

FMF-23

Northeast Brazil: Tension in the Sugar Belt

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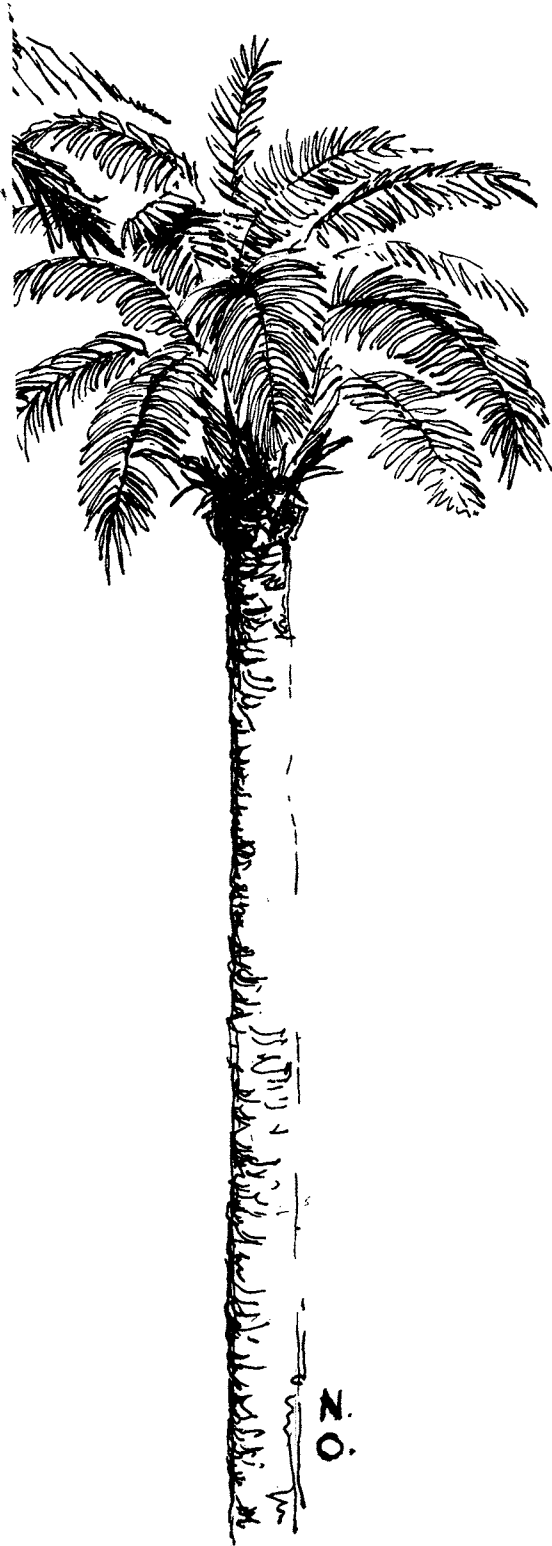
Dear Mr. Nolte:

Palmares is a creme and chalk town idling along the palm-lined bank of the Rio Una. Bleached by the hot sun of southern Pernambuco, its one- and two-story box houses front faceless upon narrow, rutted sidewalks and cobblestone streets. The whole seems worn, destitute, resigned. An occasional dust-laden jeep or truck is parked along the one main street and, seeking out the shade, clumps of idle men slouch in conversation; some ragged few sit alone, distant, in narrow doorways.

About 65 miles south of Recife, Palmares boasts the title of "sugar cane capital", focus of seven major usinas tightly clutched around it, and primate city of Brazil's sugar-producing area where the Barborema escarpment withdraws from the coast to allow a deep swath of abundant rain and humus-rich soils.

Cane fields infringe upon the city limits, their green mantle threatening asphyxiation. Plant dominates man. The Usina 13 de Mayo cuts a wedge into the urban setting; a street becomes a dusty lane deadending at the sugar mill. The hulking structure is punctuated by the massive brick chimney, symbol of the sugar belt. But there is no smoke, no ear on the rusted railroad siding, no noise from the heavy cast gears of the press. The Usina 13 de Mayo has declared bankruptcy, and all is in decline: decay in the fields, hunger in the homes, recession in the town.

These were the conditions when I visited Palmares in October 1967---over a year after the usina had shut down.



A few weeks before, the Government intervened, placing the plantation and its refinery under the supervision of the Institute of Sugar and Alcohol (IAA), following 11 months of crisis. I talked with several on the usina, which employed 2500, and got the best description from Sra. Euridice Batista de Melo:

"During those 11 months, conditions became terrible. First, they (the management) said they would pay 30% of the salaries in vales (script redeemable at the company store)—then, soon it was another 30% in vales and only 40% in money—then, there was nothing in money. The people used their vales at the company store, and the store bought from the local merchants, using the vales. But, then, no one had money, and the merchants could get no more supplies from Recife. The store shelves were empty. Through the syndicate the people got some Food for Peace, but they were starving. My neighbor across the road came crying because her children were dying of hunger. I had some mandioca growing, and I shared as much as I could.

"My husband is a mechanic, and he has a right to a garden, as does the administrator and others in this position. But the other people usually don't have, even though by agreement with the syndicate everyone has the right to a plot, but many times the administration doesn't allow it. The problem is that many people who have the right don't use it—and many who don't, want it.

"They (the management) first sold off all the cattle—then they sold every truck and tractor on the usina. There was no work and no way to work. Other people who had cars or jeeps abandoned them wherever they stopped because they ran out of gas and could get no more."

I visited a school on the usina, that closest to the refinery and, therefore, no doubt the best. It had one room with 30 desks, less than half of them occupied. This was one of a total of four schools on the whole usina—for about 2000 families.

On my own, I walked down a dusty path past one cluster of houses, mud and wattle cubicles like straightened news. The walls were blotched with cracks and peck marks where the mud had dropped away. The insides were dark with tamped dirt floors. Vaguely curious, only a couple of women peered out, but several children peeked around from corners and trees, the youngest naked with bellies swollen from malnutrition.

Talking with the agronomist assigned by the IAA to supervise the recuperation of the usina, I found him young and intelligent, but pessimistic about the usina's possibilities. The machinery was antiquated, the methods inefficient and the owners uncooperative. The idea of the intervention was to let the Government bring the operation up to viable conditions, then turn it back to private management. However, he did not think sufficient funds were available to do this with sugar—economically, the solution would be to convert to cattle raising, but social considerations blocked this alternative: with cattle only about 50 of the 2500 employees would be needed.

From other sources I learned that the owners had no interest in taking



ABOVE. Sra. Eurídice Batista de Melo and some of her children.

their clamor, but also their lack of leadership and their fear of retaliation on the part of the administration.

Before the "Revolution" of 1964, the municipality (comparable to U.S. county) of Palmares comprised the largest and noisiest Peasant League—the controversial creation of the notorious Francisco Julião. Labeled a Communist, he was one of the first to be tabbed for jail and be denied political rights by the Castelo Branco government. He fled and now lives in Mexico. The obstreperous leadership which came to the fore under Julião was immediately decapitated and in its stead, by government intervention, there were appointed the so-called "bonzinhos"—"good little men"—who would respect the power structure's views, not fuss about the peasant problems, and generally calm things down.

By someone who had worked with the Catholic Church's rural syndicates, which also suffered intervention, I was told that the post-1964 peasant leadership was innocuous—compromised as being pelegos (union leaders who are puppets of the government)—many times, men who did not even come from the same area but were brought from outside, completely ignorant of the local

possession again. Realizing that they had drained the maximum from the usina's resources, they deliberately plunged it into bankruptcy while skimming off all saleable chattel. The aim was to force the burden on the Government through intervention prompted by the suffering of the workers, then hold out for purchase by the State. In the few cases in Pernambuco when a national "agrarian reform" agency has bought an usina—never of its own initiative but by force of circumstance—the private owners have received a very good price, far better than the open market would have brought.

After the 11 months of suffering, the issue came to a head not because of the protests of the peasants on the usina but because of the middle-class merchants in Palmares. Stuck with worthless vales and destitute customers, they found themselves impoverished due to the machinations of one usineiro family. The whole economy of Palmares was at the point of collapse, and the townspeople brought pressure to bear on the political powers to rectify the situation. Commenting on the passive role of the peasants, I was told by a Brazilian social worker that it was not only resignation which stilled

situation. The peasants soon became disillusioned and lost faith in the effectiveness of syndicate organization.

A Brazilian friend, a journalist, who took a visitor to Palmares in 1966 told of how the syndicate president had showed them a list of some 300 camponês' grievances, but he admitted that he had done nothing about them because "there was no use". In 1967 when I expressed interest in meeting the syndicate president, I was told:

"He's not worth anything. He's a real donkey. He has no education, and he can't help his people because he knows less than they do."

Judicial process was instituted by President Getúlio Vargas for Brazilian workers to settle grievances with their employers. It was originally conceived to benefit urban workers, little attention being given to rural problems until the early 1960's. However, through the years the system seeped out to the countryside, with the establishment of rural labor courts and arbitration councils.

Palmares has such a Justiça do Trabalho in a squat adobe building on a shadeless street corner. Unlabeled, it called my attention because of the large group of shirt-sleeved men who waited in the sun in front of it. My Brazilian companions explained that the men were there to register claims, probably for mistreatment or back wages which had not been paid them by usinas or engenhos.

The theory is good; the practice is laborious. In fact, there are only eight rural labor courts and 144 arbitration councils to service 3000 municipalities (counties) in all Brazil. The centers are understaffed and function precariously. Some of the arbitration groups have a backlog of 6000 cases, and once a case reaches the court it can take as much as two years to be resolved. Peasants who have no possibility of saving—living hand to mouth—cannot support such delays, nor can they on their own contract adequate counsel. The cases are often settled out of court, to the detriment of the peasant.

Another institution in Palmares which I visited was the cooperative for selling foodstuffs and other domestic items. Open only two months, its shelves were stocked with rice, black beans, kerosene, coffee, salt, etc. The manager admitted that things did not go well. There was little understanding of the concept of cooperatives. The people in the town had little money and stayed with their traditional suppliers who, although they charged higher prices, granted credit for weeks or months. The camponêses on the usinas did not have the means or the money to get into the town to do their shopping and so were bound to the company stores. Offers of the cooperative to set up stores on the usinas had been rebuffed by the managements.

Last year when I was in Recife, a report came out concerning nutrition in Agua Preta, a municipality about six miles from Palmares. The source was the Institute of Nutrition at the Federal University of Pernambuco. Its survey team found families there eating snakes, rats and domestic animals to stave off starvation.

In an article about southern Pernambuco entitled "They Are Hungry",

the July 1968 Realidade, a leading Brazilian magazine, starts out with the following anecdote:

"Berto Miranda knotted the corners of his shirt without buttons, grabbed his straw hat and a gourd full of mandioca flour, and he went in front of his house to sharpen a hoe. The sun hadn't come up yet but the cane fields of the Engenho Bonfim were already green with the first light of morning. When the sun would appear, Berto would be cutting cane. Just as he began to whet the hoe, his wife came out, half afraid to talk:

"Berto, are you going to take that mandioca flour?"

"I thought so---what am I to eat for lunch?"

"It's just that we only have this little bit in the house---left for the children. What can we do?"

"Berto continued sharpening the hoe until his wife went back in. Then he left the flour and the hoe, walking head down toward the woods. About noon, the other workers brought his body: Berto had hung himself.

"The suicide of Berto Miranda, 45 years old, five children, was never known in Recife, because the little town of Ferreiros where he was buried has no newspaper or telephone contact, and the authorities did not want to know the causes. It was suicide, and that was that."

The article states unequivocally that in 40 municipalities of Pernambuco hunger has reached the same scale of calamity as in India and certain areas of Africa and the Far East. "The only difference is that here men still react...Professor Nelson Chaves (Director of the Institute of Nutrition) thinks that this reaction of the Pernambucano peasant will soon end: 'Hunger kills the spirit of man.' There will soon be no difference between Pernambuco and India."

The article quotes heavily from surveys and statistics of the Institute of Nutrition, especially from its research center in Ribeirão, just northeast of Palmares. It recounts the many ills that come from malnutrition among a people whose average daily caloric intake is 1323 when the minimum for a working man is 2600.

A long-established and reliable institution, the Rural Extension Service of Pernambuco (ANCARPE), surveyed another municipality near Palmares---Amaraji. In 1967 the infant mortality index was 67%; during the first six months of this year it was 100%. Besides starvation and dehydration, the principal causes were parasitosis, malaria, smallpox, typhus, measles and cow-pox.

It is generally agreed, even by many of the usineire class, that the physical conditions of the peasants in the sugar belt have worsened in the last decade and particularly in the last four years. As the geographer, Manoel Correia de Andrade, explained to me:

"The economic conditions of the peasants are worse now than before the 1964 'Revolution' because of the devaluation of our money. Before, the inflation was more rapid but so were the salary increases. Now, the inflation is slowed but salaries are frozen."

Another cause for the contrast between the pre- and post-1964 periods is the previous effectiveness of the peasant organizations which, obtained several real gains in terms of salary and benefits which were largely lost after the "Revelution". The growth of these organizations---peasant leagues and rural syndicates---has a short and stormy history.

In 1955 an unusual thing happened in rural Pernambuco. A group of peasants, on their own initiative, chose to resist the injustices of their senhor-de-engenho. The economics of the affair is typical. The Engenho Galileia, unable to compete or cooperate with the usinas, had closed its sugar operation. The owner, living in Recife, drew his income from payments by the tenants, the former moradores who now leased the land to raise subsistence crops. There was no binding contract between the two parties. The senhor, needing more money, boosted the lease fee rapidly, from Cr.\$220 to Cr.\$1700. The residents were reduced to such poverty that: "We buried our dead in a shroud of paper."

A unique associational group came into being in order to unite in forming a mutual emergency fund to purchase coffins for deceased of the indigent. Later, when the owner, Beltrão, decided to evict the farmers summarily in order to convert the engenho to cattle-raising, they already had their own leadership structure and chose to take legal action to protect their interests. They sought aid outside the controlled juridical structure of the municipality or state, approaching instead a state deputy of the P.S.B., the Partido Socialista Brasileiro. This party was a jejune body composed of middle-class intellectuals who had no cause; however, the P.S.B. was exceptional in that it was not puppet of the vested interests as was true of the major parties.

The State Deputy of the P.S.B., Francisco Julião, was suddenly presented with a cause, and he grabbed on to it. He first legalized the status of the peasants' organization, creating a juridical entity called the Sociedade Agrícola e Pecuária dos Plantadores de Pernambuco, on 1 January 1955. He then presented a bill before the State Legislature calling for expropriation of the engenho. Perhaps because this took place under the first state governor not representing the rural power structure, Cid Sampaio, the bill was passed after a prolonged period. Or, it has been suggested that the expropriation was to serve as a balm to soothe the growing unrest, in the expectation that with this gesture the peasant demands would be quieted.

Thus was gathered an almost coincidental amalgam consisting of 1) the peasants concern for coffins, 2) a landowner attempting to dismantle a traditional agricultural structure in order to substitute a modern economic activity, 3) an exceptional show of peasant initiative, 4) a middle-class lawyer ambitious for power, 5) a weak political party outside of the power structure, and 6) a state government reflecting the urbanization and modernization processes affecting the forefront of the Northeast's society. Out of this combination sprang the Peasant Leagues.

From an insignificant State Deputy, Julião progressed to become a potent power contender. He fully understood the need to gain political power in order to achieve reforms within the peasant structure, and he adopted various techniques appropriate to the masses in order to rouse

them from passive to participant roles. It was his original intention to process the sector's demands through the extant political machinery, and his original basic program was essentially reasonable and constructive.

Julião, as stated in his book Que São As Ligas Camponesas?, found it easier to mobilize the peasants of the agreste (transitional zone back of the coast) and the sertão (dry interior) rather than the zona da mata (the sugar belt). In the sugar area the peasant was either subjugated by the engenheiro-usina rule or was a nomadic worker; in neither case did he possess private holdings allowing any degree of independence. The social structure of the two interior areas fostered greater economic independence and, therefore, expression of individual choice than did that of the traditional-feudal sugar system. The small farmer, the sharecropper, the renters were more accustomed to making their own decisions and defending their own rights. Their comprehension of organization was greater. In may be, also, that Julião presumed they could more readily support a candidate of their own choice rather than one of the usineiro's choice, as along the litoral; in 1958, before the movement of the Ligas Camponesas had expanded, he received 3,216 votes as candidate for the state assembly; in 1961, when the Liga program had spread throughout Pernambuco, he gained an easy victory as Federal Deputy, with 16,200 votes.

Even so, in his organizational attempts, Julião was stymied by the passivity of the peasant society, by the low level of cognitive political skills and the lack of comprehension of their potential as a class. After 1964, he laid a good part of the failure of the Ligas Camponesas on the cultural malaise of the area. Describing in 1962 the greatest problem faced by a peasant organizer, he lamented that the camponês did not "act like a human being, but like a vegetable. The great task which we undertake is to make him live like a human being."

Julião was, therefore, forced to concede that "To agitate is lovely, to organize is difficult." Given the limitations imposed upon the rural mass by their own physical and psychological deficiencies and by the rigid, closed system within which they were entrapped, their mobilization within the established societal framework posed problems with which Julião did not choose to cope. Therefore, since legitimate political, economic and social channels to arrive at a power capacity were denied to the peasant stratum, resort was to extra-legal methods---i.e., marches, demonstrations and physical force.

To motivate the peasants, Julião or his lieutenants staged rallies in which they tried to implant a feeling of political consciousness among the peasants:

"We fight for the happiness of all the 40,000,000 Brazilian peasants ...You must remain united until total liberation comes. If we cannot win a peaceful solution for your problems, we will come back here and ask you to take up arms to make a revolution..."

In a manifesto, Julião exhorted: "You and your brothers make up almost all of Brazil. It is you who kill our hunger. And you die of hunger... The latifundia is cruel. It shields itself with the police and the hired killer. It elects your worst enemies. And to win your vote it uses two

formulas: violence and craft...Violence is the hired killer and the police ...His craft is to take you as a compadre—To enter your house gentle as a lamb with claws concealed, with his poison hidden...And to catch you unawares at election time by saying, 'Compadre, get ready the new contract because if my candidate wins, everything is going to change.' And when the candidate wins, nothing changes."

Julião early turned to mass demonstrations as his chief methods of bringing pressure to bear upon the power structure. On May 1, 1956, Julião led 600 peasants into Recife. For the 1st Congresso de Fereiros e Pequenos Proprietários Rurais in 1958 he mustered 3000 who marched on the Legislative Assembly at the time it was debating agrarian reform. When the famed peasant leader, Pedro Teixeira, was assassinated by rural police in April 1962 in Paraíba, a massive peasant march on the state capital was thwarted by the Army.

Naturally, these overt manifestations of peasant mobilization were countered by the establishment, using similar extra-legal means. Participating peasants were threatened and punished with considerable use of physical violence. Besides the use of police and hired mercenaries for assassinations and intimidations, the landowners banked upon the Army to maintain peace and the status quo. This became increasingly true after Miguel Arraes became governor of Pernambuco in 1962 because, for the first time in history, the state police, Força Pública, were not used indiscriminately to fulfill the wishes of the elite.

But not leaving matters to others, the landowners also increased their private caches of arms and capangas (privately hired "police force"). In early 1962 Julião sent a letter to Brazil's War Minister calling upon him to seize the arms in the possession of large landowners. In early 1964, a conservative São Paulo newspaper reported that the Associação de Fercedores de Cana do Recife had organized to buy arms and coordinate their actions against the aroused peasants.

As the positions of the Leagues and the opposition hardened during the early 1960's, Julião's proclamations became more and more radical.

In April, 1960, Julião visited Cuba and noted in his book that the visit "contributed to an even greater strengthening of the ties of solidarity between the Leagues...and that fraternal people."

In September 1961, Julião said, "I am a Communist, and I don't care what they say." He threatened that, if the Government didn't undertake an agrarian reform, the peasants would "grow beards and take up arms...democracy is a government that arms its people...the revolution of Castro is a miracle...that can be repeated in Brazil."

As Julião became more radical and the discontent swelled, other forces decided to enter the field of peasant organization in order to counter-balance his influence.

The organization of rural syndicates, under the auspices of the Catholic Church, was a 1960 product of the Serviço de Assistência Rural (SAR)

in Natal, Rio Grande do Norte. Under the inspiration of the Bishop, Dom Eugênio de Araújo Sales, the movement was concerned with basic education and leadership training of the peasantry. Three years later, 56 of the 82 municipalities of that state were organized, representing 45,000 workers.

Stimulated by SAR, the major focus of rural syndication became Pernambuco, under the leadership of two young priests, Padre Crespo and Padre Melo.

It has been pointed out that among the activists of the reformers there are two major types: the revolutionaries and the "conscientizers". By this dichotomy, it is easy to place Julião on the side of the revolutionaries—agitation for agitation's sake, under the leadership of non-peasant elements. In the words of Padre Crespo the leaders of the Peasant Leagues were "Political opportunists, without any social sense, trying to exploit this new social phenomenon for their own advantage and not in order to solve the problem of the suffering peasant. Thus the poor peasants are crushed like cane in the mill, between the political opportunists of the times."

Both Padre Crespo and Melo early gave priority to "conscientizing"—making the peasants aware of their position and ready to participate in the political system. In an interview at that time Padre Melo pointed out that the syndicates in Cabo (his own) and Jaboatão (Padre Crespo's) "are dedicated principally to educate the peasants. I believe that the Brazilian masses have all the spirit, the intelligence and, now, the will to govern themselves. But they don't have leadership, nor education—teaching them to read and to think is doing the best possible thing for the peasants."

Likewise, the Serviço de Orientação Rural em Pernambuco (SORPE), founded in August 1961 under the leadership of Padre Crespo, had as its principal objective "to assist in the self-development of the rural workers by means of union organization, cooperatives and basic education." To fulfill this objective it put particular emphasis on courses of leadership training. "We try, above all, to make the workers aware that only as a people united in syndicates and cooperatives in support of leaders who are authentic peasants is it possible from them to acquire their legitimate rights and to improve their lives."

The rural syndicate movement attempted to hold to legal, non-violent and responsible methods. Besides their concern for legality and official sanction, the syndicates also sought peaceable relations with the landowners. One of the first major campaigns for worker benefits was waged by the syndicates, climaxing in January and February of 1963, to establish the payment of the 13th month (bonus). A method of collective bargaining was employed to achieve a contractual agreement between employer and employee; the power elite was given the opportunity to participate in the resolution of rural problems by means of methods of democratic procedure. On paper, the syndicates were successful in gaining an accord on the 13th month, certified by the Government's Regional Labor Delegate.

However, two factors forced the legalistic syndicates to adopt more "expressive" measures. By 1963 various radical groups—the pro-Soviet

Communists, the pro-China Communists, the Trotskyites, the Peasant Leagues— were not only competing vigorously in the organization of peasant groups but were also infiltrating the Church-favored syndicates; in addition, both President Goulart and Governor Arraes were maneuvering to gain control of the peasant movement. To keep favor with the peasants the syndicates had to produce immediate, concrete results. Moreover, the political and social system of the Northeast was so alienated from the peasant sector that it proved ineffective to attempt to adhere to its norms. The very intransigence of the power elite forced peasant associations to adopt extra-legal methods.

The leadership of the rural syndicates learned that their most telling recourse in order to be recognized as a power contender in the Northeast was to produce overt demonstrations of their capacity to mobilize, organize and aggregate a significant sector of the society. By 1963 the momentum was mounting rapidly, and no protagonist could assure its course. In the words of Padre Mele:

"An agrarian revolution has to take place, but we should not insist that it be done peacefully, as the capitalists say, or by fighting, as the Communists say. The form of a revolution depends upon circumstances which one cannot predict. If it cannot be done peacefully, then we will have to face the reality of fighting."

The most tangible gains during the critical period beginning in 1955 were passage by the National Congress of the 13th-month bonus, the family salary and the Rural Labor Statute. The Labor Statute had its origin with Getúlio Vargas in 1954; however, after a preliminary flurry in Congress, it came to rest in committee and there was forgotten. New initiative for a rural labor law began in 1960 with Senator Fernando Ferrari, and the bill was finally passed on 2 March 1963. In effect the legislation did not bestow significant new benefits but rather reinforced ignored provisions of earlier law.

Among the items dealing with the "Regulation for the Protection of the Rural Worker" were: 1) obligatory workers permits, 2) maximum work day of eight hours, 3) a salary equal to the minimum wage set for the region, 4) a remunerated day of rest each week and remunerated holidays, 5) guarantee of safety and hygiene in work and home, 6) protection to working women and children, 7) advance notice for dismissal and establishment of tenure, 8) creation of a fund for social welfare and an institute of social security.

Fortified by the new law, the salaried workers of the zona da mata demanded their rights, culminating in a general strike in November 1963 which brought guarantees of an 80% increase in the minimum wage and payment of the 13th-month bonus; in this rare show of unity the rural organizations effected the first major strike in Brazilian agriculture.

However, in retaliation there were many instances of ^ainfrctions by usineiros and senhores-de-engenhos who quieted the victims by threats of physical violence, and many landowners dismissed their workers or limited the number of work days so as to escape the effects of the law. Even so, the favorable economic impact on the peasant sector and, therefore, on their environment was visible.

Among reports on improved economic conditions was that of the Brazilian historian Caio Prado Junior, who visited Palmares in November 1963. The merchants there were "unanimous in their recognition and proclamation that the commerce and the city in general are greatly benefitted by the great influx of new consumers, the sugar cane workers with their increased salaries."

The syndicalization movement thrived by the end of 1963. With the "Revolution", however, the momentum was halted. Not only were the salient leaders removed summarily—Miguel Arraes, Francisco Julião, etc., but also the local leadership of many of the peasant associations was ostracized—all of the organizations were closed except those of the Church and 30 of the 31 of these syndicates were investigated and intervened.

The presumption that the new government would be on their side caused the landowners to exact a harsh revenge. Payment of the minimum wage and the 13th-month bonus was quickly ignored. According to Padre Crespo's assistant at SORPE, the syndicate movement reached a low ebb after the "Revolution". The peasants withdrew, reverting to their suspicious attitude, because they lost faith in the Government—both state and federal—and in the new leadership imposed upon them after the "purge"; the landowners often tried to buy off the leadership—the president of the Jabotão syndicate was offered one million cruzeiros. In addition, they feared reprisals by the patrões who used all kinds of pressures to make them quit the syndicate; also, they no longer had the assurance of the protection of the state police.

Visiting SORPE again this year, in October 1968, I found the attitude more aggressive than the previous year. I had a long session with Padre Crespo—a soft-spoken man in his 30's. The morning I talked with him he was wearing an open-necked sport shirt, hanging loose, with only a small cross pinned to its pocket to indicate he was a priest. He was anxious to emphasize that the syndicate movement was entering a new phase at that very time:

"The syndicates have entered the third phase, now in this year. The first, 1961-64, consisted of basic organization and leadership training. We established the syndicates as legal entities, and we gained certain important laws such as the Rural Labor Statute and the Land Statute.

"The second phase, 1964 through 1967, was one of working within the laws, trying to accommodate the requests of the Government for patience and understanding, having faith that the Government's intentions were good and just and that we would obtain advances.

"We achieved absolutely nothing during this time—in fact, we lost ground. Because of the 1964 Land Statute, the usineiros and senhores-de-engenho took away the plots from the moradores because they feared that letting them use the land would give them a claim to own it. Also, because of the benefits promised the peasants by the Rural Labor Statute, the owners try to get rid of the moradores so that they don't have to pay them according to the law.

"So the tradition of the roça (usufruct of a land parcel) has been destroyed. And the system of the morador (resident on the plantation) is being wiped out. Instead it is replaced by the empreiteiro system—piece work

on a contract basis with an intermediary. The unemployment is so high that the usinas can easily get all the workers necessary without fulfilling any of the social provisions---workers waiting in the early morning for a truck to pick them up do not demand guarantees---they usually don't even have a work card (which qualifies them for minimum wage, fringe benefits, etc.). So, conditions have gotten a lot worse.

"During our 'legal' phase we relied largely on the rural labor courts. But delays of two years were common, and the syndicate had to provide a lawyer. Even if we won the case, by the time the peasant got his payment it wasn't worth a fraction of the original claim because of inflation. The peasants became disillusioned with the syndicates and membership fell off---due both to lack of faith and also nomadism.

"So, now we enter the third phase. The syndicate leaders---who meet monthly at the Federation headquarters here in Recife---have concluded that working within the law and accommodating the Government serves no purpose for them. More and more, they are decided to unite in resistance---peaceful, but not bound by the laws and system of the establishment. There will be more strikes and continuous non-violent pressure to achieve their goals, including those which are not granted by law but are in justice theirs.

"The strike at Cabe going on right now (to be described in detail in FMF-24) is particularly significant. It shows the new aggressiveness in the peasants who in their assembly voted against obliging the government request for yet another postponement of the strike. They decided not to compromise for small gains but to insist upon the full package---not to settle before the strike like they had been doing since 1964, but in fact to stage the strike to get what they deserve. We'll see more of this."

As we parted after some two hours of conversation, Padre Crespo came back to his main point: "Do not forget---the important thing is that we are now entering a third phase."

Sincerely yours,



Frances M. Foland

Photo, p. 3: FMF

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