
RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

EXPLAINING CONFEDERATION: Colombian Unions in the 1980s*

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The formation of a “united front of all workers” has been a strategic goal for most labor leaders, but in reality, such coalitions have been more the exception than the rule. This kind of alliance requires workers in different sectors of the economy, who usually have dissimilar interests, to merge into a coordinating body, generally a new labor confederation. Therefore, regardless of whether they emerge in the core or on the periphery, confederations that aggregate the interests of the majority of organized workers have necessarily been preceded by fascinating processes of negotiations and mergers among unions. This study focuses on the formation of one such coalition in the Colombian labor movement.¹

During the early 1980s, leftist, liberal, and conservative unions formed a coalition that crystallized in the establishment of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) in September 1986. Its first congress was

*Fieldwork in Colombia was made possible by a PRA fellowship from the Organization of American States and a Distinguished Scholar Award from the University of California, Los Angeles. I am very grateful to a large number of labor activists, scholars, and colleagues who have offered a variety of data and suggestions. Those interviewed in the study contributed precious and long hours from their busy schedules. Colombian historians and labor historians Mauricio Archila, Alvaro Delgado, Fernán González, and Mauricio Romero also provided important information. Jonathan Rosenberg and Michael Wallerstein offered valuable suggestions, and I also wish to thank the *LARR* anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. The shortcomings that remain are my responsibility.

attended by eighteen hundred delegates representing forty-five federations and six hundred unions (about 65 percent of the organized work force in Colombia). Until that time, the Colombian labor movement had been organized into four labor confederations: the Unión de Trabajadores de Colombia (UTC), the Confederación de Trabajadores Colombianos (CTC), the Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores Colombianos (CSTC), and the Confederación General de Trabajadores (CGT). None of these confederations, however, could claim to represent a majority of the organized work force. In addition, a number of powerful autonomous (non-confederated) unions were also operating. At present, the Colombian labor movement comprises five confederations and an autonomous sector, but now one of these confederations (the CUT) can speak for most of the organized labor force.

This research note will argue that in Colombia unions tended to coalesce as the result of a crisis. During this crisis, two variables became crucial: exclusion from regular channels of negotiation (a long-term experience for public workers that also began to afflict workers in the industrial sector in the 1980s) and a serious decline in union membership. This hypothesis admittedly focuses on short-run outcomes and tends to downplay important events in the 1970s that promoted some collaboration among unions, triggered labor mobilization, and improved communications among different sectors of organized labor.

During the decade prior to the formation of the CUT, collective action involving unions and other popular movements, plus the persistent unification strategy of some leftist sectors within the labor movement, had a general integrating effect. For example, popular manifestations of integrated action (the so-called *paros cívicos*, particularly that of 1977) contributed to the concept of forming a unified front. Confederations and autonomous unions combined efforts with social movements to mobilize and protest against inflation, organized crime, the assassination of labor leaders, and unemployment.² The results were several rather successful "civic strikes" that at times brought the country to a halt. At the same time, the Communist-led Colombian confederation (the CSTC), like a number of its counterparts elsewhere in Latin America, had been trying for many years to integrate most unions into one confederation. The CSTC saw the 1970s as a good opportunity to pursue that goal more intensively. During these years, this confederation even proposed its own dissolution in order to pave the way for a unified coalition. Yet Colombian unions did not formally coalesce into a united front during the 1970s, or for that matter during the 1960s, when they also developed some solidarity and mobilized jointly.

The formation of the CUT should not be interpreted exclusively as a victory for the CSTC or the simple result of the "cumulative" effect of intense collaboration on collective action. These events certainly contrib-

uted to worker unity, but Communist organizers had been trying to establish a united front in the Colombian labor movement without success for more than thirty years. The fact that the successful coalition was not established until the early 1980s implies that new variables came into play during these years. Until the CUT emerged, divisions within the labor movement had precluded mergers between Communist unions and those of different persuasions (with the exception of a period of reform in the 1930s that made a liberal-Communist alliance possible). These divisions precluded coalitions with other leftist unions as well. Only in construction were Communist labor organizers able to make significant inroads into sectors of the economy that were already dominated by other confederations or autonomous unions. Yet alliances with these unions did not materialize either. Hence the questions to be asked are, why did this situation change in the early 1980s, and why were unions confederated under the CTC and UTC finally willing to ally with the left in general, whether Communist or not?

The idea can be accepted that collective action during the 1970s had an impact on collaboration, particularly among unions in the public sector. Yet as is usually the case, the cumulative effect of collective action cannot be adequately measured or predicted, and the fact remains that coalitions did not occur at the peak of mobilization but years later. Perhaps more important, collective action also had divisive effects on the labor movement. Joint mobilization does not necessarily bring about a sense of solidarity and collaboration that contributes to more formal linkages among various sectors of organized labor. Mobilization can weaken the labor movement and strain relations between unions, and as several persons interviewed pointed out, some animosities did arise as a result. These frictions were revealed in the mid-1970s by the failure of the Consejo Nacional Sindical.

In sum, these variables seem to constitute necessary but not sufficient conditions for unions to coalesce. To explain the initiative taken in the early 1980s by dissident UTC unions in negotiating alliances with different sectors of organized labor, other factors must be added. The fact that the Communist-led CSTC enthusiastically supported this move is hardly surprising. What remains to be explained is precisely why in the early 1980s an initiative coming from UTC and CTC dissident unions finally allowed the CSTC to coalesce with liberal and conservative sectors of organized labor, and also with a leftist movement that controlled most public-sector workers and had traditionally been reluctant to ally formally with the Communists or any of the other confederations. As will be shown, these changes were closely tied to a worsening of the terms of bargaining and to the unions' inability to retain members. My argument is that had there been no aggressive employers' offensive in the industrial sector (which tended to ostracize unions that enjoyed a relatively better

collective bargaining system) and no sharp declines in membership, the coalition would not have been possible. Industrial and public-sector unions did not coalesce at the peak of mobilization, but later, during the early 1980s, when these additional variables took on critical importance.

First Steps toward the Formation of the CUT

The existence of four different labor confederations and the growth of autonomous unions in the 1960s (mostly in the public sector) had made unity a difficult goal to accomplish. The confederations were divided along ideological and party lines. Even more pertinent to my argument, systems of collective bargaining for private- and public-sector workers differed radically in ways that made alliances between the two problematic. Autonomous unions in the public sector, which were characterized by more radical leadership and were unable to bargain collectively, did not seem to share enough common interests with, say, confederated unions in metallurgy and in construction. Thus while public-sector workers often mobilized to change the current system of labor relations in their sector, industrial workers did not. Therefore, despite the fact that during the 1970s most public and industry workers engaged intensively in collective action and unions evidently viewed collaboration with other sectors of organized labor as beneficial, the difficulties in establishing more formal linkages between the two sectors remained.

In the early 1980s, the initiative to form a unified alliance succeeded because industrial-sector workers now felt the need to change prevailing mechanisms of collective bargaining. They had become dissatisfied with their confederations' performance in negotiations and their inability to counteract employers' determination to lower wages in relative terms. Rank-and-file workers were also unhappy about the state's scant participation in wage negotiations. It was in this atmosphere that unions in the industrial sector became involved in forming a new confederation.

The origins of the CUT can be traced back to the establishment of a regionally based coalition of unions with different political persuasions that marked the decline of the two major labor confederations in Colombia (the UTC and the CTC). In 1981, under the leadership of dissident UTC unions based in Santander, a regional coalition was established that included the UTC, CTC, and CSTC unions, plus autonomous sectors of organized labor. This move was significant because confederated unions in the industrial sector had not previously put forth sound initiatives for developing alliances among themselves, much less with their autonomous counterparts (mostly in the public sector). As noted, public workers had traditionally been more sympathetic to collaboration because of the nature of labor relations in their sector.

The emergence of this regional coalition was therefore telling, especially because it had been initiated by confederated unions, most of them in the private sector. Shortly after, other unions in various regions followed this example, supported by unions that had long promoted unity (those belonging to the CSTC). Geographically, this trend moved from the regions toward Bogotá, not vice versa. The Santander alliance crystallized in the Unión Sindical de Trabajadores de Santander (USITRAS). It should be stressed that the unions leading this move had no formal linkages with any party or leftist confederation but belonged instead to the UTC. This confederation, which was traditionally linked with the church and to a lesser extent with the Conservative party, had been the largest confederation in Colombia since the 1940s. A number of unions belonging to the other major confederation (the CTC, which was established during the 1930s by liberals and Communists) followed suit. In short, a significant number of UTC and CTC dissident unions formed the early core of the coalition.³ The unions joining USITRAS broke away from their former confederate headquarters but kept in contact with other sectors of organized labor nationwide. In less than a year, USITRAS grew markedly, and its example appealed to others. On the regional level, USITRAS succeeded in gaining recognition from employers and providing its unions with a more democratic system of representation.⁴ Professionally, the movement that started with USITRAS undermined the predominance of the UTC and CTC at the national level.

By 1986, shortly before the CUT was established, the UTC had lost eleven regional federations, six regionally based industry unions, and four nationally based industry unions. Eight of these regional federations defected to the newly formed CUT while the rest remained independent. The CTC had been losing members throughout the 1970s, but its losses in the early 1980s proved almost fatal. By 1984 the CTC represented only 13 percent of the organized work force, and after the CUT materialized, it lost five additional federations and one nationally based industry union to the new confederation.⁵

Defection was obviously motivated by dissatisfaction with the UTC and the CTC. But such dissatisfaction was nothing new. Unions in different sectors and regions customarily protested against confederation mechanisms of representation and control, pushed for more representation in executive committees, and demanded a more aggressive policy vis-à-vis employers and government. Toward the end of the 1970s, however, the issue of union representation flared following charges of corruption against the top leadership in confederation headquarters.⁶ Also contributing to unrest was the confederations' unwillingness to break up what dissidents called a "marriage" with state officials. By the early 1980s, the largest confederations (the CTC and the UTC) had developed reputations for ignoring members' interests while adopting a strategy of accom-

modation with employers' associations and the state. But it was when industrial unions experienced exclusion from mechanisms of negotiation and most unions lost members sharply that an increasing number of unions agreed that organized labor was losing power and something had to be done to revitalize it.⁷ At this point, the emerging Santander alliance initiated the first move toward unity.

Could such a resolution have grown out of the connections and collaboration developed during the agitated 1970s? These connections indeed facilitated communications, but the exclusion from policy-making and loss of union membership better explain the timing of the mergers. Formation of the coalition behind USITRAS was prompted by increasing cognizance that regionally based federations had little say in confederation policy-making, union density was declining, and unions were losing more and more clout in collective bargaining.⁸ Thus the establishment of USITRAS constituted an essential precedent for the CUT. As President Isaías Trislancho observed, USITRAS was arguably in spirit and in practice "a mini CUT."⁹

One major precedent that USITRAS established was allying confederated and nonconfederated unions. In essence, the CUT became possible in Colombia only because private- and public-sector workers allied. Neither confederated nor autonomous unions alone—even as two blocs—could have represented the majority of organized workers. Without the participation of nonconfederated unions, it would have been very difficult for dissident UTC and CTC federations to form a unified confederation. In 1980 private employment nationwide absorbed 91.5 percent of the active work force, while the public sector employed only 8.5 percent, but the distribution of the organized work force favored the public sector: the private sector employed 63 percent of the organized labor force while the other 37 percent worked for the state. Union density in the private sector totaled only 11 percent but was traditionally much greater in the public sector (68 percent by the late 1970s). The CUT therefore resulted from alliances that had to involve unions in both the private (mostly confederated) and public (mostly autonomous) sectors. And although public-sector workers had long sought to change labor relations in Colombia, no united confederation (one representing at least 70 percent of organized workers) could have been organized without unions in the industrial sector.

Public-Sector Workers and the Behavior of Autonomous Unions

The public sector in Colombia comprises a gamut of personnel including workers in public transport, banks, education, and state bureaucracies. By 1980 nonconfederated unions controlled 60 percent of the work force in the public sector. Autonomous unions were particularly

strong among white-collar workers (*empleados públicos*). The remaining 40 percent of organized workers belonged to confederated unions: 54 percent to the UTC, 20 percent to the CSTC, 18 percent to the CTC, and 7 percent to the CGT (Londoño Botero 1986, 176).¹⁰ In subsequent years, more confederated unions in the public sector became autonomous, some of them joining the CUT.

Nonconfederated unions in the public sector customarily mobilized and sought to act collectively with confederated unions. Despite the fact that not all autonomous unions felt comfortable with this situation (some radical leaders did not join the CUT until early 1987), the nature of employment and labor relations in the public sector compelled workers to seek a restructuring of prevailing mechanisms of negotiation. This behavior characterized public-servant unions in both the confederated and autonomous sectors. Indeed, challenging confederation advice to the contrary, these confederated unions frequently engaged in collective actions with their independent counterparts.¹¹

Public workers' determination to change labor relations in their sector becomes understandable when one considers the conditions affecting their unionization: strikes were illegal, unions were often repressed, and formal channels of negotiation were lacking. Conditions worsened for public-sector workers in the 1970s, when their wages deteriorated. In the early 1960s, civil servants enjoyed one of the highest per capita incomes of Colombian wage laborers (about double that of other urban employees and triple that of rural wage earners), but by the mid-1970s, this differential had been reduced by more than half (Lora and Ocampo 1986, 3). During the 1970s, the Colombian government made determined efforts to reduce public spending, and in 1979 the state attempted to cut personnel costs to a minimum, which caused a further decline in the wages of public servants. After 1983 public employment continued to decline in absolute numbers (González 1987, 25).

While this trend undoubtedly encouraged mobilization, the key to higher rates of mobilization in the public sector (as well as unions' more positive attitude toward collaboration) was their being barred from collective bargaining. Public-sector workers in Colombia were subject to special legislation setting them apart from other unions, a situation that prompted intensive collective action. For example, as early as 1920, Law 21 denied state employees the right to strike. This regulation applied to all public services, whether in private hands or run by the state. Such legislation has not been revoked since that time, despite frequent conflict and union agitation. Instead, special categories were imposed on public employees that further limited their right to organize. In the late 1930s, the state apparatus began to grow, but although such employment expanded after the Frente Nacional was established in 1958, union formation in the state bureaucracy faced serious problems.¹² Unlike other Latin

American democracies where governments were often more friendly to unions than to private employers (as in Uruguay and Venezuela), the Colombian state tried to hinder union growth and sought no alliance with organized labor. But because the state had limited resources and autonomy, it could neither co-opt nor control labor relations in the public sector.¹³

The confederations that had participated in the pact establishing the Frente Nacional (the CTC and the UTC) also lacked adequate control over the growing state workers' unions. Nor could the government use CTC and UTC influence effectively to solve labor problems within its own sphere. The result was that the state found no solution but to curtail workers' rights strictly. The public administration reform of 1968 (Decree 3135) constituted a landmark in labor relations for the public sector, as well as a constant source of union unrest. It differentiated between "empleados públicos" (public employees) and "trabajadores oficiales" (official workers). The decree's goal was to take away the right of public employees to bargain collectively by arguing that their relations with the state fell into the legal sphere of "public law." Although the decree granted the right to bargain collectively to "trabajadores oficiales" (mostly blue-collar workers and maintenance personnel), it prohibited strikes by both groups of public servants. In addition, the reform sought to extend the category of "public servant" to include workers in other services and even in manufacturing, including teachers and blue-collar workers in privately owned firms (Delgado 1984, 44–48).

These major obstacles gave rise to the radicalism of most of these unions since their emergence in the early 1960s. Miguel Urrutia, for example, has argued that barriers to union organizing in the public sector promoted a revolutionary unionism that tended to "reject legality" and questioned the Colombian political system as a whole (Urrutia 1984, 2). Leaders had to organize unions covertly and run them differently from legally recognized unions. Autonomous unions belonged to a myriad of leftist groups (with the exception of the Communist party, which controlled the CSTC) or had defected from the "traditional" confederations (mostly from the CTC). All of them claimed to represent a new style of leadership within the labor movement.¹⁴ These unions were already more centralized in relative terms by the early 1970s than were those in domestic manufacturing, and federations and industry unions predominated over plant unions. Common bonds had been forged among these unions by various factors that were not found in the industrial sector: the centralized structure of employment within the state, a more homogenous system of labor relations, and dependence on the same employer (Londoño Botero 1986, 104). In addition, these union leaders were excellent organizers: by 1980 service unions boasted a density of 66 percent.

Thus it was continuous exclusion from regular channels of negotia-

TABLE 1 *Strike Activity by Confederation in Colombia, 1971–1980*

Year	Total Number of Strikes	UTC %	CTC %	CGT %	CSTC %	Independent Unions	Not Enough Information
1971	37	16.2	8.1		27.0	48.7	
1972	67	11.9	6.0		16.4	61.1	4.6
1973	53	11.3	9.4	1.9	22.6	52.8	7.5
1974	75	21.3	2.6		37.3	42.6	1.3
1975	109	14.7	4.6	4.6	28.4	42.2	8.2
1976	58	18.9	10.3	5.1	37.9	32.7	
1977	95	24.7	9.6	1.0	40.0	35.5	
1978	68	10.3	11.7		36.7	47.0	1.4
1979	60	21.6	15.0		26.6	38.3	
1980	49	16.3	12.3		26.5	44.8	6.1
Total	671	17.0	8.5	1.5	30.7	43.7	1.4

Source: Delgado (1971, 19).

Note: In a number of cases, two or more centrals participated in strikes. Consequently, horizontal totals do not necessarily equal 100 percent.

tion that finally drew “empleados públicos” and “trabajadores oficiales” together in the 1970s, encouraging channels of communication and collaboration between confederated and autonomous unions of public-sector workers.¹⁵ Between 1971 and 1980, more than 50 percent of strikes and 89 percent of strikers involved state workers. The conspicuous development among the strikers was the establishment of alliances between independent unions (mostly “empleados públicos”) and confederated ones (mostly “trabajadores oficiales”).¹⁶

Table 1 shows that independent and CSTC unions engaged in strike activity more often than any other unions in the 1970s. This finding is not surprising, given the lengthy exclusion of these sectors from systems of negotiation enjoyed in the industrial sector by first the UTC and CTC and later the CGT and CSTC. Table 1 also shows that the UTC participated more actively in strike activity than did the CTC or the CGT, reflecting the already deteriorating capital-labor relations in the industrial sector, where the UTC predominated. The importance of public-sector workers in organized labor in Colombia can be demonstrated by comparing different rates of unionization by economic activity, as shown in table 2.

Table 2 clearly indicates that unions in the public sector were the most highly unionized. Indeed, Rocio Londoño Botero has estimated that once security personnel and police (who do not have the right to organize) are excluded, the rate of unionization among civil servants would reach 68 percent (Londoño Botero 1986, 175). Table 2 also reveals a decline in union density in most sectors after 1980, a point that will be discussed further.

TABLE 2 Levels of Unionization by Economic Sector in Colombia, 1974–1984

<i>Economic Sector</i>	<i>% of Organized Workforce, 1974</i>	<i>% of Organized Workforce, 1980</i>	<i>% of Organized Workforce, 1984</i>
Agriculture	1.5	1.9 ^a	1.8
Commerce	8.2	3.7	3.0
Construction	8.2	25.7	5.1
Public sector			
Finances ^a	47.1	22.7	13.9
Mining	21.5	31.8	8.1
Services ^b	57.6	66.0	31.2
Transports	42.8	48.5	51.8
Total public sector		43.8	37.2
Manufacturing	46.0	28.7	8.1

Sources: Informe General de la Misión de Empleo, "El problema laboral colombiano," *Economía Colombiana*, separata no. 10 (1986), p. 108; Londoño Botero, Grisales Salazar, and Delgado (1986, 58); Tenjo (1975, 5); Urrutia (1969, 184); and interviews.

^aSome institutions in the financial sector are not under state control, but the state controlled 65 percent of all activities in that sector. By 1980, despite state policies aimed at "privatizing" the financial sector, 80 percent of the work force was employed by state-controlled institutions, according to my interview with Héctor José López (FENASIBANCOL).

^bServices include an array of public utilities (water, electricity, and gas) and social services (health, social security, and legal services).

Union Behavior and Changes in the Private Sector

The manufacturing sector was dominated by the UTC, the CSTC, and the CTC, in that order. The UTC prevailed in textiles, and the CSTC in construction. But there were also some independent (although smaller) unions in textiles, metallurgy, and mechanics. The question posed here is, why did established mechanisms of collective bargaining in this sector tend to collapse?

By the 1970s, Colombia had long exhausted its import-substituting industrialization possibilities and was attempting to adopt a free-trade model that favored agrarian (and some manufacturing) export sectors.¹⁷ This shift was intended to "re-insert" Colombia in the international market (see Weisner 1978, 102). Yet the country's policies in no way typified the aggressive moves toward export industrialization (characterized by W. Arthur Lewis) that attempted to turn the international economy "on its head" (Lewis 1977, 35).¹⁸ Rather, the Colombian application of the model entailed mild modernization of coffee production along with expansion of some industries producing intermediate and capital goods. The free-trade approach was part of an economic strategy intended to strengthen the export sector.

The effects of this switch were no doubt encouraging for capital, and the early 1970s witnessed initial signs of prosperity: the external debt

had been reduced, the balance of payments seemed to be under control, and coffee prices were exceptionally high (especially between 1976 and 1980). Thus throughout the 1970s, the agricultural sector grew and returns increased. Additional income from the export of cocaine augmented the already abundant cash flow.¹⁹ But while the overall economy showed positive signs of recovery, the real income of workers and the population in general deteriorated. Earnings from the "narcotráfico" caused spiraling speculation in capital and land, adding to job insecurity and accelerating inflation. The 10 percent rate of inflation prior to 1972 rapidly escalated to 20 percent and 25 percent the following year. Wages declined markedly from 1970 to 1978, after which they rose briefly during the short recovery, only to drop again to levels even lower than in previous years. Significantly, surplus from the 1976–1980 coffee bonanza was not reinvested in industrial expansion, which prevented the creations of new jobs. Instead, in order to increase profits, production costs were reduced by introducing new technology that scaled back personnel.

Worker resistance to the introduction of new technology in several industries (particularly textiles) was rooted in a history of victimization by technological innovation. The unions were caught by surprise because they do not participate in decisions regarding technological innovation, and lacking the means to provide training for unskilled employees, unions often saw their members replaced by new, nonunionized workers. It can be argued generally that technological innovation in Colombia has provided management with a powerful tool for curtailing workers' rights and reducing union strength (compare Londoño Botero 1986, 258–60).

By the mid-1970s, the government had gradually reduced protection for domestic manufacturing. This approach created an atmosphere of instability in the industrial sector and pushed the 8 percent rate of industrial unemployment to 14 percent in 1983 and to 16 percent in 1986. During the economic recession of 1980, industrial workers suffered massive layoffs as well as employers' fierce opposition to union demands to reinstate prior wage levels and pay fringe benefits. In sum, business during this period did not honor labor contracts. It is therefore not surprising that strike activity increased. The small number of contracts signed during this period is evidence of the overall weakness of the negotiation process. Table 3 lists the main reasons for strikes between 1981 and 1984.

Strike activity in response to management refusal to honor contracts was not a new phenomenon in Colombia. Between 1970 and 1980, more than half of all strikes (52.3 percent) were precipitated by employers' refusal to honor labor contracts (Londoño Botero 1986, 114). Yet below the surface lie telling differences. First, the percentage of all strikes in this category was higher from 1981 to 1984 than in previous years. More than 60 percent of the strikes during these four years were motivated by

TABLE 3 *Reasons for Strikes in Colombia, 1981–1984*

<i>Motive</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>1981</i>	<i>1982</i>	<i>1983</i>	<i>1984</i>
Signing of new labor contracts	31.1	32.0	28.5	25.0	39.2
Violation of labor contracts by employers	64.2	60.8	64.7	72.3	58.8
Solidarity strikes	0.7	1.0	0.8		1.0
Political strikes	4.0	6.2	6.0	2.7	1.0
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Londoño Botero, Grisales Salazar, and Delgado (1986, 214).

Note: During 1985 and 1986, these tendencies were accentuated, with strikes over contracts broken by employers accounting for more than 65 percent of strike activity, according to interviews with leaders of the CTC, UTC, and CUT.

violation of agreements (see table 3). Significant increases also occurred in the number of workers involved and their distribution across different sectors of the economy. Of particular interest is the increase in strike activity by industrial and transport workers. Between 1981 and 1984, 27.8 percent of the strikes took place in the industrial sector, compared with 21.4 percent in previous periods. In addition, some twenty-one thousand industrial workers participated in strikes, as opposed to fifteen thousand participants in the earlier period. This increase was all the more significant in the face of a decline in the total number of active industrial workers due to lay-offs (Londoño Botero, Grisales Salazar, and Delgado 1986, 111). Also, during the 1970s, white-collar participation in strike activity increased even more dramatically: 41.5 percent of strikes occurred in services (versus 19.0 percent in prior years), and 18.0 percent were led by teachers (versus 12.3 percent previously). In all, these differences indicate the further deterioration of collective negotiation, particularly in the industrial sector, and reveal more active engagement in collective action on the part of industrial unions (which were confederated under the UTC and CTC).

Declining wages were not the only reason for increased mobilization and the decline of established confederations. Wages declined consistently between 1970 and 1987 (with the exception of a brief recovery in 1978–79), and yet the crucial mergers that started the CUT materialized in 1981. Thus it was the collapse of collective bargaining in the industrial sector, plus the loss of union members in private and public sectors (especially in the former) that provided confederated and nonconfederated unions with crucial additional common grounds for alliances in the early 1980s. To sum up, only when these two disturbing factors are added to the context of union mobilization and the wage crisis of the 1970s can one explain the coalitions that led to the establishment of the CUT.

TABLE 4 *Union Density in Colombia, 1939–1984*

Year	Level of Unionization (%)
1939	2.7
1947	4.7
1965	13.5
1974	16.8
1980	15.7
1984	9.3

Sources: Urrutia (1969, 184); Tenjo (1975, 5); Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social (1984); and Londoño Botero, Grisales Salazar, and Delgado (1986).

Note: It seems that during 1985, the observed decline in union membership worsened, reversing slightly after the establishment of the CUT in late 1986. Based on interviews with CUT union leaders in Bogota in 1987.

Let us now consider the argument that decline in union density in Colombia facilitated coalition formation. Closely associated with the collapse of labor relations and the confederation crisis was an alarming decline in union density. This development caused the most distress in construction (dominated by the CSTC), industry (dominated by the UTC, but with a significant presence of the CTC, CSTC, and CGT), and the service sectors (mostly controlled by nonconfederated unions). Certainly, the level of unionization in Colombia has never been high by any standards (it peaked at 16 percent during the period 1965–1980) (Londoño Botero, Grisales Salazar, and Delgado 1986, 40). In addition, unionized workers in urban centers represented less than 6 percent of the active work force. But by late 1980, general union density had dropped to 10 percent and continued to descend to about 8 percent in 1981 and 7 percent in 1982, crucial years for mergers. It rose to 9.3 percent in 1984, and after another dip below 9 percent, increased to 11 percent by 1987 (one year after the formation of the CUT).²⁰ Table 4 summarizes variations in union density from 1947 (one year after the UTC was created) to 1984.

This decline in union density affected all federations. At a time when membership expansion through union formation was not an available option, the alternative was to ally with other unions to avoid losing political presence. If the decline in overall union density depicted in table 4 does not appear sufficiently catastrophic to trigger these reactions, a glance at table 2 should be persuasive. The unions that played a decisive role in forming the CUT were unions from the economic sectors most affected by density decline: industrial and independent unions in the service sector.

In addition to the CSTC's long-standing unification strategy, this confederation's behavior also suggests a connection between decline in union membership and mergers. Table 2 shows that the construction sector, the strongest constituency of the CSTC, faced a steep decline in

membership from 25.7 in 1980 to 5.1 in 1984 (a loss of four-fifths of its membership in only four years). I submit that the CSTC's final resolution to ultimately dissolve and join the CUT cannot be completely divorced from these changes in membership. The scarce data available on the CGT indicates that it too suffered from density decline.

Unions sought to avoid losing members because their strength and voice depended heavily on density. Representing their constituencies to the government was, more often than not, more important than directly negotiating with employers, a situation that made larger constituencies a prerequisite for successful negotiation. To state the obvious, large unions enjoyed more political leverage because they represented a larger proportion of the electorate.²¹ It is not surprising, then, that in this context, unions altered their behavior in response to membership decline.

Conclusions

Unionization has always been an arduous undertaking in Colombia. The labor movement has enjoyed little influence on policy making and has had to confront recalcitrant employers and unfriendly governments continuously. As a result, union density has always been lower than in other democracies like Uruguay, Venezuela, and Argentina. Nor have plant bargaining and the prevalence of small unions favored federation and confederation growth. Adding to these difficulties was the nature of urban employment: by 1987 some 55 percent of Colombian workers in key sectors like construction were self-employed, and almost 40 percent of the total urban work force belonged to the "informal" sector.

Has the CUT made any difference for organized labor? Although in absolute terms union density has not increased steadily since its formation, noticeable progress has been made on that front. As a result, small unions have become more inclined to merge into larger units. It can also be argued that since the CUT's formation, union governance in Colombia has changed. This confederation has made possible a more coordinated way of channeling union demands and has promoted at the confederation level more intensive participation by federations and affiliated unions. CUT governing bodies include its national congress, national board (the executive committee plus representatives from regional organizations), an executive committee (thirty members selected for a four-year period by the national congress), and regional committees.²² Unlike the practice of other confederations such as the CTC and the UTC, all these bodies meet regularly and exercise great influence over affiliated unions. Thus the CUT's organization substantiates its commitment to more centralized forms of coordinated action and collective bargaining, stances that have alarmed some employers and gained the sympathy of others.²³ The CUT has also proved to be a stronger political force that has made its voice

heard in Colombian policy-making. By early 1988, the CUT had become the most important confederation in Colombia, with a relatively heavier representation of industry unions and federations rather than plant unions. The gains for the unions involved were readily apparent. By late 1987, the CUT had succeeded in forcing the state to intervene more aggressively in capital-labor relations and to help reestablish mechanisms of negotiation where they had been seriously eroded. These changes have given excluded unions an opportunity for legal representation. Finally, without antagonizing the government, the CUT has insisted on maintaining complete independence from state subsidies.

On the negative side, the coalition may turn out to be a fragile one that may not endure when confronted with increasing pressures from employers or the government, despite the assurances of members of the CUT executive committee.²⁴ Member dues are slightly higher than before, and some minor discontent remains over issues of union democracy. More important, the formation of the CUT has triggered some moves toward establishing a rival confederation, a supposedly democratic alliance that would involve the remaining unions in the CTC, UTC, and CGT.²⁵ A new confederation enjoying some governmental support might attract a number of unions now affiliated with the CUT and thus undermine its strength.²⁶ Presently, however, the coalition seems stable enough, and the CUT's executive committee is keenly aware that disrupting consensus would be fatal to the confederation.

What significance, if any, can be drawn from this process of coalition formation? First, regardless of whether the CUT survives, its emergence has changed the organizational characteristics of Colombian labor. Whatever the outcome, Colombian labor leaders and students of the labor movement are convinced that "things will never be the same again." Second, the formation of the CUT suggests that unions are affected by party politics but do not always reflect current coalitions among parties. The CUT represents a broad political alliance without precedent that includes most leftist groups but also powerful conservative and liberal federations. Despite the peace process initiated under President Belisario Betancur, by 1986 the Left and the Conservative and Liberal parties had developed no political pact paralleling that represented by the CUT. In short, the formation of the CUT reveals that unions developed mechanisms of cooperation independently of political parties. In fact, one fascinating outcome of labor organizing in contemporary Colombia is that alliances at the level of the labor movement are generating a new political movement from the bottom up.²⁷

Third, contrary to the view that Colombian labor has traditionally been a totally co-opted and dominated movement, the astonishing growth of nonconfederated unions during the 1960s, their key role in this coalition, and the initiative taken by dissident confederated unions all bespeak

eroding linkages among the major political parties, the state, and the unions. This trend suggests that the “incorporation” of the labor movement by the Liberal or Conservative parties in Colombia never involved all sectors of organized labor and that the legacy of earlier patterns of incorporation has not been a determining influence.²⁸

Last, coalition-building in Colombia reveals that when union survival is at stake, alliances can materialize despite ideological differences. It has been long argued that crises affect group coalitional behavior, but the concept of crisis is too broad a notion. Lower wages, mobilization, political loyalties, and deteriorating conditions of employment proved to be necessary but insufficient conditions for unions to coalesce. The crucial role in prompting the emergence of the CUT was played by two factors—exclusion from negotiation and membership decline.

NOTES

1. Data for this paper was gathered in Colombia between January and August 1987 by means of thirty-six open-ended interviews with labor leaders of key federations and plant-based unions. Data gathering also included interviews with employers and government officials.
2. On union mobilization and cooperation during the 1970s, see Delgado (1982, 1984), Perry (1986, 54–80), and Santana, Suárez, and Aldana (1983).
3. Interview with Isaías Tristancho, president of USITRAS and a leading figure in this dissident movement, Apr. 1987, Bogotá. On the Santander alliance, see also Delgado (1984, 83).
4. Interview with Tristancho.
5. To make matters worse, by 1987 what was left of the CTC split into two factions: the metal and machine workers were led by Marco Córdova, while the sugar workers followed Apendis Alviz. When the data were being gathered, these two factions were at odds with each other and some of the unions involved were considering unilateral alliances with CUT and CTC unions. I conducted several interviews that touched on this subject: Alvaro Delgado, Colombian labor historian, Mar.–Apr. 1987, Bogotá; Marco Córdova (Federación de Trabajadores de las Industrias Metalúrgicas, Eléctricas y Mecánicas de Colombia, or FETRAMECOL), May 1987, Bogotá; Dagoberto Quiroga (IDEMA), Mar. 1987, Bogotá; and Mauricio Romero (Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, or CINEP), Feb. 1987, Bogotá.
6. Several persons interviewed, including former UTC and CTC executive committee members like Justiniano Espinoza (UTC) and Marco Córdova (CTC), insisted that the corruption charges were a major cause of union unrest. I was shown documents and private correspondence indicating some leaders’ involvement in embezzling union funds, misusing union accounts in the Banco de los Trabajadores, and negotiating secretly with the Medellín cartel.
7. Leaders of the UTC and CTC as well as dissidents shared the perception of union weakening. This topic came up in the following interviews: Alfonso Vargas, (president of the UTC), Apr. 1987, Bogotá; Marco Córdova (FETRAMECOL, CTC), Mar. 1987, Bogotá; Dagoberto Quiroga (CTC), Mar. 1987, Bogotá; Abel Rodríguez (of the Federación Colombiana de Educadores, or FECODE, also a founder of the CUT), May 1987, Bogotá; Justiniano Espinoza (founder of the UTC), June 1987, Bogotá; Jorge Carrillo (president of the CUT), Feb. 1987, Bogotá; Héctor José López (of the Federación Nacional Sindical de Trabajadores de Bancos Colombiana, or FENASIBANCOL, also a founder of the CUT), June 1987, Bogotá; and Isaías Tristancho (USITRAS), Apr. 1987, Bogotá.
8. The formation of USITRAS reveals the importance of middle-rank union officers in coalition formation. Because they felt that their constituencies were inadequately repre-

sented in confederation headquarters, these officers increasingly questioned confederation authorities about their inability to respond to structural changes and satisfy minimally the demands of their members. This dissatisfaction led to the formation of "renovation committees" within the CTC and UTC, which turned out to be ineffective in satisfying these leaders' demands. In fact, the committees increased expectations and thus fueled dissatisfaction.

9. I refer to the previously cited interview with Isaías Tristancho.
10. Notable differences existed within the same sector, however. For example, by the early 1980s, public health workers had organized under two industry unions belonging to the UTC and the CTC.
11. Interview with Alfonso Vargas, president of the UTC.
12. Beginning in the 1960s, employment expansion in the public sector became notorious. For example, in 1964 state employment accounted only for 8 percent of the economically active population (excluding agriculture), but by 1984 it represented 8 percent of the total active population and 12 percent of the nonagricultural work force (Londoño Botero 1986, 158).
13. A detailed analysis of labor legislation in the public sector can be found in H. Gómez et al. (1986, 162 and passim).
14. Interviews with labor leaders Dagoberto Quiroga and Isaías Tristancho.
15. Interview with Hugo López, president of FENASIBANCOL, June 1987, Bogotá.
16. Some autonomous unions also grouped certain workers as "trabajadores oficiales," such as railroad, transport, and oil workers.
17. Although important moves had been made previously toward liberalization, a landmark step in that direction was the financial reform of 1974. In that year, the financial sector was radically transformed according to the requirements of liberalization (see Reveiz Roldán and Pérez Piñero 1984, 48). On the role of the state in liberalizing the economy during the 1970s and 1980s, see González (1987, 25–43). On this strategy in general, see Echevarría and Perry (1981), Lara and Ocampo (1986), Perry (1981, 4), and Reveiz Roldán and Pérez Piñero (1984).
18. In less-developed countries, moves toward liberalization and the export of manufactured goods have been common in the emergence of newly industrializing countries that characterized the 1970s. According to Lewis, by 1975 manufactures already accounted for one-third of the exports of developing nations, excluding the oil-exporting countries (Lewis 1977, 36).
19. To be sure, the impact of this "parallel economy" must not be underestimated because it affected the structure of property ownership of the means of production. The "cartel" behind the drug traffic displaced traditional "oligarchies" from the rural areas by pushing them into other activities. In addition, new groups related to the cartel consolidated a definite presence in a number of urban-based ventures that ranged from banking and financing to real estate.
20. See Lora and Ocampo 1986, 4. A number of those interviewed agreed on these figures, including Tristancho, Romero, López, and Rodríguez.
21. Some analysts have argued that high levels of unionization have been associated with the electoral support received by leftist parties in national elections (Korpi 1983)). In this regard, evidence from Latin America tends to contradict the European experience. Latin American workers do not always vote for the parties that dominate their unions (the experience of Communist and Socialist organizers speaks for itself). Yet this conclusion does not mean that a government's unfriendliness toward unions is not reflected in national elections. In Latin American democracies, which are often characterized by arrangements involving two dominant parties, parties in power are fearful that worker discontent may provoke voter turnout in favor of the opposition.
22. Compare CUT (1986, especially 77–90). The CUT executive committee includes task forces on political and administrative matters, finances, public relations, communications, education, and labor relations.
23. Interview with Jorge Ricaude, General Secretary of the Asociación Nacional de Industriales (ANDI), June 1987, Bogotá.
24. Interviews with Isaías Tristancho (president of USITRAS), Abel Rodríguez (president of FECODE), and Héctor José López (president of FENASIBANCOL).

25. The idea of forming a "democratic" alliance had been discussed by CTC and UTC leaders for some time, but serious negotiations toward that goal started only in 1987, no doubt motivated by the presence of the CUT. In the near future, organized labor in Colombia may be grouped under two major confederations instead of five. Interviews with Alfonso Vargas (president of the UTC), Justiniano Espinoza (UTC founder), and Marco Córdova (president of FETRAMECOL and CTC founder).
26. It should be pointed out that important political groups and ANDI spokespersons have repeatedly expressed their support for such a project.
27. CUT leaders have seriously proposed the creation of a new political movement to be called the Izquierda Democrática and even the foundation of a labor party. See "La CUT: entre el sindicalismo y la política," *Análisis Político* (Bogotá), May 1987.
28. The point that these earlier patterns of labor incorporation are crucial to explaining not only union behavior but also regime outcomes has been suggested by Collier and Collier (1988). The most successful attempt at labor incorporation in Colombia took place during the first term of President Alfonso López Pumarejo (1934–1938). At this time, the Liberal party tried to secure urban constituencies by promoting the creation of the CTC, the first confederation in Colombian history that could count on government support.

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