

One Year Later: La Comunidad La Florida and the Campesino Struggle for Justice

Chris Michael (2.17.06)

Colomba, Guatemala - The rich, volcanic soil of Colomba in the western highlands of Quetzaltenango is known by coffee connoisseurs and buyers for yielding some of the finest coffee in the world. However, it is also known as a region rife with unemployment, extreme poverty, campesino (worker) struggles for unpaid wages and occupations of land. It is here where a group of landless campesinos occupied La Florida, an abandoned finca (farm), for 26 months in order to purchase the land and establish a cooperative community rooted in democratic decision making, justice and ecological sustainability.

In 1984, 28 years into a brutal, 36-year civil war that claimed over 200,000 lives and displaced over 1 million Guatemalans, a group of campesinos formed SCIDECO (Sociedad Civil para el Desarrollo de Colomba - Civil Society for the Development of Colomba), a labor union designed to combat the violation of rights and to improve the lives of campesinos. "When we started SCIDECO everyone was seeking work. Men and women would leave the house, often with children, to look for work in the remaining, operating fincas in the region. We started our days at four in the morning and hoped to not only find work, but also get paid - which was becoming increasingly rare," said member Rosarara Mejia Rosales.

To make matters worse for activists, many plantation owners established a 'blacklist' of campesinos that were organizers or involved in labor disputes. Blacklisted campesinos would routinely be turned away from work or refused payment for their labor. In addition, according to Lorenzo Acjá, an original member of SCIDECO, "this was a dangerous time to start organizing because the owners said we were guerrillas. But we had to risk it due to the poverty we lived in."

Despite repeated threats and an increasing climate of terror and economic crisis, members continued to work to improve the lives of the campesinos. While SCIDECO grew in size and strength, they were negotiating for land and working in a very harsh political and economic climate. However, in December of 1996 the government of Alvaro Arzú and the four guerrilla forces that united to form URNG (Unión Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca -- Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity) signed the United Nations-backed peace accords which call for a host of reforms, including focus on indigenous rights, health care, education, accountability for the human rights' violations of the military during the civil war, the resettlement of displaced persons and the incorporation of former guerrilla fighters into civilian life.

As the ink was drying on the peace accords coffee prices were dropping to record lows. As a result, owners further decreased the compensation, if at all, of farm workers and many owners filed for bankruptcy, leaving land abandoned and campesinos unpaid. At this time, there was a further concentration of land that remains today with only 2% of the population owning 70% of farmable land. With over one decade of negotiations with the government, members of SCIDECO had not received any land. Moreover, despite the creation of FONTIERRAS, an autonomous government agency tasked to address the call for land redistribution outlined in the

peace accords by purchasing and allocating it to poor farmers, only 9,874 families had benefited in the first five years of FONTIERRAS' activity .

After over two decades of organizing, members learned of La Florida, a very large finca with over 47 acres that was abandoned by its owner in 1994. According to Lorenzo Acjá, "the results of the negotiations were very poor during the eighties and nineties and therefore we knew that we had to use more drastic means to put pressure on the government ."

At four in the morning on October 11, 2002 over 100 members descended the rich hills and occupied La Florida. Due to the lack of work and threats of violence many members of SCIDECO moved to nearby urban areas to find work leaving 22 families, with persons ranging in age from 6 months to 70 years, to make a life out of a finca that had been abandoned for over eight years. The families had huge amounts of land, firewood and access to fruit trees and an ample source of pure water. However, they had no infrastructure or supplies. Without houses or existing structures, they created homes out of scrap metal, nylon, bamboo and anything else they could harness to keep the elements, particularly the violent rains, out of their new homes.

For 26 months these 22 families worked the land for food and collectively designed a community rooted in democracy and social and environmental sustainability. All decisions were made by the group with the principal that each person has one vote and no one person or group has veto power. They established open committees to carry out the wishes of the community and to address such issues as health care, education, safety, farming, firewood, infant care, economic and legal needs. In addition, they voted for a five-person negotiation team to start negotiations with the bank and the government to purchase La Florida.

Despite constant threats of violence, all those I spoke with that lived in the encampment during the occupation during my weeks in La Florida asserted that the life they were building together was a drastic improvement to the harsh political and economic climate just a few kilometers away. According to Emelia Esperanza Acjá, a mother of four, who gave birth to her youngest daughter in the encampment during the occupation, life was "incredibly difficult and required all of our individual and collective strength; but, it was much better, particularly for the women because we have rights, make decisions and we don't have a boss - our lives are free here."

The community received logistical help from a host of organizations during the occupation and that support continued with lawyers and financial advisers during the negotiations. Eighteen months into the occupation members were facing various obstacles ranging from a price tag of 12 million quetzals (\$1.57 million), a presidential election, a new administration, and the daily struggle for survival and constant fear of violence. As a result, the negotiations were at a standstill.

Consequently, the community decided they needed to amplify their tactics and chose to occupy and live in the heavily trafficked road that connects Colomba to Quetzaltenango, the regional capitol. They agreed to let the government know of their plans and because the community had never threatened a similar action, the government took the threat seriously and rekindled the negotiation process. Five months later, on April 29, 2004 the community purchased La Florida

with a governmental loan of 6.5 million quetzals (\$843,000 USD) to be paid off in 8 years, without interest - just over half the price originally offered.

This month La Florida will celebrate their one-year anniversary and advances of democratic-decision making, utilization of committees and the distribution and rotation of workloads to create the community they have envisioned for over three decades. Members work both cooperatively for the community on communal land and each family has a half-acre to cultivate their own crops.

As for the utilization of communal land, with over 47 acres and under 100 campesinos working the fields, they have decided to begin cultivating half of the land that resides at the highest altitude with the most shade. This will help to ensure that all of their coffee is shade-grown. Moreover, members of La Florida have started various re-forestation projects to provide both shade and to ensure that six macadamia trees and six banana or plantain trees are on each cuerdra, or 20 meters squared of land to cultivate three cash crops at once. In addition, the community has been working to attain organic and fair trade certification within the next two years to "ensure that we get a just price for our coffee and we keep the soil and ourselves free of toxins," said Cleminte Basques Samayor, coordinator of the finance committee.

Water is in abundance at La Florida and a channel system flows through the community to a pool, large sinks used for cleaning clothes and dishes, and to all of the clusters of houses to ensure all persons have easy access to potable water. Also, water has been harnessed for electricity and a corn and bean grinder that provides the basic structure of diet for all in the community - tortillas and beans.

At the moment there are no salaries for the campesinos. Consequently, the only source of income for families is to sell what they cultivate individually or what cultivate from their individual land. To help address this, the community, with the help of Danish volunteers Bo Karlsen, whom lived with the community during the occupation, and Emil Birk, has initiated an ecotourism project. "Ecotourism is a way for us to support our families and provide an opportunity for interested visitors to learn the perspective of campesinos, live and learn with us," Cleminte Basques Samayor.

Visitors stay in the casa grande, the house of the former owner, and eat all of their meals with one of the 34 rotating families. Visitors and volunteers can not only live and work with campesinos to get the 'real' Guatemalan experience and perspective, they can also eat honey off the comb on the way to a series of waterfalls, trek through dense forest, climb cacao trees, grind the seeds and make hot chocolate, visit Mayan ceremonial sites on the property, learn each step of the coffee harvest, tend to animals, and learn the medicinal uses of plants. Moreover, there are also opportunities for individuals to contribute their own skills to the community via working in the fields, carpentry, teaching English, and math or adult literacy classes.

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

While I was in La Florida members held a meeting with campesinos from Nueva Florencia, a neighboring finca where workers hadn't received payment in years. A few days before I left the campesinos of Nueva Florencia occupied the finca demanding compensation. As a response, the owner exponentially increased security forces and tensions were boiling.

Though current President Oscar Berger was president during the negotiations and finalized the loan for the purchase of La Florida, he is not known for his support of campesinos. In contrast to the public relations stunt that the Berger Administration orchestrated at La Florida when the community bought the finca, in particular landing on the soccer field, the Berger Administration has been evicting campesinos from encampments at alarming rates. Within his first 6 months in office, Berger evicted 31 campesino encampments compared with just 5 in his predecessor, Alfonso Portillo's entire 4 years in office.

In particular, the massacre of finca Nueva Linda remains the most noted incident of violence during the Berger Administration and an open wound for campesinos throughout Guatemala. In the early hours on August 31, 2004, 800 agents of the special police force and private security personnel of Nueva Linda entered an encampment of campesinos that occupied the finca for over one year to protest the disappearance of Hecto Reyes Perez, their friend and lead organizer who vanished one month earlier. What started as an eviction turned into an operation of 1,200 armed officers, two tanks and four arms-firing helicopters and resulted in scorched earth, four police officers and eight campesinos killed - five of which, according to the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office, by extrajudicial killings carried out by the police.

I was curious as to what Cleminte Basques Samayor, a man who negotiated with the Berger Administration and has worked for fincas up and down Central America, thought the future would hold for the campesinos of Nueva Florencia and what role La Florida might play during their struggle. He paused for a moment, looked across the horizon and said "this is the same story of oppression and lack of justice that the campesinos have always faced. Campesinos have been killed, as in Nueva Linda, and our friends at Nueva Florencia are in their tenth day of a new chapter of their life-long struggle for justice. We believe our victory and work here helps to create a new model for campesino communities and a new model for the future."

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