
STUDY

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RURAL GUERRILLA IN CHILE: THE BATTLE AT THE FARM OF SAN MIGUEL (1968)

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This article describes the events that led to the first legal peasant's strike in Chile which happened under the Ley de Sindicación Campesina de 1967 (Farm Workers' Union of 1967). The strike, which took place at the farm of San Miguel (located in Chile's V Region) occurred between the months of June and August of 1968. It is considered as the first attempt by the Chilean Socialist Party of implementing its rural revolutionary strategies upon the Chilean central valley peasants: a group which was politically motivated. By using this concrete example, the investigation encompasses the questions of how strong the armed groups of these times were and of how much success the projects they embraced actually had.

PREFACE

Beginning the mid 1960's, the Chilean left wing begins to question how successful its peaceful strategies are in bringing about a socialist revolution. This questioning is brought about by three separate events: the Cuban revolution which demonstrated that a small militant group hidden in the mountains, using guerrilla-type warfare, could alone bring down an

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entire army and take over the country's government; the fall of Salvador Allende in the 1964 presidential elections against Eduardo Frei Montalva which showed how, when threatened, the right wing would actually vote for the Christian Democrat Party in order to stop a left wing victory; and, the continuous undermining of the political reforms taking place since 1939.

Faced with these events, a group of young socialists based in the city of Concepción, deviated from their political party, joined the Trotsky followers and together formed the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, or MIR (Left Wing Revolutionary Movement). The aim of this new group was to develop an armed front in order to bring about a socialist revolution. It did not believe in peaceful action but instead emphasized militarizing the most ignored sectors of the population: the poverty stricken peasants and dwellers.

In 1965, the Socialist Party, during its Congress in the town of Linares, also decides to change its ways and takes over those areas of the party which were considered most prone to embracing political military action. They believed that a combination of both pacific as well as violent outbreaks was the fastest way to accomplish their objective: that of building a socialist republic in Chile.

On the other hand, the Communist Party believed that the best strategy to achieve their goals was that of the *non armed way*. They emphasized peaceful mass confrontations. They did not, however, totally exclude the possibility of violent confrontations if that was what was needed to acquire power.

Thus it is during the mid 1960's that the Chilean left wing declares its radical transcendental change: *its armed fight*. From that moment on this option of violence was always to be a consideration. This decision will be a determinant factor in the future triumphs and failures of the left wing party of Chile. It is through the birth of this idea that we are able to understand how the Unidad Popular (Popular Coalition) evolved and to comprehend the events which led to the military coup of 1973.

This piece is part of a more extensive article named "La lucha armada de la izquierda chilena 1965-1973" (The armed fight of Leftist Chile, 1965-1973). We begin here with the "Batalla del fundo de San Miguel 1968" (The battle at the farm of San Miguel, 1968). This particular event was chosen because it is the first armed confrontation of national importance where we see how the guerrilla strategy which was used by the Socialist Party works. It is through this event that the Socialist Party begins militarizing politically inclined peasants: peasants who already belonged to the Sindicato Alianza (Alliance Union) group.

For six years we have investigated history by interviewing people who participated directly in this event. We have interviewed people in Stockholm (Sweden), Havana (Cuba), New York (United States), Paris (France), Leija (Belgium), Amsterdam (Holland), Munich (Germany), Buenos Aires (Argentina) and the Chilean cities of Valparaíso, Viña del Mar, Concepción, Los Andes, San Felipe and Santiago. We have also established complete archives in special collection areas in the University of Princeton (United States), which is the entity that granted a scholarship to the author of this article; at the Memorial Salvador Allende de la Habana, Cuba (Salvador Allende Memorial in Havana, Cuba); at the Fundación Salvador Allende de Santiago (Salvador Allende Foundation of Santiago) and in various other public and private universities.

In closing, throughout this article there are several names enclosed within quotation marks. The names thus represented are false. They have been created in order to protect real people. The author hopes that, with time, there will be a change in political susceptibilities which will enable the publication of the real names of these people.

PRESENTATION

The morning of Wednesday, July 31, 1968, the San Esteban borough in the area of Los Andes, belonging to the province of Aconcagua, was agitated. The air, which was usually cold at that time of the year, did not feel as it usually did. The peasants, women and children felt that something important was about to happen.

Along the old dirt road that led to the San Miguel farm, cars sped by bearing official senate emblems and carrying national and regional authorities. Trucks belonging to channel 9 as well as journalists and photographers from the newspapers of *El Clarín* and *La Tercera de la Hora* as well as from the magazines *Punto Final* and *VEA*, also drove by.

Several hours before, buses carrying 500 policemen belonging to the Grupo Móvil (Mobile Group) had arrived at the San Miguel farm along with police cars and six small tanks. Behind the parapets which had been built on the main house within the farm, 208 men awaited orders to begin shooting.

In the next few pages we will relate what happened during the “Batalla del fundo de San Miguel”.¹ What is presented here is the outcome

¹ The farmers who participated in this event call it “Revuelta de San Miguel” (“Uproar of San Miguel”). This conveys a tone of festivity and of transgression of the established laws. We have preferred to call it “Batalla de San Miguel” because it better reflects the real meaning that the people responsible for the uprising meant for it to be.

of the first legal strike that took place under the Ley de Sindicación Campesina² (Farm Workers' Union Law). It was also the first attempt at creating a guerrilla force among the rural workers. The driving force behind this event were the peasants of San Esteban who were members of the Sindicato Comunal Alianza (Communal Alliance Union), of the Federación Campesina 'Liberación' De Aconcagua (Aconcagua Peasant Workers' 'Liberty' Federation), of the Confederación Campesina e Indígena Ranquil (Confederation of Peasants and Indigenous People of Ranquil) and of the 'jóvenes ayudistas'³ ('helpful youth') of the Chilean Socialist Party.

1. The Farm of San Miguel (borough of San Esteban, province of Aconcagua)

The Aconcagua province is located north of the Metropolitan Region (Santiago). It is separated from the Metropolitan Region by the Chacabuco mountain range. The borough of San Esteban is on the eastern side of the region. It borders the Andean mountain range. This borough was established in 1936 by President Arturo Alessandri Palma. It has an area of 1,361.6 km² and is the largest of all the boroughs within today's province of Los Andes. In 1968 it boasted a population of 7,000 people and was part of the Los Andes district.

As you leave the city of Los Andes and go along the road towards San Esteban, the farm of San Miguel is located on the northern shore of the Aconcagua river. It lies 12 km northeast of the city of Los Andes and 5 km from San Esteban's municipal building.⁴ The origin of this site goes back in history. Until the end of the XIX century, it was used by travelers going between Los Andes and Mendoza as a last stop before facing the grueling mountain range trek. Later, this mountain territory was divided into plots of land. This is how the farm of San Miguel was established. The census of 1960 counted a total 146 inhabitants: 71 women and 75 men, as well as 23 houses.⁵ In 1968 this lot of land was considered among the most

² The legal text was decreed in the *Diario Oficial* (Official Newspaper) on April 29, 1967.

³ This is what we call the young militants belonging to the *Frente Interno* (Internal Front) or the military apparatus of the Socialist Party. They had rural military training and were sent to the San Miguel farm to help the peasants.

⁴ According to the official information of the Subdivisión Asignación de Tierras de la Corporación de la Reforma Agraria, CORA (1974), (Land Subdivision Allotment of the Agrarian Reform of 1974).

⁵ Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, INE, (1960), p. 22 (National Institute of Statistics).

prosperous of the area and it belonged to Mr. Ruperto Toro Bayle. To visit him you had to use the old international road which wound between vineyards and vegetable patches and passed right in front of his house.

Thirty years later, when you look at the house that belonged to Mr. Toro, it looks as if time has stood still. Almost nothing has changed about it: the old Spanish-style adobe house surrounded by its property walls; the vegetable patch with its flowering orange, peach and parsimony trees; its outlying storage buildings used to pack and store hay, all remain the same. The old houses of the workers and the soccer field also have not changed. The peace that this place conveys makes it difficult to imagine how it was here, on that morning so long ago, that dozens of men shot others and placed the attention of an entire nation upon the peasants who lived there and upon the strategies which the socialist revolutionaries used.⁶

2. The legal strike of the Sindicato Alianza de San Esteban (San Esteban Alliance Union), June-July of 1968

In January of 1968 a group of peasants belonging to the Socialist Party, who had not participated in the Asentamiento Triunfo Campesino (Peasant's Triumph Settlement), contacted Senator María Elena Carrera Villavicencio. She headed the Comisión Agraria Socialista, CONAS⁷ (Socialist Agrarian Commission). They wanted her to lead them in creating a socialist union for the borough of San Esteban.⁸

The Sindicato Alianza (Alliance Union) was formed by several independent workers who got together with peasants belonging to another 11 farms of the area. One of these farms was the farm of San Miguel, belonging to Ruperto Toro; La Toma, belonging to Mario Millán; San Regis; Santa Teresa; Cinco Hijuelas de La Florida, belonging to Adolfo Péndola and Sucesión Segura; Los Castaños, belonging to Bernardo Schmutzer; Las Bandurrias y Lo Calvo belonging to the Catán estate. Within the offices of the Dirección Provincial del Trabajo de Los Andes (Los Andes Province Office of Labor), the 154 members elected Segundo

⁶ The author visited this place in the spring of 1998. His viewpoints are based on that time.

⁷ Within the Socialist Party, The Comisión Agraria Socialista CONAS (Socialist Agrarian Commission) took care of all matters pertaining to the peasants. It was formed in the 1960's. Senator Salomón Corbalán was in charge of it.

⁸ Story as told by Bernardo Tapia, peasant and leader of the Sindicato Alianza. Look for place and dates of interviews in the list of interviewees. This may be found in the section entitled "Referencias" at the end of this article.

Saavedra S. (also known as Don Segua) as their president. Their board of directors was composed by Carlos Hernandez, Bernardo Tapia and Pedro Páez. The structure of this union also included a representative for each one of the farms. The Ley de Sindicación Campesina de 1967 (Farm Workers' Union of 1967) gave immunity to union representatives and their employers had to give them time off in order to take care of union matters. The hours not worked had to be paid for by the organization.⁹

The Alliance Union was the founding entity of the Federación Provincial de Sindicatos Agrícolas de Aconcagua (Federation for the Province of Aconcagua's Agricultural Workers' Union) otherwise known as "Liberación" (Liberation). This entity was created March 17, 1968, in the city of San Felipe. Its first president was Pascual Salinas Cruz.¹⁰

The Confederación Nacional de Campesinos e Indígenas Ranquil (National Confederation of Peasants and Indigenous People of Ranquil), an organization linked to the leftist party,¹¹ grouped itself with 'Liberación'.

While the farm workers got organized, so did the estate owners. The Ley de Sindicación Campesina (Farm Workers' Union) allowed for employer unions to form. A minimum of ten employers were required. The night of July 29, 1967, the owners of San Esteban met in the house of the Zenteno family.¹² An assembly was organized to constitute the Sindicato de Empleadores Agrícolas (Agricultural Employers Union). Benigno Zenteno Zelaya was elected president. Pablo Casas Auger was named secretary.¹³ In this manner, the employers of the area formed an organization that could represent them all of them in any matters pertaining to agricultural development.

In May of 1968, the leaders of the Sindicato Alianza composed the first list of worker's petitions and presented it to the Sindicato de Agricultores de San Esteban (San Esteban Agricultural Union). This was the first time that work matters were being conducted between unions and not individually between farm owners and laborers. The petitions included a

⁹ Ley de Sindicación Campesina (Farm Workers' Union Law) articles 11 and 13.

¹⁰ Acta de Constitución de la Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores Agrícolas 'Liberación' de Aconcagua, 1968.

¹¹ See Gómez, Sergio. *El Movimiento campesino en Chile*, 1985 (The Peasant Movement of Chile, 1985) p. 12. A complete analysis regarding this organization can be read in Almino Alfonso's *Movimiento Campesino Chileno*, 1970 (Chilean Peasant Movement, 1970) volume I, p 125-126.

¹² Ley de Sindicación Campesina, article I.

¹³ "Sindicato de Empleadores Agrícolas de San Esteban", *La Aurora* newspaper of Los Andes.

*E° represents the word "Escudo", which was the Chilean local coin at that time (today it is the Peso). The sign E° is the abbreviated form of Escudo and is used interchangeably by the author throughout this piece. Both mean the same.

minimum salary of *E° 15 a day for the common farm laborer and of E° 20 for specialized laborers, such as tractor drivers and mechanics as well as a few extras. The employers counter offered with a mere 21.9 per cent increase over their actual salary of 7 Escudos a day. In other words, the workers would earn E° 8.50 a day, an amount that, according to the workers, was not enough to live on.¹⁴ The argument of the employers union was based upon the expectation of a rising inflation. And inflation did go up: there was a 30 per cent increase in 1968 and between 1969-70 it rose 35 per cent.¹⁵

The union members held a general assembly and by a large margin voted down the counteroffer, finding it insufficient. They agreed to go to the Inspección de Trabajo de Los Andes (the Los Andes Occupational Health and Safety Authority equivalent). The department director, Ana Canaán, called a meeting upon the Junta Permanente de Conciliación Agrícola¹⁶ (Permanent Coalition for Agricultural Conciliation).

During the last days of May and the first days of June several meetings between both parties were held. No agreement was reached. The employers who had originally opposed the creation of the peasant's union, a union which they traditionally distrusted, agreed not to give in to the wage adjustment petitions. They backed up their decision by stating that market prices for their products had gone down and by mentioning a slowing down of the economy caused by the severe drought which affected the area. Their argument was based upon facts: in 1967 only 173 millimeters, or 60% of the average annual rain fall, fell over the area; in 1968 the amount of rain was the same and in 1969 there was almost no rain. The Sindicato de Agricultores (Agricultural Union) held that the wage increase being asked for placed the agricultural business in serious jeopardy. Meanwhile, the peasants, led by Ranquil, by the Federación 'Liberación' and by the Comisión Agraria Socialista -CONAS (Socialist Agrarian Commission), maintained that agriculture remained strong as an industry and that their employers opposed the wage increase only because they did not want to recognize the validity of the union: a union which they considered communist.¹⁷

¹⁴ "Paro de 11 fundos afecta a 280 familias: Senadora Carrera enfrenta conflicto", (Strike of 11 farms affects 280 Families: Senator Carrera takes on the Conflict), article in *La Aurora*, newspaper of Los Andes N° 11.744, Tuesday, February 6, 1968. The president, Benigno Zenteno, who was also known as Nino, was a militant member of the Partido Nacional (National Party).

¹⁵ Julio César Jobet, *El Partido Socialista de Chile*, 1971, volume II, p. 143.

¹⁶ Organization created by the Ley de Sindicación Campesina (Farm Workers' Union Law) as a go-between during agricultural conflicts.

¹⁷ Story told by Bernardo Tapia (peasant, leader of the Alliance Union).

On the second of June, all of the workers got together in the theater of San Esteban. Speeches strong in nature regarding worker-peasant unity were loudly cheered and applauded. Among the most effective speeches were those of Rolando Calderon, vice president of the Confederación Ránquil, and of Segundo Saavedra S., president of the Sindicato Alianza (Alliance Union). The workers voted for a legal strike. The meeting had a festive note about it and after their decision they ate empanadas and drank chicha.¹⁸

After the meeting they immediately formed strike committees and a committee for the diffusion the news. A vigilance committee was also created for the purpose of overseeing that no farm property would be removed from the premises. They stockpiled food and money.¹⁹

That is how, at 8 o'clock on the morning of July 17, 1968, the first legal peasants' strike began. The national flag was risen at all three locations at the same time. Women played an important role in the conflict: they were placed in charge of the food and created and organized communal kitchens at the 'Lo Calvo' farm and at the doors of the farm 'Cinco Hijuelas de La Florida'.²⁰ They also participated in the marches, in the meetings and in the guarding of those farms which had been taken over.²¹

The solidarity between the workers was immediately apparent: the Sindicato de Trabajadores Agrícolas del Sauce (El Sauce Agricultural Workers' Union), a union with communist tendencies and which was affiliated to the Federación 'Liberación', donated 400 escudos worth of non perishable food.²² The Central Única de Trabajadores de Aconcagua-CUT, (Aconcagua Central Unitary Workers' Union) which was led by a communist militant leader named Eduardo Velastín Rodríguez, also made a donation.²³ A priest of the San Esteban parish, Humberto Muñoz, manifested his support for the strike by preaching about it as well as

¹⁸ Chicha is a liquor derived from grapes produced in the area. It is sweet and has a high alcohol content.

¹⁹ Story told by Miguel Aguilar, an occasional farm laborer.

²⁰ Story by Oscar Ibaceta Zelaya, son of Oscar Ibaceta Espíndola, manager of the Cinco Hijuelas de La Florida farm. He was not a member of the Union and he did not take part in the strike. At the time he was 20 years old. He remembers perfectly the place where the flag was risen and where the communal kitchens were established.

²¹ Story told by Bernardo Tapia (peasant, leader of the Alliance Union).

²² "Strike of 11 farms affects 280 families: Senator Carrera takes on the conflict", article in *La Aurora* newspaper of Los Andes N° 11.860, Wednesday June 26, 1968. This union was composed of workers from the farm of El Sauce which was located in the borough of Los Andes. During the 1930's, this farm was bought out by the government. In 1968 it belonged to an American mining company named Compañía Minera Salto del Soldado.

²³ Story by Eduardo Velastín Rodríguez, teacher who was also the provincial president of the CUT).

organizing a food drive for the workers. The priest's attitude was merely a reflection of the new way in which the Catholic and Apostolic Church of Aconcagua was interpreting the Scriptures. This entity immediately sided with the peasants and acted as a legitimizing agent for the conflict of the workers.²⁴ Likewise, Francisco Perinetti D., mayor of San Esteban and also member of the Partido Nacional (National Party) donated a barrel of oil and other groceries to the communal kitchens. The mayor, who did not agree with the strike and who was actually a part of the group of employers, gave food to the strikers simply because he knew them and knew they were "good and behaved that way because they were being pushed by outsiders." Also, because children and women should not be made to suffer the consequences of peasant naiveté.²⁵

The Dirección Regional Aconcagua del Partido Socialista (Regional Chapter for Aconcagua's Socialist Party) was also on the move. It ordered the Los Andes' governor, Luis Muñoz González, to coordinate whatever was needed in order to help in the conflict. Every day, Mr. Muñoz visited the communal kitchens taking fish, vegetables and other such aid. Owners of the vegetable and fruit stands at the Los Andes market as well as other smaller agricultural producers, also supported the peasants' strike. Socialist Senators María Elena Carrera, Carlos Altamirano and Under Secretary General Adonis Sepúlveda Acuña, also supported the peasants by advising them regarding strategies that best would resolve the conflict.²⁶

The problems started a few days after the strike had begun. Adolfo Péndola, owner of the farm Cinco Hijuas de La Florida, sold a mare. When the new mare owners, Rolando and Javier González (also known as "bad steel"), tried to leave the farm with their new acquisition, the peasants, led by Javier Reyes, tried to stop them by closing the farm gates with chains and locks. They claimed that the 33rd chapter of the Ley de Sindicación Campesina (Farm Workers' Union Law) stated that owners of farms under strike were prohibited from removing any "animals, machines or products except perishables from the premises."²⁷ A few days later, Carlos Guajardo, a local plow worker who did not belong to the striking union and who had

²⁴ Juan Briceño, priest of the parish of Santa Rosa de Los Andes.

²⁵ Francisco Perinetti Dighero, Italian immigrant. He arrived in San Esteban towards the end of the 1930's. He worked as a distributor of fruits. Later he bought a small farm. Politically, he participated in the Partido Liberal (Liberal Party). Later, he was mayor of San Esteban. He died in 1997.

²⁶ Stories by: María Elena Carrera, former senator for the Socialist Party; Adonis Sepúlveda Acuña, former senator, undersecretary general of the Socialist Party; Eduardo Velastín Rodríguez, teacher and former president of CUT's regional chapter as well as communist activist).

²⁷ Official Newspaper, # 26.730, Saturday, April 29, 1967.

gone to the farm to work, was violently thrown out of the property by these same laborers. Javier Reyes, the brothers Juan, Pablo and Salvador Cisterna, Luis Reinoso, Miguel Espinosa and Luis Montoya (the farm's tractor driver), stood on the dirt grooves²⁸ marking the roadway, faced Guajardo and forced him to leave escorting him out to the public road.²⁹ Likewise, on July 25, the Alliance Union spread a statement saying that "a serious incident almost took place on Tuesday at the Santa Teresa farm. It was caused by work inspector Ana Canaán who asked for police reinforcement in order to enable workers to plant tobacco plants."³⁰ This dispute arose because of the interpretation awarded to article # 33 of the Ley de Sindicación Campesina (Farm Workers' Union Law). It stated that, once a strike was declared, "all farm activity, except that activity absolutely necessary for the preservation of fruit, plants and animals, had to come to a complete stop". Legal entities were obliged to supply emergency personnel in order to ensure that activities relating to the preservation of perishable goods be continued.³¹ The Alliance Union peasants claimed that planting tobacco plants was not an *absolutely necessary* activity while the farm owners declared that the planting of the tobacco plants was vital in ensuring the existence of the farms. Ana Canaán thus decided to ask for police help in order to ensure that work be completed. The farm workers objected and were supported by workers from neighboring farms. Their determination forced the workers, who were at the farm ready to plant tobacco, to leave. After that, and due to pressures from Ms. Ana Canaán, the Los Andes governor, Jaime Rodríguez, ordered the police to stay out of the fight.³² The group of peasants who was against the planting of the tobacco plants was led by Atilio Arredondo and Leoncio Vásquez. Union members were able to convince people foreign to their cause that the conflict was one that would aid in the cause of all laborers by alluding to the support given them by the working class as well as by making reference that this was a fight against injustices of all employers.³³

²⁸ "grooves" describes the plow's indentation marks left behind on the dirt.

²⁹ Carlos Guajardo was around 45 years old at this time. He made his living by renting out lands to plant melons and watermelons. He also owned a tractor, and would be hired to plow the lands of the neighboring farms. This "independent" line of work gave him a higher status than that of the other peasants. Also, he was friends with Jose Quiroga, a client of his, making him an ideological sympathizer of the National Party. For these reasons, he strongly opposed the strike.

³⁰ "*Momios* siguen buscando el odio a los campesinos" ("The Rich keep looking for hatred among the peasants"), newspaper *El Clarín*, Friday, June 28, 1968.

³¹ *Diario Oficial* (Official Newspaper), Saturday, April 29, 1967.

³² "*Momios* siguen buscando el odio a los campesinos" ("The Rich keep looking for hatred among the peasants"), newspaper *El Clarín*, Friday, June 28, 1968.

³³ Story of Bernardo Tapia (peasant and leader of the Alliance Union).

Ten days after the strike had begun, Senator Carrera visited the farms and told the workers that she would file a formal complaint against Ms. Canaán at the Department of Labor. She also stated that if the workers' demands were not resolved promptly she would give due course to the expropriation of the lands in question, just as the striking peasants had originally proposed.³⁴

Thursday, July 18, thirty days after the strike had begun, the peasants and their families marched into the city of Los Andes carrying signs alluding to their cause. At 5 o'clock, they began their march beginning at the Aconcagua river. The crowd was headed by farm leaders Rolando Calderón, of the Ranquil Confederation; Pascual Barraza, of the Federation 'Liberation', and by Segundo Saavedra, president of the Alliance Union. Beside them, and leading the march were, Salvador Allende, Senate President; Eduardo Osorio, Congressman, and the Los Andes socialist mayors Luis Muñoz and Arturo Zuleta; beside them was Julio Contreras Muñoz in his double role as socialist governor and as striking peasant. During their march, they received the support of the town dwellers who stood by their doors and watched the crowd parade by. Many young people joined the group. The march ended with heated speeches where the peasants asked for an end to the conflict because their families were starting to go hungry. Luis Muñoz, the governor, went on stage to emphasize the allegiance of the Socialist Party; Pascual Salinas, went up on behalf of the Federación 'Liberación'; Rolando Calderón, spoke on behalf of the Confederación Campesina e Indígena Ranquil; Congressman Osorio and Senator Allende³⁵ also spoke. A few days later, another gathering was held in the Plaza de Armas of Los Andes. Senator Allende again spoke at that time.³⁶

3. The siege of the San Miguel farm

The strike continued. After 45 days, and despite the strong support awarded to the peasants, the employers would not budge in their decision to not raise the workers' salaries. Their aim was to wear down the people thus provoking a division between the strikers, breaking up their unity and

³⁴ "Momios siguen buscando el odio a los campesinos" ("The Rich keep looking for hatred among the peasants"), newspaper *El Calrín*, Friday, June 28, 1968.

³⁵ "Solución a sus problemas piden en combativa concentración" ("In heated debate, peasants ask for a resolution to their problems"), article in *La Aurora* newspaper, of Los Andes, #11.880, Friday, July 19, 1968.

³⁶ Story by Bernardo Tapia (peasant, leader of the Alliance Union).

failing the strike.³⁷ For the owners of the San Miguel farm, it was imperative to re-establish order and to get the peasants back to work. They saw it as the only way in which to maintain the political and social homogeneity of the borough. This homogeneity had already been questioned after the results of the latest elections.³⁸ The land owners feared that if the strikers succeeded, the hierarchical order of San Esteban would collapse. Faced with this possibility, they remained firmly and solidly united.³⁹

During those days a group of young members of the Socialist Party's *Frente Interno* (Internal Front) had arrived in San Esteban, from Santiago. They remained secretly hidden in houses of militant supporters. This group had recently been created to ensure that the agreements made during the Congreso Chillán of 1967 were followed.⁴⁰

Slightly after their arrival, the Comité de Huelga (Strike Committee) met at a walnut tree on the edge of the Aconcagua river. There they made a complete analysis of the developments that the conflict had caused and the situation which they now faced. They then discussed alternative solutions. They proposed the possibility of ending the strike but this was firmly discarded because, for the Socialist Party, it was vitally important that the first legal strike embarked upon by the peasants be a success. They held that this would motivate other unions to follow the example of San Esteban thus provoking a situation of real insurrection in all rural areas. However, the more responsible members knew that the strike could not continue and if it went on a few more days, it would break apart. Because of this, the leaders felt forced to increase the pressure on the farm owners and on the government. They decided to create a political event that would veer the *attention* of the country towards their conflict: a conflict that had already gone on for far too long without a solution. Several alternatives were discussed. However, the course of action proposed by the group "jóvenes

³⁷ Story by "Raúl Marcos", "helping youth" of the Socialist Party. In the San Miguel farm he acted as chief of the brigade. He was a university student, of a middle class family from Santiago. At the university he had joined the socialist movement. He was part of the *Frente Interno*, a militant division of the Socialist Party.

It is important that the reader knows that those names placed between quotation marks are not real. They are aimed at protecting the true identity of members of the *Frente Interno*, or like militant division, of the Socialist Party.

³⁸ During the governor's elections of 1967, the Nationalist Party obtained 947 votes vs. the Christian Democrat party's 707 votes and the Socialist Party's 351 votes. The citizens elected two governors. Among those governors elected were two christian democrats, and one socialist. (Elección Ordinaria de gobernadores, Sunday, April 2, 1967, province of Aconcagua).

³⁹ This statement was given by Oscar Ibaceta Zelaya (entrepreneur, son of the manager of the Cinco Hijuelas farm).

⁴⁰ Story by "Raul Marcos", member of the Socialist Party's "helping youth".

ayudistas” (helping youth) was chosen: they proposed the *taking over* of the San Miguel farm.⁴¹

Strategically, the main thing to consider for the taking over of the farm, was its location. Surrounded by a canal of the same name, by the Aconcagua River and by some hills, the San Miguel farm was the most difficult of the farms to defend. It had several emergency exits. Besides, they felt it necessary to punish Ruperto Toro, the farm’s owner, who along with Teodoro Zenteno⁴² were the most fervent opponents of reaching an agreement with the peasants.⁴³

The “jovenes ayudistas” took over the planning of the siege. They wanted to show their paramilitary knowledge, have their “baptism by fire” experience and see just how strong a reaction the government and the military would have. It is by the name of “Anibal Ruiz” that we will call the man who led the siege of San Miguel. In 1968 he was 23 years old. Born in the house of the owner of a small farm of the area of Rancagua, his family moved to the Aconcagua region when he was still quite small. Under his father’s influence, he joined the Socialist Party as a militant. In the mid 1960’s, he went to Cuba with a group of young men in order to receive training in rural guerrilla warfare. He was the militant with the most experience. He also was the highest ranked person among the peasants. He was trusted by party members and thus was awarded autonomy in organizing all the actions that were embarked upon by the group. These responsibilities included all what took place at the farm of San Miguel.⁴⁴

So at around midnight, creeping under the umbrella of a walnut forest, their path lit by the light of an old flashlight, a group led by the confident “Aníbal Ruiz” sealed the fate of the conflict: over the next days the striking peasants of the Alliance Union *took over* the San Miguel farm.⁴⁵ In our opinion, this action radically altered the dimensions of the strike. The conflict, through this uprising, became an illegal event which violated institutional order, hampered public safety and affected the right of property owners.

In order to complete the siege, “Anibal Ruiz” went to Santiago to meet with other militants. He organized different brigades. The leader of this

⁴¹ Story by Javier Reyes (peasant of Cinco Hijuas de La Florida).

⁴² Teodoro Zenteno, agriculturer, was the man in charge at the farm for decades. He was a liberal militant, and he was elected mayor for several terms. During the strike, he was the most fervent opponent of reaching an agreement with the union. He died at the end of the 1980’s.

⁴³ Story by Javier Reyes, (peasant of the Cinco Hijuas de La Florida farm)

⁴⁴ Story by María Elena Carrer (former senator, director of CONAS) and by “Raúl Marcos” (‘joven ayudista’ and member of the Chilean Socialist Party).

⁴⁵ Story by Javier Reyes (peasant of Cinco Hijuas de La Florida).

nucleus was “Claudio Pardo.” Since he was related to several important political figures of the time, he could use official government cars allowing him ease in accomplishing his mission. That is how a Czechoslovakian machine gun bearing the coat of arms of the Bolivian army, several guns, Winchester rifles, shotguns, projectiles and explosives, found their way to the farm of San Miguel.⁴⁶

The ‘jóvenes ayudistas’ gathered secretly in the houses of people who could be trusted and who lived near the farm. Here they made antitank grenades, Vietnamese bombs and molotov cocktails.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, “Aníbal Ruiz” formed three brigades comprised of those peasants who were the most determined, disciplined and brave. He particularly chose those who had already completed their military training and thus had experience in handling weapons. He coached these chosen ones explaining the reasons why it was necessary to take over the farm; He affirmed them that this uprising constituted an extremely important act as this was the first time in the history of Chile that a group of armed peasants would face the power of the Government; He told them that San Miguel was the “Sierra Maestra” of the Chilean revolution and that it was upon their leadership and success that other Chilean workers would look towards to fight for their rights; He detailed the objectives they were aiming for; Finally, he guided them in what type of semi-military behavior they had to exhibit.⁴⁸

The first battle group was led by “Raul Marcos.” This name protects the identity of this student who until September of 1973 belonged to the *Frente Interno* of the Socialist Party. The second battle group was led by “Jorge Cerda.” It is under this pseudonym that we will know the militant of the *Frente Interno* who in 1968 was barely 20 years old. He belonged to a middle class family in Santiago and had been a member of the Socialist Party since he was a child. He had paramilitary training and was a karate expert.

⁴⁶ Story by “Raul Marcos” (“joven ayudista” of the Socialist Party of Chile).

⁴⁷ Story by Bernardo Tapia (peasant and leader of the Alliance Union) and by Luis Montoya (peasant of the Cinco Hijuas de La Florida).

⁴⁸ Story by Bernardo Tapia (peasant, leader of the Alliance Union) and by Luis Montoya (peasant of the Cinco Hijuas de La Florida).

The Sierra Maestra is a mountain in Cuba. This is where Fidel Castro’s army trained and became strong. It was from here that Castro led the offensive which led to his victory on July 1, 1959. Because of this, the Sierra Maestra became a symbol for all Latin-American revolutionists. When “Aníbal Ruiz” was in Cuba, he absorbed the thesis spread by Che Guevara, that the Andean mountain range of South America was the Sierra Maestra of the Latin-American revolution. His words, which are remembered to this day by the older peasants, were: “Convertiremos la cordillera de Los Andes en otra Sierra Maestra y San Miguel será el principio.” (“We will make the Andean Range into another Sierra Maestra and San Miguel will be the beginning”).

The third brigade was led by “Juan Herrera”, head of the Aconcagua Socialist Party regional chapter military group.⁴⁹ He was a peasant from San Felipe.

On the night of July 28 they tested their weapons, finished making their explosives and specified the duties of the different missions. They made several reconnaissance expeditions and were able to verify that Ruperto Toro, the farm’s owner, was there.⁵⁰ The 29th was a day of tense wait. By mid afternoon, a socialist leader who had been alerted by the militants, showed up in the area and spoke with the leader. “Ruiz” explained what they were going to do, asserted that they were ready to face the opposition and that there was no turning back. The leader returned to Santiago convinced that he had to alert the Comisión Política (Political Commission) of the socialist party as well as to inform the different press means they controlled. He contended that the situation could be serious, that there could be a loss of control and that probably a massacre would end up taking place.⁵¹ This is how the day came to a worrisome end.

Thus, a little before 11 o’clock on the dark night of July 29, 1968, the brigades began their march. Everyone carried weapons or explosives. The third group, led by “Juan Herrera,” had the mission of cutting the only phone line that connected the main house to the outside world. Lack of experience and knowledge in how telephone cabling worked, led them to cut out more than 100 meters of cable.⁵²

The objective of the second brigade was to capture Teófilo Serey, the farm’s administrator. Under the command of “Jorge Astorga”, they took Serey and Serey’s wife by surprise, quickly reduced them and took away their gun. “Jorge Astorga” had been born in the farming area of Talca and had rural guerrilla training. At this same time, the third group approached the door that led to the sleeping quarters of Ruperto Toro, owner of the farm. The knocked and when Toro opened, “El Viejo” pointed at him with the machine gun and reduced him. “El Viejo” was second in command. At the time of this event, he was a middle aged man, of farming origins, who had received rural guerrilla training. He was the one responsible of carrying the Czechoslovakian machine gun, the strongest of all the weapons that the group had. The people who were captured were locked up in two rooms and guarded constantly. By midnight, all three brigades had accomplished their

⁴⁹ Story by “Juan Herrera” (laborer, Socialist Party militant). During this time, Aconcagua had a small paramilitary group. They had few weapons and little training.

⁵⁰ Story by “Juan Herrera” (laborer, Socialist Party militant).

⁵¹ Story by Adonis Sepúlveda Acuña (former under secretary general of the Socialist Party).

⁵² Story by “Jorge Cerda” (“joven ayudista” of the Socialist Party of Chile).

assigned objectives and the leaders went to report to “Anibal Ruiz” who was holed up in a nearby house. Shortly after that, “Anibal Ruiz” went to the main house on board a green “Willy’s”^{*} jeep. At 0:30 hours on Tuesday, July 30, 1968, the farm of San Miguel *had been taken under siege via the use of force* by the strikers of the Alliance Union. They had been commandeered by “Anibal Ruiz”, and seconded by the “jóvenes ayudistas” of the Socialist Party of Chile.⁵³ The first phase of the Battle of San Miguel had been accomplished.

That morning, the peasants gathered material to strengthen themselves. Around the main house, they built a trench and fortified it with bags of foliage, wheat and hay. “Anibal Ruiz” placed his command post here. The peasants also strengthened the four sides of the house and they built a parapet approximately 30 meters from the street. They also dug anti-tank trenches in places considered tank accessible. Meanwhile, in the surrounding areas several groups of armed men kept watch over every one of the farm’s points of entry. Their orders were to not allow access to anyone without previous authorization of the commander.⁵⁴

By mid morning the mayor of San Esteban, Francisco Perinetti D., arrived at the farm in the company of Ernesto Sepulveda Opazo, criminal judge of Los Andes. Both had police protection. However, the peasants did not allow them entry. The judge thus verified that the farm of San Miguel as well as the road that lead to it had been taken over and were under the control of the Alliance Union strikers. He stated that 208 men were hiding in the trenches awaiting to see what happened. Because of this, there remained only two alternatives: or the opposing parties reached an agreement and the peasants voluntarily left the area, or the peasants would be forcefully removed.⁵⁵

4. The combat at the San Miguel farm, July 31, 1968

The night of July 30, 1968, in the government house of the province of Los Andes, an agreement began to be reached. This agreement was to be

^{*} A brand of jeep.

⁵³ Story by “Raul Marcos” (“jóven ayudista” of the Socialist Party of Chile).

⁵⁴ Story by “Raul Marcos” (“jóven ayudista” of the Socialist Party of Chile).

⁵⁵ “Raul Marcos” (“jóven ayudista” of the Socialist Party of Chile). “Jorge Cerda” (“jóven ayudista” of the Socialist Party of Chile). “Los violentos sucesos del fundo San Miguel” (“The violent acts at the San Miguel farm”) article in *Vea* magazine #1.523, August 8, 1968, p. 25; Alfonso Bórquez (correspondent), newspaper *La Tercera de la Hora*, Wednesday, July 31, 1968, p.7.

ratified by 6:00 o'clock on July 31. As a consequence, the owner of the farm was let go. The farm manager and his family had already been set free.⁵⁶

That same night, the Minister of the Department of Internal Affairs, Edmundo Pérez Zujovic, took matters into his own hands and ignoring the agreement reached, ordered the General Huerta, Director of the Police, to vacate the entrenched peasants from the farm.

At dawn on Wednesday, July 31, 1968, over 500 armed policemen from the Grupo Movil took their places in front of the main house and along the road that led to it. They had six tanks for back-up. The troops were led by General Humberto Araya and by the prefect of the province of Aconcagua, Lieutenant Colonel Jorge Jiles Suazo.⁵⁷

Senator Maria Elena Carrera, responsible for the Comision Agraria Socialista-CONAS (Socialist Agrarian Commission), arrived at the farm at 11:30 and asked General Araya, chief of the troops, time to speak with the Mr. Perez Zujovic because she feared a massacre. "My orders are firm and do not allow for postponement, Senator" he responded. "At 12:15 p.m. I'm going in; this order should have already been met at dawn."⁵⁸

At 11:30 from Santiago came the order to vacate the premises. An officer announced this over a loudspeaker system and ordered the peasants to leave the premises immediately. The leader of the entrenched peasants responded negatively.⁵⁹

At 12:15, an officer blew his whistle and the battle began. A ferocious bombardment of tear gas contaminated the cold pre-mountainous air: hundreds of bombs were thrown from the tanks. Affected by asphyxia, peasants abandoned the front line trenches and retreated. From the parapets that faced the hill, a peasant who did not have the patience to wait for the directions of the leader of his brigade, threw a box full of grenades thus immobilizing a tank which, circumventing an anti-tank trench, had intended to enter the patio by knocking down a wall.⁶⁰ At the same time,

⁵⁶ "Los violentos sucesos del fundo San Miguel ("The violent acts at the San Miguel farm") article in *Vea* magazine #1.523, August 8, 1968, p. 25.

⁵⁷ That morning, on the road which led to the farm, a 5 year old girl named Jacqueline Báez B. was run over by a van belonging to the San Felipe county. The child died while being treated at the hospital of Los Andes. The car was driven by cadet José Camus O. See Luis Borquéz (correspondent), "Violento desalojo en el fundo San Miguel" ("Violent Ousting at the farm of San Miguel"), newspaper *La Tercera de la Hora*, August 1, 1968, p. 12.

⁵⁸ "Los sucesos de San Miguel", ("The Events of San Miguel") article in *Punto Final* magazine, #61, August 13, 1968.

⁵⁹ Alfonso Luis Borquéz (correspondent), "Violento desalojo en el fundo San Miguel" ("Violent Ousting at the farm of San Miguel"), article in the newspaper *La Tercera de la Hora*, August 1, 1968, p. 12.

⁶⁰ The explosion was very strong; the vehicle was lifted off of the ground and its axles broke.

other peasants began *shooting against the police*. This action was emphasized by Alfredo Guerra, his knee on the ground as he had been taught during his military service, aimed his Winchester shotgun between the smoke trying to hit one of the tank drivers.⁶¹ The inexperience in battle of the entrenched peasants, the bad quality of their weapons, the asphyxia and the distance, did not enable them to hit their target.⁶² Minutes later, when the peasants took refuge inside the main house, “El Viejo” shot a machine-gun round with the weapon he carried. The shots could be heard clearly and this paralyzed the police force for a few minutes. After that, silence ensued: a silence that announced what the outcome of the battle would be.⁶³

Machine-gun fire announced that the infantry and cavalry troops of the Grupo Móvil had passed into offensive mode. The tanks tore down the adobe walls and managed to get into the patio. From his post of command, “Anibal Ruiz” gave the order to stop the fight. He sent someone to rise the white flag as a sign of defeat: however, the police perforated it with gun fire. The leaders of the siege tried to avoid a massacre of the peasants and surrender. The group of 40 men who were defending the main trench obeyed. They threw down their weapons, raised their arms and surrendered. They were punished severely by the police. At this, the peasants lost all order as they began to be chased by the cavalry. Some groups fled to the river on foot and horseback while others went towards the hills. The hunt for the insurgents had begun. Senator Carrera placed herself between the strikers troops trying to prevent them from beating of those peasants who had surrendered. The police were physically violent against the rebels.⁶⁴

The outcome of the battle left several peasants with varying degrees of injuries. Two policemen belonging to the Grupo Móvil had mild wounds:

⁶¹ Story by “Jorge Cerda” (“joven ayudista” of the Socialist Party of Chile). Peasant Alfredo Guerra died in 1999.

⁶² The decisive factor of the confrontation were the tear gas bombs which were thrown out in great quantities by the police during the first moments of the fight. The defenders could support an intense gun fight, but they could not withstand the sense of asphyxiation that the chemical gases caused, a police major assured. See article written by Augusto Carmona in the *Punto Final* magazine, #61, Tuesday, August 13, 1968, p. 28-29. According to the testimony given by peasant Javier Reyes, the weapons were of bad quality. During the confrontation the gun he had got stuck and he was not able to shoot off more than 10 rounds.

⁶³ Augusto Carmona “La Batalla del Fundo de San Miguel” (“The Battle at the San Miguel Farm”) *Punto Final* magazine, #61, Tuesday, August 13, 1968.

⁶⁴ In order to reconstruct the confrontation we have used statements given by “jovenes ayudistas”, “Raul Marcos” and “Anibal Ruiz”, of the Socialist Party; of peasants Bernardo Tapia and Javier Reyes; from daily newspapers, newspapers and magazines: *La Tercera de la Hora*, *El Clarín*, *La Aurora* de Los Andes and articles from *Punto Final* and VEA.

Jose Navarro Henández suffered a bullet wound in his left cheek and Viterbo Henríquez had multiple injuries on his legs caused by shrapnel. Both were hospitalized.⁶⁵

The police managed to capture 101 of the 208 peasants who had been entrenched in the farm. The detainees were severely beaten and then transferred in buses to the Los Andes commissary and there they were thrown into an empty pool. A high ranking official went up to them and taking advantage of the situation the peasants were in, threatened to burn their houses. “Anibal Ruiz”, the peasants’ leader, made him quiet down. Ruiz reaffirmed the trust he had in the loyalty of the man who had led them into this confrontation.⁶⁶ The next day they were taken to the Valparaiso prison and the government charged them of breaking the Ley de Seguridad Interior del Estado (State Security Law).

Their arrival to the port of Valparaiso was like a scene straight out of the movies. At 9:15 on Thursday, August 1, the police shut down traffic in the Plaza Victoria and Rodriguez streets along the street of Independencia. At 9:30, four buses belonging to the Grupo Móvil of Santiago, transported the 101 detainees down Colon street. They were escorted by several Valparaiso city police cars. The prisoners were taken to a theater within the prison grounds.⁶⁷ Since there were more prisoners than space allowed, the prison guards ordered the prisoners to clear out an area that had bails of hay. As a sign of rebellion, that night the prisoners took the bails of hay and built a trench similar to the one they had created at the San Miguel farm. The next morning, a peasant known to have a low IQ woke up frightened not recognizing where he was and yelled: “Which farm have we taken over now?” The sentence caused generalized laughter. This anecdote is one of the most remembered by the protagonists.

President Frei Montalva’s administration and the right winged party qualified this event as a serious guerrilla confrontation. During a press conference, the Minister of the Department of Interior Affairs, Edmundo Perez Zujovic, said: “Peasants had a powerful arsenal....”⁶⁸ This phrase was

⁶⁵ “Niñita muerta y dos carabineros heridos es saldo del conflicto en San Esteban” (“Girl dead and two wounded policemen is the balance of the San Esteban conflict”), Article in *La Aurora* de Los Andes, #11.890, July 31, 1968.

⁶⁶ Story by “Raul Marcos” (“joven ayudista” from the Socialist Party of Chile).

⁶⁷ “Trajeron a campesinos: Llegada fue espectacular” (“Peasants were brought in: Arrival was Spectacular”), article in *La Estrella*, of Valparaiso, Thursday, August 1, 1968.

⁶⁸ “Dijo Perez Zujovic: Poderoso arsenal tenían los campesinos”; “Aplicaran ley de Seguridad contra 110 detenidos” (“Said Perez Zujovic: Peasants had a powerful arsenal”; “Safety Law will be applied against 110 detainees”), in *La Tercera de la Hora*, Thursday, August 1, 1968.

printed in all of Santiago's newspapers. Information regarding the event was full of confusion and misinformation such as the supposed detention of senators María Elena Carrera and Carlos Altamirano, who at the time of the confrontation had not even been there.⁶⁹ The Minister of the Department of Interior Affairs added that the peasants' arsenal included 30 dynamite bombs, 15 Molotov bombs, 10 guns of various brands, 6 rifles of varying caliber, two Winchester shotguns, 3 pistols, 100 rifle rounds, 1000 gun rounds and 20 heavy gauge firearms.⁷⁰ At that moment, Perez Zujovic did not yet know of the existence of the Czechoslovakian rifle, which was found days later hidden along a path.

The defense team for the detainees was represented by a group of lawyers who were mostly socialist militants: Juan Matus, Humberto Fuentealba, Carmen Villanueva, Nelson Salinas among others. Most of these professionals held that the conflict with the union had already been practically resolved and that they had only been awaiting the signature on the Acta de Advenimiento, when the incidents began.⁷¹ The strategy used by the defense showed that the conflict was merely a conflict within the union and that the peasants had been attacked by the police after the strike was over.⁷²

Since most of the leaders remained in jail, on Friday night, August 2, a meeting was held at the Sociedad de Artesanos de Los Andes (Artesian Society of Los Andes). This was a union meeting called upon by the Confederación Ránquil in order to deal with the conflict. It was here that they agreed to restructure the peasants' organizations and form a solidarity committee.⁷³

In Valparaíso meanwhile, the detainees were questioned. In these interrogatories, the peasants demonstrated adeptness in dealing with the questions and showed solidarity towards the "jóvenes ayudistas", whom the authorities tagged as the responsible party. When the acting judge,

⁶⁹ Carlos Altamirano Orrego, senator, leader of the revolutionary tendency of the Socialist Party of Chile. He was an active participant in this event. He was in the conciliation meetings, and aided in keeping the "jóvenes ayudistas" in San Miguel. At the exact moment that the event took place, he was in Santiago and arrived at the scene after 2 o'clock in the afternoon.

⁷⁰ "Dijo Perez Zujovic: Poderoso arsenal tenían los campesinos; Aplicaran ley de Seguridad contra 110 detenidos" ("Said Perez Zujovic: Peasants had a powerful arsenal"; Safety Law will be applied against 110 detainees"), in *La Tercera de la Hora*, Thursday, August 1, 1968, p. 4.

⁷¹ "Defensa de Detenidos" ("Defense of the Detainees"), article in *La Estrella* of Valparaíso, Saturday, August 3, 1968.

⁷² Ditto.

⁷³ "Reestructuran Federación Campesina: Formado Comité de Solidaridad" ("Restructuration of Peasants Federation: Committee of Solidarity is formed").

Enrique Correa Labra, asked Segundo Saavedra, president of the Union Alliance, whose idea it had been to take over the farm, he replied “The assembly. The assembly took the decision, Sir.”⁷⁴

The confinement of the members of the Sindicato Alianza de San Esteban (Alliance Union of San Esteban), of the Federación ‘Liberación ‘ de Aconcagua (Aconcagua’s ‘Liberation’ Federation), of the Confederación Rancuile and of the “jóvenes ayudistas” in the prison theater produced many shows of solidarity and protests against the government. The Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile-FECH, (University of Chile’s Student Federation) organized a march in the Pedagógico (University of Chile’s School of Education) in support for the detainees of San Miguel. It ended with barricades on Macul street and strong confrontations between students and the police; in Valparaíso there were several mass visits to the jail and many student and laborer marches along Pedro Montt Avenue. A solidarity committee was formed by the Central Única de Trabajadores (CUT) in the city of Los Andes for the workers and for their families.⁷⁵ On Wednesday, August 7, a mass gathering took place in the Plaza de Armas of that city; 17 union leaders spoke there. Three days later, on Saturday, August 10, there was another mass protest in San Esteban. This gathering counted, among others, the presence of Altamirano and María Elena Carrera who criticized “the lack of action of the government and their protection of the land owners....”⁷⁶

That same day, university students from Santiago and Valparaíso arrived in San Esteban on board buses carrying non perishable food and clothing.⁷⁷ It is calculated that more than 3.000 kilos of food were distributed among the community kitchens at the different farms. Also, a group of social workers began a program to register the families.⁷⁸

However, the students and the political leaders were not the only visits that the community received. Enrique Correa Labra of the Department of Education, and Jorge Jiles, Lieutenant Colonel of Aconcagua, also went. On Monday, August 5, Correa went to the area in order to personally find

⁷⁴ Story by Javier Reyes (peasant of the Cinco Hijuelas de La Florida farm).

⁷⁵ Story by Eduardo Velastín R. (professor, then president of the CUT for the province).

⁷⁶ “Nuevo reparto de palos en concentración socialista del sábado” (“New dispersal of knocks during socialist gathering on Saturday”), article of *La Aurora* of Los Andes, # 11.900, Tuesday, August 13, 1968.

⁷⁷ Story by Luis Ortega Martínez, historian, Universidad de Santiago de Chile-USACH professor, then leader of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile, Valparaíso (University of Chile, Valparaíso, Student Federation President).

⁷⁸ “Visitas de todos los colores tuvo San Esteban: También llegaron provisiones” (“San Esteban had all types of visits: Provisions also arrived”), article in *La Aurora* de Los Andes #11.894. Monday, August 5, 1968.

out what had happened. He got a statement from the owner of the farm. While touring the place he saw the toppled barricades, the destroyed iron gate and the marks along the walls were the tanks had passed when they had entered the farm.⁷⁹

In order to stop the social unrest that the detention of the peasants was causing, on August 12 the Department of Labor published law N° 338. This decree ordered that work resume immediately in places where the strike was taking place. It held that “personnel affected by the strike must resume work straight away upon notification of this decree and under conditions no less than those established by the Segunda Agrupación de Reconciliación Agrícola de Los Andes” (Second Group of the Los Andes Agricultural Reconciliation). The authorities gave the workers a deadline of Wednesday, August 14, to go back to work. Otherwise, their contracts would be terminated. The contract for the commencement of work was signed the night of August 14 in the house of government. An increase of 25 per cent was established over the wages that had been in place when the strike had begun, allotting them a wage of 8.75 Escudos; to this a bonus of 1.25 Escudos was offered by their employers.⁸⁰ Almost all the peasants returned to work before the set date. The few who still remained detained returned to work as they were released from prison.⁸¹

The owner of San Miguel tried to do away with the presence of the union at his farm but in order to accomplish this, he needed the approval from the labor tribunals and he began procedures to accomplish this. The fortune of the peasants depended upon this decision. The owner asked for permission to fire the 33 workers who had participated in the events⁸² and it is our belief that Toro’s intentions failed when his petition was not granted. Through Toro’s attitude we can perfectly see the reasons that drove the owners of San Esteban: the problem was not the increase in wages. Rather, the problem lay in that the strike finished off what was left of traditional society by modernizing labor relations, by modifying methods for the resolution of conflicts and by legitimizing the actions of peasants joined together under the umbrella of a union. Toro needed to fire them because the workers had revolted and changed the established order at his farm.

⁷⁹ “Ministro en Visita en San Miguel” (Designated Judge in San Miguel), article in *La Aurora de Los Angeles*, # 11.895, Tuesday, August 6, 1968.

⁸⁰ Lets remember that the peasants’ original petition had been for 15 Escudos a day and 20 Escudos a day for specialized labor.

⁸¹ “Otros 34 campesinos salen bajo fianza de 50 lucas” (“Another 34 peasants set free after bail of 50 thousand”), article in *La Aurora de Los Andes*, # 11.903, Friday, August 26, 1968.

⁸² “Serán despedidos los obreros del fundo San Miguel” (“Laborers from San Miguel to be fired”), article in *La Aurora de Los Andes*, # 11.908, Thursday, August 22, 1968.

They were no longer loyal but dangerous; they stopped had being renters and had become agricultural owners This definitively was a change towards modern ways.

5. In Liberty

The first to leave jail were two minors and the man with low IQ. Before August 14, almost half of the detainees had left prison, previous payment of a E° 50.000 bond. The bond money was donated by the workers of the Municipality of San Miguel (Santiago), by the laborers of San Esteban of Los Andes and by the CUT.⁸³ Saturday, August 17, the designated judge granted freedom to another 34 detainees. On Monday 21, he allowed another 21 be set free. On August 20, there were still 64 people detained⁸⁴ but finally, on the 26th of August, the leaders of the Ranquil Confederation and the “jovenes ayudistas” were let go due to lack of evidence that proved the allegations set forth by the government.⁸⁵ The last process was to determine to whom a notepad containing guerrilla information belonged to. The pad was found in one of the rooms of the overtaken house. It had maps and drawings of the barricade locations and was under a false the name. None of the detainees claimed ownership of it. Thus, with the failure of this last process the designated Judge ordered the immediate release of the remaining ten prisoners.⁸⁶

As though a paradox, the last prisoner to be detained from the battle of San Miguel was the green “Willys” jeep. It was registered in the borough of San Miguel and belonged to the Socialist Party of Chile. The jeep continued to be “imprisoned” in the county jail and could still to be seen there in the summer of 1969 as no one ever claimed it.⁸⁷ At the end of 1970, after Salvador Allende had taken office, Vital Ahumada, the new governor, returned the car to the Alliance Union in an act of compassion. Time and

⁸³ Eduardo Velastín R. (professor and CUT Provincial President).

⁸⁴ “Por falta de plata no salen los demás campesinos” (“Due to lack of money the rest of the peasants are not yet out”). Article in *La Aurora* de Los Andes, # 11.906, Tuesday, August 20, 1968.

⁸⁵ “Caso campesinos de San Miguel: Buscan libreta guerrillera” (“Case of San Miguel Peasants: Looking for Guerrilla Note Pad”), article of *La Aurora* de Los Andes, # 11.910, August 24, 1969; “En libertad detenidos del fundo San Miguel” (“Freedom for detainees of San Miguel Farm”), article in *La Aurora* de Los Andes # 11.912, August 27, 1968.

⁸⁶ “Caso campesinos de San Miguel: Buscan libreta guerrillera” (“Case of San Miguel Peasants: Looking for Guerrilla Note Pad”), article in *La Aurora* de Los Andes, # 11.912, Tuesday, August 27, 1968.

⁸⁷ “El jeep de San Miguel todavía espera su dueño” (Jeep of San Miguel Still Awaits its Owner”), article in *La Aurora* de Los Andes, February 6, 1969.

rats had finished it off. The jeep was the only direct victim of the battle that had taken place at the farm of San Miguel, in San Esteban of Aconcagua.⁸⁸

6 Epilogue

In the beginning of September, 1968, everything was normal between the peasants and the leaders of the Alliance Union; however, the situation was different for the leaders of Ranquil and for the “jóvenes ayudistas”. After being set free, they began being watched over by the political division of the police. This division aimed to find out who their contacts with the paramilitary organizations were. Due to this, the party granted these men permission to go undercover. “Aníbal Ruiz”, “El Viejo” and “Jorge Astorga” took refuge in the farm lands of Aconcagua, where they survived by hiding out in the homes of other socialist peasants.⁸⁹ The others traveled to Chaihuín, a place found in the jungles near Valdivia, and formed a training camp based upon guerrilla warfare ideas. It was torn down by the Chilean army in 1970. They were detained and were granted pardon by President Allende in the beginning of 1971. They then returned to the Frente Interno (Internal Front). This was the socialist military group which, on September 11, 1973, fought against the INDUMET industries. Then they went into exile. Later, some returned to the country clandestinely to oppose the military government.⁹⁰

The peasants belonging to the Alliance Union remained in their organization. In 1970, they took part in the presidential campaign for President Allende. After finding out about the September 11th coup, 1973, a group carrying weapons and explosives were ordered to take refuge in the mountains of Campos de Ahumada. There they were detained by the army.⁹¹ In 1974, José Sarabia López, a peasant, was awarded a lot of land;⁹²

⁸⁸ Story by Bernardo Tapia (peasant, leader of the Alliance Union).

⁸⁹ Story by Bernardo Tapia (peasant, leader of the Alliance Union).

⁹⁰ Stories by “jóvenes ayudistas” of the Socialist Party: “Raúl Marcos, “Jorge Cerda”, “Aníbal Ruiz”. The pardoning of the guerrillas was cause for great polemic in the country. President Allende called them “jóvenes idealistas” (“young idealists”). Those who returned to the country did so in the beginning of 1980. They composed a group which was known as “Los Bruselas” of the Socialist Party.

⁹¹ Story by Bernardo Tapia (peasant, leader of the Alliance Union). The leader of this group was Juan Torres, a militant belonging to the Juventud Socialista de Los Andes (Socialist Youth of Los Andes). He was jailed for several years. Later he went into exile and died fighting in the Nicaraguan revolution.

⁹² José Sarabia took part in the battle. During the confrontation he had a Winchester rifle. He is still remembered because he would go to the Alliance Union meeting riding a black horse which he would tie up outside. In 1998, when talking to the author, he displayed his happiness because the old leaders had returned to the area. His adhesion to the Socialist Party has not changed.

Pedro Paez, the man in charge of the San Miguel farm, traveled to Copiapó where he now works in a fruit exporting company; Manuel Cabrera, a peasant from Santa Teresa whom the military accused of bearing weapons, was savagely tortured by them (the military) and as a consequence remains crazy to this day; Bernardo Tapia, Alliance Union leader, was in prison for three years and then was exiled to West Germany for 17 years. He returned to San Esteban and now works there part time; today he is a leader of the Socialist Party of that area; Segundo Saavedra, union president, got sick and died in the beginning of the 1980's. Most of the people responsible for Ranquil and for the Comisión Agraria Socialista-CONAS (Socialist Agrarian Commission) went into exile after the military coup.

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