a fabric of red clay in rainy seasons that adds sediment to water streams. Despite the millions of gallons of oil that have transited between Puerto Gaitán and Rubiales, no company has ever paved the almost 200 kilometres of road nor did the state pave it despite their millions in royalties. If the road is in good condition -due to the company’s array of workers that handle the upkeep– then it would take five hours driving an SUV to get to Rubiales. When the road is in bad condition it takes the tank cars more than 15 hours to make the same journey. “One cannot accelerate over 15 kilometres per hour
or one may break the axis because of the inclinations and weight”, one trucker told me.

The oil field was explored and initially exploited by ECOPETROL and Petroleo do Brasil (COLEX) for a short time. There were several circumstances for the oil companies to leave: (1) Scarc knowledge about heavy oil production; (2) the 1997 legislation that prohibited exploitation of heavy oil because of environmental damages; (3) the taxing and impositions of the FARC-EP and, ultimately, (4) the war to occupy the territory between paramilitary and the guerrillas forced them to leave.

José Baldomero Linares, alias “Guillermo Torres” and demobilized commander of the Self-Defence Forces of Meta and Vichada (ACMV), asserts that oil engineers sought him out in 1995 during the hearings before the Peace and Justice Tribunals. In his testimony he states that the oil company needed to get its oil drillers out of the oil fields and he assures that the engineers complained about the 39th front that asked them for supplies, money and named workers at their will (Verdad Abierta n.d.). The oil companies withstood the pressure but in 1998 they finally left: FARC-EP’s extortive kidnappings of oil engineers and the coming war between the ACMV, alias “Los Carranceros”, was just beginning.

Rafael also remember that period, “We could move freely before they came, but once they arrived we had to stay at home at 6pm; otherwise, you may get in trouble […] before paras came you could go fishing late at night in the Manacacias, Meta or Yucao rivers, but they began to deny the access so you had to ask for permission, we lost the right to move freely”. However, what Rafael remembers that most impressed me is his fear of blackouts. While we were talking in 2015 the town went dark and he instantly became anxious. He explained to me that there was a coincidence between blackouts and assassinations and he immediately blamed the police: “every time the lights turned off you may find one, two or three bodies, and the police must be involved because the lever that turn the lights on or off is next to the police station”, he said. He also recalls the sexual abuses against women but prefers not to talk about that episode of gross gender violence and child abuse. In Puerto Gaitán, the ACMV kidnapped girls from houses or schools and forced them to work in their camps, to have sex with multiple paramilitary members and some were forced to prostitution. Since then, the town has changed forever. Gender violence and moral punishments became mixed with violent forms of control (Verdad Abierta; 2014).

Newcomers are told about the violent past via anecdotes or silence, a situation that becomes clear every time the paramilitary kill somebody in town like drug addicts or social leaders. Sara* is a secretary of one of the oil companies. She travelled from Villavicencio to Puerto Gaitán to look
for a job and she said she was told about the past but only because she was staying in the house of a relative: “because she was my cousin she told me, otherwise she may not; people here are reserved regarding that”. She admits she did not pay attention to the history of violence and power at first; nevertheless, she became intimidated after the first killing in town since she moved there. “That young guy was warned before going to the army that he had to leave the town, he sniffed too much cocaine and smoked it. He came back during the first days of the military service and they killed him”, she says. One soldier killed by paras did not represent any danger for the assassins.

Once the ACMV consolidated again the economic axis of Victor Carranza, the oil companies returned to the oil fields. José Baldomero assures that in 2001 entrepreneurs looked for him again and asked for protection in order to return to the oil fields. It is in that year that the Brazilian entrepreneur Germán Efromovich bought the license and Metapetroleum started the oil extraction and production of heavy oil in Rubiales. Nonetheless, the production of oil was possible because of the money that was paid to the ACMV per tanker car between 2001 and 2005 so the oil could reach Barranquilla port in the Colombian Caribbean. During those years the guerrillas were no longer a threat, the area had already been taken over by the ACMV by 2001.

Both the payments of Metapetroleum to the ACMV and the taxes the paramilitary charged per kilo of cocaine that transited from Vichada to Puerto Gaitán with Villavicencio as destination, made it possible for the criminal organization to grow in numbers. José Baldomero assures that in 1994 the ACMV had 27 men and between 2000 and 2005 the paramilitary structure had 350. In 2005 the company ceased paying because the ACMV demobilized that year, along other paramilitary structures from all over Colombia, illegal armies that all together formed the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC). Nevertheless, the benefits for the companies of the paramilitaries’ actions did not stop there, neither did the paramilitary actions in that area.

Crimes against humanity were used by the ACMV as counterinsurgency techniques to control the areas previously controlled by the FARC-EP, to control the cocaine business and retake the Carranza axis. These violations also benefited the oil companies that willingly asked for protection and not only in terms of returning to the oil fields and shipping the oil to the international market. According to the former Unique Registration Office for the Forced Displaced Population, between 1997 and August 2010, 3,379 people were forcibly displaced from Puerto Gaitán. In Puerto Gaitán, those peasants are attempting to claim back 126,000 hectares they either had to leave or that were taken by force. Rafael told me during my first visit that one example of such coordination between paramilitaries and oil extraction is evident in the area called Altos de Tillavá. In 1998, different paramilitary organizations that operated in Meta worked together and burnt seven houses
and killed settlers and indigenous people. The fear caused everyone from that “vereda” flee. Today, the peasants endure difficulties in returning. PRE started the extraction of oil in that area, now called CPE6.

The sovereign power exerted by the paramilitaries via public sexual violence, torture, massacres and assassinations forced the inhabitants to obey the paramilitary commands, but the ACMV was controlled by Carranza, a baron that claimed the use of violence and repressed all behaviours at his will. Therefore, the sovereign power of the Colombian oligarchy became materialized and consolidated not by the monopoly of violence and state bureaucracy but via a third person, a subject that gained benefits while serving a sort of master that ruled from the capital cities and decided the destiny of the peripheries that were once ignored but eventually became valuable because of the oil mining.

**Pacific Rubiales Energy, oil and paramilitary**

Meta Petroleum was bought by Pacific Rubiales Energy (PRE) in 2008, a company created by the Canadian company Pacific Stratus Energy and Petro Rubiales Energy Corporation; this was company property of the Brazilian entrepreneur that bought the license in 2001 to ECOPETROL. PRE have the concession of the oil bloc CPE6, which is located exactly in the Vereda Altos de Tillavá. However, there are no deeds or documents concerning the lands; the paramilitary destroyed the archives which enormously affects the disposed. In addition, Colombian legislation makes it impossible for the state to adjudicate empty lands to any person located five kilometres from any oil dwelling and that area is full of oil extraction points.

However, paramilitarism did not end after the ACMV demobilization and today paramilitary units are still useful for the companies and continue profiting from drug trafficking while exerting violent power over young addicts, minor delinquents and opposition. Rafael says in 2013 and repeats almost the same in 2015, “they [paramilitaries] no longer do what they did before, they are today involved in drug trafficking and threaten anyone who protests”.

PRE is the company that has been in charge of the oil fields that produce most of the Colombian oil in the last decade; but, in 2011, after three years of operating Campo Rubiales, the multinational had to face consecutive worker strikes. The answer from the paramilitaries was immediate. Camilo's story in the introduction is one example of such reaction: when he was threatened he was leading, with other workers, the strikes against PRE. In addition, one of the workers that was leading the cease of labour is Héctor Sánchez, a person that was threatened because of his activism as a trade unionist. He received the following message to his mobile phone:
“We know every step you take. It is good for you to get some help, but that would not help you. We know you have to go to work. Do not look for a stupid killing, same for your wife and son”. Norlay Acevedo, another leader, was also a target of threats and he subsequently went into exile in Chile.

The relationship between the paramilitary and the company creates different types of silence. Sara, the secretary I met at a restaurant in 2013, chatted sort of openly about the killing of young men when I asked about how safe she felt after the assassination, something she did not answer at the end. However, she never mentioned the violence against workers despite working for an oil company. After she left I asked Martín*, the man who introduced me to Sara, about the trade unionists and the discontent. He immediately uttered the official discourse “it was the USO that brought violence” and remained quiet. Afterward he invited me to go for a beer. I met Martín that same day, he approached me and asked me if I minded if he sat at my table. There was nobody in the restaurant and all chairs were free on the sidewalk. I agreed to see what would come next. It was my first and last meal outside my hotel and I was tired of eating in the same place, something I consistently did in 2013 in order to prevent anyone asking questions. Martín says he was recruited for the multinational and invited me for a beer. I rejected his invitation; I had rather a stronger motive than the distrust and security protocols: I was about to meet one participant that was coming from the oil fields in my hotel room and I had already planned to leave early in the morning.

Today, it is visible that the relation between paramilitary and PRE causes silence and fear among the population; therefore, few people protest about the nets of corruption between the major office and PRE or the links between paramilitary and the company. Many have adjusted to that dynamic and take advantage as much as they can. Ricardo* who knows the political relation among majors, PRE, governors, oil palmers and workers because of his work, summarizes the relation of PRE with the municipality as follows: “why do you think that the governor has not visited once since PRE has been in charge? PRE controls everything and all majors work for PRE”. Nevertheless, the trade unionists are not the only ones that have been a target of violent actions. The house of the REDHER was robbed after collecting material concerning the socio environmental affectations caused by PRE in Puerto Gaitán. The material was the only thing that was stolen from their house in Bogotá. It means that violence is also exerted against foreigners if necessary.

**Power, cheap oil and low capital expenditure**

People in Puerto Gaitán have experienced different power relations with different armed actors that have pursued control of the region. First, the absence of the state created a vacuum of power that smoothed the path for the mafias to proliferate and exert their will. However, the guerrillas -
exerting their type of state/sovereign power - achieved control of the area for one decade with no state apparatus but rather an efficient military intelligence and control of the JAC. Afterwards, the men trained to conduct the selective killings that contributed to the political genocide of the UP developed into the several paramilitary organizations that made it possible for the oil companies to have access to the lands that once belonged to the farmers who were forcibly disposed. Similarly, the intense use of violence has provoked the oil industry to reduce capital expenditure during oil exploitation, people remembering what happened and fearing a repeat occurrence. The inhabitants and newcomers know local authorities are in favour of the multinational and do not trust the CAF because of the relation the sectors of the police and army have had with the paramilitary that overthrew the FARC-EP guerrillas. For the inhabitants, to obey does not mean to sympathize; it is more like bearing the political and economic system imposed by different groups since the mid-1970s.

Today, economically and politically, PRE attempts to control the basic unit of communitarian organization in the countryside. Rafael, who has been president of the Communitarian Council (JAC) of his neighbourhood says all the JAC are “in the pockets of PRE” political institutions that do not argue about the corruption, neither concerning how bad the infrastructure of the town is nor the contracting system.

Here and in the veredas where they extract oil, presidents [of the JAC] receive money from all sides, the company offers you money to keep you in silence. […] In addition, the presidents of the JAC have to pass lists with the names of people that live here in the town or in the veredas in order to rotate the non-qualified jobs that are available. But they [presidents] charge foreigners the some price each month during the time of the contract or a big amount before labours began. That’s how they get people in […] one inspects and the subcontractors say all are professional assistants but many are carrying stones.

The same happens at several levels says Ricardo: “corruption is so high you cannot imagine and everybody knows, the governor, the clergy, the ombudsman, everybody”. The control in the town is so high that the power was turned off at the same moment the journalist Guillermo Prieto presented on national television the misuse of 9 million USD in sanitary facilities and irrigation systems in the Puerto Gaitán urban area. Corruption is neither a secret nor the link between the multinationals and the majors that have governed Puerto Gaitán, nor the history of violence between the oil companies, the paramilitary and the CAF.

In addition to the power exerted by the barons -who control the areas with systematic and dramatic use of force and coercion- judicial prosecutions have demonstrated themselves useful as a technique of intimidation; a sovereign power that uses the bureaucracy of the state. Prosecutions
and death penalties have achieved one purpose: people fear dissention which is beneficial for the private mining business and the state.

**Reducing constant capital**

State and private companies between 1995 and 2005 paid for protection from paramilitaries and paid willingly per tanker truck for five years. Such payment may be considered constant capital expenditure, the companies surely accounted for it in their archives. Notwithstanding, the millionaire cost of mining under paramilitary conditions may be considered also as a form to reduce other types of constant capital expenditure. On one hand, they collaborate with that money to put an end to FARC-EP presence, extortions and other demands from the guerrillas. In addition, the paramilitary actions turned out to be convenient for the oil business. The forced displacement in Altos de Tillavá made it possible for any company to explore and exploit without paying compensations or relocations, which produced a reduction in constant capital and millions saved. It is also beneficial for the state, since the 300,000 barrels PRE put into the international market every day are an important income for the national economy and an incentive for other mining industries to come. A crucial aspect for the Colombian presidents since 2002, both affirm that progress comes in the hand of the “investor confidence” and lately in “the mining locomotive”. However, violence has not only been useful for the accumulation of dispossession via forced displacement and the reduction of investment in the means of production, a constant capital reduction. Violence against trade unionists also reduces variable capital.

**Reducing variable capital**

The harassment of social leaders by police forces slow down trade unionist struggles that ask for basic rights. For instance, in the case of Puerto Gaitán thousands of workers had to sleep in tents by the hundreds and each tent had no more than two fans. Furthermore, the salaries are below those paid by ECOPETROL in regions that have security problems because of guerrilla attacks. However, such payments are better because of the collective agreement between ECOPETROL and the USO. Worker’s demands were answered by intimidating callings and other techniques that sought to demotivate protesters and break down collective action with social leaders being assassinated. Oscar went to prison for some months and could not come back for a while to Puerto Gaitán and El Porvenir where he built his house. His family had not lived there for a while. Norlay, another trade unionist leader who initiated the protests with Héctor stayed for a while in Chile with his family and Camilo had to escape on a motorbike in the middle of a speech.

Those threatening actions slowed down the USO agenda in terms of the satisfaction of the
demands of the workers they represent. On one hand, in terms of the living conditions such as food and facilities, it is again constant capital. On the other hand, the extensive hours with no benefits and the low salaries made it possible for the company to save on expenses and transfer more surplus from oil workers to the shareholders: a variable accumulation of capital.

**Organizing help for extraction**

The oil industry organized the help needed for the extraction. Directives and/or CEOs from the oil industry surely had to debate the pacts held with the ACMV, agreements that secured the equipment left during guerrilla times and the long payment per tanker truck. Therefore, one may also say the CEOs procured the valuable “empty lands” the state put in concession after violence. Lands the state attempts to return to the disposed but proves to be inefficient, even in places with high militarization and police like Puerto Gaitán. In addition, the oil industry benefited from the social control imposed on the workers and the inhabitants of Puerto Gaitán in connivance with the local political power.

All three circumstances are a brief example of how the oil industry has made it possible to produce cheap oil during the time Rubiales oil fields were most productive. The oil wells reached maturation point between 2008 and 2014. Now PRE manages to keep the production and has to return the fields in 2016 to ECOPETROL but those oil fields will never raise again. On the contrary, each year the production will diminish.

Despite the problems, the oil business is very lucrative for PRE. In conversations with Camilo about oil, the USO lawyer told me that the cost of production is 28 USD per barrel and the selling price is 50 USD, half the price oil received some months ago because of the fall in oil prices in 2015. This means that in bad times, PRE obtains 22 USD per barrel and produces 300,000 per day, more than 6,000,000 USD per day. However, Camilo is suspicious of the costs of production of PRE, “it is necessary to investigate why PRE says the costs of production are 28 dollars per barrel. Because the cost of production of heavy oil for ECOPETROL in Chichimené, Apiay and Castilla fields is only 9 USD per barrel.” However, the state lacks political interest in this regard. In fact, it is the company that counts the barrels of oil extracted not the state; therefore, the country totally relies on the integrity of the multinational that is linked to human rights violations, corruption and environmental damages.

Violence, corruption and accumulation are situations well known by trade unionists, especially those that have been in the USO for decades and survived the 1980s and the 1990s
killings. However, between 2001 and 2011 there was no trade union that represented the oil workers in Puerto Gaitán; therefore, each one of them had to deal with the subcontracting companies by themselves. Some workers already know about the oil business because they were themselves oil workers before but there were many who did not know anything about the oil business.

In summary, this chapter has explained oil industry accumulation of capital in Puerto Gaitán in terms of the reduction of expenditure in variable and constant capital as in Marxist economic analysis. However, such accumulation of capital is explained in terms of the historical relation of sovereign power between the oil industry and the state with the inhabitants and the oil workers. The reason for the use of the Foucauldian forms of power is to complement the analysis regarding economic and extra economic compulsion of capital in the Oil Industry in Puerto Gaitán. In addition, following Lilja and Vinthagen, “power and resistance exist in a mutually constitutive relationship and the two concepts are increasingly being understood as interconnected and entangled” (Lilja and Vinthagen; 2014:111). Therefore, in order to account for resistance it is necessary to account for power. That line of reasoning leads us to more questions. How did the thousands of workers from different regions cease labour in a place with so much history of violence? How was the USO chosen to represent the discontent? This will be discussed in the next chapter.
V

The “unthinkable” happened

The joy of having a job

Javier* is in his early-30s. His family was forcibly displaced by the FARC-EP guerrilla in the late 1990s when the insurgency controlled vast regions in the north of the Caldas department. By then, the 47th front had zero tolerance with the inhabitants and forced recruitment at a young age was common and thousands fled. His family moved to La Dorada municipality and there, at the banks of the Magdalena River (the most important river in Colombia), Javier worked full time during the day and finished high school studying at night. He noticed that building was better paid than agriculture and he liked it more, prompting him to complete his technical studies on building. Once he finished his studies he was hired as an evaluator by the educative institution that trained him, the state technical institution SENA. However, he became dissatisfied and he only worked as an evaluator every other six months, otherwise the state would have had to hire him. The Colombian state apparatus uses temporary services contracts to avoid the so called “pension burden” and other expenses associated with workers. This situation caused him to scrutinize people that told him that in Campo Rubiales everything would be better.

In 2009 Javier travelled to Puerto Gaitán and obtained the job he was looking for. “I borrow for 85 USD and the tickets. I arrived in this town [Puerto Gaitán] with three friends in 2009, but the money that we brought was not enough. We rented a room and bought some food, one week later none of us had any money left”, he says. Eventually, a few days later each one of them found a job in town and helped each other. Javier, in less than one month, handed his resume to several cooperatives and Montajes JM interviewed him. Ten days later he was working for Rubiales.

People told me in Campo Rubiales that workers complained a lot because of the food and the sleeping conditions, but I was coming from a very bad situation and once I arrived it seemed like paradise for me. I have never ever worked in a place so big and with such a fine project with so many people. It seemed so good to me that I became comfortable, I earned good money. Now I think the conditions kind of sucked. Today I would not like to sleep in tents for 260, 160 and 80 people. At that time, we all slept like that. I was never in the military service, but people told me it was very
similar. The bunk beds were aligned and the divisions were made out of paper […] in town people told me the food was bad but in the morning you may have eggs to try, orange juice, ribbon soup, I found it to be great. I imagined bad food like what we had at home so many times because there was not enough money: “Agua de panela” [sweetened water with raw sugar cane] and bread […] We woke up at 5am and we started labour at 7am, then we worked until 10, 11 or 12am. Fourteen hours shifts and longer. I thought it was fine because I started the 5th of May and there you were paid on the 20th. I received 500 USD [almost two minimum salaries] for those days, I was happy. Where else could I have earned that much money? I started to wonder why people complained about salaries. Then I learned that in ECOPETROL people are paid more for being locked up in extreme heat and workers are given transportation subsidies and other things you are not given here.

Javier’s first months raised his spirit but he began to understand why people complained. He and all the other workers in the area where he was working were promised a special bonus equivalent to one extra salary once production reached 5,000 barrels. Despite achieving the objective earlier than expected the bonus was not paid and Javier saw how history repeated itself regarding promises: Montajes JM continuously promised bonuses that never arrived during the entirety of the workers’ three year contract. Once the legal bond finished, people were fired and no bonus was paid.

The strikes in Puerto Gaitán began in 2011 while he was working as a regular labourer. He said that people grew tired of bad salaries, the awful conditions and the false promises. People talked about the conditions in other camps and this motivated the discontent of people like Javier.

In Barrancabermeja they pumped only thirty thousand barrels per day and they all have the guarantees that are granted by ECOPETROL. Even in places with war problems they pay better. In Arauca [department] the guerrilla blow an oil pipeline so there are more expenses at the moment of extracting oil and we are paid less […] one opens the eyes and says ‘I am not paid badly but they are paying half of the salary in the end’

Workers’ knowledge left an imprint on Javier’s understanding of the oil business. He began to use as a point of reference the USO and ECOPETROL, a trade union and a company Javier was not familiar with before working for PRE. However, he had a previous notion about trade unionism: “what I knew was what I was being told, that trade unions broke companies”. Javier’s discontent increased and he turned from being initially happy to being suspicious of the conditions provided by the company.

Javier’s dissatisfaction arose from the false promises and first and second hand experiences of mistreatment. He could sleep in the facilities in 2011, creating for him a new definition of sleep:
“Because I was in the facilities I could sleep in the same bed but when you are sleeping in tents you never sleep in the same bed twice, we called it “the warm bed”: once a worker got up another took his place and so on, so you cannot have a locker with your things and you may get robbed easily”, says Javier. In addition, it came to his knowledge that thousands of workers that had to work far from the facilities were given cold and even rotten food. By 2011, Javier became chagrined and began to understand the points raised by experienced oil workers when complaining about the conditions.

Not everybody was happy

Norlay Acevedo worked for the oil industry as a driver. He already had experience in working for big projects. He worked as a truck driver for the companies that rebuilt Armenia city after a fatidic earthquake that depressed Colombia in 1999. When he finished his work in Armenia city he moved to another site and worked there until he heard about Campo Rubiales. Once intrigued, he travelled there in 2009 seeking a job. Once he obtained, it he immediately began to complain about the conditions but held back because he needed the job so badly.

I had to work all days and they did not pay extra days, nor did I have days off. You were given tupperware, a spoon and a mosquito net. Breakfast was served at 4am and those like me that did not come back and had their lunch packed had to eat it cold and sometimes it would rot because of the heat. There were no fixed schedules for the drivers and the conditions for those that did the topography were the worst of all because they had to endure rains or intense sun. At least I could always take cover inside the vehicle until dark when we had to come back to the camps.

Norlay worked there for a year, resting only every three months from the oil field but not from working for PRE. He was sent to Villavicencio city four times to fix the truck he was assigned to. He had to drive more than ten hours and had the truck checked and repaired for the next day in the city. Once the mechanics finished the job, he had to immediately return to Campo Rubiales. S2 Technic Ltd. finished the seismic project in 2010 but he immediately began to work for TRACTENI and INTRICON S.A. for one more year. Some conditions improved but in general the abuse continued. Norlay became part of the logistics team that delivered lunch to the workers of those companies so he could lunch in the facilities. However, he saw his former situation when delivering food to the men that worked isolating the oil pipelines in order to keep the heavy oil serums at temperatures that sustained their flow. “They could not choose what to eat like those that worked in the big camps, the meat, especially the chicken, was spoiled and juices were served in plastic bags. Today they still transport juices in bags”, he says.
Norlay’s demands about the long shifts, “the warm bed”, the lack of privacy and the labour insecurity of that system were never heard because of the type of contract:

I was hired by a transportation services cooperative that worked for the companies that worked for PRE, that’s why I received orders from the companies. It the end, I was not working for PRE nor for any company. The cooperative did not even pay me but the owner of the car did. That’s why you couldn’t complain. I received orders from a company and when I complained to them, they sent me to the cooperative, the cooperative sent me to the driver and the driver said he did not know anything about the cooperative […] the situation was chaotic and my story was the story of many, 90% of the vehicles were affiliated with cooperatives, PRE had 263 hiring companies and nobody was paid extra hours. No settlements were given and we had to pay for our pension funds and liability insurance from our own salaries. In addition, we endured the constant pressure of private security.

By 2011, Metapetroleum –a company owned completely by PRE– had 12,644 workers and recognized only 535 while CEPCOLSA –a Spanish subcontracting company that also worked for PRE– had 1,880 and recognized 83. The contractual and living conditions motivated the workers to talk late at night and form a sort of a group with leaders. Leaders went tent by tent after the long shifts and discussed how to address the different abuses. In the end, the oil workers decided to stop their activities and that the workers’ representatives should voice the social discontent. Norlay was one of them: “We were sixteen and on July 19th at 4am we stopped all activities, something that had never been done before and unthinkable in Campo Rubiales”. The power of the company and profiting via abuses and bureaucratic neoliberalism was finally challenged.

Héctor Sánchez -part of the group of 16 leaders- told me during an interview at the USO headquarters in Bogotá that the organization of the strike took some days and was inspired by a previous antecedent:

The workers started to talk about a strike, especially those that had been working for three or four years, everything was rotten in all possible ways. In addition, one month before there was a protest in Puerto Gaitán against the subcontractor CEPCOLSA, raising the spirit against PRE. However, it was sort of illogical to think about a strike against such a ‘monster’ moreover when we were piled, locked and under surveillance.

The surveillance was led by the police and they used PRE’s infrastructure, something Javier remembers as being an oppressive and improper task for police officers: “the police should be looking after the town’s security […] but they [the police] were like the private security of the company; they stood in the entrance to PRE’s control posts where they frisked all of us”. The disciplinary surveillance was the first thing the oil workers broke down during collective assemblies
and it was something that called Javier’s attention: “I could not believe that so many people would stop their activities, nobody moved or went to work, we all agreed on the call for stopping activities and remained in the tents and camps […] I was afraid. You know, it is Meta so I feared that anything may happen”. Javier knew that Meta and Campo Rubiales were areas where power was exerted by illegal armies with a proven relationship with the multinationals, state and local powers.

Javier observed from a prudent distance and took care of the place where the workers gathered: “The others and I were excited but looking after the facilities conditions, I did not want anybody messing around because we were the ones that lived in there: we were the ‘campamentarios’”, he says. The leaders knew they all needed an experienced interlocutor with PRE and the subcontracting companies and the closest reference was the USO. In addition, ECOPETROL owned the rights to 60% of the whole oil field while PRE only owned 40%; this opened the possibility for the mechanism of a scale salary to become a reality.

**The arrival of the USO**

Anxiety, fear and hope were mixed feelings the workers experienced for four days. In the town of Puerto Gaitán the police used the Mobil Anti-riot Squad (ESMAD) against the demonstrators, a measure that affected the workers that were protesting and other inhabitants including minors. In **Campo Rubiales** the police sent out another ESMAD squad against the workers but the thousands of labourers easily forced them to retreat: “We did not want to fight but they started the whole thing, can you imagine? We were having breakfast and others were sleeping when the police, those “Robocops”, started to launch gases, to break everything and hit us. People began to defend themselves and we were too many”, says Norlay. Javier as ‘campamento’ was always with an eye wide open sort of looking after the place where thousands were gathering while waiting for the USO leaders to come. However, the trade unionists could not arrive easily. The USO leaders from Meta and Bogotá were the target of a systematic blockade and all narratives describe the trip as an odyssey in the savannah.

The USO came and the police did not allow them to enter. Workers had to go there and help them to come in. Fortunately, there were some workers that were from here and they know the many ways to enter so they could help them to avoid the traps set up by PRE through the security company and the police. They [PRE and associates] blocked a public road by placing a bulldozer on a bridge, the battery and other parts were removed. That was possible because PRE ruled the area; but, the USO leaders are also workers, electricians, and engineers so they fixed the bulldozer. By then, we were 11,000 workers in the facility. When the USO finally arrived the leaders from Bogotá and Meta
addressed all of us and explained that they would join us and support our claims.

Javier remembers that day with details he could not have foreseen, like the traps or the bulldozer in the middle of a small bridge, but those stories became a vital part of the struggle against PRE and state violence: workers’ move ahead over the articulation between the state and PRE. In addition, once the USO leaders arrived, the oil workers felt they improved their negotiating capabilities. For instance, thousands of people became affiliated with the organization, which from one day to the next burgeoned the USO into becoming a valid social agent in front of PRE and any other private or state institution. This is precisely what the natural leaders needed.

Those that established contact with the USO asked them to come. The USO had not come before and the conditions we set to the people before assuming leadership was that the USO should come and take responsibility regarding the negotiations. We announced the possibility of joining the trade union and the next day, when they finally arrived, approximately 5,000 workers became affiliated and the list of demands was settled with five points.

The five points Norlay mentioned are: (1) decent housing, (2) enough shower water for everybody, (3) to end mistreatment on behalf of supervisors (4) to improve the roads (5) and to stop the exploitation of workers by: days with paid leave and overtime hours, ending long shifts and terminating the subcontracting practice that created the labourers’ instability.

The demands for decent housing and enough water were requests requiring PRE to invest constant capital and improve the living conditions of the oil workers; meanwhile, the demand for ending supervisor mistreatments sought to avoid the transferring of surplus from the oil workers punishments to the shareholders: the supervisors ‘Capataces’ obliged workers to keep working without interruption despite the long shifts, they also menaced workers with sanctions that would result in the reduction of their salary and imposed punishments based on more working hours. The request for road repairs confronted two issues: first the health of the workers and inhabitants who developed vision and respiratory problems due to long term exposure to dust; secondly, the dust clouds produced by the thousands of cars and tanker trucks that transited daily through the road covered plants and caused damage to crops as well as cattle and most likely humans. Moreover, in rainy seasons the dust became mud that contaminated the water sources and turned the road into a precarious place to transit, affecting both the locals and the owners of the trucks who had to continuously pay for its suspension and other mechanical repairs. The road became an issue that united workers and locals in the claim for the so called “entrepreneurial responsibility” of PRE with
the locals, settlers and native communities. Finally, the last set of demands concerning contractual matters sought for a raise in salaries, the hiring of locals and labour stability. This meant that PRE would need to invest in variable capital and the economic life of the inhabitants. In summary, the oil workers demanded that PRE augment their expenditure in constant and variable capital and to stop the abusive transferring of workers surplus to the shareholders via capataces.

The USO could not come back to Puerto Gaitán that night, Javier said there were rumours about deadly retaliations that circulated among inhabitants and workers. ESMAD units increased in numbers and army squads were sent to surround the area. The trade unionists stayed and a pre-settlement was signed by PRE and the USO in order to solve the delicate situation in the oil fields the same day. The pre-settlement sought to avoid the company retaliating against the workers by prosecuting those who were caught by the police; therefore, the first point was obtaining the freedom of those who were detained: a challenge to the disciplinary and sovereign power of the state and PRE as political and economic agents in Campo Rubiales. The second point agreed upon was the full payment of the days the workers were striking: a measure to avoid material repercussions over the livelihoods of the oil workers and their commitment to the strike and trade unionism. The last point was the settlement of several negotiating tables regarding the five demands raised by the oil workers and the allocation of an office for the USO in Puerto Gaitán, an agreement that sought the consolidation of the five demands that would mobilize thousands of oil workers. However, on July 20th the president of PRE publicly stated that the multinational never signed a pre-settlement, denied the demonstration was caused by the labour conditions, argued that the demonstrators caused damages and stated that the USO leaders were some sort of “heavily armed” saboteurs. The words of the president of PRE immediately used the troublemaker and guerrilla stigma against the trade unionists in order to discredit their demands.

Finally, the president of PRE stated that the Canadian multinational served as an intermediary between the USO and the subcontracting companies that developed projects for PRE: CEPCOLSA and METAPETROLEUM. While the president of PRE was delegitimizing the strike from Bogotá and warning that the workers' actions were “a bad symptom” for the so called “foreign investing confidence”, in the savannah thousands of oil workers and inhabitants continued their daily activities and kept keen regarding the negotiating tables and the promise of Angelino Garzón, a former trade unionist and Colombia’s vice-president, about visiting Puerto Gaitán on August 3rd 2011.
“A bomb about to explode”

The beatings and negotiations could not be reported. The area became immediately militarized and ESMAD squads became part of the everyday life of the oil workers. In the midst of this situation, the USO leaders were handling the conditions along with social leaders of the oil workers in Campo Rubiales and other social organizers like Rafael in Puerto Gaitán. Henry Jara defines the USO as a catalyst that precipitated the possibility for the workers and the community to canalize the demands.

Henry Jara is the president of the USO Meta sub-directive. He participated in the negotiation with PRE in 2011 and since that moment has kept informed about the situation in Campo Rubiales. He is a social leader that join the USO when ECOPETROL began to exploit oil in Apiay in 1994.

I met the USO in Apiay, Meta, where some leaders of the trade union arrived and opened the eyes of the people in town [Pompeya]. We did not know anything about oil and the USO help us to organize ourselves because we were poorly paid. By then, the USO helped us to establish an association that initiated demanding from ECOPETROL social and entrepreneurial responsibility. There I got to know the trade union and I started to get involved with it and I liked it because I could open my eyes and see the lies of the T.V. news, the lies of the politicians. I am sure the people in the association and I changed and learnt more.

Henry has participated in different strikes and social struggles in his twenty years of activism and he notes that the situation in Campo Rubiales was delicate. In his words: “a bomb about to explode”. Rafael says the major did not pay attention to the situation in the urban and rural areas nor did the National Audit Office nor the Ombudsman, so the people became uncomfortable. Henry says both inhabitants and workers were alone and both argued for social responsibility reparations from PRE and the state regarding social and labour responsibilities: “when we entered [USO] we found the people in great need of an organization that would ventilate the corruption and mistreatments, the people were in need of being heard”, he says.

The USO left a powerful impression in town and amongst the oil workers. The ESMAD during the days of the strike in the urban Puerto Gaitán and Campo Rubiales arrested people in the streets and put them inside the water cannon tanks, people the USO advocated for because prosecutions started right away. “Thirty-two to 35 people were arrested in the streets. Fortunately, we counted on the Committee for Political Prisoners (FCSPP), they are experts in the defence of political prisoners and the rights of people during demonstrations. They made freedom possible without prosecutions for those people”, says Camilo. The USO’s network proved to be efficient with the lawyers. The liberation of the imprisoned, the affiliation of thousands and the promise of
the vice president of coming to Puerto Gaitán made the USO and the social fabric acquire a social momentum in the social struggle for the fulfilment of the constitution regarding labour and human rights.

Javier, Rafael, Henry Jara, Norlay and Camilo resisted in different and interdependent ways the disciplinary power performed by PRE and the state in the first strike. In general the oil workers endured both disciplinary techniques (1) aggressive police intervention and (2) prosecution attempts; those techniques were resisted by the USO with the assistance of the FCSPP to denounce the policed intervention. At this level the state power could not achieve a more powerful demonstration of its support for the Canadian multinational but the message was clear: social protest and oil workers’ organization were not regarded well. However, despite the efforts of the persecution and prosecution, the workers and the inhabitants built a sort of network that still exists today.

**Agents, Power and Resistance**

**Sovereign power**

The different workers who participated actively and passively in the strikes in July 2011 defied the power centres in Puerto Gaitán. This action challenged (a) the status quo achieved in Puerto Gaitán by the ACMV, (b) the multinational control over the body of workers and (c) the state design regarding mining business -the so called “investing confidence”. The challenging of the three social agents and their respective agendas undermine key mechanisms of their sovereign power such as obedience, fear, punishments and violence. In addition, such resistance encouraged workers to claim legitimacy and legality as social agents. In other words, the workers declared they had no fear of exerting a counterproductive agency regarding the objectives of coercive capital accumulation and the monopoly of violence.

The success regarding the oil workers resistance against the sovereign power by PRE, the paramilitary and the state is defined early in this section because the strike in June 2011 is but a turning point in the history of Puerto Gaitán and resistance is an ongoing process more than a finite action. However, it is possible to affirm that the oil workers made it possible to negotiate material and power relations with the oil industry, a move that turns such resistance against the sovereign state into a negotiation of the disciplinary conditions; a situation that is analysed in the coming paragraph.
Disciplinary power

For Vinthagen and Lilja, “resistance to discipline will be about either openly refusing to participate in the construction of subjectivity/capacities/skills/organization, or the de facto transformation of such social construction into something else – something not useful for power interests” (2014: 114). In the strike, workers that did not know anything about the oil industry were motivated and refused to continue working after several assemblies. The cease of labour, that counted thousands of people who attended the gatherings, stopped the production of thousands of gallons of oil. The economic pressure was significant and an undeniable loss of profit for PRE. The workers economic pressure on PRE is the most visible resistance tool used as collective social agency against them; therefore, the objective: to achieve an opening to a negotiation. Nonetheless, the assemblies are the key aspect of the trade unionist resistance: gatherings allowed oil workers to join together and be informed about the rights all Colombians have; in addition, they also created a consensus of the demands and participated in forming the objectives of the strike.

The assemblies caught PRE – METAPETROLEUM and CEPCOLSA’s attention. The workers discussed in the company spaces better salaries and living conditions, factors that would affect the reduction of capital expenditure. Moreover, it was the massive congregation of oil workers who stimulated the demonstrators to reject the policed intervention, which in turn challenged the state. On one side, the space meant to be a means for oil production was turned, for a limited period, into a place where thousands of workers challenged the discipline that sought to profit from the production of their bodies. On the other side, the workers openly disregarded the history of deadly paramilitary influence and challenged the status quo in which the town and the whole municipality had been living since the ACMV took over the municipality.

Vinthagen and Lilja state that resistance is not only a matter of refusing to actively participate in the construction of subjectivity but something beyond: “resisting disciplinary processes is often connected to the re-writing of one’s self” (Lilja and Vinthagen: 116). The “re-writing” in Foucauldian terms is possible through the technologies of self: the re-examining analysis and consequent agentive response that may be used to foster disciplinary practices -like going to work under awful conditions for years- or to participate in strikes as in Javier’s case. Of course, not all workers modified themselves in the same way. For instance, both Norlay and Héctor told me they had been social leaders before: Norlay participated in an association of construction workers in Armenia and Héctor became social leader of a displaced population when the FARC-EP forcibly displaced him. Both exerted a sort of resistance in social organizations that employed the
experience of trade unionists like Henry and Rodolfo. The interdependent cognitive understanding of the trade unionists regarding material relations - the unfair accumulation of capital - and resistance is as similar as it is unique. In terms of resistance, it is possible to observe that individuals modify themselves differently via self-disciplinary techniques that may contribute to the adoption of disciplinary power or to foster resistance, each one depending on first and second hand experiences. For instance, Javier modified his beliefs about trade unionism and became a member of the USO. On the other hand, Héctor or Norlay, who had no experience in the oil business, became leaders because they had a history of using resistance practices which required self-discipline techniques like assuming responsibilities and utilizing their free time for activism tasks. Henry Jara and Rodolfo Vecino implemented regulatory techniques that implied living together with bodyguards and dealing with a security detail.

**Biopower**

Lilja and Vinthagen define biopower as follows: “Using statistics, predictability calculations and surveillance of patterns within the social body biopower is interested in the body of the population (a nation, members of an organization, etc.) and social engineering, in which the health, longevity, energy or vitality, stability and growth of social life is in focus” (2014: 122). The company attempted to extract surpluses using different techniques depending on the context of possibilities. For instance, the Colombian “investment confidence” policy and the high persecution of trade unionists permitted the company to accumulate capital at the expense of worker vitality. An example is the demand for water. Norlay told me at the formal interview at the USO headquarters in Meta in 2015 that one had to take showers early in the morning: “One had to be first in line or stink all day”. The profit from vitality is clear in the decomposed food and the long shifts that caused accidents during industrial activity, including the threats made against workers when they decided to take action regarding their history and future - an action also linked to the sovereign power.

For the authors, resistance is linked to “the creation of resistance cultures” and they explain that it “can be carried out through a multi-centred or heterogeneous body of resisting subjects”. They explain that those resistance cultures cultivate “a different set of values, practices and institutions”. The authors conclude by stating that “as biopower includes some aspects of discipline, various resistance practices might also be directed against these aspects. (ibid). The trade unionist definitely cultivates a resistance culture that is full of symbols and different people from different social backgrounds that are aligned with liberal and leftist ideas. However, in this section I am not addressing the issue of alternative practices within trade unionism but the results of the first strike in
In 2011 the workers collectives and the USO challenged the mining state-PRE policy and struggled for their vitality, their stability and their future. The workers also resisted the sovereign state terror and turned the situation into a disciplinary terrain; therefore, they opened the channels for the democratization of a semi-feudal region where mafias, the state and PRE could profit from the workers and the inhabitants. In this point, the trade unionists and the USO fused their actions and demands in a struggle against wild capital accumulation and the internal enemy doctrine.

In summary, this section has presented a characterization of the agents of resistance which complements the characterization of the agents of power made in the previous chapter. On the other hand, this chapter has also presented the analytical concepts regarding the forms of resistance against the sovereign, disciplinary and biopower in a geographical space and at a specific moment in time, in other words, at a turning point regarding oil workers’ agency. This clarification about the forms of resistance also complements the forms of power described in the previous chapter, providing the basis for the next section: an analysis of the forms of resistance as an ongoing process.
VI

Pacific Rubiales strikes back

The workers challenged the violence and the so-called “investment confidence” by avoiding falling into the violent provocations, which made possible the opening of spaces where they could negotiate and learn from the state and PRE. For instance, Héctor, during the negotiation tables that were initiated after the meeting with the vice president in August 2011, learnt that the police deployed in the area received bonuses for working for Rubiales. “Police, army, ESMAD, all are controlled by PRE in fact, PRE has contracts with the Ministry of Defence and PRE paid half an extra salary to every cop - 600,000 COP for working here”, Héctor recounted bitterly. Today investigations of contracts between private companies and police and army forces are becoming another scandal in Colombia. The knowledge and experience of participating in those kinds of meetings and negotiation scenarios remained with the labourers and it was appreciated; not only had the vice president attended those reunions but police and army generals as well.
However, the negotiation tables did not work. In Héctor's words: “they were co-opted by the state institutions and the state ended up turning them into a negotiation between the state and organizations that had nothing to do with the labour, social and environmental issues, the most important points”. PRE did not change a thing for three months and the negotiating tables did not fructify; on the contrary, right after the dialogue spaces, a wave of retaliation against workers started.

PRE did not change but continued doing the same and began to fire trade unionists from Montajes JM and other subcontracting companies. All the workers that were fired by Montajes JM were workers that participated in the strike [...] they fired thousands of workers more or less, they took them out in busses, caravans of busses; the last caravan held 500 workers and was supposed to leave on September 20, 2011. We decided to stop activities because they were firing the people, they [workers] called us and said 'we have been fired because we are affiliated with the USO, what can we do?' says Norlay.

Because of the massive firings the oil labourers decided to take action before the caravan with 500 workers departed, and on September 18, 2011 they ceased all labour activity again -the unthinkable happened twice. Nonetheless, PRE was ready for the protests. Most of the informal leaders that became trade unionists were fired in order to affect the oil workers’ leadership. In fact, once the workers started the second strike, ten of the sixteen leaders had already been fired. In addition, the oil company prepared an infrastructure and expended capital to barb wire the camp while conducting exemplary firings and individualizing trade unionists in order to neutralize them.

The first cease of labour was severely repressed but the repression during the second one was even harder, something the workers did not expect. Both Norlay and Camilo say that they expected a reaction similar to the first strike, especially because there were already points to negotiate between PRE and the workers:

Early in the morning 400 ESMAD units arrived and at 6 am they started to fire tear gas at the workers camps and the people that were having breakfast in Villa Gómez [...] those who were in the barracks began suffocating because of the gas and we started to run disoriented because the police were firing rubber bullets and stun grenades. We did not understand why they were behaving like that because we were not throwing stones nor causing any damage. It was a brutal assault. We had to defend ourselves. They [police] continued the attack by air and land but we were no more than 800, the rest were in Consorcio Oriente, the camp that accommodated most of the workers. Once they realized we were being attacked, they ran out and started to fight back.
The violent confrontation lasted two days. During that time PRE cut the water supply and managed to leave the demonstrators without food while the police continued attacking them.

The company and the state also impeded the passage of the USO leaders that were travelling to the oil fields in order to support the workers, and the phone service was interrupted because the signal was cut out, halting communication between labourers and their families, the USO, human rights defenders and journalists:

Suddenly we could not communicate, it was easy because MOVISTAR was the only company that showed a signal there. In fact, all the workers received a text message in which we were given instructions to cease all protests and that we should head to RB90, an isolated place within the oil fields [...], Norlay confirms.

In addition to the attacks, the blockade of water and food and the cut of all modes of communication, the judicial police entered the camps and started to take photos, attempting to capture the labourers; however, the police decided to stop the confrontation and let the USO leaders arrive to Villa Gómez where thousands of workers were gathered waiting for a solution.

They [police and PRE] realized that we would not resign because what we wanted was a serious negotiation. We were not asking for things out of this world, just better salaries; we were asking the company to sign a labour convention under the current law parameters; but PRE did not understand that. PRE pretended to continue extracting oil while paying pitiful wages and humiliating us. They [police and PRE] let the USO in because things were getting out of control and the ESMAD was committing terrorist acts like setting vehicles and workers’ camps on fire; moreover, the police hit a bus against the Llanos Orientales Oil Pipeline, we thought that would blow up because it was set on fire too.

The negotiations started in Rubiales and also in Bogotá. In the capital city the USO leaders from the national section were holding meetings with high government representatives and PRE’s managing directors. The government served as guarantor of the negotiation and the protest ended once an agreement was reached between the USO and PRE: four representatives of the workers would travel to Bogotá to negotiate all the demands for one month, and the company signed a document in which it promised to improve the living conditions and the salaries right away.

In the end, the protests force the sovereign power to sit down and negotiate but sometimes a gain is not a victory but part of a strategy of accommodation on part of the sovereign.
Confidence and deception

PRE and the state -most probably via the national police- managed to influence a third party, the multinational of telecommunications Movistar, something that is an example of the articulation of multinational and state bodies in order to satisfy the will of the sovereign power—in this case Pacific Rubiales and the state. Another example of the articulation between PRE and the state is the cut to the water supply which is also a sovereign decision that affects the vitality of the workers. I put both together because, with the material collected, it is not possible to discern to what point Pacific Rubiales ordered such measures and to what point a measure was taken by the police. What is certain is that, independently from whom the initiative comes, the abrupt halt of communication and the water shortage are organized acts sanctioned and executed by the multinational and the state.

Nor the excessive use of force exerted by PRE and the state against the workers via the legal armed forces could not achieve its purpose: to force the will of the labourers into submission regarding their petitions and extinguish all dissent. In fact, the dramatic use of force exerted by the police against an unarmed population with the deployment of airlifted and ground police units, the violent punishment of the impact to the body of rubber bullets and/or tear gas cans, the beatings some workers endured and the cuts to food and water supply were not only ineffective but rather strengthened the USO.

In these terms, the strikes proved to be a worthy strategy for the oil labourers because, despite the violent confrontations, the workers forced the company to augment the capital expenditure of their wages, to invest in the infrastructure destined for workers and to join them at the negotiating table. Therefore, the workers challenged the sovereign power that was given by the state to PRE when approving the 'investment confidence' policy and the imposition of such power via the legal and illegal violence articulated by PRE. Factually, the workers, via an organized cease of labour and the use of stones and clubs as self-defence weapons, were able to challenge the commands of surrender, the prohibition of protest, the violent punishments, the fear instilled long ago in the area, the obedience they were supposed to adopt towards both the company and the police units and, more importantly, the workers challenged the claim to legitimacy of the company and forced them to recognize the legality of their complaints over the power of said company and the state. In summary, the workers challenged the neoliberal doctrine in which the state—as pointed out by Harvey- guarantee the quality and integrity of money by setting up military, defence and police structures and functions “required to secure private property rights and guarantee, by force if need to be, the proper function of the markets” (2007: 2). Thus, the workers ultimately challenged the adaptation of neoliberalism in rural Colombia for a short time and applied an economic pressure
upon the company and the state. The result was effective and even mass media outlets covered the issue, the most widely read newspapers putting together the two versions as part of their coverage.

Moreover, the sovereignty of PRE and the state was not the only power challenged by the workers. The labourers also challenged the disciplinary power that sought to discipline the workers, transforming themselves “into a tool for other interests […] a tool that is increasing its productivity and effectiveness” (Lilja & Vinthagen; 2014: 114). First, previous to the strikes and during the protests, the workers disciplined themselves in a way that was not useful for PRE interests in terms of capital accumulation at the expense of the workers and, at the same time, they challenged the anti-unionist de facto policy that made possible the continuous assassination of workers in Colombia.

This resistance is not only seen in the open refusal of the workers to comply with both the working schedules and the orders of the police via the coercive text messages sent to every one of the workers; it is also seen in the preparation for the strike based on information about labourers rights and the Colombian constitution, the major legal framework of the country. Therefore, the workers managed through meetings and trade unionists’ discipline to transform themselves into a collective body that served their own purposes and not the company objective -capital accumulation- nor the state purpose -investment confidence. However, the workers' resistance aim did not intend to completely subvert the relation of the workers in relation to PRE and the state. In other words, there was a subversion process that sought to negotiate the discipline imposed and they used the following resources as navigation routes: the constitution, national and international labour and human rights treaties and their knowledge and experience as a collective. The objective of working under decent and just conditions was temporarily achieved with PRE’s agreement to guarantee better working conditions and the state’s interim halt of illegal violence inflicted upon protesters; however, as mentioned, the agreement was temporary.

The workers also challenged neoliberalism as something that affected their vitality. First, the workers made it possible for the USO to represent them in a negotiation that sought stable contracts and better living conditions, something that challenged the neoliberal principle of only offering temporary contracts. For Harvey, following Lyotard's description of the postmodern condition in labour, “the temporary contract' supplants 'permanent institutions in the professional, emotional, sexual, cultural, family and international domains as well as in political affairs’” (Lyotard in Harvey: 4). Here, this phrase is taken in its critical dimension to modernity and neoliberalism as development of capitalism. In the protests, the workers were conscious about the disadvantages of such contracting system that regulated their lives in aspects that transcended their own bodies and vitalities as it is related to a sort of “social engineering, management or governmentality in which
health, longevity, energy or vitality, stability and growth of social life is in focus” (Lilja & Vinthagen: 118). However, the USO’s list of demands as a banner in their desire to sit down and negotiate did not necessarily spell success. For Pacific Rubiales, the conversations did not mean a pact, not even a negotiation, but an opportunity to gain time and re-accommodate.

**Countermeasures**

**The expulsion of the USO and the arrival of the UTEN**

The company fulfilled its promises and the awful conditions in the oil fields changed once the second strike ended, enabling the USO to acquire even more strength in terms of negotiating capacity and the number of affiliated workers:

The tents were changed for containers, the food was far better, the salaries changed. For example, a driver that earned 630,000 COP began to earn 1,630,000 COP. We made it possible for all the workers to gain more and what is fair in the oil business because we were not working in manioc crops but in oil extraction [...] the USO was representing 3,500 workers at the moment but the numbers increased because we had the backup of 10,000 more and many of those began the affiliation process. All workers realized that the USO brought benefits. Four slept in a container not ten or eight like before and they installed one shower for every four workers not a shower for every fifty workers [...] The women that worked for Duplo preparing food and doing the workers' laundry worked seventeen hours and were paid only ten, the other seven vanished; we changed that and
women began to work only ten hours, those that were paid so the company had to organize another shift.

The workers and the USO saw both PRE’s acceptance to negotiate and the changes implemented within the oil field as a sign of good will. Moreover, the role of the state as guarantor gave the workers confidence regarding a possible and successful outcome of the negotiations, but the reality was very different and disappointing. All the trade unionists and social leaders I met and interviewed told me it was a mistake to give the company one month to negotiate:

They [PRE & the state] tricked us, the given month was used to take the leaders out of the camps […] we trusted the government and PRE's loyalty but they played dirty, they used that month to use what we negotiated and they gave it all to UTEN, a new trade union nobody knew about and they kicked us out of the way, attests Héctor.

During the one month negotiation the workers and the USO addressed different issues that comprehended the claims raised by both the workers and the inhabitants of rural and urban Puerto Gaitán municipality. The discussion was centred on the effects to the urban and rural areas due to contamination produced by pollution and the dusty roads. It was also a matter of discussion on the impacts of the unexpected growth of the urban area as a consequence of the thousands of workers that began to work for PRE and the fortune seekers that came to the little town once the oil boom began. This exhausted the situation because the control was in the hands of the paramilitary. In addition, in the new neighbourhoods the water service was more than precarious, there was no sewage in town and the prices soared so high that for the farmers of the municipality it was not possible to get enough food due to the rising costs. Sara, the secretary, told me that when she arrived in 2011 she barely found a place to live because even a room in a plastic shed of a house was rented for the same amount one would pay for a whole house in other cities in Colombia. Other issues discussed were the contracting system and not only in terms of the illegal subcontracting practice but in terms of the discrimination against locals previously described in the last chapter; thousands of workers came from other regions and found a job while the locals struggled. In addition, the leaders of the protests, that by that time became USO unionists, propelled the signature of the labour convention the USO already had with ECOPETROL.

During weeks the workers’ representatives were satisfied because the negotiation was advancing, but some days before signing the labour convention the leaders of the protest began to face black propaganda, massive firings and the militarization of the camp.

We [the workers’ representatives] attended the last meeting in Bogotá in order to address the last
points we would agree upon and there a photograph was taken. I do not know at what point that photo was taken. The picture was published in a local newspaper in Villavicencio that claimed that we negotiated only 1,050,000 COP for everybody, can you imagine? People read that and in Puerto Gaitán things became complicated. One guy on a motorbike shouted at my wife in front of my house screaming that I was a scab, she got really scared.

On 24th October 2011, the negotiations ended but an agreement was not reached. Immediately the representatives travelled back to Rubiales, not only to inform the workers about the negotiation situation but because the oil workers called them and told them about the mass firings. Héctor says that what they found was a “camp battle” between workers and both the army and the police. “That day there were approximately 3,000 units among army, policemen and judicial police. They seized the camp and pulled out the workers; those that resisted were thrown out with rifles pointing at them towards Puerto Gaitán […] that day the persecution began”, says Héctor with a strong load of reproach in his voice the day we met in the USO main building in Bogotá in March 2014.

Persecution and prosecutions

“That day, what they [PRE and the state] wanted was to capture and prosecute us”, says Héctor. He hid himself and watched as some of his fellow companions were chased and when the judicial police and the army arrived at the container he used to sleep in to search for him “even under the container”, he notes. For that reason he says he escaped from the oil fields by walking through the forest of the savannah in order to avoid the 'ambush'; those were frightening hours for him: “I am sure that if they had found me they would have killed me and I would have been kidnapped”, he says. Not all the leaders could escape. Norlay was in charge of one bus as part of his duties as a worker in the camp so he stayed with the automobile the whole time in order to avoid something happening to the bus; therefore, he was an easy person to spot.

They captured me when I was putting some gas in the car. The police took me but thanks to the USO I was released; fortunately I managed to call them. However, I was retained for two hours, they took me into the offices of the new union, the UTEN, there the SIJIN [judicial police] took photographs of me and only then was I released after they escorted me out.

The persecution became a reality that day. Rafael, the communal leader that worked for PRE and other social leaders began to demonstrate in the Puerto Gaitán urban area as a way of highlighting the abuses and the entrance of the new trade union. As a consequence of his activism, he became the subject of black propaganda:
I do not know who took the picture and filmed the video that was used against me, the only thing I know is that the video was used in order to distort my words and make me seem close to the insurgency. A few days later some cars were painted with propaganda by the FARC-EP 16th front guerrilla, but the insurgency was not there anymore and there were lots of police and army units so it was a lie. It was meant to distort the demonstrations and intimidate us; they succeeded and I preferred not to continue.

Rafael backed down from his activism because he feared possible deathly consequences as a result of his role in the demonstrations and his support for the USO trade union. Things in Puerto Gaitán became very difficult for the trade unionists and the social leaders that were close to the USO. Camilo, the lawyer of the USO, told me “there was a witch hunt” and provocations during demonstrations by the ESMAD against the protesters. “PRE with the help of the prosecution office, the SIJIN and the army tried to mount cases against us, against the visible heads of the protests in order to cause a demoralizing impact and spread fear among workers and inhabitants”, assures Camilo.

Héctor also backed down for one month and in November he returned to his house in a small village called El Porvenir; he thought the situation and the persecution would also back down by then but they did not. He was asked to stop at an illegal checkpoint installed on a public road by the company; PRE blockaded the free passage and circulation with a long metal stick for its private security to control the inhabitants and forbade the passing of any foreigner that attempted to visit the area. Today the same happens but the police are the ones who act as a private security force. Hector did not stop his motorbike, “I only obey the Colombian authorities, I do not have to stop at an illegal checkpoint and the private one is not an authority”, he told me proudly. Some kilometres ahead he was detained by the army. “Forty soldiers waylaid me as if I was a terrorist, a very dangerous guerrilla”, he says. Héctor was retained for three hours and then some armed civilians approached him and forced him to go back to Puerto Gaitán,

They were pointing their guns at me so I had to ride my bike back while they followed me in an SUV […] they say it was an order from PRE and maintained that I was not allowed to enter the area and that they did not care if I lived there or not […] I asked them to identify themselves when we were passing by a house. I stopped there and only then did they confirm that they were SIJIN. I took advantage of the situation and I called the lawyers of the FCSPP and the USO and shouted loudly that if they wanted to kill me they had to do it there because I would not move forward; they gave me back my ID and I headed to my house.

He was detained again 20 kilometres later. The police were waiting for him at another illegal...
checkpoint managed by the private security of PRE. “I was tied to a post from 13.00 to 18.00 under the direct sun with no water or anything”. It was the private security personnel who tied him up. Fortunately, his mobile phone was not taken and he managed to call the USO again which called the police, the Colombian Vice Presidential office and the Ombudsman; however, his freedom came with a strange offer.

At 18.00 the general supervisor of Servillon [the private security company] approached me and told me PRE sent me a gift: three hundred million pesos in a briefcase but with the condition that I leave immediately and that I leave my home and my family. They wondered why I did not take the money, I am sure it was a trick to arouse a judicial set-up to appear as if I was blackmailing them.

He finally arrived home that day and started a campaign against the illegal checkpoints. The USO supported the campaign and the local demonstrations in the little villages close to the PRE installations and, finally, the campaign succeeded. Today there is only one checkpoint in the first village after Puerto Gaitán in a place called El Oasis, a checkpoint that, as I mentioned, is managed by the police. The outcome of the campaign that led Héctor and his activism as a trade unionist soon brought him undesirable consequences. After the campaign’s success he received an SMS which read “if you continue your trouble you are a dead man”; a few days later a man dressed entirely in black -in such a warm place- blocked his pass and told him roughly the same. Soon his family received the same intimidatory messages and in June 2013 he decided to leave with his family but he returned, only to encounter more threats, each time more sophisticated and always in the context of his activism.

We made PRE and the mayor of Puerto Gaitán sit down on October 10, 2013 with the presidents of the Communitarian Councils of the different villages in Puerto Gaitán municipality. It was summoned to talk about labour issues, about goods and services and the social responsibility of both regarding the villages and the urban area. But the day before a laminated pamphlet was circulated in Puerto López and Puerto Gaitán that said 'Héctor, the USO is fattening you up in order to kill you on Christmas Eve and capitalize on your death, you are a puppet'.

All the presidents of the Communitarian Councils got scared before the meeting with them, says Héctor. He did not back down by then, neither other did other trade unionists but Norlay who went to exile before. Norlay not only escaped a possible assassination but jail. The others, they did not escape prison. Héctor Sánchez, Campo Elias Ortiz and Dario Cardenas were captured on December 2013. All charges were based on the situations that took place the days the army, the ESMAD and the SIJIN pushed all the workers away from the oil fields in 2011. They are all free today but they are not yet absolved. Norlay was not involved in the judicial harassment because he
fled the country in 2012 after he was death threatened in a way that demonstrate the ability of the intimidators to find him even when he was hiding with his family.

Norlay, after the violent expulsion of the oil workers, did not leave right away like Héctor and the others. On the contrary, he stayed with Camilo in Puerto Gaitán and they installed a camp in the main park of Puerto Gaitán along with other oil workers and some inhabitants. They called it: “the resistance camp”. One of the motives of such demonstration mechanism was the inconformity regarding the purge of those workers that got affiliated to the USO, the cleansing of trade unionists among the oil workers. According to Henry Jara, the president of the USO in the region, 3,500 workers were vetoed. PRE got to know who was affiliated because during the negotiations between the USO and PRE the company asked the trade unionists for the list of those that were affiliated. Henry Jara told me the USO formed the list by choosing 3,500 people at random out of the five thousand affiliated, “we did not give the entire list to PRE because we did not entirely trust it”, he said during the conversation we had in his office on March 2014. Those on the list given to PRE were fired and, for that reason, Camilo and Norlay supported the resistance camp but soon they had to abandon it and not only because December and Christmas was coming -what definitely affects a long term demonstration in Colombia due to the general holidays and festivities- but because of the threats and the assassination of one of the social leaders that supported the USO activities.

Milton Rivas, who had worked for TERMOTECNICAS -a subcontracting company linked to PRE- was assassinated in the middle of Puerto Gaitán on December 12, 2012. The crime was perpetrated in plain sight and 17 shots were fired at his body. This crime severely affected the people in Puerto Gaitán because it was linked to the social protest and not to drug trafficking business control, which had caused the assassination of more than thirty people in Puerto Gaitán.

Henry Jara told me that the crime took place at a moment in which more than 2,000 ESMAD units were deployed and explained that such crimes are evidence that the Colombian armed forces work in connivance with the paramilitary in Puerto Gaitán. Today, the crime has not yet been solved and there is no one under arrest. Norlay explains that the resistance camp could not combat the increasing threats and that all leaders and workers had to abandon it.

Most of the workers that were fired came to the camp and we prepared our food there and slept there while others like Camilo visited the neighbourhoods in order to talk with the inhabitants. The idea was to gain support and explain our views while telling the people about the Constitution and labour rights. Immediately people that called themselves ‘paras’ and policemen started to follow us and they

3 Carranza died that year and, during the reaccommodation of power in his former axis, caused the death of several members of paramilitary units.
sent us threatening mobile text messages, they even spread written threats to Henry Jara in his hotel
that read: “you are already a dead man”. I stayed for a while with my wife and kid in the camp but
we both decided she should stay at home with my son. It did not work, they visited her and told her
that we all would be killed because of me. It was so strong that the USO decided to dismantle the
tent and I left on December 24th. I got a job in the indigenous reservation called El Tigre, I was not
even able to work for one month there because men arrived at my tent late at night and put me in a
car; they let me go 14 kilometres away from Puerto Gaitán […] All the leaders were by then hiding
in Bogotá or other places. I travelled with my family to —— and began to work with the Lawyers’
Office José Alvear Restrepo (CAJAR) denouncing all the mistreatments and holding workshops with
other social leaders, especially in Casanare regarding oil extraction environmental effects. I was
invited by the social leader Rosa to hold a workshop and fifteen days after the workshop she was
murdered by the paramilitary and later another social leader from Puerto Gaitán was also killed
[Milton Rivas]. I was scared. I hid with my family in —— and I continued receiving calls that
described how my little child was dressed. I left the country because an SUV with a plate from Meta
started to round my place late at night in front of my house and because the phone threats increased.
They said terrible things about what they would do to my wife and son. I exchanged some words
with the USO and Rodolfo Vecino; the president of the USO helped me. My family and I ended up
in Chile.

The time that most of the leaders from Rubiales backed down was the moment that the
visible social leaders who remained in the territory were spotted and threatened like Norlay and
Camilo. However, once those that left returned, they were also spotted and harassed. Camilo told
me in 2015, while we were drinking some beers in Villavicencio with Norlay, that he was dragged
out from the resistance camp after the incident with the paramilitary that tried to attack him when he
was addressing the inhabitants, “I did not want to leave but there was no other choice, we all had to
run away from Puerto Gaitán but because they could not harm more than they did, the prosecution
became an alternative”, he disclosed.

The silencing and prosecuting of the protests

The discipline imposed by the authoritative PRE was probably murderous and if it is true that the
company was involved in crimes and/or psychological terror, then the company used and sanctioned
illegal activities for profits, something that could not have been done without police and army
participation nor other types of authorities. Moreover, the illegal acts are not the only intimidations.
Pacific Rubiales is involved in arranging legal means of oppression to those who challenge it and
organized support at national levels by manipulating the news, using national police and a
Colombian parliamentary member, and sending the leaders that organized the protests to jail.

By the time of the first protests the media portrayed a situation favourable to the workers and later broadcasted long advertisements about the national soccer team being sponsored by PRE. Immediately all the articles about Rubiales stop addressing the social conflict in depth. The control was so high that a congressman -Alexander López- on 29th November 2012, could not enter Rubiales during an official visit because the army constrained his right to free mobility and disregarded his position as Senator. This occurrence was not broadcasted by corporate media.

The social leaders were arrested after several exhibitions of power by PRE: the territorial control by force, the failed visit of Alexander López, the assassination of Rosa and Milton, and the forced displacement of Norlay. However, the solidarity of different social organization started right away at the defence of the workers. For instance, the CAJAR lawyers’ office highlighted that the imprisonment of the workers was related to a legal denouncement of PRE in which all three were witnesses.

In 2013 the USO instaured a penal procedure against PRE before the Context and Analysis Unit (UNAC) of the National Prosecutor Office for environmental damages, violation against the right of freedom of movement and association […] and for the illegal restriction of mobility on public roads. Sánchez, Ortiz and Naranjo have given testimony regarding this case in their communities as well as in the trade union. In the case of the company, it is accused of dumping polluted residues into the rivers indiscriminately, and the use of private security and armed forces units to prevent the trade union and public figures communicating with the labourers and being able to check on the labour conditions. (CAJAR: 2014)

When I first interviewed Héctor he had recently been released from prison although he and the other trade unionists were still under accusation by the prosecutor. He was planning to come back immediately but he was advised not to do so by his friends and other trade unionists. They all feared for his security. I travelled to Puerto Gaitán after meeting him and then I got in contact with the Meta subdirective in Villavicencio and some social leaders in Puerto Gaitán and El Oasis. In Puerto Gaitán I met Rafael and on the porch of his house he told me that the imprisonment of the leaders was a strong hit to the people who were demanding better conditions. Because of the vetoes, the killings and the imprisonment of leaders the people who were on the USO side were afraid of supporting it openly to the point that the USO could not have a representative in town and had to close the office: “People stoned and vandalized it at night, can you imagine?” Rafael says. In a town so militarized, with police everywhere at that time, it was possible for those people to destroy an office.
During my time in Los Llanos I was able to participate in one of the hearings. Cardenas, the last of the three workers, was still in prison. That day I arrived early in the morning to the park in Villavicencio, which I was informed would be the departure place. I arrived there and after being introduced to other participants -more workers and Cardenas’ family- the bus and the cars of the unionists headed to Puerto López. I was expecting more police inside of the buildings like in Bogotá where one must go through metal scanners and there are police including prison police (INPEC) guarding the prisoner with rifles; in some cases there are Special Police Anti-Riot Squad (ESMAD) outside. In Puerto López some policemen guarded a room that had a window towards the hall so the prisoner and all the participants of the judicial session could look outside; there were also workers who piled against the windows. I was able to enter but a while later the session stopped after a policeman saw that some people in the room had guns under their vests; those were the bodyguards assigned by the state's National Protection Unit (UNP) to Henry Jara. The clarification about the legality of holding guns did not last long and the audience continued. That day, the process informed Cardenas about the recollection of evidence. It was an informational hearing where all of the arguments provided by the defence and the prosecutor were presented. The testimonies against him were saliently exaggerated. Thirty-three people, most of them patrolmen from Puerto Gaitán and SIJIN agents from Villavicencio, were the witnesses the prosecutor called to the stand. They testified that Cardenas and the other unionists kidnapped more than 5,000 people in 2011, in an open space where the executives and other personnel had at their disposition helicopters, a small airport and cars, none of which were blocked. The arguments were so lacking in coherence that the charge was not considered in the cases against Héctor and Dario and encouraged their successful release. The case of Dario was different and similar, he was accused of more crimes but no less sensational. First, Dario and Héctor were in a meeting with PRE and some civil servants of the state so they could not be present at the protest. Secondly, according to the testimonies, Dario alone managed in ten minutes to commit six acts of vandalism in total; that is why he was accused of six felonies. “According to them he went up to the tank car and opened the compartments, destroyed the valves, set the tanker truck on fire and contaminated the rivers”, says Henry during a conversation in 2014. It means that Dario managed to do that in the presence of thirty-three witnesses, all of them policemen who did not attempt to stop him but fully recognized him. For Henry, the message is political.

They say with these 'USO people: do not disturb us much longer or we are going to put you behind bars, and then your family and you will suffer' … I was even threatened -and one must say it- at the demonstration of 2011, several threats were spread in front of my hotel that read: 'Mr Henry Jara you are already a dead man'.
While several workers could approach Dario that day through exhorts and rallies, the lawyer and the president of the directive and a few trade unionists could speak with him for a brief moment. The punishment of the jail was evident, he was thinner and had the pale look of prisoners. I could see that because there was a real size dummy of him, a much rounder and happier figure than the real Dario. We left him in the custody of the prison guards and we all ate in the same place just before leaving the urban area of Puerto López. Talking with the different men that were rallying with him, they all said that they themselves or other workers always attend the hearings to “support the comrade so he would see that he is not alone”.

**Levels of assault**

The threats, followings and killings of social leaders close to the trade union was one of the levels of the assault, one that used illegal agents and illegal means which caused the exile of Norlay and the assassination of social leaders related to the protests or the USO. This level was a public example of murderous retaliation, threats and impunity that not only impacted the trade unionists but also the people which was what the murderous and theatrical display of power sought for. The scenarios also affected the many people that had relations to the Colombian war, which one may see in Rafael’s decision to refuse to participate again as an activist. It is also visible in the town, the USO being an unpleasant topic which aroused suspicion in 2014.

The second level was the judicial assault that directly affected the workers who were the visible leaders within the oil workers -and at the same time witnesses against the company; with that same act, the prosecution, the state and the company affected, indirectly, all workers and other social leaders who were intimidated and augmented the fear produced by the assassinations. The misused or ineffective surveillance of information in the plots may also be considered as theatrical displays of power that attempted to put Dario in jail for more than thirty years. An action that definitely threatened all workers, especially because of his position, was his position as Vice President of the USO Meta subdirective and his role was kept during his time in jail. It is considered here that, as in the extrajudicial executions and exile, jail is a punishment that eliminates the presence of the person in the territory and is also a theatrical execution for all the surroundings.

The third level of assault were the vetoes against the USO. Those that were affiliated with the union could not work again for PRE subcontractors and the USO was unwelcome in negotiation spaces. During a demonstration that I attended in 2014, in the community of El Oasis, the police told the social leaders that the presence of any USO representative in the dialogues with PRE would
bring an end to the meeting the police cleared the meeting of USO representatives before the PRE representatives arrived. This constituted a type of social veto that helped the social exclusion of a deadly targeted group in Colombia and promoted through fear a type of social death, the fear of association with the trade unionists and certainly encouraged people to connect the USO with violence, fostering exclusion.

The illegal targeting and killing, the legal targeting and prosecution, and the social exclusion are the three levels proposed here. The countermeasures used by Pacific Rubiales had one objective: the social death and eradication of the USO. Here, the levels help me to describe and allow me to organize the powers that are exerted in a simultaneous and interdependent way, the powers now being addressed in terms of resistance which is also interdependent. Here, the levels help me to describe and allow me to organize the powers that are exerted in a simultaneous and interdependent way, the powers now being addressed in terms of resistance which is also interdependent.

In this chapter, I continue the idea that the sovereign power of the state and PRE - as a structure that follows neoliberalism as an economic and politic route map for life regulation - was exerted via illegal and legal means and agents. Here it is highlighted that disciplinary techniques like: the literal panopticon of the helicopters over the demonstrators described in the first chapter, the phone intervention, and the lists of trade unionists and its usage to 'purge' a group are strategies based on modern technologies but used within a context of violent exclusion and killing. Therefore, the imposition of fear by using modern disciplinary technologies does not seek the workers' self-acceptance of conditions and it is rather a contemporary display of sovereign power that is not unique to Colombia as pointed out by Watts (2005). Following that line of reasoning, jail and the prosecution process are disciplinary tools used as legal actions for the good of the sovereign: not fully comparable is the act of killing but the prosecution and the risk of being in prison for decades is definitely a theatrical display of oppression, absurdly noticeable in the outstanding number of indictments.

The sovereign power presented here has a dual entity, PRE and the state, both articulated via neoliberalism and capital accumulation under Colombian circumstances. Both exert disciplinary legal and illegal instruments of power against the USO and actions are taken locally by regional actors. In the case of Meta, "feudal lords" and mafias find profitable and foster the social death of trade unionists. This, in my understanding, is all about biopolitical power. In the end, one of the outcomes of exerting sovereign power and fostering a discipline within the people is the exertion of the biopolitical power: the achievement of plans that favour exclusion processes meant accumulation of the vitality of the people as disposable lives, people that were obliged to take 'free decisions' and join PRE by signing up with the UTEN. Undoubtedly, Pacific Rubiales, after the
negotiation table, managed to solve the trade union problem and invited the UTEN to participate in the project that favoured Pacific Rubiales’ process of accumulation, something that was done through exemplary extermination, exclusion and deceit, all in connivance with different state bodies.

It is true that the sovereign power and discipline techniques that follow neoliberal premises and mafia regulations severely affected the USO along with other social leaders and sympathizers. The heterogeneous collective that resisted neoliberalism as doctrine and also sought the translation of violence into respect for the constitution and national and international legal frames faced deliberated plans that intended to destroy what they had already built it terms of a social movement process. However, neither physical extermination via assassinations, the walls that trapped bodies, nor the vetoes were enough. The workers and the USO continued resisting and adapted to circumstances.
VI

Resisting the 'monster'

The insider(s)

Killings, serious intimidations, prison and social exclusion dissuaded people from associating themselves with the USO, but legal and illegal actions could not determine social agency and trade unionist agency as a collective and as individuals resisted in heterogeneous ways. One example of the resistance of an individual is Javier who continued helping the USO from inside the oil fields. He told me during the time we met in 2014 that he was always transmitting information, photos and videos to the USO regarding events and conditions that concerned the UTEN, the USO and PRE. Javier was never fired and since he consistently met with the USO, he kept contact with them and supported them no matter the political reprisals within the camp and outside it. In fact, he is so appreciated by others that the person who gave me his phone number explicitly said: “do not expose him” before giving me the contact; there was no such courtesy for anyone else.
Javier told me that, after the police and the army managed to empty the fields when the negotiation was broken in October 2011, the subcontracting companies communicated to all workers that they would have some resting days. Days later the companies started to call people, thousands never received any such call and around 10,000 workers were fired. Some that were signed up with the USO and were not on the lists asked the trade union to disaffiliate them and signed an affiliation with the UTEN, the union that introduced itself as an entrepreneurial alternative:

Today unionism is claimed to be a type of thoughtful movement, wise enough to understand the dynamics of the economy in order to arrive at agreements that may guarantee the sustainability, in other words, that allows us to continue enjoying the comfort that comes from our work today, one that is expected to be long term.

Once the subdirective learned about the procedure and faced the fact that several workers were requesting to disaffiliate, the decision was to inform them about their rights and that they could continue in the USO and in the UTEN at the same time legally. All the leaders and Javier told me the workers kept their affiliation with the USO in secret and they are still represented at judicial procedures, just as those who were fired are. This action made the USO supporters talk about keeping their affiliation so the union could maintain numbers and representation despite the impossibility of making the relation public. “We have a lot of support but it is in a kind of standby”, says Henry. Today it may represent something for workers because PRE must give back the oil fields to ECOPETROL and the USO has a collective agreement with the Colombian multinational. However, ECOPETROL is already rejecting responsibilities associated with Pacific Rubiales Energy and now there is tension in the transference of the oil fields back to national companies.

I asked Javier why he was continuously communicating things to the USO and why he was engaged with those activities, “one must do it because the USO really represented us and despite the lies, you see that they are working for us”, he said during the interview. He said he is always afraid but cool at the same time, that he takes care but does not worry and “enjoys it”. Well, that phrase comes from a very cheerful person. Another reason why the workers kept their affiliation with the USO and support it is because of the UTEN mistreatments, “if you got sick or complained to the UTEN regarding bad conditions you got fired immediately. The UTEN only favours PRE, it is a fake trade union”, says Javier and many other workers I got to know.

Rafael backed down but still tells the USO what he learns. In fact, the interview was a sort of act of resistance. He knows about the local councils, the corrupt contracting system that the
neighbour local councils use in order to supply the company with workers, and people that have to pay part of their salary to those that secure the job for them. This extortion is backed up now with paramilitary that are profiting from controlling these kinds of posts, making the USO a target as the trade union demands transparency. This articulation between the company, the local governance and the paramilitary makes the contractual system a point of convergence where the company is able to organize legal exclusion of locals while participating with illegal forces -at least in the contracting system. All this with the sanction of the state because of the corruption and/or the lack of political will. The possibility for the subdirective of learning what different people tell their leaders, representatives and people of interest makes planning and evaluation doable tasks and contributes to the legal cases, security evaluations and plans of action among others.

In the world, the collection of testimonies and data along with the systematization of the material collected have proven to be worthy in cases of genocide and political violence. About selective violence and people's data recording, Pablo de Greiff, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence, said in October 2015 in Stockholm that social organizations and their systematization have made it possible in South America to pursue truth and justice more than the state bodies that have such a mission. Pablo was referring to Chile, Uruguay and Argentina. Factually, the systematization of the USO and fight for workers’ rights and respect have brought to satisfaction some objectives: for instance, judicial procedures have made it possible to reintegrate more than two hundred people in a similar and different situation.

The conflict [another labour social struggle] starts because we talk about rights. In this country there is no interest in teaching the people about their labour rights nor their human rights, people do not know where the money goes and at what cost. In 2003, because of that, 265 people were fired and the national government said the protests were illegal. Because of that our people were fired, we had to appeal to the ILO and the international body recommended the state to rehire the personnel, this in the context of the 2009 agreement. The rights of the workers were defended, some are still not reintegrated but most of them were reintegrated, indemnified and work under a different type of contract. […] that was a victory of the trade unionism and one says 'things work when it comes to international courts' but it is sad that we have to go out of our way to make the state respect our rights.

The systematization is consistent because of individuals like Javier and Rafael that collaborate with the struggle that the subdirective representatives face. Here, Javier had no immediate, material, apparent motive to help the USO but he does. In the case of Rafael, his immediate material reasons are many. First, he is a local with a deep attachment to the beautiful and
fertile geography and he does not want the oil extraction to continue. Secondly, he doesn’t want his town to be under the influence of PRE and the paramilitary and third, he is one of the many who was fired.

I could not come back to work after the last raid of the police, but they continued paying my salary, they did not want me there because I am also part of the USO. Once the contract expired I was never called back [...] I defend the trade union and I do not believe the gossip PRE spread all over the place that the USO received 30 million dollars and left. In addition, not many have brought people here to see what happened to the rivers and the effects of the dust except the USO; nobody cares that this town is now full of whorehouses but them, they talk about drinkable water, social and health services.

The material interests are taken into account here because those are the axes of articulation of the USO with the community and labourers and, here, it is shown that the agendas go beyond the labour rights. Therefore, it is worthy to highlight that the participation of the trade unionists in demonstrations and informative journeys regarding socio-environmental conflicts and outcomes is a sort of ‘sabotage’ to its own work. The USO have sponsored actions with that focus and, therefore, it is my conclusion that the USO is a union that provides elements for the locals to make informed decisions rather than being a trade union defending only workers’ rights. In that line of reasoning, the trade union does not defend per se the oil extraction. These sorts of actions regarding the environment and the inclusion of social demands have resulted in the articulation of the trade union in events like the one that I attended when I interviewed Camilo.

Subsequently, the subdirective is part of a social net in a department with a recent oil extraction history but the trade union is already articulated with other grassroots organizations, inhabitants, workers and social leaders who inform the USO of different happenings at different levels so the trade union and its representatives in Meta are not isolated.
Demonstrating social and environmental agendas

Relations with members of the community in the oil fields are as important as those with international and national organizations like international and national trade unions or lawyers collectives. Here, the focus is on the articulation of the trade unionists with grassroots organizations which makes it possible to examine the connections with workers and inhabitants.

“No water for oil”

During the first march I observed the USO during my fieldwork in Villavicencio the day I met Camilo. The motive was the massive death of capybaras in Casanare. Hundreds of people of different ages were grouped as friends, families, activist groups, students and also individuals who gathered and walk together. A few with cars joined and used their vehicles to spread messages. The USO was present with several people, among them the press official who was using a loudspeaker claimed for transparency and the protection of waters among many other slogans; Camilo and Henry Jara, with his bodyguards, attended also but were walking among the crowd.
The march had no problem in its route and slogans in favour of nature and the misuse of water in oil extraction process were shouted. One chant was salient, about the cease of all oil extraction. “No water for oil” was part of the lyrics that were sung by several people. The oil workers were positive regarding the chant and the message. Talking with the trade unionists about the contradiction of working for oil extraction and against mining, they say that, as it is already a developed project, the trade union works in favour of responsible mining but does not promote mining per se. I saw a similar response to the USO but six years ago. In the late 2010s with environmentalist organizations and the USO, we all visited a community in the Boyacá department, a remote municipality where an oil multinational wanted to intervene in order to pump oil. I was there as a journalist. The representatives of the oil company did not want to present their arguments and proposals in front of the NGOs, the USO, nor before any journalists. The community said they would like to have both groups at the same time and as a response the representatives of the oil multinational left. That day, those that came with me stayed and held their workshop about the consequences of seismic explosions, legal procedures and the testimonies of people from other regions who had experienced the oil extraction and endured environmental changes that destroyed or severely altered their means of subsistence. There, I collected information about the process of socialization and negotiation of those projects with the inhabitants.

Following both empirical materials at different moment of time and place, it seems that the trade union in fact has a politic regarding environmental and social issues and comprehends them both as part of its scope of action. It is demonstrated that such praxis is not performed alone but with other organizations and there is strong evidence, for instance, in documentaries and media about Rubiales and the environmental damages where the USO has intervened as facilitator. Moreover, there are also collaborations with environmentalist organizations in other parts of the country. For instance, in 2010 in Tauramena, Casanare, the USO supported the social movement with information and public seminars against the continuation of the oil extraction by British Petroleum in the area. Part of the materials were documents and testimonies about human rights and environmental violations which I also witnessed as a journalist.

In summary, the actions against both neoliberalism as a doctrine that guides the structures that exert sovereignty and the social relation of power in Colombia have resulted in a variety of relations that cover not only labour topics. The USO representatives resistance praxis overpass the material benefit of better redistribution of salaries and better conditions but goes further. Perhaps it is a coherent stand regarding what they have witnessed since 1923. The USO is a faithful witness of:

The environmental and social impacts generated by the oil industry in our territory; the systematic
violence in what we have called the 'oil war'; the non-existence of legislation regarding central aspects of the mining industry; the attributions only of the executive power and the exclusion of these issues by Congress; the limited participation of the state in the oil rent; the disassembling of ECOPETROL.\(^5\) (USO in de Currea-Lugo; 2014:88)

### Breaking down open exclusion

A calmed articulation and participation about the environment was performed in Villavicencio, but it is one thing to make a demonstration in the capital city of the department of Meta and quite another to participate in one in Puerto Gaitán. Preparing myself to come back to Sweden and lamenting the fact that I had valuable information but little related participant observation of the interactions among the USO, the oil workers and social leaders - I rather had a participant observation of workers and social leader's restlessness- I received a call in April 2014. I was informed that a delegation formed by National USO leaders would participate in a demonstration in El Oasis and that I could go with them. There were three SUVs with three important leaders. In all three cars there were also journalists from different media outlets, one photographer Nadege Mazars with a project about trade unionists. I travelled with Rodolfo Vecino, the president of the USO at the national level, his two bodyguards and one journalist from El Turbión, Marcela Ramírez.

We travelled all afternoon and we arrived at night. In El Oasis, a local social leader and business owner received us and we spent the night in his hotel for travellers after a session of presentations by each of us at dinner. Next morning after breakfast, the demonstration started, and some social leaders got close to the national representatives who gave speeches about the social responsibility of the company regarding the inhabitants and the need of state control bodies’ intervention. I walked the march and the surroundings and could see the surveillance, police and army guarding the entrance of the oil complex with a checkpoint on the road. The USO was welcomed by the people and only few preferred not to be identified with them or the demonstration but recognized the lack of, basically, everything. Sara\(^*\) is one of those that preferred not to be identified with the demonstrators: “it just causes troubles to demonstrate, I do not like that. And the company is not the state and the state… we know how it is, so, what's the need to seek what you have not lost?” she told me. However, she is far from being happy. El Oasis is a village of several people from different parts of Meta and Colombia that have arrived there in order to find a better life even before the mining project and once it arrived. Today, people that have lived in the areas and newcomers have increased in numbers and demand the better living conditions they expected.

\(^5\) My translation
Many are tired of packing and leaving again and again in their lives. For many -like Sara and the demonstrators- it is unfair that while the whole oil camp was built and millions of barrels are pumped per month, there is no school in good conditions. The only classroom for miles is a building with no walls where all primary school students share the same room. In addition, there is no medical centre for miles and the only medical equipment is merely a stand with different medicine on a small counter. Therefore, those that suffer accidents have to travel far and the company does not admit anybody to the emergency centres they have.

The people that participated in the demonstration appreciated the presence of the USO, and not only because of its participation but because the USO brought journalists that aired the situation on TV and in the media. However, once the police announced that no USO representative would be allowed to participate or the negotiation meeting would end, the USO leaders dispersed and did not interfere. People did not ask for the USO’s participation but rather pushed for the meeting to start immediately, and so it was scheduled in the afternoon. After lunch -based in large portions of meat as is the tradition of settlers in the savannah– the meeting took place. The presence of the USO was set aside from the meeting but leaders and their adjoining participants talked to Rodolfo and other USO representatives during the meeting by leaving it for brief periods. Therefore, some social leaders talked with them and listened to their opinions and analysis regarding social and environmental effects, opinions later used in the leaders’ argumentations with PRE. In other words, the USO could support the leader’s social action and they all together emphasized the need for studies about contamination, the revision and respect of the law regarding subcontracting practices and other issues. In the demonstration and in the dialogues there was also a fierce defence of women's rights and it was led by one woman who was a former worker in the oil camps; she demanded stopping discrimination against jobs assigned to women, mostly related to laundry, cleaning and cooking, and denounced the fact that women’s labour is badly paid and that women have to endure longer working hours.

The presence of the USO was visibly excluded not only at the meetings. While the photographer, some journalists and I planned to pass through the checkpoint in El Oasis, the USO preferred not to go in order to avoid further troubles. We used a pickup from a local person and not the cars of the trade unionists. We were able to pass the checkpoint but before the police let us pass, everybody had to show their IDs and explain the motive of the visit, an illegal census of the state in public areas with no guerrillas and officially no paramilitary but a mining company and locals.

These two marches are but a small description of the public participation of the USO in demonstrations and the type of relations that are present in those acts and also its differences; it is not the same for the USO to participate in a demonstration in Villavicencio as it is in El Oasis. The
tensions with other social organizations and legal and/or illegal armed forces are also not the same. In the city the USO was not isolated at any time despite the messages about ‘no oil mining’ by the demonstrators, the legal armed forces did not show off their power and there was no sabotage against them by the police. On the contrary, in El Oasis the trade union was isolated by the police and the army but the objective was not accomplished. On one side the USO representatives continue talking with the natural leaders of the area and they build a stand towards the government and PRE while the presence of the journalists promotes transparency and breaks the monopoly of the information, something that is appreciated even by people who are not interested in it or the social protests like Juliana: “At least they bring these journalists, maybe we were heard, but this is something we have to tell the governor and the mayor not PRE”, she says.

**Grass roots resistance**

In 2015, I got to spend more time with Camilo, Norlay and the other trade unionists and I was able to see that, as in 2014, they permanently left to go to regions to support and work with local leaders in towns and oil fields with other workers. During my time I focused on Puerto Gaitán so I waited to travel with Héctor from Puerto Gaitán to Rubiales in 2015. Finally, after four years I could see how it was on the inside and I was able to observe the relation of a stigmatized and imprisoned social leader with the inhabitants’ and workers' different interests and doubts.

**Visiting Puerto Gaitán and El Porvenir with Héctor**

As we could see in moments of tension, those that joined demonstrations were representatives from the National branch but once things developed differently, it changed the relation of the workers to the space. The attempt at exclusion did not succeed. Héctor was able to come back to Puerto Gaitán municipality and today he lives in El Porvenir and comes and goes to Puerto Gaitán, Villavicencio and Bogotá among other places in ‘Los llanos’. Today he is an inhabitant and the Vice President of the local council in El Porvenir where he acts as a trade unionist from the USO. During my time with him in 2015, I was able to observe him in those roles.

*“Let's go to a brothel”*

I met with Héctor in Rubiales in 2015. He was with a foreign journalist that was looking for a different place in Meta but wanted to know about the history of Puerto Gaitán. We spent some time in town and the journalist was able to talk via Héctor to the people of the town, people who could openly express themselves about the economic falling of the urban area of Puerto Gaitán. He could not do that so openly in 2014 , but that day Héctor even told the journalist to enter one of the
brothels to see that there were fewer women than before as an explanation of the decay of the economy. The massive firings -that UTEN never reported after the fall of the oil prices- have caused the collapse of the economy of the town and it was possible to see, by walking the streets, that in all sort of businesses windows signs read “business for sale”; moreover, early in the morning it was possible to see a dozen cars with people’s lives fully packed, yet again pursuing another boom or just escaping debts and ruin.

In the park that serves as a bus stop we met Juana*. There she told us that there had been threats against prostitutes but that few left scared; most of the women that walked the streets with her left pursuing places where men drink and buy sex. The threats the 50 year old woman mentioned were directed only to women that walked the streets and had sex in parks or at the shores of the river Manacacias, and she informed us the threats were something new. During the months I visited Puerto Gaitán in 2014, the streets close to the bus stop were crowded with women at night, but one year later there were definitely fewer. After flirting with us, Juana left us and continued walking in the night towards the park. I was not surprised by her invitation to us to enter the brothels. I was surprised by what a brothel represents in towns like Puerto Gaitán; usually, brothels are controlled by mafias and in 2014 Javier told me there were two brothels in town, and one place for the after party that was also a brothel, all owned by the same person; Rafael, the social leader, mentioned the same saying that the town changes from having four prostitutes to having more than two hundred in clubs and the bus stop street, and he did not exaggerate. The possible presence of mafias seemed unimportant to Héctor in 2015.

Javier also said at the end of the interview in 2014 that if I did not care about going to a brothel, in his words: “the places where all workers lose their money”. When he saw the look of disbelief on my face he smiled and said “only to observe, I have been locked up for more than 20 days, come on”. Because I was leaving the next day and I felt curious and entered with Javier. There were lots of women with a variety of Colombian accents in their 20s or early 30s. Here, a description of the scene: there were drunk workers slouching in their chairs, other men sat with women and liquor by their side, women in their turn had to come out and exhibit their naked bodies to the discernment of all the men sitting at tables the women had apparently previously been assigned to. I also noticed prostitutes bribing or tipping the waitresses so they would help them to spot clients with a lot of spending potential. In the end, it was the waitress who made connections between the women and the clients. Despite the fact that the place was full of customers, there were more women than men and they were all looking for clients. I left early. In 2015 it was the opposite, there was only one brothel and three women were there; in fact, there were more drunks than anything else.
In the streets we ate and talked about the town and the journalist was ready to take notes, especially about the blackouts and the deaths. We went to bed early because the next day’s travel would be long, but part of the night the energy service was cut. Despite millions in royalties the energy service in Puerto Gaitán is never reliable.

Héctor definitely showed the journalist different perspectives and made it possible for him to talk to a variety of people he otherwise would not have been able to. In the end, Héctor makes it possible for an external observer to look upon the state of dependence of the oil enclaves on the oil markets and the abandonment on part of the state of women working in mobile prostitution. In the end, the journalist told me he had an idea of the decline of the economy and the social problems derived from the coca, the palm oil monocrops and the oil economy, and how violence is directed against civilians in order to control the different economies and respective booms. It could not be more different. In the end Puerto Gaitán was not funded by the oil industry but rather became a cocaine enclave because of the absence of better paid cash crops. The place later became a palm oil producing area and lately has turned into an oil enclave by force and adapted to neoliberal policies and political violence related to counterinsurgency and extractivism protection, affecting the lives of those that have lived there for decades and those that seek a better future.

*El Porvenir*
El Porvenir is six to eight hours on a motorbike away from El Oasis, which is three to four hours away from Puerto Gaitán. I completed the whole trip on Carlos’* motorbike, a friend of Héctor who drove the whole trajectory from 9 AM. Héctor was driving his own bike and carrying Francisco. Because of the poor state of the road, they fell down at night while it was raining, fortunately without major consequences. Once in town at 8 PM, we rested and stayed in the village for almost a week. Despite the fact that Héctor was still being threatened, he was working as an activist in the Puerto Gaitán rural and urban areas. For instance, for several days and nights before we met, he stayed in the park of the bus stop in Puerto Gaitán where all the workers from the oil field arrived; there, he and Nate asked all the passengers from each bus to respond to a few questions about their place of origin, occupation, and other details. The material collection will be used for PASO and the trade unionists of the USO to support arguments about the activities of the company. For instance, data about the amount of foreign workers, types of labour, contracts and more. This was performed in order to contrast how many unskilled labourers are coming from other regions while the inhabitants are denied their right to a job.

The visibility of Héctor and his activities as social leader and trade unionist are connected to his political activity and his memory. He remembers the cases of several people in the region and talks about the oil infrastructure and the affects by naming places and calling names. In fact, I asked him about people affected by the company and he named several immediately. I visited some in order to hear their stories and see their reaction when mentioning the USO and Héctor, and to see the reaction regarding the presence of Carlos, who is close to Héctor. I jumped on the motorbike again and while I was looking for the people Héctor named, I was also able to take pictures of the oil installations and landscapes. That is how I met Ricardo*, a 68 year old man who invested all his money in the lands he wanted to live on until his death. However, the company arrived and he participated in the development projects PRE promoted, he acquired debts and the project failed because it was not profitable. Now he is about to lose their lands and seeks the USO’s support and the leadership of Héctor, a small possibility of having a better future in his elderly days. I also got to know Miguel* who suffered more from the contamination of the waters and the presence of oil installations with pools of oil 200 meters from his house. His father, an illiterate man, signed a deal that allow the company to stay on their lands for very little and now, from time to time, the oil pools flood into the water springs called 'Morichales'. Miguel’s son fell ill and now they have to walk long distances to retrieve water from other springs and their crops are also in poor condition. Animals are also found dead and are migrating from the area. Miguel was not as enthusiastic as Ricardo, perhaps
he felt himself more surprised than anything else but still receptive. One person in particular called my attention, Diana*. It was as I was looking for a picture of the presence of police in the restaurants of PRE that I met her, a thin small woman with a strong character and strident laugh who sold candies, sodas, biscuits, fries and other packaged edibles in front of the restaurant of the camp. She is from Villavicencio and works beneath the hot sun while breathing in the dust of the road. Because there are no jobs in the capital city, she works near the camp while her mother takes care of her daughter in Villavicencio. She explained to me why Carolina* is apart from her: “I would not bring her here, there is nothing here for kids … here I work and provide for her”. Diana saw that I was with Carlos and she was receptive and even helped me to take the picture of the installations with the ESMAD by posing as if she was the main character of the picture. The last thing I wanted was to explain to officials was why I was taking photos but it did not matter. We were spotted anyway and later security personnel asked me who I was as I jumped on the bike. Carlos did not give me time to answer, actually, and rode the bike away from them. At any rate, when I asked Diana what she thinks about PRE, she said it abuses its workers: “workers come here as you have seen and they tell me or call their relatives and friends so I listen when they complain”. However, she was keener regarding her own experience, “They tried to prohibit our vendor stands here but could not, and then they prohibited the drivers of any tanker or truck to pick up people on the roads. I now have a small motorbike because I had to pay for transportation. I saved a lot by walking every day. Now they do not allow me to use the toilet of the restaurant, the guard chases me and as you see there is nothing for one to cover here”. PRE in the end attempted to dictate cohabitation rules and obviously I wonder why and how PRE justified the coercive relations against the locals and newcomers. The answer came from Héctor:

They said we are invaders, that there was no community here in El Porvenir, that's the reason for the harassment of the authorities, but you could see people living here in this place before and it got bigger after the oil exploitations. Well that's true, but here the natives also came before anyone and there were settlers who have deeds and parcellled the terrain by plots and sold them to us, the inhabitants of El Porvenir. PRE is just trying to avoid consulting the communities, to pay social and environmental compensations and to hire local hand labour. The governance is also avoiding investing here and echoed the needs of PRE.

All the people I got to know this time were receptive towards Héctor and the USO, perhaps because the falling oil prices brought difficulties especially to those that had good contracts with the subcontracting companies as providers of goods and services that are now broken as a result–PRE owing them millions. My presence did not go unnoticed and people related me with Héctor and the
USO. In fact, a natural question there is “where are you staying?” This is because workers had their camps and there is no hotel for miles so one has to be at some local's place and, as a result, everyone knew each other. Once I mentioned I was staying at Héctor's place my presence was welcomed since he is one of those that demanded the state to install electricity in all houses among other constitutional rights. For that reason he is acknowledged: “not too many tell the state we are abandoned here”, a local named Maria comments. I think El Porvenir is not abandoned but invisible; therefore, El Porvenir is portrayed as a space with no name and nobody occupying it. Factually, in the news the only thing that is shown is the Puerto Gaitán urban area, the workers and the oil fields, as if there were no settlers and no natives within a rural economy developed despite the social indifference.

When I visited the camps they were starting to empty because contracts were cancelled and were not renewed. This caused the whole chain of oil economy collapses. For instance, because of the massive firings, the stands in front of the restaurant of PRE in Rubiales oil fields have diminished from eight to only two. Moreover, in El Porvenir, those that owned medium sized shops -where one may find anything from a shovel to a 25 kilo fertilizer 'bulto' or a kilo of spaghetti- were having financial trouble. Some owners I got to know complained that business fell more than forty percent. The sex industry was also affected and only one of two brothels stayed open. Diana, sitting in her usual chair where she stays and make jokes with the oil workers while saving some money to create a business in Villavicencio, told me that the company prohibited the workers of all subcontracting companies to buy from or to visit El Porvenir. She says workers told her that. The same story was told by many others in town during conversations. El Porvenir is not full of people anymore but there were not as many abandoned houses and the water treatment company, where everyone bought their drinkable water from, is working so the finances of the town are not that bad. In addition, in El Porvenir the small petrol energy plants that provide energy continue working and it means that people in the village managed to pay the monthly fee to those that own the plants. People in El Porvenir come from adjoining areas and many others come from Meta, Boyacá, Caquetá, and several other departments. Many escaped infamous massacres like the native family with whom I shared my meals during my time in the shanty town: the family had to flee after the infamous massacre in Mapiripán. Many have endured wars and other seek a better economy and income because in the city there is nothing to do. As Diana can attest to, “I am here because in Villavicencio there are no jobs”.

In Puerto Gaitán, in both the urban area and in the rural village pubs, dancing places, brothels, restaurants, shops and small fast food stands are the only option for workers, travellers and inhabitants to relax and have fun, and those businesses heavily rely on the oil based economy
although it is declining. However, the situation seems to be more dramatic in the urban area because the oil boom does not exist any longer. In El Porvenir, the impact is felt but the natives, peasants and settlers also have a peasant economy so they make their purchases and play billiards or go to the brothel before 10 PM, when the petrol energy plants turn off. In addition, sometimes a pickup with workers from the company passed and bought supplies in the shops despite the prohibition and it was possible to see people chatting till late in front of houses, drinking beers or sodas while soldiers patrolled and bought cigarettes. In the Puerto Gaitán urban area, the economy is just collapsing.

Héctor, as representative, talks with the people during the week in his capacity as Vice President of the local council of inhabitants who addressed the problems with PRE and the abandonment of the state, including the inoperative state of the local council since the moment Héctor was detained. That day I learnt that the local council froze after Héctor's arrest for more than one year. What people most cared about was energy and not to live with energy plants. They also needed better installations like a sports centre and help with the regulation of property. The President and Vice President talked about the necessity to take action at the governmental level and asked for greater recognition of the village.

Héctor, for the workers and inhabitants, is then a representative that, despite the flaws of any human, has gained the respect and attention of the people, making it possible for him to articulate well in the different roles he occupies. This is possible because now he can walk within Puerto Gaitán, perhaps not because the animosity against him is less than before but because of the presence of Nate Miller who, as a Peace Observer, serves as a human shield. However, his physical presence is as important as the content of the actions and speech of Héctor, and it was possible to see that he worked hard collecting information, talking with people, working with Francisco and attending to me. A disciplined man I can say.

I left the warm people of El Porvenir, Héctor, Carlos and Nate. No more private security motorbikes trying to ask me why I was taking photos while Carlos just accelerated and left dust as the answer. No more barbed wire everywhere for my eyes to roam over as a response to the demonstrations. No more illegal checkpoints of the police for me to get out my ID and press credentials to speed things up. No more beauty of the savannah and the ugly oil pipe lines everywhere, no more trucks spilling oil and water from the oil fields onto the roads, contaminated water that ended up in ‘morichales’ which constitute the hydrological system of the department. Nonetheless, that is my reality. There, people still have to contend with armed actors, corruption, abandonment, and environmental damages and PRE. However, from June 2016, ECOPETROL will take the oil fields back which might change the participation of the USO, but might not put an end
to the threats; there is also no guarantee of reparations or compensation to those affected during the time the oil wells were productive.

The sovereign doctrine followed and limited the ability of those that exerted power as structure imposing their model of exclusion on the USO and the people. In the end, both the trade unionists and the inhabitants were excluded differently but both endured social and spatial abandonment and fought for a vitality that was the focus of the active harassment of PRE and the sordid mutism and indolence of the state.

Challenging material and social exclusion

![Photo: Andrés Gómez](Image)

The former three sections deal with the interdependent exercise of power of the sovereign structure and the resistance actions and strategies with focus on subverting the illegal out casting. It also covers a range of people, from sympathizers like Javier or Rafael to committed leaders like the ones mentioned here as well as other social organizations. The first section narrates the collaborator's agency, meaning the resistance exerted by those that are in the spaces of social exclusion informing the subdirective and the national USO leaders. The second one shows a part of the articulation of the USO of environmental and social agendas at different levels and the resistance to social exclusion from public life during different circumstances. However, there is also something else I consider necessary to account for in terms of resistance as praxis: the social and familiar conditions of the trade unionists and the methods to avoid and challenge the hundreds of summary executions trade unionists have undergone; therefore the impunity, the social stigma and social death.

**Bullet-proofing life**

During the travels I managed to know different USO leaders, all from different regions but all
having worked for the oil business and enduring different periods. Rodolfo Vecino has been with the trade union for 31 years and he has been severely threatened since 2005. In 2006 his wife, a friend and a bodyguard were shot at but the bullet proof car repelled the attack. He was not in the car that day. Almost ten years have passed and he still uses a security detail. Shootings and killings of trade unionists continue to take place but have reduced in number. However, there are also situations that are as difficult as the attempted assassination of loved ones and oneself.

To become a representative involves risk and one must use the security detail that is offered by, and recently investigated for corruption, National Protection Unit (NPU). This body uses three subcontracting companies to provide weapons, bulletproof vests, cars and bodyguards. The corrupted bureaucracy of the protection unit makes life hard for the bodyguards and those that are protected. That is why there are a lot of complaints regarding delays in both the payroll and the per diem during travels to the bodyguards, a situation that goes along with the complete distrust and abandonment of the security detail. Many state crimes that are now investigated were committed by DAS agents or in connivance with the paramilitary; because of the scandals, the DAS was dissolved but its agents continue offering the protection service they used to provide.

With Rodolfo I had the chance to have a conversation during our time together in 2011. He first told me about the history of Puerto Gaitán and made a relation with the space. For instance, in Alto de Neblinas he indicated there was a checkpoint of the paramilitary with presence of the state. There, many 11 to 17 year old girls and boys that had been abducted and obliged to be trained in military tactics to combat the guerrilla were assassinated by those that forcibly recruited them. Fortunately, we were able speak with him about the beauty of the landscapes and other topics like his health, his incessant travelling and his airline reservations and future travelling to do the same he was doing in Puerto Gaitán: to walk, to advise, to negotiate and to set in motion common agendas, among many other tasks. The night and the long trip left everyone sleepy and even the bodyguard sitting behind Rodolfo fell asleep with the automatic pistol ready in the pocket of Rodolfo’s back seat.

Private life tensions

Other leaders have security detail, Henry Jara being one of them as he travelled a lot as president of the Meta subdirective inside the department. He explained to me in 2014 that the Inter American Human Rights Tribunal compelled the state to grant the security to the trade unionists in the early 2000s and that he was assigned one security detail because of the level of the threats against him that came much later. By the time Henry became engaged with the USO, violence against unionists was rising; the situation at the end of the 1990s and the 2010s decades was so difficult in Colombia
that the state had to create a special unit to protect several groups and individuals like journalists, human rights defenders, lawyers, politicians, land reclamers and many more.

Henry said that before 1996 all unionists had to use their own resources to exert their activities as trade unionists, but after a series of demands that were negotiated between ECOPETROL and the USO, the Colombian oil company granted the assignment of an automobile to the USO representatives; later, in the early 2000s and after the compelling order from the Inter American Court to the Colombian state regarding the protection of trade unionists, the state assigned a bulletproof SUV and four bodyguards to the those that were threatened. “I remember at that time each one of them (bodyguards) had automatic rifles and automatic pistols; things changed completely, I had to walk with some of those leaders throughout those years”, Henry told me with an expression of unrest. However, he did not give further details about the times he joined trade unionists with such a security detail he only referred to his own problems in relation to having bodyguards and a special truck.

[…] when you are with a bodyguard, people change and many do not want to hang out with you anymore and become intimidated to the point that they do not say ‘hi’ to you anymore […] It also makes people believe what is not true; at one time we [USO] lacked cars and we had to rent some out to companies that intermediate hiring services with the owners. The owner of the car I used saw it by chance one day as it was parked in front of my house. My place stands out among the others so he became intrigued and asked some neighbours who I was. They told him that I was a paramilitary with an armed man guarding me. That guy asked the company why I had his car, why the car was being used for criminals … it was a problem.

The security detail bring those that are threatened a type of protection for their daily activities but also many troubles: the petrol, the daily expenses of the bodyguards and the bureaucracy around the security detail costs are heavy matters. There is of course also the loss of public and private intimacy, among many other things; situations that unionists and people that are threatened and have security details must endure. In Henry's case, his wife told him that 'you are with bodyguards so you must have enemies' and asked him why he is involved in trade unionism. He told me that he explained to her the protection measures for trade unionist which calmed him.

The security details are definitely tedious but they might have dissuaded possible attacks against Rodolfo and Henry as trade unionists, or against Claudia Julieta Duque -who investigated the army. However, I consider that it is necessary to pass from protecting the lives of people by bullet-proofing them, to another point where it is not necessary to perpetuate the paraphernalia that continues the militarization and creates distance in the private lives of those that are threatened.
I make the militarization problematic because it does not solve the structural problems of the threats and causes other problems for those that are already threatened and now have to deal with the bureaucracy of protection. Nonetheless, it is also necessary to recognize that without those security details, the life of more trade unionists and journalists would be extinguished by now. In the end, the exclusion that those protection measures create is contradictory because the state protects and allow the USO leaders to exert their agency while, at the same time, the state measures are a major perpetrator of violence against social movements and trade unionists.

**International accompaniment**

With Héctor I could see another option that makes it possible for social leaders to do their work: the peace observer accompaniment. Héctor is protected in a way by Nate, a member of Project for International Accompaniment and Solidarity in Colombia (PASO International). He joined Héctor in his travels as social leader but especially because of his activities as a trade unionist. PASO is an organization that works for and support unions in an array of ways. Like PASO, there are other state organizations that exist. In Sweden one may find the Swedish Fellowship for Reconciliation.
(SweFOR) and there are others that are international organisations like Peace Brigades International (PBI).

In the case of Héctor and Nate, they work together using the actor-foster process of documentation and engagement with the community. It is not as intrusive as the armed one where you are tied to other two people who have control over your movements and respond to state bodies that are mistrusted in many cases. Héctor and Nate interact differently; because Nate is a foreigner authorities treat him with special precautions and it affects other types of relations with the population that are not addressed here in detail. What is at stake is that this type of accompaniment makes it possible for Héctor to travel to a place where he is not safe and interact with the population of El Porvenir in the terms described in the section devoted to his work. In this way he is able to create bridges with people in terms of social and environmental petitions, which is articulated in terms of his roles as trade unionist and also as vice president of the local council of El Porvenir. The attempt to be eliminated from a space and isolated from a community and a geography is challenged here again through the presence of somebody else, this time with a non-armed person that is also collaborating with the documentation process who do not take part in discussions with other social actors and mediate with authorities if needed.

The exile

Norlay had to withstand several bad experiences during the time he had been an activist in the USO, and the violations of his rights were causing problems in his marriage: “she was in the stand or the trade unionism or the marriage but then we had to move to Chile”, he says. He never liked Chile despite having a job and a stable life where he could live tranquilly. In fact, the only bad thing he remembers is one episode of discrimination at school against his nine year old son for being Colombian. He tried to make his life again not knowing when to come back, but two years after his sudden departure a family issue forced him to return quickly. After travelling with his family by bus for two days he was able to attend his business.

Before arriving he said they both were fine: “In Chile I was able to explain our struggle more clearly and why I did not want to cease my activities as trade unionist; she was then able to understand my stance much better”. Once he came back with his family, Camilo and others talked to him about staying; he later addressed his wife with the issue and she answered, “we did not come back to return, whatever happens let’s go together”.

The exile might be taken as a failure and it hurts when you are forced to leave the place you like to be. It is assimilated with defeat because the person is removed from the space where he or she is no longer wanted. In the case of Norlay it was like that. He felt defeated and humiliated and
that’s why he told me he almost cried when he came back to Rubiales oil fields after the short exile. “Last time I was here we were thrown out with rifles pointing at us and I also left broke. I thought I would never be able to come back here but here I am now”, he says. Norlay has no security security detail and walks with Camilo through the streets of Villavicencio and the urban and rural municipalities they visit. Despite the fact that the exile in a way is a triumph over the agency of the person that is forced to leave, it is also true that the exile allows the corporeal existence of the excluded to continue and it is a triumph over the attempt of annihilation. In the case of Norlay, it also means the recomposition of his sentimental life and as he says, “to see how people live in other countries and build more strength; because what we ask is what people in other places already have”.

**Articulation at grassroots levels**

The levels of assault as a schema allowed me to put together the interdependent powers, agents and strategies in the last chapter; however, in this chapter organized resistance, agents and strategies are not presented in the same way. Here, agents and the interdependent actions of resistance are organized in terms of the engagement of different people with the trade unionists; therefore, labourers, social organizations and inhabitants at grassroots levels.

First, at an individual level, I devoted some pages to the group I call the insiders, a term used to illustrate those who have access to or live in spaces that are regulated by legal and illegal powers. In that section the description of the importance regarding the sharing of agendas is introduced; this is a way that allows the subdirective and the USO national to keep in touch with those that are in rural Meta and in the cities where they were proscribed. The relationship is something no state or multinational may control because the material relations that are at stake are inherently related to the vitality of workers and the inhabitants; what’s more, the state and PRE threatened with their sovereign power the lives of the people that dissent their policies and communication with mafias and paramilitary forces.

The second section addressed the work of the trade unionists in the rural areas and the relations around the person as a representative which allows me to see how people interacted with him, including who the people were that protested the checkpoints and which were the common points with Héctor in terms of acceptance of his discourse and presence. As in the first section, the common agenda was the key for him having the support of the people, including the fact that he engaged others working around the situation, giving confidence to many people about his work as
social representative while demonstrating his subjectivity as an individual and in his relations with the USO and its contacts.

In the last section, I addressed how trade unionists deal with complete exclusion, showing that the return to the oil fields was not fast but the subdirective and those threatened could come back and continue working in Meta, challenging the social death and assassination of some trade unionists. Regarding that point, it is interesting to observe the differences and reaches of peace observation accompaniment rather than the bullet-proofing of life. However, here I am not addressing this point though I recognize its importance as deserving of separate reflection.

In summary, I analysed the resistance to the sovereign structure of the trade union, the social leaders and those that participated in demonstrations or carried out tasks that undermined the process of exclusion and accumulation in rural Meta. The union and its supporters are guided by the law itself and contest the structure that supports PRE’s sovereignty; therefore, they ask for the fulfilment of the constitution and supranational laws. However, that does not mean that the trade union representatives and the social leaders are not challenging the sovereignty of the state and PRE over Puerto Gaitán. They do challenge the “de facto” sovereignty of PRE and the biopower exerted by the multinational with the sanction of the state.
VII

Resisting abandonment

-Conclusions-

In the previous chapters some of the mechanisms have been described that make the articulation possible between state terror and oil extraction as a social phenomenon taking place in neoliberal economy and how trade unionists faced such articulation. In other words, this ethnography has addressed the relation among state terror, neoliberalism and resistance using USO trade union social action as a case study in the context of the oil concession granted to PRE in the Meta department.

This thesis deals with the question of how Pacific Rubiales Energy, the Colombian state and the paramilitary articulate efforts in order to transfer surpluses from oil workers to multinationals. Specifically, PRE is presented as organizing, with the sanction of the state and the help of mafia barons, illegal and legal violence with the objective of achieving the reduction of constant and variable capital. One explicit form of accumulation is seen in the relation of the paramilitary with Pacific Rubiales in the contracting system which reveals the paramilitary profits from controlling the hiring posts while the company accumulates capital by controlling the personnel with an illegal agent. In addition, it is also stated that the articulation at national and local levels defines the sovereign power as a political and economic structure in which PRE organized coercive power with the sanction of the state at national levels and with paramilitary at the local level.

This power structure explains not only the means of oppression but also how the USO resisted such articulation. Regarding this point, it is demonstrated that poor conditions and the experience of veteran oil workers were keys in conforming leaderships and the organization of the first strike, actions that challenged the sovereign power of Pacific Rubiales, the state and the mafia barons. It is also stated that such resistance is a negotiation of the disciplinary conditions, and it is concluded that the trade unionists re-write themselves in a different way regarding their own social action as labourers. Therefore, workers adopted self-regulatory techniques that made it possible for them to challenge Pacific Rubiales as a sovereign power while paving the way for the USO leaders to assist such social struggle. It is also stated that the veteran and new oil workers together with the USO and the social leaders fostered a resistance culture against violent capital accumulation and the internal enemy doctrine in order to stop PRE from profiting from the workers' vitality while fighting back against both the state and the barons’ coercive status quo that has kept Puerto Gaitán
municipality under murderous violent domination for more than a decade. The objective was to make the implementation of the Constitution a reality in such a way that it would protect their own lives and rights as humans.

Self-disciplinary techniques are important for collective action and in this thesis it is possible to see that only the active involvement of workers and inhabitants in resistance actions makes it possible to challenge big powers and even to change immediate realities. However, it is also relevant that power and resistance are always in a dynamic of tension and adaptation, hence the agents that exert power and/or resistance. Thus, tension and adaptation are characteristics to consider in order to answer how it is possible for a union like the USO to continue the social struggle against capital extraction and political violence.

In that regard, the countermeasures of the state and the multinational are presented against trade unionists' social action and civil disobedience. It illustrates how legal and illegal violence is organized in order to eradicate the trade unionists and how the sovereign power outcome is related - in general- to the biopower exerted by PRE and the state. In other words, the sovereign power exerted by PRE via the state is informed by neoliberalism as political and economic policy that do not change the status quo of Colombia -as semi-feudal country- and enhances the process of submission that allows PRE to profit from affecting the vitality and the lives of workers and inhabitants while fostering the conditions for barons to continue profiting from violence.

Regarding the tension and adaptation on part of the resistors, what is important is how insiders collaborate with the USO in terms of information and support, but that such support relies on “sharing agendas” which is determined by social and environmental claims. It is also discussed how Héctor as a trade unionist and social leader articulates at local levels with the communities, reinforcing the collaboration and connection between the trade union with the communities. Therefore, it is concluded that the USO is alive in Puerto Gaitán because the trade union supports the agendas of the workers and the inhabitants alike. Presented here is also the individual and collective resistance of the trade unionists against the prison, the exile and the attempts of assassination and how the different mechanisms used by them have allowed the trade unionists to continue carrying on the social struggle in Puerto Gaitán.

In general, it is possible to conclude that the mechanisms that make articulation possible between state terror and oil extraction as a social phenomenon that takes place in neoliberal trading are related to the condition of Colombia as a state that navigates waters in which mafia barons have feudal powers and multinationals have sovereign ones. Therefore, it is my conclusion that the sovereign power in Puerto Gaitán Meta is exerted by Pacific Rubiales and I consider Puerto Gaitán an oil enclave of the Canadian multinational. Nonetheless, one must not forget that it is the sanction
of the state and the help of mafia barons to organize peripheral territories the elements that make it possible for Pacific Rubiales to extract oil in the way it does. Therefore, it is the state that realises the legal and illegal articulation of the paramilitary and Pacific Rubiales in Puerto Gaitán, and the only one that might grant the respect human rights of thousands of workers and inhabitants in order to change the rules.

Resisting the semi-feudal sovereign

Using as point of departure the previous argument, one can conclude that the state, being the regulator of the legal order, is the one that put the inhabitants of Meta in a state of exception; therefore, it is the only power that can restore the constitutional order -which does not enjoy a historicity in Puerto Gaitán nor in several parts of rural Colombia. This fact may be paradoxical but the sovereign power is inherently paradoxical, something previously pointed out by Giorgio Agamben (1998):

The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order. If the sovereign is truly the one to whom the juridical order grants the power of proclaiming a state of exception and, therefore, of suspending the order’s own validity, then “the sovereign stands outside the juridical order and, nevertheless, belongs to it, since it is up to him to decide if the constitution is to be suspended in toto” (Schmitt, Politische Theologie, p. 13). The specification that the sovereign is “at the same time outside and inside the juridical order” (emphasis added) is not insignificant: the sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law. This means that the paradox can also be formulated this way: “the law is outside itself;” or: “I, the sovereign, who am outside the law, declare that there is nothing outside the law [che non ce unfiiori legge].” (Agamben; 1998:17)

Agamben argues that the paradox of the sovereign becomes manifest in the state of emergency which is a legal order and he uses in his dissertation the Nazi concentration camps and genocide of the Jews of Europe as examples. Therefore, the state of emergency that Agamben describes is nothing other than the suspension of the rights of Jews and Roma, explaining that the people were not excluded but thrown into a state of rights abandonment. In Colombia there are no concentration camps like there were in Nazi Germany and, despite the fact that there are human rights violations and exploitation in Puerto Gaitán, the oil camps are no ‘läger’ and there is no ‘final solution’ for Colombian workers. The convergence point is in the state of exception in Puerto Gaitán, the suspension of the rights of the people in the oil camps and the use of the vitality of the
workers through exemplary coercion in order to favour the economy of the multinational and the state. This was possible because the multinational fostered the internal enemy doctrine and pushed the workers forward into a state of gradual rights abandonment, making it necessary to analyse in depth Agamben's conclusion:

The relation of exception is a relation of ban. He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable. It is literally not possible to say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside the juridical order. (1998: 23)

Agamben’s conclusion summarises the abandonment of the sovereign power regarding those that are banned in Puerto Gaitán and makes it possible to elucidate the situation of those that are banned in Colombia, especially in the rural areas and war-zones. However, in terms of the relation of banning and abandonment it is necessary to put in place resistance regarding this threat.

In this thesis it is concluded that the Colombian state regulates life by using mafia barons to keep the status quo of the state while profiting from their own power and armies. The agenda of this deal is highly influenced by neoliberalism as a life policy that influences the state’s agency within its borders and supranational relations; thus, the social cleansing of the oil areas and the arrival of Pacific Rubiales is not a causality. Furthermore, this very relation -between the Colombian state as a semi-feudal country and neoliberalism- is at stake in the acts of resistance of the workers, trade unionists and other social leaders.

Resisting abandonment

In this thesis the historical abandonment of people’s rights in Puerto Gaitán is put forth. I have also stated that the trade unionists, the social leaders and several thousand oil workers exerted resistance against the sovereign power to overcome the de facto state of exception they have been subjected to. The exclusion of the trade unionists and social leaders in Puerto Gaitán is possible by declaring them as subversive elements linked to the guerrilla and to disorder, as agents that embrace violence. Following this line of reasoning, Pacific Rubiales, using the state, outcasts the social and trade unionist leaders from the rest of the citizens and declare them ‘persona non gratae’. In Agamben’s terms a ‘homo sacer’, a bandit that must be prosecuted and also a person that anyone can harm (1998: 63-68), is evident in terms of the impunity granted to those that have planned and executed the assassination of thousands of trade unionists and social leaders in Colombia.

The assassinations and the exclusion are also possible because of de facto state of exception
that is explicit in rural areas like Puerto Gaitán, a condition imposed by the state, the mafias and Pacific Rubiales. In other words, the semi-feudal country, the barons and the multinationals have punished the body of the workers that attempted to change, because all changes at the end contribute to the modernization of a state that resists modernization at all costs.

These arguments summarize the very objective of social leaders’ and trade unionists’ resistance: to transform the state by actively participating in politics with the objective of making space in their agendas. This objective affects Pacific Rubiales as a sovereign power including the structure that sustained it. In the end, I consider the workers’ attempt to affect and influence the biopower that is being guided by the state policies and the political and military doctrines that agglutinate the state and the oil multinational as an act of resistance against neoliberalism, the counter-insurgent internal enemy doctrine and the semi-feudal condition. The challenging of the structure and denouncing the articulation and environmental and social outcomes defies the sovereign power of the state at national levels and the will of accumulation on part of Pacific Rubiales in rural areas like Puerto Gaitán.

For the workers of the USO, to challenge such agents and their agendas the social and trade unionists leaders first negotiate their different ideas with workers and inhabitants in order to have a common ground and form a flag to wave. This process cannot be done without thinking about how their own vitality as citizens must be regulated and what is life about, which means that those that participate in actions against PRE and the state are designing and deciding how to exert a biopower from and for themselves to influence the state.

In this thesis it is concluded that trade unionists and social leaders have to rewrite themselves and adopt a discipline that allows them to confront the sovereign power at different levels while transforming their own disciplinary power. For instance, the trade unionists have to deconstruct themselves as merely workers and passive citizens in order to see themselves as people with agency that may empower themselves; this means –in general- learning about the oil business in Colombia and in the world, to learn about contracting systems, to change schedules and devote time to meetings, to confront fear against aggressions, to learn about the environment and oil exploitation consequences, to establish relations with other social organizations, etc. In summary, workers via looking upon critically their own discipline deconstruct the essence of capitalism which is succinctly defined by Eric Wolf:

The essence of capital is its ability to mobilize social labour by buying labour power and setting it to work. This requires a market in which the capacity of human beings to work can be bought and sold like any other commodity: buyers of labour power offer wages, which sellers accept in return for a commodity, their own labour. The market creates a fiction that this buying and selling is a
symmetrical exchange between partners, but in fact the market transaction underwrites an asymmetrical relationship between classes. Through that transaction, workers are paid back a portion of the product of their own labour in the form of wages, relinquishing the remainder as surplus value to the capitalist class (2010: 354).

Nonetheless, workers and inhabitants do not only deconstruct the fiction of the 'symmetrical transaction' by learning and claiming their rights, but they also deconstruct the fiction of development via mining extraction. In this regard the environmental agenda is key in the social action of the agents of resistance and it has come to be not only an articulating point in the agenda of those that resist but also a point of tension that disputes the Colombian economy doctrine and corporate trade unionism. First, the environmental agenda challenges ‘the universal truth’ of development via extractive economy and, at the same time, breaks down corporate trade unionism by going beyond the spectrum of traditional petitions for trade unions as organizations meant to defend workers’ rights only.

Therefore, it is concluded here that the list of demands the USO has used as a flag is an atypical list of demands that agglutinates workers and inhabitants, resulting in the popular support of the trade union making it possible for the USO to overcome the assaults against the lives of its members and -despite its forced absence from Puerto Gaitán- to keep itself, in the eyes of the population, as a legitimate representative of the people's needs in the city.

Following this line of reasoning, it is plausible to state that the social action of social leaders around the atypical agenda the USO has used as a flag– has allowed the oil workers and social leaders to resist the limbo of the absence of rights and to advocate the modernisation of the state while resisting the neoliberal extractivism development fiction; therefore, in the end, resisters are breaking Colombia's contemporary biopower while fostering a bottom-up democracy that rejects the universal truth of neoliberalism.

Therefore, the social action around claims that overstep the corporatist trade unionism is, in the end, what made it possible for the trade union to continue its work and to dispute an agenda while resisting the biopower of the state; this is thanks to the compromise of such agenda by workers and inhabitants alike. Therefore, the deconstruction of trade unionism as something that is circumscribed to workers’ rights and the adoption of an environmental agenda seems to be the key in the process of resistance in Puerto Gaitán. In the end, it is the importance of the agenda that inspires the workers and inhabitants to discipline themselves, a necessary step at the moment of rewriting oneself and reconfiguring one's social action and disciplinary power.

This line of reasoning means that only through workers' self-rewriting is it possible for the agents of social change to elucidate and address critically the abandonment the state has created via
the state of exception allowing the integration of social and environmental agendas. Therefore, it is my conclusion that it was crucial for the agents to reflexively reject both tangible contradictions by reconfiguring state and multinational 'truths': those that are inherent to a semi-feudal state like Colombia and those that are inherent to neoliberalism. Only then could workers and inhabitants that became leaders and supporters find a way to endure vetoes, exclusion and attempts at elimination.

In these terms, counterproductive and counter-repressive self-discipline was key for trade unionists, social leaders and sympathizers in articulating efforts against Pacific Rubiales Energy, the state and mafia barons. Those efforts, however, are different as they are performed by different people with divergent material and immaterial interests, meaning not fully organized resistance with no revolutionary consequences that negates and accepts at the same time the basis of the domination, possibly based on material benefits. Therefore, these findings are in opposition with Scott’s criteria about 'genuine' resistance (1985) since resistance is not considered here as 'genuine' or 'not genuine' or as a 'revolutionary act' (ibid) but rather as an act of opposition with tensions and adaptations that make social change possible. In Meta, the resistance of those abandoned and banned by the sovereign power is but a struggle with the power that abandoned them in the first place, a struggle that encompasses the defence of the right to life, the right to decent work, the right to property, the right to clean water, among many others. All demands follow legal procedures like the pacific demonstrations, the workers negotiating tables and violence performed as a self-defence action.

There can be no doubt that the trade union’s resistance is but a struggle for the human rights of thousands of workers within the paradox of a semi-feudal sovereign power that invests multinationals with the same sovereign power. This is something very relevant in Colombian contemporary history since war has been an obstacle for the full expansion of neoliberal extractivism. Now with peace at the gates, the obstacle will cease to exist but the serious conditions of inequality and political persecution will remain. In this regard, trade unions -and surely many other social organizations- will continue playing an important role in fighting back against bans, the rigid semi-feudal state and neoliberal trade.
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