

**Shattered Power, Reconstructed Coalitions:
An Analysis of Rural Labor Unions in Maranhão, Brazil**

by

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SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF URBAN STUDIES AND PLANNING
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER IN CITY PLANNING
AT THE
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

JUNE 1997

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ABSTRACT

During the dictatorship (1964-1985), the authoritarian political system enforced the organization of the labor movement by law in Brazil. The government aimed at keeping control of workers' organization by establishing the monopoly of their representation, centralizing control, and imposing a uniform labor structure. One prevalent argument in the literature is that this corporatist and monopolistic union structure would lead unions to be less democratic and less organized. Contrary to this mainstream thought, I found evidence that in spite of the corporatist and monopolistic regime, rural labor unions differed from each other and represented workers successfully in the state of Maranhão, Brazil, because there has been competition among unions and non-union organizations for the union leadership.

Evidence presented here shows that in certain contexts the existence of monopoly unions did not constrain change and pluralism, but rather enabled competition among different streams for the union leadership. The existence of one sole labor structure forced worker-related groups to organize and compete for the leadership role within the unions' formal structure, because formal unions had human, financial, and organizational resources, and were the only organizations allowed to represent workers in judicial and administrative arenas. To compete for the leadership of the union, workers created parasyndical organizations, the so-called opposition movements, and ended-up creating internal competition. This internal competition generated a constant pressure on unions' and workers' leadership, fostering responsiveness to workers' demands. Later, during the democratization process in Brazil (after 1985), because the union monopoly persisted, the existence of non-union groups led to specialization of social action functions of the unions and other organizations. These groups included political parties, non-governmental organizations, and the Catholic Church. In the places where there were a variety of such groups, strong external competition between unions and non-union organizations took place and increased the pressure for improved performance of unions and, at the same time, increased the stock of social capital that kept unions responsive to the workers' demands.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank,

Judith Tendler. Her critical thinking, enthusiasm for the buried ideas and precise words, and unwillingness to take anything for granted have pushed me along this work. Mostly important, she taught me a passion for the possible and more about Brazil than I ever thought.

Richard Locke, my reader, who became a good mentor, giving excellent advice, treating me with respect, and encouraging me to pursue my dream.

Karen Polenske and Omar Razzaz who not only gave me incentives to follow the academic career but also made me rediscover the passion for legal issues, institutions, and property rights.

Vinit Mukhija, Tom Harsanyi, and Douglas Webb, for reading my thesis and discussing my argument(s) with me numerous times.

My friends of the International Development and Regional Planning group who shared my dreams, expectations, problems, and many laughs and pleasant moments. In special Veronica Naranjo, Maria Mulkeen, Amanda Bickel, and Alen Amirkhanian.

Francisco Gomes and Sergio Silva [and all the technicians and employees of the Projeto NORDESTE] who were always receptive to my ideas and who provided me with information and resources during the time when I was in Maranhão.

All of the Brazil Group with whom I shared experiences in my own country.

CAPES (Coordenadoria de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal do Ensino Superior) for providing me with resources to pursue my work.

My parents, who encouraged me from overseas.

And most of all, my husband, Claudio Pinhanez, who tolerated my moments of despair, believing in me ever single minute. He spent many nights awake, reading and discussing my work. Although he is a computer scientist, he knows more about unions and workers' organizations than he ever thought he would (all my love).

This thesis is dedicated to the rural workers in Maranhão, who shared with me how they cherish life, how they suffer, how they survive.

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Acronyms

ACESA	Ação Comunitária em Saúde and Agricultura (Community Action in Health and Agriculture), a non-governmental organization in Maranhão.
AMTR	Associação das Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais (Association of Women Rural Workers).
ASSEMA	Associação dos Assentamentos de Reforma Agrária no Estado do Maranhão (Association of the Settlement Areas in Maranhão).
CEBs	Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (Christian Base Communities).
CENTRU	Centro para Educação e Cultura do Trabalhador Rural--Imperatriz (Center for Education and Culture of the Rural Worker-Imperatriz).
CGT	Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores (General Central of Workers), a labor central in Brazil.
CLT	Consolidação das Leis Trabalhistas (Consolidated Labor Laws).
CONTAG	Confederação Nacional de Trabalhadores na Agricultura (National Confederation of Workers in the Agriculture).
CPT	Comissão Pastoral da Terra (Land Pastoral Commission), an ecumenical organization active in land and production issues, created in 1975.
CUT	Central Única dos Trabalhadores (United Central of Workers), a labor central in Brazil, created in 1983.
EMATER	Empresa Maranhense de Técnicos e Extensionistas Rurais (Rural Extension Agency of Maranhão).
FAEMA	Federação dos Agricultores do Estado do Maranhão (Federation of Employers in Agriculture and Livestock in Maranhão).
FASE	Formação e Apoio, an non-governmental organization working with rural workers' mobilization.
FETAEMA	Federação de Trabalhadores na Agricultura do Estado do Maranhão (Federation of Rural Workers in Maranhão).
FUNRURAL	Fundo de Assistência ao Trabalhador Rural (Fund for the Assistance fo the Rural Worker). Rural health program administered by rural labor unions created in the early 1970s.
IBGE	Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statisitic).
INCRA	Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agrária (National Agrarian Reform Insitute), created during the authoritarian government (1964-1985) to administer agrarian reform.
ITERMA	Instituto de Terras do Maranhão (Land Institute of Maranhão).
MST	Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra (Landless Rural Workers Movement) formed in 1985.

PCB	Partido Comunista Brasileiro (Brazilian Communist Party).
PFL	Partido da Frente Liberal ((Liberal Front Party) conservative party outgrown of the ruling party PDS (Democratic Social Party) and ARENA a political party created by the military government.
PSB	Partido Socialista Brasileiro (Brazilian Socialist Party). Left-wing party.
PT	Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party). Party created in 1980 in São Paulo by unionists, intellectuals, and leftists.
SMDDH	Sociedade Maranhense em Defesa dos Direitos Humanos (Human Rights Defense Association of Maranhão).
STR	Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais (Rural Labor Unions).
UDR	União Democrática Ruralista (Democratic Rural Union). Landowners association formed to oppose agrarian reform.

Chapter I - Introduction

In 1964 the Brazilian military government enforced a monopolistic, uniform, and centralized labor union structure as the legal organization for workers' representation. This enforcement aimed at facilitating the control of workers' organizations by imposing the monopoly of workers' representation in the judicial and administrative arenas, the uniformity of the union activities, and the prohibition of union involvement with political parties. In spite of the monopoly or unity¹ of the formal state system, workers devised adaptive strategies aimed at securing the minimal channeling of their needs and demands through competition. They created parallel and informal structures that competed (and sometimes cooperated) with the legal structure to secure a diverse, responsive, and democratic union whose activities varied according to workers' demands.

This thesis unveils how rural workers' organizations changed and challenged the formal system through internal and external competition, and which situations and processes catalyzed change in the state of Maranhão, one of the poorest, most traditional and agricultural state of the Northeast region in Brazil.² There, politically motivated violence still occurs, most of the peasants are scattered far apart from other peasants, and trust, cooperation, and dependency relations between landlords and peasants are stronger than relationship among the peasants themselves.³ Yet, a heterogeneous labor movement mushroomed in Maranhão.

Thus, the primary aim of this thesis is to uncover under what conditions the activity of rural labor unions varied and what strategies the workers used to accomplish it.

¹ Price (1964:17) explains that the principle of monopoly or unity means that union required the recognition of the Ministry of Labor, and once recognized, the competition of another rural union was precluded from the representation of that economic groups in a given area.

² The state of Maranhão comprises an area of 333.376,6 km², i.e. 133,346.24 square miles, is the second biggest state in the Northeast region, and has a population of 4,930,253 of inhabitants. 60% of the total population lives in rural areas, and 52.6% of the active population (above 16 years old) is working with agriculture and livestock IBGE (1996).

³ In Maranhão, the landlord used to provide for all the needs of the peasants, from commercializing the production to providing medical services. In turn, the peasant devoted to the landlord not only political loyalty, but also submission. For instance, the peasant had to vote for the landlord candidate who would provide transportation to the ballot place. Also the peasant could not sell his production to another landlord or middlemen, even if he were

1.1. The subversion of the system and the appropriation of the legal labor apparatus by the workers

Presently there is a debate in Brazil about pluralistic and monopolistic union systems. Some proponents of labor reform in Brazil claim that pluralism in the union sector would lead unions to be more democratic, more responsive to workers' demands, better organized, and more solidarity (Genro 1996:46-53; Rodrigues 1990:11-19). Brazilian scholars and workers' representatives have questioned the legitimacy of monopoly representation because some of these labor unions have neither effectively struggled for workers' rights nor mediated in conflicts between workers, employers and landowners (Antunes 1980; Maybury-Lewis 1991; Antunes 1995; Pereira 1991; Manfredi 1996). Some unionists argue that single unions guarantee the labor movement more bargaining power and view the move toward plurality as a means of undermining labor strength (Gacek 1994; also Lothian 1986).

Evidence from the field research presented here shows that in spite of the existence of single unions in a given region (termed *unidade sindical* in Brazil), institutionalized unions created a fulcrum for the labor and social movement in Brazil and were a formal mechanism enabling non-union groups to compete for the union leadership by forming opposition movements. This same situation occurred in the local rural labor unions. Labor laws allowed the proliferation of rural unions all over Brazil, because individuals were able to subvert and to manipulate the laws made to restrain political action and maintain the *status quo* (Maybury-Lewis 1994).

In addition, my field research shows that peasants organized parallel movements to compete and challenge the formal union and ended-up building bridges between government agencies and the community realm by using the legal apparatus to legitimize their actions and to channel their needs. There, competition for the unions' leadership occurred because and despite the way the unions were structured; and the political competition flourished outside unions as opposition movements. Later, when the opposition assumed the formal union leadership, they were able to

offered a better price. This system is known as *coronelismo* (Nunes Leal 1949; also Pereira 1991; Pereira 1997:24; Cammack 1982).

negotiate with local and regional governments in order to make the new economic and political order work for them. However, this transition did not occur everywhere. This study shows the paths of that transformation through the study of unions in the state of Maranhão, Brazil.

1.2. The Maranhão case

In my field research, I observed that rural labor unions in Maranhão were distinguished by their activities. First, there are unions that mainly perform bureaucratic functions, such as registering workers to receive social security benefits and representing workers in judicial courts and local conflicts, the so-called *purely bureaucratic unions*. Second, there are unions which, besides performing bureaucratic functions, also manage land conflicts, represent, and advise workers on how to proceed in cases of agrarian conflict, the so-called *combative unions*. Third, there are unions which execute both activities mentioned above, and also mediate social and economic processes, such as discussing the production process with workers and credit and subsidy allocation with donors, governments, and banks. I call unions which perform these services *production-oriented unions*⁴ In Maranhão, I looked at ten unions which perform these three sets of activities.

Although the variance in the activities presented above characterizes ideal types of labor unions in Maranhão, in fact there is a continuum in the typology of workers' organization affected by events that occurred in each locality. Briefly stated, political associations were repressed and the legal rural labor unions were the only organizations allowed to represent workers. In response, workers and their allies, such as the Catholic Church and left-wing political groups, began to find ways to legitimize their actions through formal channels. The repressive environment forced worker-related groups to organize and compete for the leadership within the formal union structure in order to have legal representation. These so-called opposition movements could not have access

⁴ Maybury-Lewis (1991) differentiates between the first and second type of union in his study of Brazilian unionism. However, he does not make any comment on the existence of the third type.

to financial resources, government services, legal recognition, and political power to realize their needs and voices as workers outside the union structure⁵

The struggle for control of the union created an internal competition that placed constant pressure on workers' leadership, which in turn gained them responsiveness to workers' demands. With the proliferation of associations and organizations, unions and non-union organizations, such as political parties, non-governmental organizations, and the Catholic Church, who had first competed for power, later learned to cooperate, coordinate, and specialize to create synergy in the labor movement.

To investigate this process, I first describe the events that created the monopolistic representation of unions and the elements that determine differentiation among unions. Second, I analyze the environment in which rural labor unions operate and verify how social, political and economic factors contributed to change and the reconstruction of both social and institutional relations.

One factor that affected differentiation was different demands for representation. These demands, in turn, were affected by local constituencies, class aggregation, and political mobilization. First, in the places where the peasant had more ties with other peasants a society based on class bonds and a different power mosaic emerged; new ties and identities were established, and horizontal coalitions strengthened the workers' movement. Usually, class-bonded organizations appeared in places where migrants with similar biographies met.⁶ Political mobilization was fostered by the existence of numerous social actors --NGOs, associations, and cooperatives that catalyzed the process of transformation.

Peasants' needs for representation and services changed over time because of conflicts and change over land ownership, changes in production patterns, and changes in social ties among local elites and rural workers. In sum, the same political and legal system produced different results according to the microcosm of social relations. Changes in the social and economic

⁵ Schmitter calls them parasynical structures (O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986).

⁶ For the themes brought up here there is an immense literature. On the composition of power structures, see Bowles and Gintis (1986:92-120), and Scott (1969). On the formation of horizontal ties and networks, see Granovetter (1992), Granovetter (1973), Heller (1996).

structure and in peasant identity created different demands, and consequently union differentiation, in Maranhão's rural areas.

At the core of my analysis, I argue that the differentiation in the activity of the union that grew out of the formal structure was also based on a very competitive social environment. This competition did not promote rivalries and political hostility, but allowed the appearance of a new organizational framework.⁷ Although the union and non-union organizations competed for workers' loyalty, they also cooperated to address common social concerns of the workers. The network of organizations provided a thick web of linkages and ties, allowing the formation of a social net that did not break easily because it was sustained by a variety of arrangements among individuals who knew each other in other contexts. The more socially dynamic a place, the more competition and the greater the formation of social capital.⁸

Several organizations formed the network of associations with the union at the center. The reasons why the union was at the core of this network of organizations are two-fold: first, unions were recognized as *de jure* workers' representatives with financial, legal, and human resources; and second, their members were the only possessors of the bureaucratic knowledge to perform critical tasks, knowledge which induced local and state governments to give them more power to deal with government agencies and organizations. The union delegates disseminated information about government projects and registered workers for administrative purposes, creating ties across the public-private divide.⁹ Eventually, they became the only agents with the know-how to perform bureaucratic tasks, giving them the comparative advantage in rural labor unions as compared to the members of other organizations and associations. The outcomes were: (1) other organizations and associations' leaders had to either compete with union leaders, or (2) ally with them to channel workers' demands and have the attended benefits of doing so.

⁷ For a discussion of institutions and organizations, see North (1990).

⁸ According to Putnam (1993), "social capital refers to features of social organization and facilitates spontaneous cooperation. Social capital refers to trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by coordinating actions. The broader the social context within which any particular game is played, the easier solidarity and reciprocity. See also Coleman (1988).

⁹ Evans (1996) explains embeddedness and the formation of social capital in Kerala, India.

In sum, union variation occurred because of demand changes that were satisfied through competition, when the union leadership did not provide means to fulfill the demands. Demand was affected by changes in land tenure patterns, migration, and changes in peasants occupational patterns and class structure. Where there was demand for representation and land conflict, non-union groups, such as the Catholic church and non-governmental organizations, mobilized workers to provoke the redefinition of groups in control of labor unions. This, in turn, forced an organizational twist both within and outside the realm of the corporatist unions and allowed workers to voice their needs. With the emergence of other organizations and associations, workers expressed their needs and revoked their support when the union did not convey their demands, and channel led them to other organizations. The logical outcome of this would be the weakening of workers' organization as a whole. In order to survive, union and non-union organizations became more specialized and shared moments of cooperation and competition. To show how competition occurred, how it satisfied workers' demands, and what paths and strategies it followed in the competitive process is the objective of this paper. My research about unions in Maranhão illustrates variation in union activities became possible even under a monopolistic and corporatist regime through the study of five cases in the state of Maranhão.

1.3. Fields of research

The state of Maranhão is situated in the frontier area between the Amazon forest and the semi-arid Northeast. It comprises both tropical and semi-arid characteristics. Socially and economically, it is one of the poorest areas in Brazil: 70% of the total rural population earn less than the minimum wage,¹⁰ and the state presents one of the worst GINI coefficients (0.8) for land distribution in Brazil (INCRA 1996:51). The economy is based on subsistence agriculture, and the cultivation of crops as rice, beans, manioc, and corn. People live either in communities (*povoados*) concealed in remote areas or on plots rented from landlords.

¹⁰ IBGE (1996:191). The national minimum wage at the time of the elaboration of the Census was Cr\$ 36,161.60, i.e., US\$ 40.00/month.

From June to August 1996, I visited and interviewed union leaders, peasants,¹¹ government officials, political parties' representatives, employees of non-governmental organizations, and politicians. First, I found out which activities unions performed and that there was huge differentiation among unions' activities. For the sake of clarity I grouped them into the three groups mentioned earlier, namely, purely bureaucratic, combative, and production-oriented, according to the activities each union was performing (for detailed methodology, see chapter 3).

Then, I visited ten unions in ten municipalities, choosing at least two unions that were performing similar activities. I collected information about unions' performance and activities during interviews in São Luís, the capital of the state, with professors, government agencies, the Rural Workers Federation (FETAEMA), the Catholic Church, Human Rights Defense Organizations, Bank managers, and the Agricultural Employers Federation (FAEMA). I chose two of each type among the most cited unions by all the interviewees. For example, unions in Imperatriz and Caxias were mentioned by the Catholic church representatives, Bank managers, and government agencies as production-oriented unions, whereas unions such as Arame and São Mateus, were mentioned as been combative, and unions in Santa Helena and Grajaú were mentioned as stagnant and bureaucratic.¹² The municipalities visited were Alcântara, Amarante, João Lisboa, Caxias, Coelho Neto, Grajaú, Arame, Imperatriz, and São Mateus (Figure 1). The choice was made in order to verify commonalities and differences among the ideal-types in a broad sample of different kinds of formal unions.

¹¹ Although in the literature there is a distinction between peasants--as small farmers, sharecroppers, and tenants--; and proletariat, as rural workers, I use the term "peasants" in a broad sense: they are renters, small farmers, sharecroppers, and tenants, and rural workers in general. I will be explicit when referring solely to peasants as small farmers, or as rural workers. See Forman (1975).

¹² Information about Imperatriz and Caxias were gathered at the Projeto Nordeste, a development project in the Northeast region, the Northeast Bank managers, the CPT (Land Pastoral Committee), the church branch for land issues. Unions in Arame and Grajaú were considered respectively combative and bureaucratic by politicians, such Deputy Mercial (PFL) and the Catholic church.

Once in the municipalities, I looked at the patterns of land tenure; the existence and objects of conflict; the characteristics of the peasants (rural workers, small farmers, sharecroppers, or tenants); the local economy; the strength of patronage ties; the immigration pattern; the existence of political parties, associations, and non-governmental organizations; and the existence of opposition movements. My intention was to identify which conditions drive unions' activities and performance (Table 1).

I isolated two conditions for variation (gray area in table 1): (1) peasants' demands which are affected by many factors such as land availability, relationship with landlord and with other peasants, agglomeration and common identity, (2) competition denoted by the presence of non-union groups such as non-governmental organizations and opposition movements. I observed that, although there were distinct demands, change in union performance and activity only occurred when there was presence of non-union agents and, therefore, exhorting some competition and pressure to unions' attend workers' demand.

In this thesis, I concentrated on five of the cases visited because they are representative of different ideal-types (Table 2). I chose Imperatriz, Arame, Grajaú, Santa Helena, and Caxias, because the conditions for differentiation in unions' activities was consistent the majority of cases observed and provided the reason for the such differentiation.

Imperatriz and Caxias were among the unions in Maranhão performing production-oriented activities; Arame had a genuine combative history and were going through a bureaucratic period; and Grajaú and Santa Helena were performing purely bureaucratic functions. Caxias, Coelho Neto, and Grajaú are areas of old occupation (mid-1800s), while Imperatriz, João Lisboa, and Arame are areas of recent occupation. Rural labor unions in Imperatriz, Caxias, and Arame were considered by both workers and their counterparts to be very active and innovative. Coelho Neto's, Grajaú's, and São Mateus' rural labor unions were less effective as intermediaries between workers and landowners in land conflicts, and in the mediation of local economic development.

Table 1: Land occupation and tenure, peasants' characteristics and demands, and unions' activities

	Santa Helena	Coelho Neto	Grajaú	Sao Mateus	Arame	Alcantara	Amarante	Caxias	Imperatriz	João Lisboa
Land Occupation	Old	Old	Old	Old	New	Old	New	Old	New	New
Conflict existence motif	few buffalo	few cattle	few cattle and land	yes land	yes land	yes land	na no	yes cattle and land	yes land	yes land
Peasant Past 10 years	sharecropper tenants, occupants	tenant, sharecropper	tenant, sharecropper	tenants, occupants, sharecropper	squatters, unemployed rural workers	squatters sharecroppers settlers	occupants	tenants, occupants, sharecroppers	unemployed rural workers, landless	unemployed rural workers, landless
Present	the same	the same	the same	the same	the same + settlers	being evicted for spatial base	settlers, small farmers	the same + settlers	the same + settlers	small farmers settlers
Production	subsistence	subsistence	subsistence	subsistence	subsistence	subsistence	subsistence	subsistence	subsistence	subsistence
Industry	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes	yes	no
Peasant groups	none	none	none	none	strong	strong	strong	depends on the region	strong	varies
Migration in out	some	some stable	few	transition	intense	stabilized	stabilized	intense intense	intense intense	stabilized
Demands 10 years ago now	services	services	services	conflict resolution	land conflict settlement production	land conflict settlement production land conflict	production	Land conflict production	Land conflict Settlement production	production
Political parties	one	one	two	two	two	two	two	two	many	one
Trade Associations	<10	<10	158	<10	40	<10	<10	>100	>100	<10
NGOs	none	none	none	CC	CC	CC	CC/CENTRU	Many	Many	CC/CENTRU
Union opposition	none	none	none	yes	won in 1982	won in the 1980s	formed by workers	won in 1994	won in 1984	alliance
Labor School	none	none	none	CPT	CPT	CC	CENTRU	CUT	CENTRU	CENTRU
Union activity	bureaucratic	bureaucratic	bureaucratic	bureaucratic and some combative	bureaucratic, combative	bureaucratic/ combative/ production	Bureaucratic/ production	bureaucratic/ combative/ production	bureaucratic, combative, production	bureaucratic, production

Source: Field research. Subsistence crops are corn, rice, beans, and manioc. Trade associations are associations which deal with commercialization of production. Conflicts are around cattle invading farms, and land grabbing and invasion. In- and out-migration refers to trends of peasants arriving or leaving the municipalities.

Table 2: Similarities and distinction in Santa Helena, Grajaú, Arame , Caxias, Imperatriz.

	Santa Helena	Grajaú	Arame	Caxias	Imperatriz
Land Occupation	Old	Old	New	Old	New
Conflict existence motif	few buffalo	few cattle and land	yes land	yes cattle and land	yes land
Peasant Past 10 years	sharecropper tenants, occupants	tenant, sharecropper	squatters, unemployed rural workers	tenants, occupants, sharecroppers	unemployed rural workers, landless
Present	the same	the same	the same + settlers	the same + settlers	the same + settlers
Production	subsistence	subsistence	subsistence	subsistence	subsistence
Peasants ties	none	none	strong	depends on the region	strong
Migration in out	some	few	intense	intense intense	intense intense
Demands 10 years ago now	services	services	land conflict settlement production	Land conflict production	Land conflict Settlement production
Political parties	one	two	two	two	many
Trade Associations	<10	158	40	>100	>100
NGOs	none	CPT left in 1990	Catholic church	Many	Many
Union opposition	none	none	won in 1982	won in 1994	won in 1984
Labor School	none	none	CPT left in 1988	CUT	CENTRU
Union activity	bureaucratic	bureaucratic	bureaucratic, combative	bureaucratic/ combative/ production	bureaucratic, combative, production

Source: Field Research (for information refer to table 1).

In terms of economic development, Caxias and Imperatriz are more developed cities than the other localities and have some industry, whereas all the other municipalities have agriculture-oriented economies. The fact that Imperatriz and Caxias are more developed than the other municipalities contributed to the existence of a more dynamic social atmosphere, attracted many migrants, and allowed the formation of more organizations and associations in these localities. To explain how and why differences among unions occurred is the main goals of this paper.

Chapter II outlines the formal labor structure in Brazil. Chapter III is divided into two parts: the first part shows the union variation prevailing in Maranhão, the second demonstrates the need for competition to provoke change. In chapter IV, I analyze how competition occurred, what strategies workers used, and how a network of organizations allowed that competition,

cooperation, and collaboration to emerge amidst a monopolist and corporatist environment. In chapter V, I draw some conclusions about why corporatist unions differed in Maranhão and make some suggestions about labor policies.

My conclusion is that differentiation in the role and performance of unions was possible because there is competition among union and non-union groups. This competition allows synergy in the labor movement and responsiveness to workers' demands. However, responsiveness only occurred where peasants mobilized and organized opposition movements and when non-union organizations stimulated competition for union leadership, for workers' loyalty, enhanced political awareness, and cooperated with unions. Furthermore, the existence of the formal labor structure allowed a fulcrum and a facilitative structure for the opposition movement, even when this structure was supposed to control the movement. However, the competition was only possible in the places where there was a more dynamic civil society and where the stock of social capital was high.

Chapter II - Labor Structure in Brazil

Different types of workers' organizations have existed since the Imperial period in Brazil, although they were not always maintained by the workers themselves. Indeed, contemporary workers inherited the present labor structure from that imposed by the military government during the authoritarian period from 1964 until 1985. The 1988 Federal Constitution established a few changes in labor legislation, but most of the regulations concerning union organization and structure established during the dictatorship remain the same. This chapter presents the main characteristics of the Labor Structure in Brazil and the legal changes until the present time in order to compare the formal structure with the variation found in Maranhão.

2.1. History and organization

Some of the first rural workers' organizations to have an impact on institutional arrangements were the Peasants' Leagues, associations of rural peasants created to order peasants' demands and needs. These workers' mobilizations became very strong after the 1950s, but the authoritarian state undermined the Peasants' Leagues.¹ Rural elites and government representatives, who are usually dominated by the same groups, tried to stamp out rural workers' mobilization by regulating their organizations. Indeed, many authors portray the rural labor unions as a means of keeping social unrest under control.²

Even though some laws concerning rural workers' organizations had existed since the beginning of the century, it was only in the 1930s that labor laws in Brazil began to regulate urban

¹ The Peasants Leagues were registered as civil associations based on the Brazilian Civil Code, because in order to register as unions, rural workers need the approval of the Ministry of Labor, which was almost impossible to obtain. The first Peasant League was founded in Pernambuco as a mutual-aid burial society for financing funerals.

² See Maybury-Lewis (1991). See also Adriance (1995), Novaes (1996), Mascaro Nascimento (1989), Silva (1989), Alves (1994:426).

unionism and labor movements.^{3 4} In the 1960s, President João Goulart, a pro-labor president, adopted several policies in order to ease the organization of rural workers. In 1964, after the military *coup d'état*, the military government retained the established rules and norms that had regulated unions (Maybury-Lewis 1994, Price 1964; Keck 1992). As Schmitter (1973:206) poses it referring to the new corporatist system,

“[...] without changing a line of [the] existing law, but by applying a very different practice, the 1964 revolutionaries restored the syndical movement to its former status as cornerstone of the system. By first conducting massive purges and then controlling subsequent leadership recruitment to workers’ syndicates, they got the enforced “social peace” they needed [...] and removed undesirable “radicals” from unions.”

The government then established union duties and obligations, such as the responsibility for the provision of welfare services. The government enforced the institutionalized corporatist unions’ bureaucratic and social functions for the sake of keeping the union leaders occupied.

2.2. Union functions and prerogatives

According to the 1964 regulations, rural labor unions are obliged to perform bureaucratic functions, such as representing their rank-and-file in administrative and judicial claims and closing collective labor contracts and conventions.⁵ Five elements affected the unions’ performance: (1) the unions’ monopoly of representation of each professional category of workers in each municipality;⁶ (2) the provision of welfare services,⁷ such as medical and dental services within the

³ The first law concerning unionization in rural areas in Brazil dates from 1904. See Pereira (1991). For a more comprehensive chronology of rural labor legislation, see Price (1964), who reports the evolution of legislation concerning rural labor in Brazil since the Imperial Constitution, starting in 1830.

⁴ Labor relations were codified in the 1930s, culminating in the Consolidated Labor Laws (CLT), also known as the Labor Code, which was made into law in 1943. The keystone of the Brazilian corporatist model, this law remained intact up to the end of the military regime. The CLT designated unions as organs of collaboration with the government for the promotion of social peace. State-recognized unions were to have a monopoly of representation in each occupational category. The Labor Ministry could intervene in unions internal affairs and replace elected union leaders with government functionaries. See Keck (1992:61-62). The CLT should regulated mostly urban workers, whereas the Rural Worker Statute, enacted in 1963, was conceived to regulate rural labor. However, most of the rural regulations followed the CLT.

⁵ The Rural Labor Statute, article 115, and Consolidation of Labor Laws, article 513, see Price (1964:22).

⁶ The município is the territorial basis for the union, as defined in the Labor Code.

union; (3) the presidency by the Ministry of Labor over union hierarchy--the Ministry of Labor had the power to control unions and to replace elected unions leaders with government officials; (4) adjudication by a court of labor as a form of dispute resolution, and, (5) the mandatory contribution--union tax--was taken directly from the employees' wages and transferred to the unions.

Later, in the 1970s, the government created the voluntary contribution, allowing unions to establish in an assembly meeting an extra contribution to be charged from members, in addition to the mandatory fee. This contribution was intended to finance the union president and employees' wages--in some cases, union delegates--and services offered by the union (Price 1964).

The Rural Workers' Statute (Law No. 4214, March 1963) also regulated vacations, agreements, and wages extending the benefits of urban workers to rural workers and envisioning the modernization of agriculture. In 1971, the government created PRORURAL/FUNRURAL (Program/Fund for the Assistance of the Rural Worker), a system instituted to grant welfare benefits to rural workers and to "neutralize the demands of rural labor unions." Unions became responsible for distributing welfare benefits, making dental and medical appointments for their members, and preparing documentation for retirement petitions, hospital care and medical treatment. However, FUNRURAL was not able to cope with the workers' needs, because with the economic crisis of the 1980s the government stopped contracting unions for medical service delivery. Since unions were already providing medical services and many members had affiliated with the union because of it, they could not stop it. This was a way of keeping the members in the union. Unions now had to pay for services out of their own budget. Budgetary problems also increased because members defect payment. However, since union leaders consider that political activities were more important than medical service delivery, "a government obligation," as said a union leader, they stop providing the service. Eventually, the PRORURAL/FUNRURAL was integrated into the INPS-INAMPS system (the urban welfare system) in 1983.⁸

⁷ In principle, it was a quite extensive social welfare program, an incentive to labor leaders to work within the system, as co-optation elements in the labor legislation.

⁸ Brumerr (1993). Also in Maybury-Lewis (1994:39).

Because of this policy, many unions were created, and the movement attracted members seeking medical care. In 1988, there 2,747 rural labor unions (Brumer 1993:409; Maybury-Lewis 1993:39). However, some unions would just provide these kind of services. Indeed, when I asked some workers whether and why they were unionized, they responded:

“I am in the union because it is good. It has to be. The union provides doctors and medicines. The old people here in the community need to be affiliated with the union. Well, they need more care than us. In addition, there is retirement. That is what the union is for.”

Furthermore, the union could form cooperatives, give legal assistance, monitor and accompany workers in case of labor accidents, and create training and educational centers. Many rural labor unions formed cooperatives, mainly to mill rice, in order to attract more members.

2.2.1. Monopoly of representation

The Labor Code of 1963 imposed a single trade union structure, known as “unicity” or *unidade*, which entitled the unions to a monopoly of workers’ representation. By “unicity” the law means that there is only one union per occupational category in a given geographical area, for instance, there is only one union representing metal workers in each municipality (*município*).

The Rural Workers Statute, enacted in 1963, established that only a single rural labor union is allowed in each municipality and that all rural workers, encompassing small farmers, wage workers, renters, sharecroppers and all other workers living in rural areas, such as fishermen and rubber tappers, should affiliate with the local rural labor union (Pereira 1991, Keck 1992:62-4, Price 1964).⁹ In many areas of rural Brazil, the boundaries between rural and urban areas are blurred, and unions for other categories of workers (for instance, the Teachers’ Union) do not

⁹ According to the Rural Workers Statute (Price 1961:16), the activities and occupations of the peasants in the rural union included: agricultural workers, workers in cattle raising, workers in rural extractive production, independent workers, and small property owners.

exist, so rural labor unions affiliate all rural and urban workers, swelling unions' membership. Affiliation also increased because subscribed union members can apply to receive retirement pensions from the government.

In 1988, the Federal Constitution stated that the right to represent workers should be extended to fishermen's associations (*colônia de pescadores*), although for the majority of rural workers, the unicity persists.¹⁰

2.2.2 Mandatory and voluntary contribution

The law also obliges all workers to pay a "union tax" to the Ministry of Labor, which redistributes the funds to national trade union federations, according to their membership. The mandatory contribution (*contribuição sindical*) is equivalent to one day's pay per year, is deducted from each worker's paycheck regardless of whether the rural worker is a union member, and is distributed according to criteria determined by the government.

In the case of small farmers' unions, the mandatory *contribuição sindical* is established by the union assembly meeting or by the union president, since the workers do not receive any wage and most of them work their own land. In the case of employed rural workers, the employer or large farmer is supposed to deduct the tax from the wage and send the money of each of his workers to the bank.

In addition to the mandatory contribution, there is a voluntary contribution that is determined in an Assembly meeting by all the members. Although described as voluntary, after the Assembly

¹⁰ For an accurate discussion of the 1988 Constitution on Labor see Silva (1989) and Nascimento (1989).

decision, this contribution is deducted automatically from the worker's wages and deposited in the union's bank account, once the worker is associated with the union.

In rural areas, two issues aggravated the financial situation of unions. First, affiliation with the rural labor union is not mandatory, and social and retirement benefits can be requested in branches of the Ministry of Labor. Second, since "small workers and settlers live more isolated, are less dependable on each other, and have less sense of group" they are not worried about paying the fee, do not have a sense of collective group, and are not committed to the union.¹¹ Differently, where small farmers had to fight for the land, members are more committed to the union.¹² Second, when workers are affiliated to the union, affiliation *per se* does not mean that the union will collect more fees, especially when the members are small farmers, renters, and sharecroppers. In this case, the amount of the contribution is estimated according to production patterns, and part of the production (less than 5%) is committed to the payment of union dues. Since production oscillates from year to year, the amount received by the union also oscillates.¹³

Furthermore, the contribution is determined during assembly meetings and is based on the production capacity of the region, so that members are required to contribute the equivalent of one day of harvesting per year. The table below shows the contribution and wages earned by delegates and union leaders by law and in some municipality.

¹¹ Interview with Joscelito. Also see Pereira (1997) and Maybury-Lewis (1994).

¹² Interview with Dona Querubina, Imperatriz, August 1996.

¹³ Interview with Joscelito, 1997.

Table 3: Monthly contribution fees (in Reais–R\$)

	By law	Arame	Caxias	Imperatriz
Members		8,000	6,000	40,000
Membership fee	one day of work or 1% of production	R\$ 1.20	R\$ 1.00	R\$ 1.00
Members paying	all	400	500	600
small farmers, settlers, tenants	individual contribution	<10%	<20%	<20%
Retirees	direct in the bank	100%	100%	100%
Members paying	all	400	500	600
Delegate's wage	not defined	none	30% of fees collected	30% of fees collected
Leaders' wage	up to one and half minimum wage	R\$ 42.00*	*	R\$65.00*

Source: Field research. (*) complemented by contribution in kinds/per delegate. The contribution made by retirees and non-retirees was estimated (interviews with union leaders). Only up to 10% or 20% of small farmers pay dues, whereas 100% of retirees pay fees because they are deducted directly by the bank.

According to table 3, the contributions vary from R\$ 1.00 (one real is approximately one American dollar) to R\$ 2.00. For instance, in Arame, the monthly contribution is estimated to be R\$ 1.20 (one real and twenty cents, equivalent to US\$1.20). The seven leaders working for the union received the same amount (R\$ 42.00). A minimum wage in Brazil is equivalent to US\$ 100.00 per month (in 1996). Since the leaders worked in the union full-time, mainly to cope with the bureaucratic functions of the union, leaders had to count on friends' and relatives' help because to survive otherwise they could not sustain their families.

Workers also know that if they do not pay, chances are that the union will give tax exemption during election times. Some unions forgive the debt at elections time in order to make the workers' vote, even though it is illegal. The members, either because they know that or because they do not have money at all, do not pay, while waiting for the tax exemption. No real penalty enforces the payment. If the worker does not pay, he does not receive the services offered by the union, but most of the services can be delivered by other organizations, such as registering for social benefits, technical assistance, and so on. The union leaders do not have any enforcement tool but persuasiveness and political mobilization. Thus, free-riding is very common, because of election waivers.

In addition, the leaders and union delegates are affected directly by the problems that concern small farmer and do not have how top force the payment, because they are in the same situation.

“Most of the members are not politicized and they think that the union is only for registering to receive medical services. But then, when they have a problem, need a lawyer, or need to solve a conflict, they need the union, but if they do not pay we can not help them. Well, what happens is that, eventually, the union ends up helping them anyway because we all are in a similar situation and no one has money, we do not charge the workers.”¹⁴

In cases where the union is involved with land conflicts, the members affected are more concerned with sustaining the union. For instance, in Imperatriz and Arame, most of the members who are paying were involved in the struggle for land.

However, even in these places, default is a problem. Antonio Luiz, a union leader in Arame, told me that he could not charge a member knowing that the harvest had been destroyed or because the member was not able to pay the fee.

“Here the plantation and harvesting are seasonal, some crops are planted only during the first semester. The peasants have to sell the crop before harvesting to buy other staples, seeds, and products, and sell the production cheap. When the season is over, the price of the staple increases and he cannot afford to buy as much he needs. Then, the union cannot charge the member. And we know his situation because we have the same problem.”¹⁵

The money collected by the union pays the president’s salary, trips, and other expenses related to his work. However, in the unions that I visited, I observed that leaders barely survive with what they receive from the union, unless they keep working their own plots. Antonio Luiz told me that he could not work his plot because it was too far and that he had so much bureaucratic work in the union that he had to count on friends. In many unions only the president is paid, minimizing expenses with personnel.¹⁶

Another way is to charge members when the union delivers a service:

“Usually, we charge the member when he comes to use the rice mill. Most of the small farmers in this area to do this in the union. They bring the rice

¹⁴ Interview with union leader in Arame, 1996.

¹⁵ Interview with Antonio Luiz, Arame, July 1996. Interview with Joscelito, union consultant, Cambridge 1997.

¹⁶ Interview with Joscelito, 1997.

or the manioc and we put it in the mill. They take the rice and the union keeps the middling and the byproduct. Some of them pay in kind, one chicken, a pig, whatever they have.”

Sometimes the union leader has other resources. For instance, leaders with connections with the large farmers are paid when they negotiate deals with small farmers when cattle grazes small farmers' fields or when they avoid land invasion and conflicts. For instance, in Engenho D'Água, an old union delegate worked for the landlord and received the house where he lived and other benefits. In other unions, leaders survive mostly out of the contributions in kind made by members or they rotate their work on the farm (e.g. Imperatriz and Caxias).

The meager amount received by union leaders may lead the union leadership to ally with local elites and collaborate with landowners. They receive benefits from the large landowners and sometimes are hired by them to take care of part of their farms. In other cases, the leader ends up resigning his position, or is absorbed by the political system or the structure of organizations that support the political mobilization, such as the Catholic church, or the Rural Workers Federation.

Some unions receive contributions from international and domestic organizations (mainly from Italy, the Netherlands, and Germany) and from political parties to travel, cover expenses, and so on. Indeed, a collaborator said that

“these donations are much more than any money that the union could collect, and some leaders get used to it and do not want to work their plots anymore. But the donation is for the union and everybody is supposed to work.”

Recently, this contribution has diminished because non-governmental organizations are helping other groups, and union leaders have to deal with a scarcity of resources. Fund raising is part of the work of the unions too.¹⁷

Both in Caxias and in Imperatriz, unions are based on the existence of small production groups created in order to improve production and to keep the workers united. The production groups, then, are collective political and financial foundation for the union. Instead of counting on individual contributions to the union, some unions created small groups of production that are responsible for the production of a small of familiar group and for the contribution of the whole

¹⁷ Interview with Joscelito, 1997.

group. Another advantage of the small groups of production is that the base of the union is more diverse since each group is formed in its own way. The production groups will be studied in the chapter IV as a strategy to finance competition and to keep workers engaged in the union.

In sum, unions count on the money received from the transfer of retirees' payments, according to the law and union assembly resolutions. The contribution is deducted directly from the pension paycheck in order to pay the union. In fact, the affiliation of retirees increased significantly after the government determined that all workers and small farmers registered in unions could apply to retirement pensions. Although the value of the retirement pension is only the minimum wage, it is a substantial amount in rural areas.¹⁸ Members, who are waiting for retirement benefits, are allowed to register one year before benefits start being paid. When the retirement pension became widespread, affiliation with unions in rural areas increased notably. Although requests for retirement benefits could be made directly at the Ministry of Labor local office, the union was closer to the worker and the union delegate was prepared to prepare the documentation. Therefore, in all the unions that I visited the union carried out these services.

The mandatory contribution had a beneficial effect on unions and it is considered a premium in unions formed by small farmers and non-union groups which compete for the union leadership. First, most of the members of unions are small farmers and, consequently, their unions are not sustained by the mandatory contributions that the Ministry of Labor automatically collects from workers' wages. Small farmers do not receive wages, therefore there is no automatic withholding of taxes from them. Most of the affiliation came from workers who would retire in one or two years. In rural areas where most of the voluntary contribution paid by workers and small farmers depend on production, the mandatory contribution made by retirees became a very important part of unions' finances, accounting for almost 80% of unions budget.¹⁹

In accordance with the Consolidation of Labor Laws, union contributions are to be used for legal, economic, and social objectives. 60% of the total amount belongs to the local union; 15% goes to the state federation, and 5% to the national confederation; however these values are charged

¹⁸ The minimum wage in Brazil was equivalent to US\$100.00/month in 1996.

¹⁹ Interview in Arame, with Antonio Jose, July 1996.

from retirees' contributions since the government does not have much control over what unions receive as voluntary contributions (Table 4).

Table 4: Workers contribution and distribution among labor structure.

Destination	General case
Confederation	5%
State Federation	15%
Local Union	60%
Special deposit for employment and wages*	20%
Total Contribution	100%

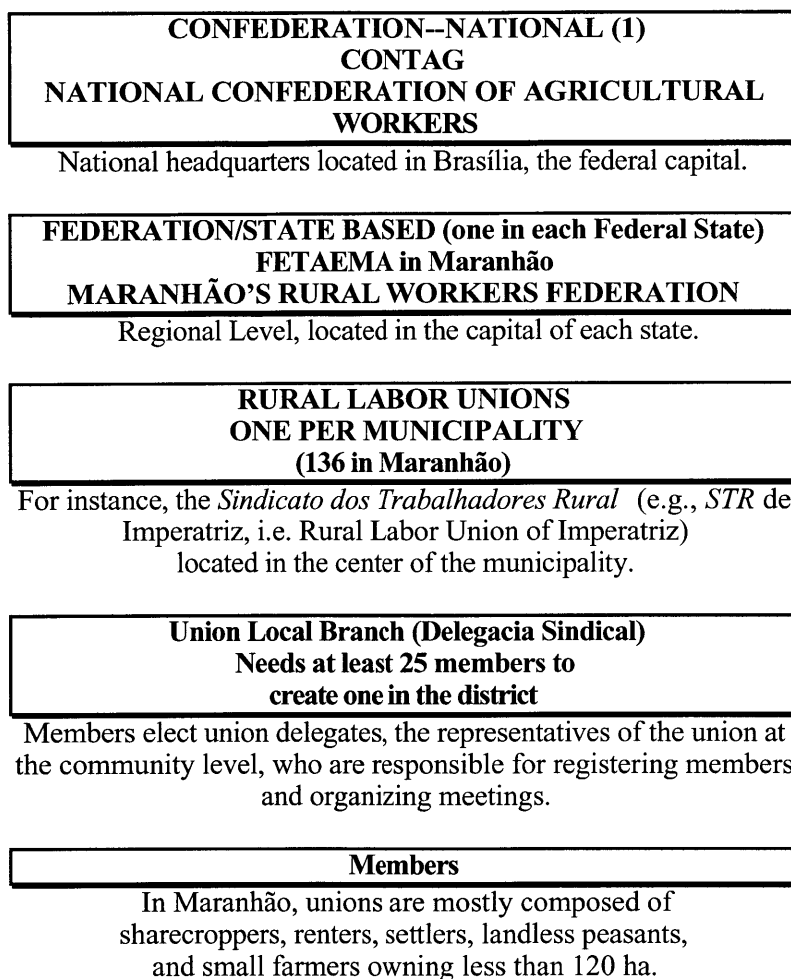
Source: Consolidated Labor Laws art. 590 and 591. * a special deposit to the social security system.

2.3. Labor organizational structure

The Labor Code established the labor structure in the country and the organizational structure within the unions. The labor structure is a pyramidal one that extends from the federal level to the community. Union community branches (*Delegacia Sindical*) are linked to the local rural labor union in the municipality where the community is located. Unions, in turn, are linked to the state Federation, in the capital of the state, and the state Federation is under the jurisdiction of the national Confederation (Figure 2).²⁰

²⁰ The labor structure follows the political division of federal, state, and municipal governments in Brazil. The municipality is smallest political unit with executive powers.

Figure 2: Rural Workers Structure in Brazil



The CONTAG (National Confederation of Workers in Agriculture) is the confederation on the federal level and aggregates the state federations. On the state level, there is one Federation for each state. In Maranhão FETAEMA (Federação de Trabalhadores Rural do Maranhão) controls labor politics on the state level. The rural labor unions (RLU) known as “*Sindicato de Trabalhadores Rural*” (STRs) exist on the municipal level. Finally, on the community level there are the union local branches. The union local offices, managed by Union Delegates, are the union administrative branches at the community level, voted in by union members. To form a union local branch, there must be at least 25 union members in the community where the branch will be located.

Besides being part of a consolidated institution *per se*, the top level of the labor structure is able to back up its local branches, due to its powerful hierarchical structure. Also, this means that unions have a competitive advantage over other organizations. The unions' rigid structure is advantageous because rural labor unions are supported by the higher level of the organization. When there is any legal problem at the local level, the Federation's representative can be called on to serve as an arbitrator. Usually, the Federation provides lawyers to the unions in case of conflict. In many places, due to the presence of the Federation's representatives, union opposition movements were able to ensure that union elections were conducted in a proper and legal manner.

Although the labor structure and organization are determined by law, the internal structure can be changed by vote of the local assembly, and then sanctioned by the respective rural labor federation.

2.4. Management and leadership of the union

Internally, the union possesses a vertical structure. It is composed of a board of directors consisting of not more than three members and a fiscal council also composed of three members, both elected by the union general assembly. Usually, the president is responsible for all political activities and most administrative functions. In addition, the treasurer is responsible for union finances and accounting, and the secretary for administrative matters. In many cases, the president is the only member who works and stays physically in the union. In these cases, he possesses all the decision-making power.

The Rural Labor Statute (Article 118) establishes that all the directors be elected through direct elections by members affiliated to the union. The leadership, the fiscal council, and union delegates are chosen through a direct and secret electoral process. The Rural Labor Statute also prohibits the use of the union by any organization involved in political activities. This provision allows the Ministry of Labor to intervene in the union, to appoint and to exert control over the composition of the union leadership.

Although most unions are centralized, there are unions where the internal structure is decentralized from presidential control. Such unions have more departments and more people involved in union administration. Political parties and factions are also represented. Some unions

have from to five to seven departmental areas, including social services, finance, labor education, production, and agrarian politics. This does not mean that the union is able to work effectively in all these areas. In some cases, internal decentralization is a result of simple mimicry of the Federation and other organizations by unions or of agreements imposed top-down. For instance, unions affiliated with the *Centrais* went through restructuring and a decentralization of functions, involving more union members in the activities carried out by the union.

2.5. Union delegates

The union delegate (*Delegado Sindical*) is at the bottom of the structure and carries out functions on the community level, usually in the union district office or delegation office (*Delegacia Sindical*). They advise rural workers, mediate conflicts, register workers for administrative purposes, and collect union contributions. Since the union president has political control of the union, most leaders consider the delegates as mere bureaucrats. In fact, the union delegate is the street-level bureaucrat in the labor structure. To form a union community branch, there must be at least 25 members in the community, and union delegates are voted in by the rank-and-file in the union delegation office.

2.6. Who votes in the unions: membership

Union membership and affiliation are determined both by law and by agreements at different levels of the labor structure in the union General Assembly. Although there is some differentiation among members of unions in distinct localities, varying according to the type of working class and peasantry in a given region, the Rural Worker Statute establishes that rural labor unions must comprise peasants, landless laborers, and small farmers mostly working in subsistence agriculture or for a large farmer, whereas rural employer unions, simply called rural unions in Brazil, usually comprise large and medium size landholders whose main activities are livestock and cash crops and who employ labor.

In Maranhão rural labor unions differ from employers' unions according to members' economic status, measured by land tenure. Members of rural labor unions are either rural

workers, landless farmers, or small farmers whose land comprises less than 4 rural modules (120 hectares). Owners holding farms larger than that size are affiliated in the employers associations.

This study analyses only rural labor unions composed of small farmers, sharecroppers, tenants, renters, or settlers. Many of them are landless peasants who have migrated from other regions after being expelled by large farmers from their former holdings.²¹

2.7. The rural employers unions

Parallel to the labor structure, employers and large farmers unions, the Rural Employer Unions (*Sindicatos Rural*) have a structure that is very similar to the rural labor unions), to represent farmers who are large landholders.²² This division is not respected and there are many small owners in the employers unions. Indeed, there is a loophole in the law about the size of the plot owned by the members. The law only differentiates between small and large and between those who have employees and those who do not. Since the membership varies according to the size of the farm, the union can decide that 10 ha is small or big. Therefore, this decision, taken in the union and federation assemblies, is a political decision that varies from region to region, and from state to state, depending on land availability and productivity. For instance, in the South of Maranhão the size of the farm is much larger than in the mid-west because the soil fertility is different and affects productivity. In the employers' union, which works as a cooperative,

²¹ There used to be some rural wage workers working on cotton and sugar plantations in the eastern and central regions of Maranhão state, but with the decline of the plantations and the transition to livestock raising, most of the workers were dismissed and migrated.

²² There are 58 employer unions in Maranhão. On the state level they are linked with the FAEMA (Federação dos Agricultores do Estado do Maranhão), and on the national level they are affiliated with another confederation, the National Confederation of Agriculture (CNA). They do not have community branches. There is some competition between rural employer unions and rural labor unions for membership, despite the provisions of the Rural Workers Statute. During the presidential election campaign of 1990, politicians spread rumors that left-oriented parties and unions would institute agrarian reform even on land owned by small holders. Many small farmers affiliated with rural employer unions became afraid of being expropriated if the leftist groups won. This underlines the fact that not only agricultural employers, employers in cattle raising and in rural extractive production, and large estate owners are affiliated in the rural employer unions, creating a dispute among employer and labor unions. Later, right-wing groups formed the UDR (União Democrática Ruralista) as a party opposing agrarian reform and defeated the leftist candidate. See also Pereira 1991. Interview with the president of the Employer Union in Imperatriz, 1996 and with the president of FAEMA, June 1996.

membership does not concern the size of the plot, because they want to encompass all farmers to increase profits.²³

2.8. The union centrals (*Centrais Sindicais*)

At the top of the pyramidal labor structure is the confederation. For rural labor structures, there is the CONTAG, already mentioned. For the urban workers, there is the CGT (General Workers Central). At the end of the 1980s, a group of union leaders dissenting from the formal labor structure and opposed to state intervention in the labor movement created a parasyndical movement to oppose the labor confederation at the national level. The opposition was born in the state of São Paulo, in the trenches of the Metalworkers' Union. The CUT (United Workers Central or Sole Workers Central), the biggest labor central, was formed to oppose the CGT (General Central of Workers). However, the CUT grew strong in the 1980s, organized national strikes, founded labor schools, and also gave financial and legal support to union that were being threatened. For instance, the CUT paid for the expenses of unions leaders' trips to the federal capital in order to make them participate in rallies and general meetings.²⁴ Presently, they negotiate with governments and in the rural areas they organize workers to participate in the CONTAG (Confederation Of Rural Workers) through the CUT-RURAL. After the insurgence of CUT, groups of dissident unionists opposed to CUT, created the Força Sindical (Union Force) and Unidade Sindical (Union Unity).

The labor *Centrais* are informal, politically-oriented labor organizations. State federations and local unions affiliated with the *Centrais* voluntarily. Usually it is a political decision. Today there are more than 2,000 unions affiliated with CUT. In Maranhão, in 1983 43 unions were affiliated with CUT.²⁵

There are many additional *Centrais* in Brazil, such as the CUT (the Sole Workers Central), the Força Sindical (Union Force), and the Unidade Sindical (Union Unity). Ironically, each of the

²³ Interview with the president of the employers' union in Imperatriz.

²⁴ Interview with Nonato, vice-president of FETAEMA, 1996.

²⁵ FASE (1993). For more information about structure and politics, see Keck (1991) and Gacek (1996).

Centrais intended to be the authentic representative of the workers, and has named itself “the sole workers central,” “the general workers central,” etc.

The *Centrais* are controlled by labor groups with different political and labor ideologies. For instance, the CUT supported factory-level organization, emphasized union independence in relation to the state and employers, and is linked to the Workers’ Party; Unidade Sindical believes in “institutional pressures” through interaction with state institutions and political parties (Keck 1991:172)..

Although the *Centrais* and political parties compete internally within the labor structure, the monopoly and singularity of workers’ representation is maintained in the official realm. Competition occurs particularly in two situations: among the rank-and-file for hegemony within the union, and outside the unions for a more ideological engagement of the workers and unions with the *Centrais* and their political parties.

Unions affiliate with the *Centrais* according to their political orientation. Different groups within the unions, affiliated with *Centrais*, compete for leadership in the union. Thus, unions’ legal “unidade” does not really reflect the political differences that are present on the local, state, and federal levels, since competition takes place among the political groups trying to control unions, federations, and confederations.

2.9. Labor organization *de jure* and *de facto*

The description presented above imply that unions perform the same activities equally across states and regions, are uniform, and that control is centralized since their structure is established by law; but this is not the case. Union activity varies widely from one municipality to another. Variation reveals that legal uniformity has not prevailed, neither has prevailed the principles that unions should attend and represent workers. Indeed, in many places workers changed the system, took control of unions, and established innovative roles for the union, such as the organization of the production and the coordination of union and non-union activities. In other places, unions are barely providing bureaucratic services. The next chapter argues that there was union variation in Maranhão primarily because workers’ demands for representation changed, ranging from demand for services to conflict resolution to production organization. However, the cases studied in the

next chapter also show that unions remained the same where there was not competition and they did not feel pressure from other organizations to perform better.

Chapter III - Demand Change, Union Unresponsiveness, and the Need for Competition

The rule of law imposed the structure and functions of rural labor unions with the aim of keeping the uniformity and centralization of labor movements to facilitate state control. However, the reality observed in Maranhão reveals that local rural labor unions differ widely. How did differentiation occur in Maranhão, one of the most socially and economically backward states in Brazil? This chapter presents the reasons when differentiation starts among unions and which events lead to differentiation, in terms of members' demands and identities and political mobilization. This chapter also shows that workers needed to oppose to and compete for the formal unions to have their demands attended and that where it did not occur, the union did not change.

3.1. Diversity in the labor movement: selection criteria and typologies

The history of rural labor in Maranhão is similar to that of the rest of Brazil. Rural labor unions followed the same laws and had the same prerogatives. Also in Maranhão, in the aftermath of the enforcement of the Labor Code, workers saw the multiplication of unions. In 1963 there were 3 recognized rural labor unions and 14 further groups had filed petitions for union creation. In the 1970s 70 unions were created, and by 1981, there were 128 unions. Presently, there are 136 rural labor unions in Maranhão. Local elites organized the majority of these unions in order to control peasants' and small farmers' organizations and to request from the government social benefits and welfare services for their employees and affiliates. These unions represented workers in few cases, poorly mediated conflicts, and carried out only a few of the functions mandated by law. In addition, although unions were prohibited from associating with political groups, they were influenced by local elites and political groups, as I will show in the presentation of the cases.

Contrary to what the legal homogeneity suggests, I found that some unions differ greatly from the majority. They carry out more activities than they are supposed to, even creating new roles for the union at the local level, keeping more democratic internal structures, representing a broader

array of worker and their needs and demands, and having different ideologies. Some of this variety is reported in the domestic and foreign literature on Brazilian unions, although in my studies I found further variation (Maybury-Lewis 1994, Allied 1989, Antunes 1980).

In order to describe the variation among unions and establish a typology for grouping them, I looked at the activities and organizational structure of unions in 10 municipalities and at the external circumstances that could affect activities and structure. Concerning activities, I observed the type of service delivered by the union: medical care, legal advice during land conflicts, representation, and production advice, and mediation with donors and agents. With respect to organizational structure, I looked at the inclusion and participation of members in the decision making process and the existence of training programs. Finally, I looked at whether unions are able to innovate or are trying to do so, and at the ideology followed by union leaders. Pertaining to the latter, I observed that rural labor unions sometimes are linked with leftist parties, others with right-wing, and other with both. The data collected are presented and explained below (Table 5).

Table 5: Unions activity, internal organization, and innovation potential in Maranhão, Brazil as for 1997.

	Alcântara	Amarante	Arame	Caxias	Coelho Neto	Grajaú	Imperatriz	João Lisboa	Santa Helena	São Mateus
Service Delivery										
Welfare Service	+	+	-	+	+	-	+	+	+	+
Representation	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Land Conflict	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	-	+/-
Production	+/-	+	+/-	+	-	-	+	+/-	-	-
Innovation										
Actual	+	+	+/-	+	-	-	+	+/-	-	+/-
Potential			+						-	
Organization										
Participation	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	-	-
Training	+	+	-/+	+	-	-	+	+	-	-/+
Ideology										
Left-wing	+	+	+	+			+	+		+
Right-wing			+		+	+		+	+	+

Source: Field research. Elements based on Carroll (1992:37). (+) means yes; (0) means no; (-/+) means incipient or poor.

Since I spent a long time in unions' headquarters, service delivery was easy to observe. Almost all the unions execute some or all the activities, such as the delivery of welfare services, the representation of workers in judicial and administrative cases, and the registration of workers to receive social benefits. The delivery of medical and dental services is declining, mostly because of

government cuts to programs that provided resources for these services, in the 1980s. In Grajaú and Arame, unions do not provide these services, but fill out forms to send peasants to local hospitals. All in all, the unions deliver such basic services as registration and representation.

The great contrast among unions concerning service delivery refers to whether and how they deal with land conflict problems and production activities. In Santa Helena and Coelho Neto, leaders declared that there is no land conflict in the municipality, and therefore there is no need to be combative, whereas in Grajaú, they negotiate directly with the landowner, and the role of the union is eliminated.

Concerning production, the basic distinction is whether unions are developing activities to deal with production problems, such as negotiating agricultural subsidies to workers, bringing in information about government projects, and searching for better production processes.

Variance in the internal organization of unions was also observed. Many unions preserve the old structure composed of one directory board and a fiscal council. Others present a more horizontal internal organization composed of more departments and a more diverse board of directors from different political parties and religious groups. Power is decentralized from the president's hands, and the union administration is carried out by several members. I concluded that a greater number of participants in the union administration implied more diversification. Some of them have from five to seven department areas including social services, finance, labor education, production, and agrarian politics. This is the case with the unions in Imperatriz, Caxias, and Arame, whereas in Grajaú, Coelho Neto, and Santa Helena, unions are run by one or two leaders and their families. In Grajaú, the president had just resigned and was running for the local Council, and no one could attend to me at the deserted union, but a secretary. In Santa Helena, the president told me that he had arrived there twenty years ago and that he and his relatives were the main officials of the union. Presently his nephew presides over the union and his brother is the treasurer.

Training accounted for the capacity of a union to prepare its members to take part in the union administration, the presence of labor formation initiatives, and the possibility of bringing in extension agencies to train small producers. Since I interviewed a very small sample of union

members, mostly leaders and union delegates, I do not take this variable into consideration as part of my analysis.

Actual and potential innovation were measured according to information from different sources inside and outside the unions, in the government, and also in comparison to what the majority of unions are doing. Actual and potential innovation was determined by the list of activities that the union performed or intended to perform in the short run, besides the ones mandated by law. For instance, unions in Imperatriz, Alcântara, and Caxias participate in the elaboration of production projects for the municipality and for the region. In Arame and João Lisboa, union leaders are trying to do the same. In other unions, leaders think that the local and state government ought to define the production and subsidies for the region.

Finally, the leaders' political orientation also varies from union to union. Basically, there are two kinds: left-oriented rural labor unions, which usually are linked to left-wing ideologies, and right-wing rural labor unions which are linked to right-wing parties, are against radical conflict, and sometimes side with large estate holders and local authorities. In São Mateus, Arame, and João Lisboa both tendencies are present in the union. The unions that are leftist include members of political parties such the Workers' Party, the Brazilian Socialist Party, and the Communist Party. The unions that are rightist are linked with the Liberal Party (PFL), the Social Democratic Party (PDS), and the Rural Democratic Union (UDR), traditional parties that represent the local oligarchies and oppose agrarian reform.

The political orientation of the union reflects the political party to which leaders are linked and the way leaders respond to change in peasants' demands. For instance, in Imperatriz and Caxias all leaders are affiliated with the Workers' Party, in Arame leaders were affiliated with several left oriented parties, and in Santa Helena and Grajaú most of the leaders were affiliated with the PFL. Unions in Imperatriz and Caxias seem to be more responsive to members' needs and more concerned with keeping up to date with innovations and policies to provide services to members, such as guaranteeing that rural credit is being distributed, than the union in Grajaú.¹

¹ Although the party affiliation play a great role in the differentiation of union politics, it is very common to find alliances between members of left and right parties in the countryside, mainly considering that in rural areas

I observed that the greatest and newest differentiation among unions appears in the activities that they are performing. For instance, a few unions are performing production oriented activities. I aggregated unions depending on the type of service delivered and the potential to innovate in the short run, because it seems to me that some unions were more prepared to respond to changes in workers' needs and demands.

According to the research outlined above, I grouped unions by activity: purely-bureaucratic unions, combative unions, and production-oriented unions² (Table 6).

The purely-bureaucratic unions are the ones that only perform the administrative role established by federal law. In these unions, leaders usually side with large landowners in the struggle for land. Purely-bureaucratic unions do not intervene in the production process. They only perform bureaucratic tasks, such as enrollment in social security programs for retirement and pensions. Previously, this type of union carried out welfare functions, a remnant of the earlier phase of unionism in Brazil. In some cases, they even side with the landowners when they have to negotiate indemnification for small farmers when the large landowners' cattle invade their plots.

A second type of union is called "combative." This type of union is a corporatist union that performs all the same activities as the first type, but combativeness usually emerged from the struggle for land and the need to accommodate the workers on a piece of land. They also perform bureaucratic functions, but they consider themselves a political arm for the peasants. Their leaders believe that to perform bureaucratic functions is a burden imposed by the government, although peasants also require it of them. They allege that welfare functions could be performed by branches of the Ministry of Labor and local governments.

The third type of union I named the production-oriented union. All unions in this category are corporatist unions that perform all the tasks performed by type one unions, and in all the cases that I observed, they have performed, or still perform, type two activities as well. However, they have been changing their focus from land issues to production since resolving the conflicts. They

individuals are relatives and live closer to each other. Then, the differentiation between political parties in rural areas is more formal than *de facto*.

² Interview with Pedro Marinho, rural extension agent and agricultural agronomist working for the CPT.

discovered that land is not enough, because the small farmer needs to produce, commercialize, and adapt to the new and changing economy.

Table 6: Union activities and municipalities visited

Classification	Characteristics and Activities	Municipalities visited
Type 1: <i>Purely-bureaucratic unions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> controlled solely by the president have a very centralized internal organization register workers for social security benefits provide health care, medical and dental services represent workers in judicial and administrative cases defend the worker when large ranchers' cattle invade plantations 	Grajaú, Coelho Neto, Santa Helena
Type 2: <i>Combative unions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> controlled by many members of different political orientations are involved in land conflicts support invasions and confrontation with landowners register workers for social security benefits provide health care, medical and dental services represent workers in judicial and administrative cases defend the worker when large ranchers' cattle invade plantations negotiate with government agencies such as the INCRA, EMATER, ITERMA (Rural Extension Agencies) for agrarian settlement projects 	Arame, São Mateus, João Lisboa
Type 3: <i>Production-oriented unions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> do the same as type 2 promote and advise the formation of cooperatives and associations participate in local committees for resource allocation negotiate subsidies for infrastructure and projects intervene in the local production process advise small farmers about crops and techniques 	Imperatriz, Caxias, Amarante, Alcântara

Source: Field research done by the author.

Briefly put, rural workers and small farmers need to survive land reform. Unions in the regions where land conflict was resolved, need to find ways to keep the peasant on the land. For the sake of that, they have to guarantee that settlers will receive grants and loans to produce. They had to overcome the radicalism of their combative stage and negotiate better conditions for

production. For instance, union leaders in Imperatriz have to mediate conflict with INCRA (the National Agrarian Reform Institute). Before they used to occupy land and fight with landlords. Now that they have already received the land, they have to convince banks that they are able to service their debts. A priest explained the situation like this:

“They are not threatened by violence, they are even protected by the state, but they need to prove that they are serious and that they were not occupying land only for the sake of revolution, but for the sake of the justice. They have to show the whole society that we were serious and that they did not want *revolution*. They only wanted to survive. They have to change to be respected in their goals and future actions.”

These unions started intervening in local and regional politics not only by imposing themselves by force but also through alliances and negotiations with their counterparts and opponents.

They became autonomous from political organizations such as political parties and are becoming incubators for leaders at the regional and national levels. For instance, four out of five leaders that I interviewed in the state Federation (FETAEMA) came out of unions that were combative or production oriented.³ The state Deputy Vila Nova is a peasant from the Tocantins region, and Domingos Dutra, Manoel da Conceição, another rural worker from Imperatriz was the second highest vote-getter in the senatorial elections of 1990.⁴

They have formed and advised other organizations--associations and cooperatives--without competing with them, and they keep a more comprehensive agenda according to economic demand. They seek the improvement of agricultural and livestock production and study new productive processes. They are producing their own space in society by participating in local committees for resource allocation, production plans, and local economic development. Furthermore, these unions have a larger committed membership and a more horizontal internal structure.

The reason why combative and production-oriented unions still perform bureaucratic functions is that unions' financial health depends on government transfers and the collection of membership fees, as explained in the previous chapter. Therefore, they must continue registering the workers,

³ Namely Nonato, Domingos, Joãozinho, and Anastacia, but the ex-president of Santa Helena.

⁴ Interview with father Gian Zufferallo and Luís Pirota, São Luis and Caxias, July 1996.

even though many leaders find the provision of health and social services less important than political and productive functions, and feel that it is “time consuming and a co-optation trap.” Since most members skip paying membership fees, government transfers, although meager, count a great deal towards the unions’ survival.⁵

In sum, despite the formal labor structure presented in the previous chapter, union variance occurred in Maranhão, the causes for differentiation are presented in the next section.

3.2. The causes of differentiation

Variance in the typology presented above characterizes ideal types. In reality, there is a continuum in the typology of workers’ organizations. Events unveil the causes of differentiation. Interestingly, the history which unions went through in each municipality evinces that all types of unions assume different functions not only as a response to the demands of their members, but also as a strategy to survive and to maintain the privileges and rights seized in previous phases.

Differentiation among unions reflects the changes in peasants’ demand for representation over time. The major factors that affect peasants’ needs and demands are the social and economic transformation occurring at the local level and tailoring the peasants occupation, identity, and perception of allies and enemies.

Purely-bureaucratic unions prevail in places either where the social and economic environment is more stable and peasants do not need further representation and assistance (because it is provided by the landlord), or where the landlord does not provide this service any more and the government has to substitute for him, or where peasants’ demands were repressed. In the first case, the peasants fit in the local social and economic structure and their immediate needs are fulfilled. In the latter case, even when conflict and discordance existed, peasants either left, choosing an exit option, or they accepted the present *status quo*, because they were threatened. In this case, it is a lack of options or a temporary silent resistance.

⁵ This information was gathered mainly in NGOs that were working in rural areas and in the Catholic Church, and in the FETAEMA.

Combative unions emerged where land conflict was intense and social fragmentation was high, where peasants did not identify with the local elites any more. The vertical structure between patron and peasant was broken by betrayal and distrust, and in turn, more horizontal and class-oriented organizations emerged. In these places peasants needed a more responsive representation and social organization both within and outside formal structures. Furthermore, in these places workers were able to mobilize, amass resources, and pressure their representatives to either to fight for the union leadership or represent them better, because there was enough critical agglomeration of peasants in the same situation and the existence of a group with common demands allowed collective action to emerge.

Here peasants are landless farmers, unemployed rural workers, and displaced tenants and sharecroppers. They have a common past of distrust, struggle for land, and betrayal by the landlords. In addition, the demand for better representation attracts political and religious groups that provide a critical vision through education, labor schools, and community meetings to discuss common problems.

Production-oriented unions appear in places where there is a need for production organization and commercialization. Peasants' needs for legal representation in conflict resolution has been provided. Peasants in these places are mostly small farmers, who own the means of production, the land, but they need to survive in the land.

In sum, the type of union reflects changes in demands mirroring changes in the peasantry identity, the strategies used to replenish their needs, and the way organizations compete for the union leadership. The three cases presented in the next section show how demand changed, and situations where unions did not respond completely the demand.

3.3. Research in the fields of dispute

To illustrate how changes in demand led to variation of union roles and the need for competition, I selected three brief cases studies because they show both demand change, variation in union role, external factors, and the need for competition to stimulate the change. The cases presented here show what happens when competition is absent or left.

3.3.1. Bureaucracy and welfare service delivery in Santa Helena: the pure type one⁶

The case of the union in Santa Helena shows the performance of a bureaucratic union, how the peasants view of themselves, their occupation, and the relations that they have with the landlord affect the union activities. In Santa Helena, the peasants needed basic welfare services and some mediation for conflict resolution. The first demand was supplied, but workers were not able to channel the second one because they did not an environment which could support or channel their claims, therefore they left Santa Helena.

Santa Helena is located on the northwestern coast of Maranhão state. It is a region of prairies, composed of pastures and shallow ponds, where the peasant farmers cultivate rice during the summer, and fish during the raining season, when the pastures are flooded.⁷ In the late 1970s, big ranchers, who used to cultivate rice or raise livestock, introduced the buffalo. Before the buffalo raising started, there were few conflicts between peasants and ranchers. When the buffalo arrived, the subsistence culture of the peasants was destroyed: the buffalo, created freely in the prairies, stepping through the rice fields and swimming in the ponds, contaminated the water and killed the fishes. After the buffalo arrived, the conflicts started.⁸

Another reason why there were few conflicts in Santa Helena was the status of land tenure. Most of the land holdings were old and the owner was known. In the areas where land tenure was unclear, the so-called *terras devolutas*, the land belonged to the state.⁹ In addition, in the pastures, ranchers and peasant farmers had lived together for many years, sharing the same space and the same convictions. The fact that of the 6,394 properties in Santa Helena, 6,311 are managed by the

⁶ Santa Helena's population was 26,447, 14,358 rural and 12,089 urban (IPES 1994).

⁷ This region has a thick soil, with streams that because of the inclination of the region are insufficient to drain the water, flooding the whole area in the rainy season. In the higher areas the Amazon forest is dominant, whereas in the low lands there is the capim *marreca*, a grass that grows in the water (SEMATUR 1991).

⁸ Interview with Deputy Vila Nova, July 1996.

⁹ Land was granted to landlords during colonial times, but since they were not cultivated as the grant demanded, they had be returned to the government. Most of these lands remained unclaimed, and peasant farmers and workers occupied the land and lived there for many generations. Later, these lands would be claimed through adverse possession claim and customary law.

owner means that most of the peasants are small farmers who own the plot they are cultivating (IBGE 1991:204).

Moreover, the peasant farmers who did not own the land could not, and did not know how to, defend their customary rights over the land. Most of the peasants who had problems migrated to remote areas in the northwest to find a place free of buffaloes. “There is always land in the west and we can find a place faraway from the trouble.”¹⁰ This common attitude in the region suggests that the peasants in Santa Helena are content and that there is no reason for conflict.

The rural labor union’s headquarters in Santa Helena is housed in a nice building. The previous president, a medium-sized farmer in his 50s who founded the union, is proud of the maintenance of the place. He is also proud of the medical and dental service that he provides in the union. A doctor and a dentist go there periodically and keep the dental-medical clinic working. Union leaders kept all the registration services updated, and the management is keen. Members seemed to appreciate the service.

The current president was a nephew of the previous president. The treasurer was another uncle. According to them, “the union has been in the family since it was founded in the early 1970s. And my grandfather was president too. The union is like our house.” This was another reason for pride. The union was managed by the family, and there was no one else working there, besides the sporadic visits of the doctor. It seemed that the union members are satisfied with the union, and there was no opposition movement.

“We do not have problems, and we live a very good life. We never have disagreements and we have the best hospital in the region.”

The Santa Helena case shows that in the places where the peasants are predominantly small farmers, are settled far apart from each other, and there is little land conflicts, unions remain as they were created. Indeed, given what the union president and his family told me, the union is almost a small enterprise or an association of small producers. It seems that the union exists because it is convenient for the president for the maintenance of his authority--a typical case of

¹⁰ Interview with the president of the union, August 1996. Interview with Deputy Vila Nova, July 1996.

entrenchment. Yet, although medical services is only service provided by the Santa Helena union, union leaders from other places recognized the importance of this work. At present, the Santa Helena union president works for the FETAEMA as the secretary of social welfare services, showing a change in the perspective of the labor movement.

In sum, the type of demand and stability that prevail in Santa Helena prove that the union is adequate for the workers. As a consequence, other groups have not emerged because there has not been any demand. The study of this union shows how important it is to consider the external characteristics of the locality in order to understand how competition emerges. This is the topic of the next chapter.

The next section shows how land tenure patterns and peasant characteristics influence change in peasants' demand, the effects of aggregation, the elements that behave as catalysts, such as competition from non-union organizations, and what happens when the competitors leave. The next section looks at a combative union.

3.3.2. Arame: the outsider as catalyst, the crisis of the leadership, and stagnation in type two

Named after the barbed wire used to fence pasture and driveways, Arame was in the middle of the route used to transport cattle from one pasture to another. There, hemmed in by mountains at the edge of the rain forest belt, until the mid-1980s Arame was a district of Grajaú. Most of the population arrived in the 1970s, composed of impoverished migrant farmers coming from many places to hide or to rest, looking for unsettled areas.

Although unsettled, most of the land in Arame was private and belonged to large landlords and *grileiros*, land grabbers, who bought or took the land when the Amazon frontier was pushed back.

Since land was occupied in the most remote areas of the state, property limits were unclear, facilitating land grabbing. Soon after the peasants arrived and settled, large ranchers started claiming the land, expelling peasants, and charging land rents. As a consequence, many agrarian conflicts erupted.

In 1980, three Italian priests arrived at Arame and started organizing CEBs (Christian Base Communities) and educating the peasants. The bishop of Grajaú invited them to come to Brazil before they were ordained in Italy to work with the rural poor in Brazil. The Catholic church was both concerned about the fact that its followers were choosing other religions and with solution of poverty.¹¹

“The priest created one CEB per street. We had meetings every night. There was at least one meeting per day and we knew where the next meeting would be and when they would start because the bells of the church would toll.”¹²

In the meetings at the CEBs, political awareness, the rights of the peasants, and issues such as justice and fairness were broadly discussed. The priest worked with the peasants, lived the same life, and shared their problems. In the beginning the priest were seen as neutral by the large farmers of the region, until the first conflict when the priests sided with the peasants. From that moment on, the large landlords retaliated:

“Up to that moment, large farmers would give us support, some food, and even cold water [only large farmers had freezers]. After that moment, they started complaining to the bishop, did not give us any support, and even the cold water disappeared.”

After the priests had worked intensively for two years, the peasants decided that they needed to have a union, rather than just meeting in the church. Although the priests played a crucial role in

¹¹ Interview with Gian Zufferalo and Luís Pirotta, the Italian priests. Father Gian told me that when he was in Italy, he did not like the elites.

¹² Interview with Francisquinho de Arame, 1997.

Arame, the workers believed that when they petitioned to open the union branch in Arame, it was their matter. The peasants realized that the right place to fight for their rights was the union.¹³

In 1982, still as a district of Grajaú, Arame could not have a union, but merely a *delegacia sindical*. Although Arame's peasants, member of the Grajaú union, elected Arame's union delegate, the president of the Grajaú union had to endorse the choice. Arame's peasants elected Francisco Vieira (Francisquinho), a community leader formed by his work in the trenches of the CEBs. The president of the Grajaú union did not want to accept the peasants' choice, preferring his own delegate, but because the peasants were mobilized and went to Grajaú to pressure the president, he confirmed Francisquinho as union delegate. The Catholic priests supported Francisquinho and hired a lawyer to make the president follow the law.

Since the union delegate supported and participated in the actions occurring in Arame, the president removed Francisquinho from his position and closed the union district office. In response, peasants in Arame formed a committee that went to São Luís, Maranhão's capital, and petitioned the Rural Workers Federation (FETAEMA) to enforce the law, reinstate the union, reopen the union, and support the workers' petition regarding land conflicts. Eventually, the Federation recognized the workers' rights, and reopened the office.

From 1982 to 1986, many conflicts occurred in Arame. The main objective of the union local branch was to protect the peasants from threats made by ranchers, big landlords, and farm managers. The actions against peasants always included prohibiting the small farmers from planting their crops, charging rent for land for which tenure was not defined, and letting cattle invade the plots of small farmers without fair compensation, since the cattle roamed freely. The large landlord owned the land, or claimed to, and through middlemen and hired gunmen threatened that if the peasant complained, the landlord would expel him from the land.

The peasants did not have anywhere to go, so they gathered at the edge of Arame. Together they occupied some land, whose ownership was unclear, and started planting their crops. Retaliations started and their crops and houses were burnt. Death threats became very common and a community leader was assassinated by a gunman. In 1985, peasants invaded the *Fazenda*

¹³ Interview with Father Gian Zufferalo and Luiz Pirotta, ex-priests in Arame.

Merck and destroyed the houses, and later, they killed the gunmen who had killed a community leader and political activist. This event resounded at the local, state, and federal level.

Up to this point, the factor that contributed to the success of the workers' organization in Arame was that the peasants present in Arame had a long story of migration and did not develop patronage ties with the landlords. Indeed, since southern firms owned most of the land, the owner barely knew where the land was located and where its boundaries were. Usually a middleman managed the farm. The middlemen had neither the economic power that the landlord had over the peasant, nor his respect, because ultimately he was a peasant who betrayed his peers, threatening them.

The relationship between the middlemen and the peasants shows how well defined class bonds in Arame were. Arame's peasants saw the middlemen as their equals, and tried to convince them to join their cause before invading or occupying an area.¹⁴

“When we were about to invade some land, we would invite the middlemen to stay there with us and occupy the area with us. We did not have anything against them. Some of them stayed. Some left. Others adhered to our movement when they saw that we succeeded. They also want a piece of land; they are small farmers without a piece of land like all of us.”¹⁵

In fact, the peasants' ability to establish ties among peasants themselves and their families, and eventually to extend those ties to local policemen (studied in the chapter about the union delegate) and the soldiers who came to Arame after the gunman was killed, is surprising. Moreover, the events that occurred in Arame show that when the demand for legal representation increases and the peasants are able to amass a critical group of people, they will challenge established groups. Indeed, critical mass is essential to keep the movement alive and to guarantee the balance of power; thus the involvement of other groups and classes, such as the women and the soldiers, was critical for the strength of the movement in Arame.

¹⁴ Interview with Pedra Preta, Arame, July 1996.

¹⁵ Interview with Braz in Pedra Preta, Arame, July 1996.

The siege of the Mothers' Group: female rural workers at the front

When peasants were killed, nobody would notice. Less than twenty-four hours after the peasants killed the gunman, 130 military police arrived at Arame to impose order. The peasants gathered on top of a hill close to the center of the city. 200 rural workers took part in the operation. They knew that the reaction would be severe. The military task force surrounded the hill and established a siege.

The Mothers' Group in Arame was the lurking place of the workers' movement. Women were the only people allowed to pass the barrier, since they were considered harmless by the military command. They served as couriers, bringing and taking messages to the men on the hill. They brought food, cooked, and, eventually, remained in the encampment, supporting their husbands. After that, women were always up at the front fighting with the men and assuming their role as rural workers.

The most interesting accomplishment of the women was that they established a connection between the workers at the top of the hill and the soldiers at the bottom. Although the government sent the soldiers to control the situation in Arame, it did not send enough food to maintain them there. After some days of siege, the soldiers were starving:

“They did not have anything to eat. They were in a worse situation than our men. And they realized that we were not a threat to them. Then, we went down the hill and offered them some food. After a while, they realized that we and our group just wanted peace and justice. In the last days of the siege, we had some parties together.”¹⁶

When the commandant in charge of the police task force found out that the soldiers were in contact with the peasants, he tried to prohibit it. As Francisquinho told me: “there was nothing he could do, because the soldiers were already convinced that we were people of good will, and we kept doing it.”

Although this all happened in a very subtle way, men and women told me that after women climbed the hill and decided to stay, the first thing they did was to put a white flag on a house where everybody could see. On the flag they wrote: “Here live God's people.” Peasants believed

¹⁶ Interview with Braz, August 1996.

that it was an act of peace which eased the relationship between those who were at the top of the hill and those who were at the bottom. The most important accomplishment, though, was that women were considered as partners in the community as they had never been before.

During the 21 days of the siege, outside Arame's territory another struggle was going on. The two priests had been networking in the capital of the state. They mobilized non-governmental organizations, church, local, state, and federal politicians to call off the siege. When it came to an end, two buses arrived in Arame full of activists from other states and cities, and people rallied with the peasants to celebrate the victory.

This event shows how important it was to involve not just peasants in the struggle, but to guarantee the support of other groups, groups not necessarily related to the local constituency but that would bring outside support.¹⁷

The demand in Arame was for legal representation and conflict resolution. The union was the legal mechanism for both of them, however, since the previous union leadership did not sided with workers, other groups such as the Catholic church encouraged the workers to gain control of the union and to believe that the union was the right channel to voice their demands, as is shown in the following section. Thus the Arame case shows how the existence of an outsider induced not only the transformation of the local union into a combative union, but also helped to gather critical power to face the "common enemy." However, the existence of non-union groups in the process of competing for unions and making them responsive to workers needs must have roots in the locality, otherwise when the support leaves, the movement fades.

The patronage of the church: training in solidarity and political activism

Who was responsible for the successful mobilization that occurred in Arame and gave birth to the combative union there? The priests certainly had certainly a very important role in Arame. They were the catalysts that glued the peasants together; however, they made the workers too dependent on them.

¹⁷ Moreira Alves (1989) reports a similar situation.

The union leadership went through a severe crisis when the priests who had backed up all union activities left Arame. In 1992, the bishop of Grajaú replaced the priests in Arame with priests who had a more spiritual inclination. According to the people in the communities, the difference between the priests was that: “the first priests were the warriors, they would fight with us and for us; the later priest are the constructors. They work for us but do not ask us what we think.”

Although the new priests working in Arame work very hard, they were not considered part of the community as the first three priest were. First, the first three priests fought with them; second, the priests were sharing their doubts and problems and listened to them; and third, the priests would respected their ideas and empowered them. The second group of priests were as good workers as the first, but they would impose top-down decisions, they were less effective, and they did not acknowledge the struggle that the peasants had before.

Graça and Braz told me:

“The other priests would walk two days to get here at Pedra Preta. Then, they would sit around the fire and talk with us and sleep in our hammocks. In the morning, they used to wake up and go to the fields with us. Now the new priests come, talk to us, and decide what is best for us. For instance, they decided to build the well on top of the hill because it is healthier, and they wanted to move there. But we live here and want to stay here. They divided us.”

Then I asked whether they were good or not, and she said:

“They are good, but they do not like to talk much. And they do not like to talk about the other priests and their work.”

While the peasants in the communities resented the change emotionally, because the current priests are less effective, the union leaders’ resentment reflects a feeling of rejection. “We felt as we had been abandoned” said Antonio Luiz. “The first group of priests left us and we were not prepared enough. And we had too much trouble.”

The movement in Arame became too dependent on the support of the Catholic church and did not mature to keep going by itself. When the Catholic church left, they felt isolated and weakened, because all their actions had been backed up by the priests. When the priests left, there was no

other group left to support them or to oppose them, and they felt alone. They had to learn how to walk by themselves, without the moral support provided by the church.

In other places, such as Caxias and Imperatriz, intermediaries came and went frequently. But when support was withdrawn, either other groups were already providing support, or the union leaders had enough maturity to keep working by themselves. In Arame there was as rich an environment as in Imperatriz. Because of the remote location and the poverty of the place, few organizations were present in Arame. Even the religious groups are few there. This is a key difference between Arame and other places such as Imperatriz and Caxias, determining the future performance of the union and the isolation of the union members. The fact that peasants were close to each other, indeed, was one of the factors that boosted the movement in the first place, but it was not enough to attract other groups to the area. To keep the movement going and responding to workers' needs, it is necessary for members to be motivated and mobilized. Where other organizations existed, competition and pressures from outside the union kept motivation and mobilization high, whereas where there were no non-union groups, the union did not keep the same pace.

Bureaucratic routinization or political activity: what is the role of unions and governments?

Once the land problem was resolved, Arame's union leaders felt the burden of routinization. In addition, the government established that trade associations should pledge for rural credit instead of unions. Unions, thus, had either to subsume the role of coordinator, or to retract to bureaucratic functions. In Arame, union leaders were struggling between the two roles because they did not overcome the combative stage.

A direct result of the workers' actions was that the government granted land to 1,500 families in Arame. The state government expropriated four large farms were expropriated (Pedra Preta, Citusa, Viamão, and Lago da Onça) and will expropriate others soon. An indirect result was that the mayor of Grajaú to which Arame belonged, Deputy Mercial, worked out the incorporation of Arame and made it become a *município*. When Arame became a *município*, the union local branch became Arame's own union.

The Deputy alleged that the incorporation of Arame happened because they won the right to be independent. Arame is big enough, the population is growing, and so is the economy. They had everything there and they do not need Grajaú's support." He also mentioned that, "moreover, they had already caused too much noise."¹⁸

After 1988, the mission of the local union having been attained, the union had to cope with the routinization of union activities. Peasants received permission to remain on the land, but the implementation of the projects was a very slow process. Union leaders had to start to appeal to federal and state government agencies, such as INCRA, EMATER, ITERMA, Projeto NORDESTE (PAPP).¹⁹ Overall, the union had to help enforce the laws that support agrarian reform and to carry out the bureaucratic services, petitioning for infrastructure projects such as roads and wells, in addition to their regular bureaucratic job.²⁰

In 1993, when government agencies determined that in order to apply for government grants for rural credit, development projects, and so on, communities had to be organized in associations, the union had to start advising communities how to form associations.²¹ Before that determination, unions would petition for grants or development projects such as buying equipment and tractors. However, once the community had bought the tractor, the union leader who had signed the petition would keep the tractor for the union and charge for its use and the community which had petitioned the benefit would have to fight for its use.

To avoid this problem, government agencies established that only associations with members who proper documentation would be able to request such projects. Then, local governments and non-governmental organizations and unions started organizing associations in order to apply for

¹⁸ Interview with Grajaú ex-mayor, Deputy Mercial.

¹⁹ INCRA is the Agrarian Reform National Institute, EMATER (Extension agency of Maranhão), ITERMA (Land institute), Projeto NORDESTE (PAPP) Program to support the Small Producer.

²⁰ In the case of agrarian settlements, settlers are entitled to receive several benefits to stay in the plot, among them, rural credit, funding for livestock and agriculture, housing, and infrastructure. However, these services are usually not provided immediately, and it takes several years for the government implement them. In Pedra Preta, in Arame, and in Imperatriz, the average length of time to wait for such projects is seven years. The union, then, petitions to have these services implemented.

²¹ Associations of Small Farmers are civil organizations formed to trade production, request rural credit, and so on.

those credits. However, union leaders in Arame resented the formation of trade associations. They thought that associations would weaken the union's power, because once the association was formed peasants would not need the union anymore. Antonio Luiz complained:

“the government promoted the formation of associations in order to finance projects and try to denigrate the image of the unions. Even if the worker belong to the union, the worker needs to belong to a trade association in order to apply for credit. In this system, the worker thinks that the trade association is better than the union, and despise the union. It is a failure for the union movement.”

Besides that, the union had to mediate conflicts between associations in localities where the government had already implemented infrastructure projects and improvements and associations in communities where the government had not yet implemented projects.²² Antonio Luiz, a union leader, told me that:

“To be in the union is very demanding, both politically and administratively. We do not have time to do anything, and we have to be a kind of scapegoat for the government. If one association is fighting with another, we have to mediate the conflict, and then the union's reputation is affected, because they say that we are siding with the other side whoever it is.”

Another leader told me the following story:

“There were two blind men begging in a square. A rogue told one of them: ‘I want to give you some money, but I do not have change because I gave all I had to the blind man on the other side of the square. I told him that half is yours’. Then, he went to talk to the other blind man and said: ‘Look, I left some money with your buddy on the other side of the square, because I did not have change. Go there and get your part.’ After a while the two blind men met and asked about the money. Since both thought that the other had the money, they started cursing and preparing to fight. The rogue, who was watching the scene, yelled to the two blind men: Not with a knife!’ Both blind men thought that the other had a knife and ran away. This is what the government does with the unions and the trade associations, and no one ever sees any money.”

But when I asked whether they advise trade associations, he said:

²² Interview with Antonio Luiz and Raimundo Rosa, Arame, August 1996.

“We have to, we cannot stop, we know how to do that and we have to do what our members ask. If they come and ask for help, we help them. Right now we are advising around 15 associations in Arame.”

Although they do the service, they feel like middlemen and have been demoted. With the emergence of so many associations they are losing space in the political sphere. Another leader, Raimundo Rosa, posed the problem as follows:

“The union provides the documentation that the INCRA requests. We go to the area, collect information about the land and about the peasants. When the project is to be developed, the INCRA goes directly to the area and the union does not even know what is going on. And then, the union does not mean anything to them. But it was the union that made the petition. Then we are losing to the associations because they are doing things that the union used to do, and the peasants feel that they do not need to affiliate with the union any more.”

In spite of a trend towards focusing on production, union leaders in Arame still think that the union is a means for political struggle. All the union leaders run in local or gubernatorial elections and think that their final goal is to influence how politics are done. Arame union leaders are trying to keep pace with local politics and innovations, such as taking part in a project to protect the rain forest and denouncing corruption local government, lack of transparency, and projects developed only in communities linked to politicians. However, they are preoccupied that they are doing only the basic and bureaucratic functions that a union must do to keep members affiliated and to make them pay their dues and commit to the union's goals.

Union leaders in Arame complain that they are not as strong as before and that they are stagnant now, although they recognize that it is part of their duty to keep the union functioning, and they are trying to keep mobilization high in order to pressure governments to provide for their needs. However, it is difficult for them to recognize that demand is changing. Indeed, the demand there is shifting from political organization and conflict resolution to the organization of production. The union's leaders do not get to advance towards new roles as much as in Imperatriz and in Caxias, because they have not been under pressure from other groups. Thus, competition and, to some extent, the coordination of social action, are not necessary in Arame. Competition and coordination will be examined in the next chapter.

In Arame, the only thing that seemed to keep union leaders together were the common ideology, the past experience that is union leaders' pride, and a far, but still constant, support from

the Catholic Church. Indeed, the first group priests keeps advising the union towards responsiveness to workers' needs. Besides that, the case of Arame shows that unions may go back and forth in a continuum of activities, according to peasants' demands and the existence of other organizations which may supply workers' need.

The survival of the union in Arame may depend on the maintenance of the bureaucratic functions and the union monopoly established by the law. However, since only union delegates and union members were able to carry out some functions such as registration of workers to access welfare and assistance to agrarian reform activities, the government must invest in other ways to inform and access community.

The next case, Grajaú, shows how workers' demand can be satisfied by the actions of the local government and local elites and the absence of non-union organizations, affecting the performance of the union.

3.3.3. Retraction in the quiescent labor movement of Grajaú and the role of the local government

The reason why the case of the bureaucratic rural labor union of Grajaú is interesting is four-folded: first, a group of workers who were unsatisfied with the performance of the union formed an opposition movement in the 1970s. Second, this group was supported by a Catholic priest who left the locality after a short time and no other organization supported the union. Third, the union leader from the opposition movement was killed and the labor movement retracted. Fourth, the local government took over the role of organizing small farmers' production, created 158 trade associations in the locality, and splitting off the areas where there was some conflict arising (e.g. Arame and Terra dos Meninos) and the peasant that remained in Grajaú are small farmers already settled.

I arrived at a deserted Grajaú union headquarters, where only one secretary was taking care of the building. Later, a union delegate arrived to fill out some application forms. He told me that the president had resigned and that the union was under the direct management of the Federation (FETAEMA) because there was a suspicion of corruption in the union's finances.

While I was staying in Grajaú, the union was closed most of the day, and the few hours when it was open there was just one secretary present. The union headquarters were abandoned, and the only members present did not want to assume any responsibility, besides answering technical questions about the procedure for social security registration. I found out that dispute over the union leadership had led to the murder of one combative union leader. The following leader feared violence and possibly death. Indeed, in 1992, an opposition movement was elected and administered the union for two years. In 1994, the night before the new election, the union president, who belonged to the opposition, was murdered by his predecessor. The local and state government intervened in the union, and the election was postponed. Later, another president was elected.

The new union leadership feared both peasants and ranchers and farmers. The effects of the murder silenced the whole labor movement. Although the president of the union would take part in a Local Committee for Economic Development, he did not have a voice and said that: “No one can not talk here, because one will die.” On the other hand, local politicians took over rural workers’ organizations and founded 158 associations in the communities scattered across the municipality. The associations’ purpose was to apply for the grants provided by the government.

There are some areas of conflict in the boundaries of the municipality, but they did not seem to affect the everyday life of Grajaú politics. Indeed, the local government had an interesting strategy of giving in in the area of conflict by emancipating the district and forming a new municipality. Another member of the local government said the same about another site that was being split off in 1996, when I was there: “We want them to secede because then we do not have to deal with conflict. They are too far, and they have to solve their problems. Here the local government takes care of all the communities, and we do not want conflict.” Thus, three areas of conflict were eliminated from the municipality.

A union delegate told me that there were no conflicts in Grajaú and that they solved it in an amicable way, by talking with the landlord. Most of the conflict occurs when cattle invaded the land of the small farmers, and the landlord does not want pay compensation. One union member told me that, “There are conflicts, but people are not willing to intervene, and they accept what the ranchers offer.” So the movement has not taken off.

The most evident fact in Grajaú is that the local government took over the role of organizing workers and responded the needs of the workers they felt committed to. The workers facing land conflicts were ignored or excluded from their competence. Since there was no one in charge of the union and no one interested or prepared to compete for it, union did not provide legal representation to the workers. The absence of opposition groups and an environment where most of workers comply with the rules of the state did the labor movement retract.

Apparently, the local government was providing welfare services, legal representation, and production organization to the workers who complied with the local government and suppressed these services to peasants who dissent with the local government. Moreover, the fact that the areas facing conflict were emancipated shows the danger of having the state as a mediator and service provider. It shows how the state intervention weakened the labor organizations, instead of stimulating responsiveness. The local need of organization of production and the weak ties among peasants to keep the movement alive to fight for the demands of the excluded workers. Ultimately, the lack of opposition groups or other groups willing to administer the union made the union remain the same.

3.4. Conflicts, distrust, and agglomeration shaping peasant demands and coalitions

At the root of union differentiation lies the existence of land conflict and broken relationships between peasants and farmers. Where conflicts over land were rampant, antagonism between the formal leadership of the union and workers' organizations fighting to channel their demands seems to have triggered workers' protest against state and elite domination and mobilization to change the *status quo*.

As I observed in Maranhão, in areas where the relationship among peasant farmers and landowners was stable, conflicts were less likely to happen, and mobilization was weak. Strong vertical social ties between landlord and peasant are more common than ties among peasants themselves, because their life was restricted to the farm. The majority of peasants shared the same beliefs as the landlord and were not prepared to resist. For instance, in Grajaú, Santa Helena, and Coelho Neto, and the first *Distrito* of Caxias, land had been in the hands of the same families for centuries, the Cruz e Malta, the Family João Coelho, and the Family Cruz, respectively. In these

traditional municipalities, landlords are described as *colonel*.²³ Allegedly, there were few land conflicts, and if so, it usually occurred at the edge of the municipalities, as in Arame, that was previously part of Grajaú. Workers and union leaders reported their relationship with the landlords as very pacific and stable. One leader told me:

“we do not have any problems. We rent our land and the landowner is there protect and help us. Most of the workers are sharecroppers and they receive their share of the harvest. The only problem is when the cattle of ranchers and large farmers invade our plantations. Here, there is a law establishing that the plantation is to be fenced at our [small farmers’] expenses, whereas the cattle can graze freely. But when there is any problem, we talk with the landlord and we always get a deal such as he pays part of the damage caused and we accept, because something is better than nothing.”²⁴

Thus, in places where there are strong patron-client ties, or clientelism, confrontation is unlikely to happen. However, once the trust is violated and ties are broken, confrontation is more likely to happen.

In areas of recent occupation, promoted either by the state through projects of colonization²⁵, or by migration from other Northeastern states, peasants seemed to rely less on their relationship with the landlord and are more prone to react against evictions, because they experienced in the past that the landlord did not hold their promises when he saw a better opportunity of investment or return. In addition, common experience with eviction, increased in- and out-migration, and impoverishment created an environment of social unrest, distrust, and fragmentation of social relations. The more contact peasants had with each other, the more likely they were to come into conflict.

In my field research, I found that social and economic factors and the existence of land conflict affected the way the peasants perceive themselves--either as a rural worker, or as small farmer--,

²³ Colonel is a term used in the literature to indicate the owner of the land to whom the workers own loyalty. The term appeared in the time that landowners were called to defend Brazil inner areas from foreign attacks and landowners were incorporate in the army as colonels that would run local armies. The soldiers were the workers, small farmers and peasants who were loyal to the colonel and dependent on him. See Cammack (1982).

²⁴ Interview with union leader in Grajaú, July 1996.

²⁵ Colonization in the Amazon and Pre-Amazon area was initiated in the 1960s during the military regime in order to occupy the region and eschew invasion by foreign countries and to shun guerrilla movements that were hidden in the region. Ceará, Piauí and Bahia are states bordering Maranhão. In these states drought has been a serious problem, forcing peasants to migrate.

and the way that peasants make alliances and demand for representation. Broken ties and distrust towards local elites led to the construction of workers' organizations based on class bonds and horizontal ties, emphasized by social and economic identities. As mentioned by Wells, in such an environment, "the balance of class power shifts and the perceived legitimacy of [...] relationships is called into question" (Wells 1996:191).

Peasants who are more in contact with their peers, "have physical and psychological latitude to develop perspectives independent from landlords," and can organize collective resistance (Wells 1996:210). That was the case of Arame, Imperatriz and Caxias (next chapter), where peasants have gone through a migration route and displacement. Then, the peasants do not trust the large landholders, neither the government because the local government used to ally with the landlord or to be absentee.

To this point, I have emphasized that, although legal labor law tried to impose a uniform structure to shape workers' organizations, uniformity did not happen because workers' demand for representation changed over time, influenced by external factors. However, although demand should lead naturally to union variation because unions supposedly must respond to their local constituency needs, because demand is enough to carry through implementation. Indeed, variation only occurred when there was presence of other groups to compete with the formal union and support from non-union groups guaranteeing fair competition. The next chapter analyzes that definitive change in unions only occurred in presence of opposition groups and competition, competition that occurred in two ways: first, competition for the union leadership leading to union change and, second, competition between union and non-union groups leading to cooperation, specialization, coordination, and synergy in the labor movement in Maranhão.

Chapter IV - Reconstructed Coalitions Through Competition: Processes of Transformation and the Satisfaction of Workers' Demands

To this point, I have mentioned that the unions based on monopolistic and corporatist principles are known for being corrupt, unresponsive to members' requests, and unaccountable. Although the law anticipated elections and local representation, the politics of repression and the state apparatuses, which also authorized federal intervention, obliterated any hope for democracy. The monopoly of representation and the Ministry of Labor's prerogatives of replacing leaders and block any attempt to change unions' leadership indicated that the politics behind the law did not advocate freedom. Evidence from cases in Maranhão reveal that *de facto* pluralism occurred in spite of repression and monopolistic representation. How did pluralism occur and how transformation occurred to meet workers' demands?

This chapter shows how pluralism, even though sometimes ponderous, occurred in two ways: first, when there were only a few organizations and the union was the legal institution able to represent workers but workers did not have truly access to the union, and second, when there were many organizations competing for workers' loyalty although the union still had a monopoly of workers' representation.

In the first moment, workers competed for the union leadership, forming opposition movements. I call opposition movements the group of workers which was competing for the union leadership in order to make the union attend workers' demand because they call themselves opposition and they keep calling themselves opposition even after winning the elections. These groups had to exit the union to exercise voice outside the union and gather critical mass to compete for the union. Later, to participate in the competitive process for the leadership of the union, rural workers had to infiltrate the union, compromise, and to accept the rules. They indeed had to affiliate with the union without voice to learn how to change the situation (Hirschman 1970).

In the second moment, there were competition with the union and coordination and specialization of functions because of the formal structure of union: alliance, coordination, and cooperation was necessary. At this point, after gaining control of the union and achieving their

primary goals such as land reform and legitimating their position, opposition movements' leaders had to face competition from other organizations. To achieve common goals and to minimize crises, they affiliated with other organizations, although keeping affiliated with the union: it was multiple entry and voice.

In both cases to be studied here, the existence of a rich and competitive environment supported by extensive networks of solidarity and cooperation was key to support the competition from opposition movements through the years during which they had to thrive for success. Later, after having being recognized as part of the formal structure, the networks in which they were involved supported the new union leadership to innovate, cooperate, and coordinate with non-union groups to maximize workers' satisfaction. Indeed, Locke reminds us in his study of the Italian economy, that where there is a network with multiple interactions and where civil society was more dynamic, development is more likely to happen (Locke 1995).

Fighting for representation

Notwithstanding the legal union apparatus, a means for workers to fight for their rights, in the beginning workers did not control their own unions. Local elites and governments could intervene in the union, leaders were appointed, and the groups that were entrenched could not be replaced. In order to replace those leaders, workers started organizing opposition movements that would compete with the official union leadership. Political parties, non-governmental organizations, the Catholic Church, and other groups joined the workers to react against the "sell-out" leaders, forming new leaders to compete with the union leadership and supporting opposition movements.

The absence of legal union pluralism obliged workers to constitute movements to conquer the formal institution. Workers would fight for the union because, besides being part of a consolidated institution *per se*, recognized as the legitimate organization for workers' representation, unions were an asset for the labor movement. First, formal unions were entitled to resources. Second, the union provided a space for mobilization. Third, the powerful vertical structure was seen as an asset by workers because the top level of the labor structure could back up the local branches during conflicts, i.e., in case of legal problem the Federation's representative could be called upon to serve as an arbitrator, or the Federation could be asked to provide lawyers to the unions in case

of conflicts, as in Imperatriz and Caxias, where the Federation had intervened to defend the right of the opposition to compete and to guarantee that the election was held in a proper way. Thus, the existence of the unions' rigid structure was convenient because rural labor unions were supported by the higher levels of the organization.

Three movements occurred parallel to the official union structure, on the local, on the state,¹ and on the federal level. On the local level, workers dissenting with the political orientation of the local union leadership formed the opposition movements. Union delegates who either disagreed with the local union leadership and/or were expelled from the union, joined the opposition movements. All the opposition leaders that I interviewed were formed in the trenches of the MEBs, CEBs, and CPTs—the Catholic Church local branches—and their labor schools.

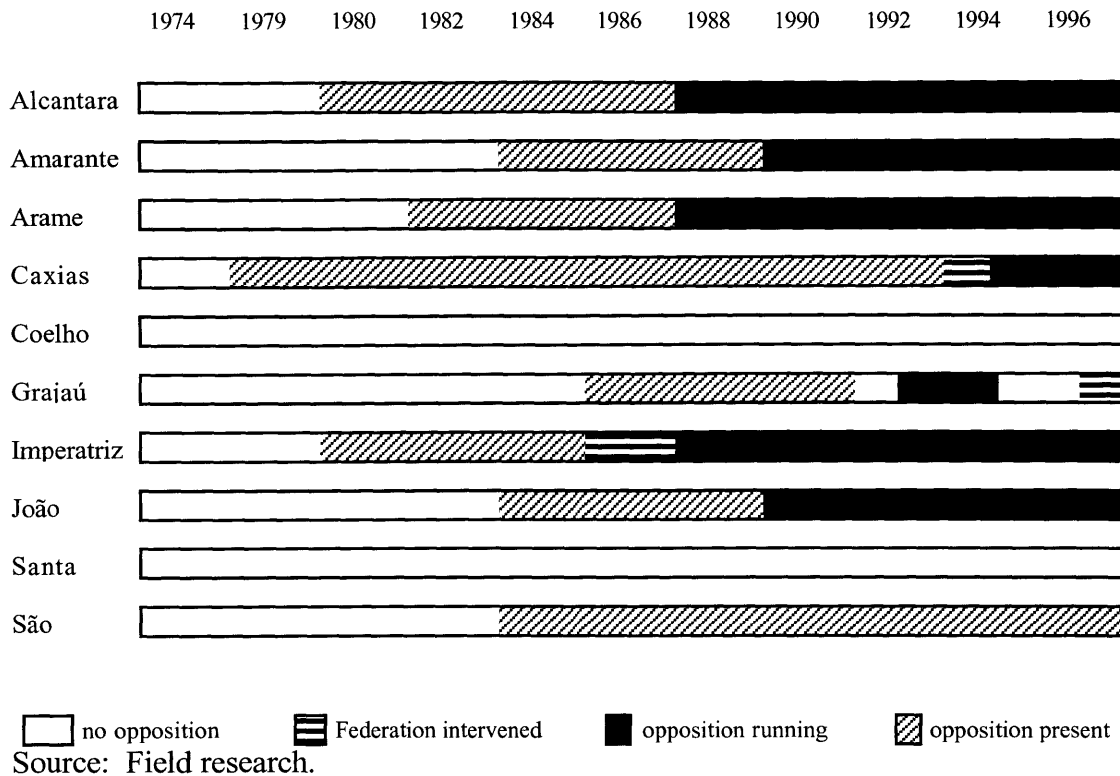
On the local level, the opposition had two ways: one that happened within the union, and another formed as a group--usually an association--outside the union. In Caxias, Imperatriz, João Lisboa, and Amarante workers formed a formal association, whereas, in Arame, São Mateus, Alcântara, and Grajaú, workers gathered around preexisting associations, such as the CEBs (Christian Base Communities). In both cases, opposition members would be registered at the union and would try to infiltrate at some decision-making level.

4.1. The local opposition movements

As I conducted my field work in Maranhão I realized that there were opposition movements in many municipalities (Table 7). Table 7 below shows the places where I found opposition movements, the period when they occurred, whether the Federation had to intervene to monitor the election, when they won the elections, the duration of their mandate, and current situation.

¹ Workers formed opposition movements in more than 20 municipalities in Maranhão (São Luiz Gonzaga, Pindaré, Mearim, São Mateus, Lago do Junco, Balsas, Lago da Pedra, Santa Luzia do Paruá, Santa Luzia do Tide) and, eventually, they formed an opposition movement on the state level. This opposition was formed by union leaders to take part in the Federação, many of them participating in local opposition movements in their municipalities. On the national level, opposition was organized by the Centrais. The opposition on the local level was not an isolated movement. It was linked to many opposition movements in several municipalities and conveyed information about politics, strategies, and land conflicts.

Table 7: Occurrence of Opposition Movements in Maranhão by municipality



The table shows that in Santa Helena and Coelho Neto, opposition movements never existed. In Imperatriz, Alcantara and Amarante, opposition movements were elected in the 1980s and in the 1990s, and remained in power. In Caxias, the opposition movement has existed since the 1970s and, recently, it was elected. In Caxias and in Imperatriz, the opposition was only able to win after the *Federation* intervened and monitored the electoral process. In Grajaú, the Federation was intervening in 1996. In João Lisboa, the opposition allied with the current leadership and jointly ran the union. In São Mateus, the opposition infiltrated the union, but never won the elections.

The appearance of opposition movements coincides with the cycle of demand in each municipality, although it happens differently in each place. First, rural workers and their allies would mobilize to oppose union leaderships who did not convey their needs. The opposition was then formed outside the union to compete for the union, because the union provided space,

resources, legitimization, and legal protection. Later, many groups emerged and started competing with the union, not specifically for legal representation, but for the loyalty of peasants and the influence over their choices. Table 8 shows what activities organizations were performing.

Table 8: Activities and representation by organization during the 1980s in Maranhão.

	Activities						
	Peculiar to the union			Not peculiar to the union			
	Legal Representation in administrative and judicial	Welfare Service	Political	Financial & Trade	Training	Technical	Advocacy
Unions							
Labor union	+	+	+	+	+		+
Opposition			+				+
Patron union		+		+			
Religious Groups							
CARITAS			+		+		
CEBs			+		+		
MEBs			+		+		
Government							
Local				+	+	+	
State				+	+	+	
Political parties							
			+				
Cooperatives							
		+		+			

Source: Field research.

In the table above, I grouped together technical training for production and basic education. Financial and trade corresponds mediation with banks, donors, and government agencies; welfare service is the provision of medical and dental care. Legal activities means advocacy in judicial arenas. Peculiar to unions are activities which the union has the monopoly of and not peculiar shows the activities that the union does not have the monopoly of.

4.1.1. Opposition from outside, strategies from within: Caxias

The case of Caxias' rural labor union illustrates how competition emerged and the opposition movements persisted, besides the existence of structural elements putting an obstacle for the victory. Yet the Caxias' case shows that structural factors, such as the political division of the

municipality, hindered effective pluralism and more democratic organization for a period of over 10 years. However, the opposition movement endured because of many strategies and the support received from non-union organizations.

Caxias is a municipality situated in the east of Maranhão state. The municipality is divided by law in three administrative areas called “*distritos*.”² The three areas have different social and political composition. The first *distrito* is located in the north of the municipality and land is owned by traditional large landowners and worked by renters and sharecroppers. The second *distrito* is composed large livestock farms. The third *district* is located in the southwest region of the municipality and is mostly composed by small farmers and tenants, whose land situation is not legalized.

During the 1970s many land conflicts erupted in Caxias. The third *distrito* was the focus of the land conflicts in the region.³ There, large landlords were changing from agriculture to livestock and expelled the small farmers from their lands. For many years, the workers did not receive support from the president of the rural labor union, *Seu Titio*, who opposed the confrontation with landlords and did not defend the workers. The Catholic church and human rights groups, such as the SDDH-CA (Society for the Defense of Human Rights--Caxias) united with rural workers, organized small farmers and peasants and tried to oppose the union by competing in elections and requesting help from other groups without success.

In 1979 a group of rural workers and small farmers formed the opposition movement called “*Movimento Sindical Florescente*” (Union Movement *Florescente*, *the Florescente*). The *Florescente* was an association composed mainly of rural workers who participated in the CEBs (Christian Base Communities) in the third *distrito*. It was supported by priests and nuns, political activists affiliated with the Workers Party, urban unionists affiliated with the CUT, lawyers, and social workers.⁴

² Distritos are a local administrative division existent only in Caxias. In the Caxias case, distritos are different of communities or neighborhoods. They comprised a geographical area and many communities and povoados.

³ Father Gian Zufferallo and Joãozinho at CPT.

⁴ Interview with Dalva, lawyer, with Iriósidro, rural worker and union leader, with Francisco and Joãozinho, and with priest Gian and Nonato, during July 1997, when I spent 10 days in Caxias, half in the urban area and half in the rural communities, the “povoados.”

According to Joãozinho and Nonato, members of *Florescente*:

“The president of the union, *Seu Titio*, never supported rural workers and small farmers when we had conflicts with large landlords and never allowed us to use the union apparatus to defend ourselves. He also never designated our communities for development projects. For instance, when we apply for grants or loan projects to the local government, we need a letter from the union saying that we are real small farmers who work the land, but we seldom got those letters from *Seu Titio*. Sometimes, we got them too late. Although the union was in charge of giving letters and mediating grants for infrastructure projects with the state government, such as the Projeto Nordeste.⁵ *Seu Titio* never took our projects to the authorities, so we had only one or two positive results; whereas in the communities where union leaders were linked to him many projects were implemented.”

When I was in Engenho D’Água, a community which had been connected to *Seu Titio* in the past, I counted five projects, namely, a school and kindergarten, piped water, electricity, an artesian well, and a new manioc mill. However, among 16 communities that were against *seu Titio*, only three projects had been implemented. For instance, only in Marruá the government gave money to finish the construction of an artesian well, whereas the Catholic Church financed most of the projects in the communities where the opposition was present.

Local extension agents⁶ confirmed that *Seu Titio* was a frequent mediator with the government to negotiate resource allocation in rural communities. I met *Seu Titio* in the City Hall negotiating the formation of new associations and demanding some projects. Most of the projects implemented were located in the first and second *Distritos*, areas to which he was more connected. On the other hand, I observed that the projects that had been implemented in some communities in the third *distrito* were financed by the Catholic church and from international organizations.⁷

After the formation of the *Florescente*, the opposition tried to take over the union many times from 1979 to 1991, but always failed to get on the ballot. *Seu Titio* won because he received

⁵ The Projeto Nordeste is a program developed to provide loans, and grants to rural communities to improve production, and roads, and to build wells and infrastructure in the municipalities.

⁶ Extension agents interviewed at EMATER (Extension Agency of Maranhão), INCRA (National Agrarian Reform Institute), and City Hall.

⁷ I noticed three international agencies involved with rural development and rural workers organizations in Maranhão: CEBEMO, a Dutch nongovernmental organization, Miserium, a German one, and Terres d’ Hommes, a Swiss one. There are also some French and German organizations that I did not have contact with.

money and trucks from large farmers in the region to bring rural workers to vote, and because the small farmers in Caxias are divided as described before. The opposition movement could not reach all the farmers, and the small farmers in each area had different characteristics, so the movement did not get united. First, workers and small farmers who stood against the union leadership did not have any way to reach the union headquarters to vote. They were recognized by the communities where they lived, called the red communities (*povoados vermelhos*), and the truck drivers would not pick them up on the road to take them to the ballot place. Even though support groups, such as the Catholic Church, provided some transportation means, they were not enough to transport everybody. The nuns and the priest just had a small car, could transport one at a time, and could not go the other *distritos*. Another problem was that *seu Titio* registered of individuals who were not part of the rural workers category was used as a surreptitious means to win the election.

Second, the political division of the municipality into *distritos* represented an economic division, as mentioned before, and as such, showed that workers and small farmers have different commitments and needs in different places. Most of the peasants did not back the opposition because they had strong relations with the landlord and less commitment to other workers.

Third, the third *distrito* had more conflict and the non-union organization working with workers concentrated there and the opposition movement did not get to amass all small farmers and workers from other *distritos* around the same question.

After fighting for ten years against the local union, having lost three elections, and facing serious economic problems and frustration, the *Florescente* adopted three strategies to make competition effective: (1) they registered women as rural workers to increase the number of people voting for them; (2) they instituted small production groups to provide themselves with better production and the means to buy trucks, cars, and other objects to keep the opposition movement alive, (3) and they infiltrated the union by participating in the local union to learn what the problems in the union were and how to win the elections. Using these strategies, in 1994 the opposition won the elections and elected Joãozinho president of the union.

The effect of women's participation

The involvement of women in the movement occurred because workers needed to enlarge the base of the opposition movement to have number and win the elections. Furthermore, they increased families' commitment to the movement.

The discussion about women's participation in the union usually concerned with the equalization of social welfare benefits received by female workers and the official recognition of women workers' status.⁸ In Caxias, it was a strategy used by the opposition at a moment of emergency. Before, women would stay at home and the men would go to the city to participate in the meetings and elections. Women were only registered as dependent of their husband because they were not considered to be rural workers. Many times, they were not even registered. The problem was aggravated when women needed medical care and could not use the public system or the union service because they were not registered. At that point, women were already taking intensive part in the movement, speaking out in the meetings and making clear their points of view. Indeed, the nuns would dedicate a great part of their work to encourage women to participate in the movement, to talk, and to show how they were important for the movement; women were the teachers and animators in many meetings in which I took part. The participation of the nuns and female activists was a motivation and example to women's participation.

In 1991, the participants in the *Florescente*, including the lawyer and the nuns, who were women, and other female rural workers, decided that to increase their numbers they had to involve women in the union. Women gathered and went to the union to request registration. *Seu Titio* denied their registration, saying that they were not rural workers and that they were only their husbands' dependents. The women did not accept that answer because they knew that as dependents they could not vote in elections. *Seu Titio* said he would call upon the Ministry of Labor and the police if they insisted, and that he would not go against the law. The confrontation exacerbated to a point where 150 women, with their hoes, sickles, and shoves, invaded the union

⁸ See Brumer 1993). The Consolidation of the Labor Laws established until the seventies that women could not affiliate with a union without the permission of their husbands. Although this article was abolished a long time ago, in rural areas where people did not know the law it is very likely that such a tradition remained for a much longer time.

headquarters and demanded their registration. They left the union only after three days and with their registration signed by the president.

Besides, *Seu Titio* gave in to the women movement because it was supported by lawyers and urban unionist who could monitor the process, claiming that women had the right to be registered and that they could not be threatened because it was illegal. The pressure of many external organizations and the democratization process going on in the whole country made *Seu Titio* and the large landlords to back down and compromise on women participation. Furthermore, they did not think it was a big threat to their entrenched power.⁹

According to the *Florescente* leaders, it was important to include women in the process not only because they were entitled to participate, but rather as a strategy of competition: not only did they amass more votes but also small farmers and union leaders did not use violence methods against women and respected them more. However, women were active agents in deciding what to do: “I told my husband that I would fight for what I thought was right, and since I was taking part in the movement as much as he was, I also had to take part in all the actions,” said Joãozinho’s wife.

On the other hand, women were very confident in their role. When I asked how important it was to participate in the movement, they were very sharp and said:

“we do everything, we plant, harvest, carry to the road. When our men were threatened they went to the forest and we stayed. We faced the police. We do the same as them, and we participate as much as they do. In our on way.”

Women were also convinced that they had to side with their husbands. Many of them told me that they had a sense of a calling and a mission, a sort of a missionary faith. *Dona Ritinha*, a seventy-year old rural worker, stated:

“When I was called and I understood, I had all the strength to fight. I could face everyone and I had no fear. We made the *Florescente* win the elections. We invaded the union headquarters and did not leave until they registered us. They tried to threaten us, but we stayed. When the president, *Seu Titio*, mentioned that he would kick me in the face, I grabbed his hand

⁹ *Seu Titio*, in turn, said he would register women and that the *Florescente* did not need to use violence

and challenged him. He did not have the guts to beat me. I found out that I was strong, and after that moment no one would defeat me” (McCabe n.d).

When I asked *Dona Ritinha* what she meant by being “called,” she told me:

“Well, I learned that I had rights and that there was injustice. Before I was afraid. My son would leave for the meetings and I would stay at home praying that nothing bad would happen. One day, all the men were hidden in the forest and the police came and we lied, we had to, we had to learn how to lie. We lied that we did not know where they were and that they had gone to the city. I was always afraid that the police or the landlord would retaliate and kill him and other people in the *povoado*. Francisquinho, my son, always told me that the landlord was trying to take the land from us and that it was not fair and that God did not want it. When I really understood our cause in the union headquarters that day, I could see it all and fought back.”

Therefore, the “understanding” comprised a mixture of religious and political devotion, where there was a calling to rebel instead of a calling to abide by the rules, showing how individuals may react and reverse a given situation.).¹⁰

Women’s participation and commitment to the struggle showed that they were aware of the broader problem affecting their poor condition and that they identified themselves as workers and key actors in the struggle against social inequality, injustice, and lack of institutional means to channel their needs. Furthermore, it broadened the base of the movement and avoided conflict and competition within the families, which were always frustrated with the losses in the elections. Women served to the purposes of competition, but their participation was only possible were there was already some participation and discussion occurring similarly to what occurred in Arame.

Production and politics: the small groups of production

The second strategy used by the opposition to keep their opposition movement alive was to create the small groups of production. Small groups of production are units of production, like associations, created to deal with the financial and economic problems faced by the peasants.

¹⁰ Interesting to notice that Weber explain the calling as a calling to obey and to work and make institutions and bureaucracies working. In this case, the calling existed, but it was a calling to rebel.

Contrary to most associations, which are created to deal with the commercialization of production, production groups are imbued with political goals and created to keep peasants' mobilization.

The idea of creating the small groups of production was born out of the fact that the opposition did not have the means to finance both their agrarian and their political activities. Most of the opposition movements were financed by grants and donations from the Catholic church and foreign non-governmental organizations. However, with the economic crisis and poor returns on investments, donations and grants shrank. Winning control of the union was a way to guarantee that the opposition would have bargaining power to realize their demands. However, more than ten years after the movement started, they were in a worse situation than before, in financial and political terms. The rural workers involved in the opposition were frustrated because they were not able to win the elections. In addition, they did not have time to dedicate to their plots and productive activities, and to their families, due to their involvement in political activities. A union and community leader told me:

“Our wives were complaining that we were never at home and our sons and relatives had to do our work. Of course, we think that the political struggle is important, but we needed to eat, and it was a problem to be fighting without rest. In addition, we were not accomplishing much, because we did not have money either to keep mobilizing people, nor to feed ourselves and our families.”

To the opposition movement leaders, the union would be the way to channel their demands to the government. Through the union they would not only have access to government funding, but could participate in strategic government arrangements such as the elaboration of projects, and the reception of government transfers from mandatory contributions. However, the main goal was to make the union a stepping stone to a higher goal, that is to run in gubernatorial and local elections. Joãozinho told me: “Our objective is to affiliate as many workers as we can and then run the local government. Then, we can face the elites and powerful groups that persecuted us.”

Workers perceive unions as institutions; institutions, in turn, “are ultimately about power.” Without being part of the union, they could not have power to mediate their demands. In addition, the resources coming from international agencies and foreign organizations were diminished because funding was becoming scarce and the results were not always as projected. In Marruá, the *Miserio*, a Catholic organization, had financed many projects, but they had being more rigorous

with donations and wanted to see more monitoring and better results, signaling a change in the philosophy of donor agencies.

The true goals of the organization, thus, were to provide financial resources to support both political and agrarian activities and psychological enthusiasm among the members, although the announced primary objective was to organize production. In comparison to what happened in Imperatriz, where the goal of the groups of production was to keep the small producer on the land, in Caxias, the political and organizational survival of the opposition movement was the key. The fact that the *Florescente* engendered the formation of the groups of production and that non-worker members and political consultants were discussing the need for a strategy to keep up the workers' morale shows how political a strategy it was. Dalva, a human rights lawyer, said that,

“We, Olivia and I [leaders and consultants to the opposition movement], had a conversation the night before the meeting and talked about the production groups, and we thought that it was necessary to do something to improve production, because the movement was shrinking and we did not know how to help workers anymore. Then, coincidentally, Joãozinho [the current union president] vocalized the same idea. Joãozinho, in turn, insisted that the groups of production were an initiative of the workers themselves because they needed to organize production and to involve all the members of the community in their fight.”

The most important result was the involvement of the whole community in the process that would lead the opposition to win the union. Formally, by imposing that all members of the group of production must be union members, they secured the political movement. Since all the members of the family were members of the group, of the *Florescente*, and of the union, they enlarged all those movements.

First, workers created a group of production in each community and affiliated the groups of production with the *Florescente*. Then, they discussed the organization of each group of production in the community and divided tasks and obligations. In Marruá, Aldeia dos Cavalos, São Jose dos Pretos and São Jose dos Meninos, communities where the *Florescente* is present, I found a well-structured organization: one person responsible for finances, collecting money for common activities such as managing the well and repairing the truck; one for production. For example, in Marruá, where small farmers had a collective poultry farm and eight hectares of manioc, they would rotate the workers responsible for the fields and the poultry: one for the

management of the group; one for the care of common animals and equipment, such as cattle and hogs, and one for the transportation of the crops and the poultry production to the city. All activities rotated among the members, and almost all the families in the community were affiliated with the groups of production.

The groups of production were considered the economic base for the *Florescente* both to earn money in order to make workers better off, and to win the election in the rural labor union, which would enable them to make their demands more effectively. As an immediate result of the groups of production, they created an economic and political dependence of the community as a whole on the opposition. After one year, there were 180 families involved in the groups of production in 16 communities. Every single member of the family was participating and had a voice. One representative of each group would always be present at the meeting of the *Florescente*. All production groups give some money contribution to the *Florescente* as well.

As a consequence of better financial performance, they were able to buy a truck and, during the union election, they transported people from all the communities to the city. After they won the union elections they improved in terms of morale, having a great repercussion in the opposition movement. As a byproduct, they learned how to manage an association. Later, in 1996, the *Florescente* became a cooperative and was already trading some alternative products, such as fruits and juices.

Contrary to what happened in Imperatriz, in Caxias the workers created the production groups to guarantee the survival of the opposition movement; though the survival of the members and the improvement of the production passed through it.

Neither voice, nor exit: infiltrating the union to learn how to oppose

The two strategies described above would not have functioned in isolation. A final step was necessary. Even gathering all their votes, mobilizing all their forces and allies, they found out that they did not know what the main cause of their defeat was. They decided that the only way to learn was to infiltrate the union and find out what has happening in the union headquarters. Some of them approached the president of the union and told him that they wanted to join and help the union. Many of them were union delegates for their communities, who did not have much voice

in the union. So they started working close to the union and learned how members would affiliate with it, and what the president was doing, what he was doing that was wrong.

Working within the union taught them the day-to-day facts about it and enabled them to collect evidence to denounce the president of the union. The main thing was that the president did not keep union's financial accounts in order. There was no bookkeeping in the union, and the destination of the money was unknown. Second, the president allowed members to register without contributing and allowed members to vote without paying their dues, what is illegal. And third, individuals who did not belong to peasants or rural workers' category were registered to receive pension benefits and were voting in the union. Also, the opposition members infiltrated in the union persuaded members of other communities of the illegality of these acts and of their own *bona fide*. In 1993, after gathering enough information against the president, and having talked other union members into their cause, they denounced the union leadership and created a Provisional Junta, under the intervention of the Federation (FETAEMA). Eventually, they organized new elections and came out the winners.

All the organizational endeavors developed by the opposition movement aimed at winning control of the union, since they perceived the union to be the legitimate institution to convey their needs. They used both women's registration and production groups as means to raise the morale in the opposition and to keep people together. The decisions to turn *Florescente* into a cooperative and to require that its members must be affiliated with the union created a strategy very similar to co-opt. Furthermore, the use of trucks at election time to bring people to vote was very similar to the use of trucks by landlords. The main difference with traditional processes that just gather people to vote in exchange for something was that in marshaling efforts to compete for the union, the *Florescente* unleashed processes of participation and education, and equalized, to some extent, the contest between groups competing for access to political power.

The aftermath of the elections: the legal majority

Being elected meant a legal emancipation for the opposition movement. Being in control of the union provided the movement with opportunities to meet the demands of workers, consolidate their organizations, and establish alternative union practices. After winning the election, the

primary goal set by the opposition movement, the leadership drew a plan to determine the future of production in the municipality. Later, the plan was presented as a bill of law for the whole municipality. Also among the activities of the union was the participation in the Municipal Committee to decide on projects and allocate resource in the rural communities. They also signed an agreement with local private banks, the Banco do Nordeste, and Banco do Brazil, to monitor projects presented to the banks.

The reason why they did this was that because they wanted to guarantee that communities and associations in all three districts would have the opportunity to acquire resources. One bank manager said:

“Because of the work that the union is doing we do not deal with the legal problems of the associations. We rely on what they are doing and the nitty-gritty work is done by the union.”

Finally, in Caxias the process of competing for the union leadership, although rich and meaningful, was very ponderous. The 14 years of competition for the union leadership almost dissipated the whole opposition movement. In crucial moments, as before the decision of creating the small production groups, the presence of non-union groups, such as the Catholic church, the CUT, and the SMDDH-CA kept the opposition movement going. The question about who decided to form the groups of production shows that it was almost impossible to separate the opposition movement from the non-union groups which give support to the opposition. In addition, workers only had strength to keep competing because the non-union groups kept motivating them.

Even after having won the union, the non-union groups kept working with the opposition. The members of the opposition movement were introduced to the counterparts, as bank managers, mayor, and other groups, as willing to cooperate and negotiate. Priest Gian told me:

“I started taking Joãozinho, the president of the opposition movement, and other union members to every single meeting in which I participated: in the City Council, in the Municipal Committee, and so on. We had to show to the mayor, the judge, my neighbor that the rural workers is not a communist or an animal. He is sensible, intelligent, and willing to collaborate. When we have to guarantee that the society will be listening when some conflict emerge or to negotiate with them.”

The strategy used by priest Gian worked. When I was in Caxias, the union, led by Joãozinho, was taking part in the Northeast Bank (BNB) and monitoring the formation of trade associations and the presentation of projects for rural credit. The bank manager told me that without the union, most of the communities would not know how to make and to present a project and that the union was doing an essential job, helping the bank and the community.

In sum, the Caxias case show how important is the presence of a network the associations promoting and helping workers and making the competitive process more balanced. The fact that only in Caxias and Imperatriz, where the unions keep having a very important role in the community, competition thrived and remained active demonstrates the importance of the existence of other groups competing with the union and linking across groups, equalizing the power among the competitive groups, strengthening the opposition, and pressuring the state and the local elites to proceed in the proper legal way.¹¹

4.1.2. Production and political commitment in Imperatriz¹²

Similar to the case of Caxias, Imperatriz also experienced the period of opposition movements. However, since in Imperatriz the movement was more homogeneous than in Caxias, it could take off earlier. Furthermore, in Imperatriz there were more non-union groups acting around the union, competing for the leadership, and collaborating with the union.

Imperatriz is the second largest city in Maranhão. It is located on the banks of the Tocantins river in the westernmost region of the state. In the 1970s, it witnessed the guerrilla movement that occurred in the Parrot Beak region of the neighboring state, Tocantins. It is at the threshold of the Amazon Forest and close to the main road that connects the Southern and Northern regions of Brazil, and to the railway the connects Pará and São Luís. To many migrant peasants it is considered the last stage in their pilgrimage, either in their hope for land, or in their dreams of finding a job in an urban area. In fact, it is a very industrialized city that witnessed many conflicts grounded on land issues, deforestation, and mining activities. It has been the stage of loggers and

¹¹ Moreira Alves (1989).

¹² Imperatriz has 276.502 inhabitants. IPES (1994:155).

cattle ranchers, the arrival of big companies, violence against peasants, and drastic changes in the local economy in the last two decades (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3: Migration routes in Maranhão.

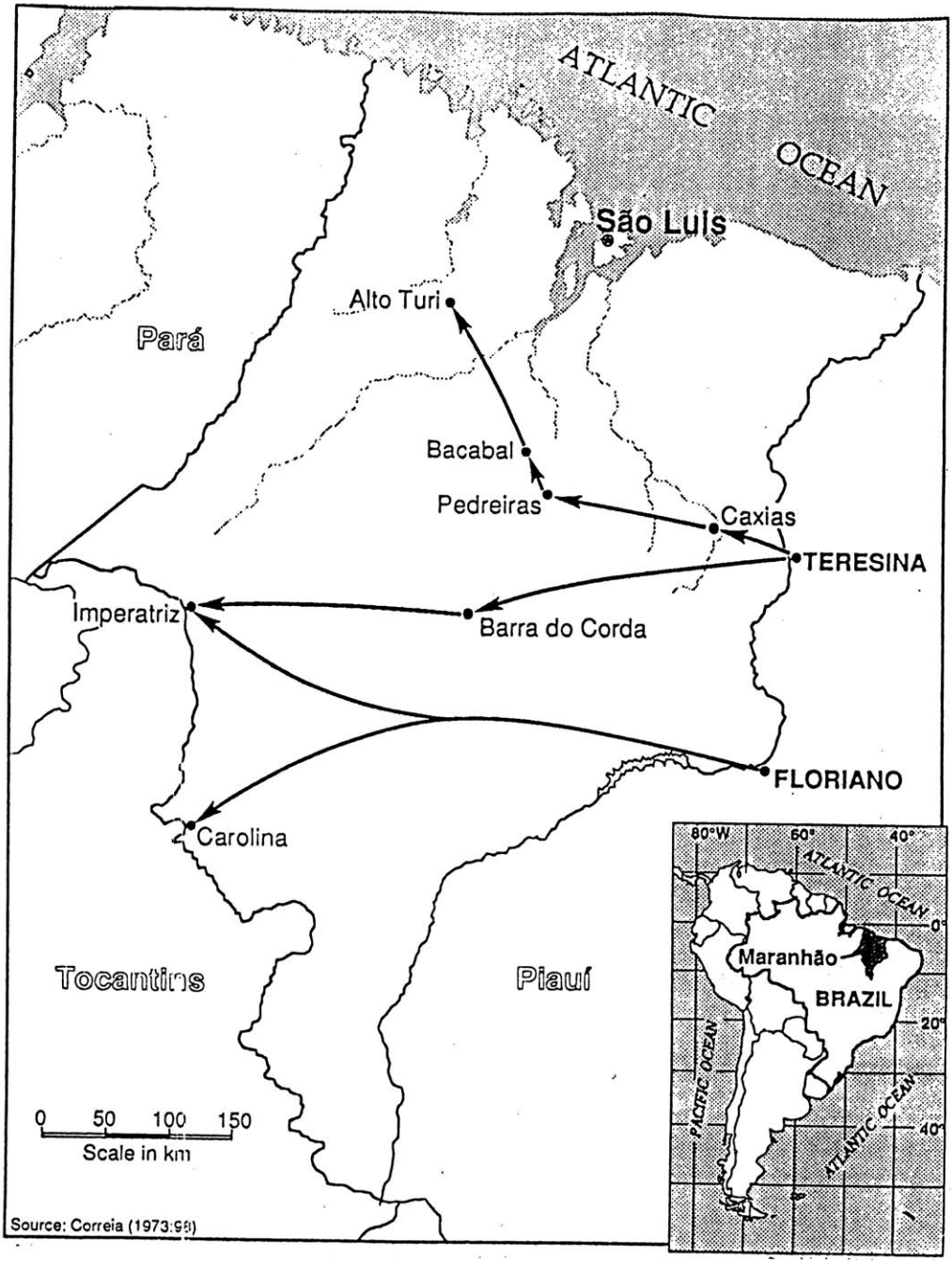
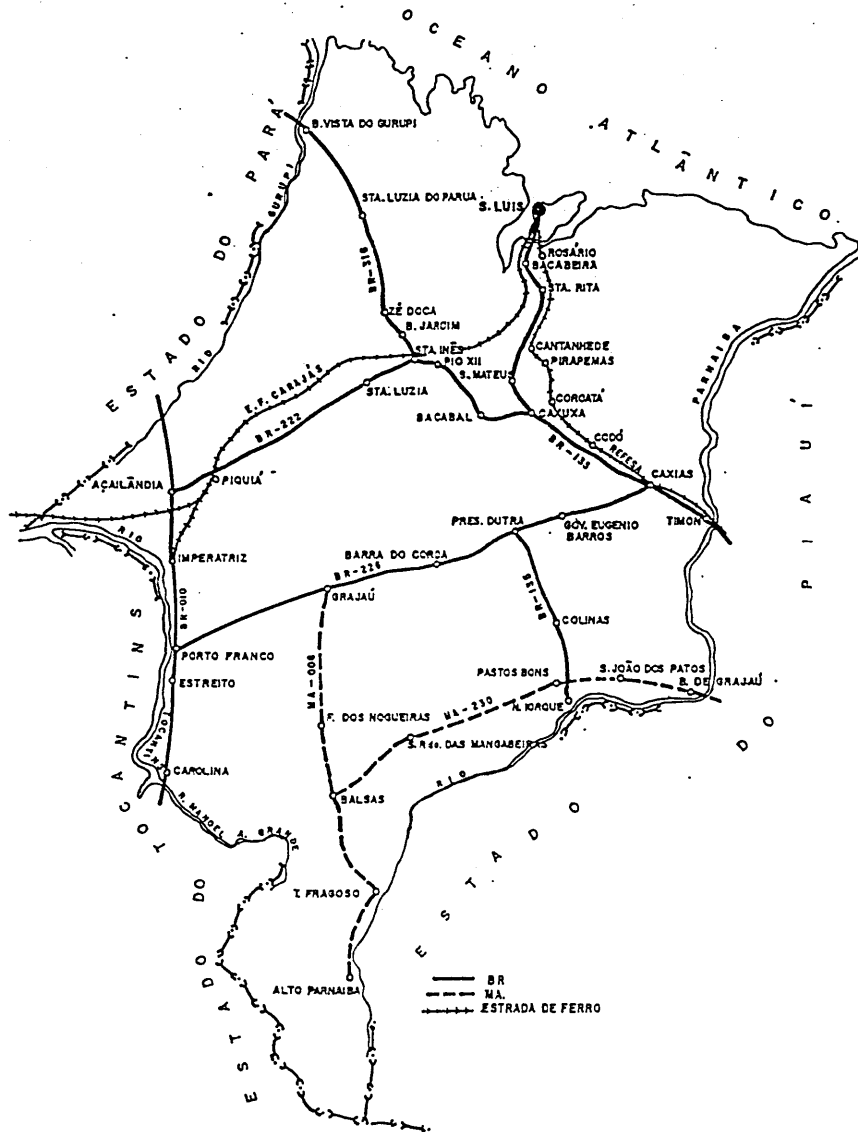


Figure 4: Roads and railways in Maranhão.



In Imperatriz the history of the rural labor movement is quite interesting. Although it is a quite old *município* founded more than a century ago, development took off with the construction of the interstate road that links Brasília, the federal capital, and São Luís. It is also at the door of the Carajás Project, a development project for the Pre-Amazon region, exploiting natural resources.

As outcomes of the development project, deforestation, land grabbing, and the eviction of peasants increased, as well as the population of the peripheries of the urban center.¹³

Throughout the 1970s, deaths and persecutions were common in the region. The experience with repression in the guerrilla period was still too vivid to be forgotten by the peasants. With the economic crisis, the shortage of production, and the increased demand for land, the peasants' poverty and immiseration became unbearable, and conflicts between large farmers and peasants increased.

With the increase in conflict, peasants needed to organize themselves. The local rural labor union was not responsive. The president, *Seu Antonio*, a medium farmer, said he: "I was doing what the law told me to do and I did not want conflict." According to the peasants who opposed him, "he had his own interests because he was a large landlord himself and received money from the large landlords." *Seu Antonio* is currently a member of the rural employers' union of Imperatriz.¹⁴

In the 1980s, a group of rural workers decided that they needed to find a way to oppose the union leadership and to mobilize resources and efforts. This group was supported by urban workers, some leaders of the Teachers' Union, and religious and political groups. They contacted the CENTRU (Rural Worker Educational Center),¹⁵ a non-governmental organization created in Pernambuco by two rural workers, one of them a former peasant from Maranhão, Manoel da Conceição.¹⁶ The history of Manoel illustrates not only the importance of groups outside the union but also the trajectory of peasant farmers in Maranhão and how individuals' biographies contribute to awareness that the union is a means for implementing workers' rights. The common history of

¹³ In the last decade the population grew from 220,095 inhabitants to 276,440. The urban population grew from 111,705 to 209,970, whereas the rural population decreased from 108,390 to 66,470. IPES (1994:155).

¹⁴ Interview with Dona Querubina, August 1996; interview with *seu Antonio*, interview with president of the Employers Union, August 1996.

¹⁵ The CENTRU is an organization founded to educate rural workers, both politically and organizationally. It was created in the 1970s in Pernambuco and then spread over four states of the Northeast: Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, Maranhão and Pernambuco. Presently, there are only two branches: one in Maranhão and another in Pernambuco. CENTRU (1984). Also Pandolfi (1987).

¹⁶ Interview with Raimundo, Teachers' Union leader, in August 1996 and professor at the local College, August 1996.

Manoel and the peasants shows the importance of common experiences and class-bond tendencies driving workers' organizations.

Outsiders who are insiders: towards political activism

The case of CENTRU and Manoel da Conceição shows the intertwined trajectory of peasants, opposition movements, and non-union groups in promoting workers' mobilization.

Manoel da Conceição¹⁷ was born in 1930s, the son of a small farmer who worked for a large landlord. In the 1950s, Manoel's father had financial problems and paid his debts by selling his farm to the landlord, who promised that Manoel's family could stay on the land forever. Five years later, the landlord died, and his heirs sold the farm to livestock farmers.

“The landlord used to help us. He protected us when we had problems and when the harvest was not good. We trusted only the landlord and his wife. When I had problems paying my debts, he bought my land from me, and he promised that we could stay there with my family and that he would never expel me from the land. That land was ours.”¹⁸

The new landlord neither knew the deal between Manoel's father and the previous landlord nor had any commitment to the people in that region. Furthermore, the type of activity he was developing, livestock, required extensive pasture but little labor. Sharecroppers and renters were compelled to leave the area. Manoel's family left and settled in a western region. At the end of the 1950s, Manoel's family started being threatened by the proprietors of the area where they had relocated; they had to move again because they did not own the land. And then, two years later, already settled in another community, they faced a similar situation again.

The area where they were located is the Médio Mearim, known as one the first areas of dispute in Maranhão and a nurturing place for radical leaders. There groups of MEBs (Base Education Movements)¹⁹ and CEBs (Base Christian Movements) started forming the first rural labor leaders. Manoel and other peasants formed a union in the region, rebelled against the landlord, and fiercely

¹⁷ Interview with Manoel da Conceição, August 10-12, 1996.

¹⁸ Interview with Manoel da Conceição, August 1996.

¹⁹ Interview with Francisco Gomes, head of Projeto Nordeste, several dates, 1996.

resisted eviction. A few days later, the union and their houses were attacked and burnt down. After that, Manoel and the others challenged the local elites and the police. After that he was persecuted, arrested, tortured, and, eventually, disappeared. He reappeared in Switzerland, where he stayed for more than four years and from where he returned in the mid-1970s.²⁰ In 1982, he returned to Maranhão, to found the CENTRU, “an organization created by the rural workers, for rural workers, to educate rural workers.”

Only rural workers could be members of CENTRU; urban professionals, activists, politicians, consultants, and religious representatives were considered collaborators.²¹ All the members were migrants, victims of evictions, landless farmers, or unemployed rural workers.²² It was a place to get organized, to meet people with similar past experiences, to share ideas, and to make strategy in order to change their situation. They studied unions as the legitimate instrument of rural workers, principles of how and why to associate and cooperate, and history and political theory.²³ Meanwhile, in the meetings, they made strategies to oppose the union leadership.

In 1984, after the opposition movement lost the elections in Imperatriz, 500 families occupied the union headquarters, requesting the intervention of the Federation (FETAEMA) and action by the Ministry of Labor to review the results of the elections and the list of members of the union. They were threatened by the police. Eventually, they proved that the previous leadership had affiliated members who did not belong to the proper category; the Federation intervened and created a Provisional Junta, i.e., a group of unionists to monitor the services of the union while it was under state intervention. The Federation canceled the election, registered women, and made a cadastral survey to ensure that only rural workers were registered. A few months later, the opposition won a new election.

²⁰ Manoel spent many years in prison. Famous for his activism, he was helped by humanitarian and political organizations and sent abroad. According to him, he did not sign an agreement of non-activism that exiled persons are sometimes compelled to sign (he is illiterate), so he could talk publicly against the dictatorship all over Europe. Manoel also spent some time in China.

²¹ The first bylaw established that other professionals and people who were not rural workers could attend the meetings as special guests or collaborators. CENTRU (1984).

²² The list of members of CENTRU includes the presidents of the rural labor unions in João Lisboa, Amarante, Imperatriz, Estreito, Montes Altos, Carolina, São Raimundo das Mangabeiras, and Loreto. I interviewed many of them in the days that I spent at CENTRU and in Imperatriz.

In the wake of these events that occurred, they were called the “iron union,” and later because of their relationship with the Workers’ Party (PT), they formed the “iron PT.” Since then, the same group has been in control of the union, although it has been challenged in recent elections by other groups, dissidents of their own. The previous group union leaders never ran in election again.

The productive phase

After the opposition movement won the elections, their first goal was to fight for agrarian reform and land distribution to the workers. They mediated land conflicts, implemented agrarian settlement projects in 12 communities, and settled thousands of families. At the beginning of the 1990s, they started facing another problem: settled peasants could not finance their farms and needed credit to survive land reform.

In this phase, instead of being unemployed rural workers and landless farmers, the union rank and file was composed of de-capitalized small farmers who needed credit to stay in business. Many of them were members of the union that had supported the opposition and the struggle for land, and with which the leadership had close ties. In fact, many leaders of the union were going through the same problem. They decided to create small groups of production and cooperatives to commercialize crops, and instead of raising subsistence crops, to invest in native fruits. They became small capitalists. As Dona Querubina and Luiz, union leaders, said:

“We are not the same ‘iron union’ that everybody knew. Now we are changing, and we are not as strong as we were before. I feel sad, but we are doing many more things and we keep fighting for the rural worker. If we do not do new things, the workers will run away from us.”²⁴

²³ Interview with Enofre, August 1996.

²⁴ Interview with Dona Querubina and Luizinho, respectively, the ex-president and president of the rural labor union in Imperatriz, August 10, 1996.

Base groups of production (BGP): a quasi rent strategy or responsiveness of the union

In 1990, the union leadership started disseminating the idea of the small groups of production in each community. There are 89 base groups of production in the Tocantins area enrolled in eight Small Producers Cooperatives in eight municipalities. The groups were created under the guidance of CENTRU and sustained the local production. The primary goal of the production groups was to yield greater production and guarantee the survival of workers and their leaders. The strategy of the groups was to involve the whole family both in the production process and in the political activity. The groups solved two problems: increased political involvement of the communities and targeted the production in the region. First, some families had problems because the men were too involved in the political process and did not have time to take care of the farm; second, the groups of production made other members of the family take some of the responsibility for deciding what crops to plant and how to trade the production; third, they registered all the productive members of the family, women, sons and daughters, and divided the responsibility for production; fourth, all members of the family had to voice their opinions; fifth, all the production groups were linked to cooperatives, which, in turn, were linked to the local union; and sixth, the decision of what crops to produce remained within the groups and its members.

Up to that moment, the small farmers had been experiencing problems with production. First, the prices of crops were kept low, and second, harvesting was seasonal, and they could not make ends meet. This problem affected everybody, but especially those who got involved in the union because they did not have time to dedicate to their plots. In addition, most of the farmers that work in the unions do not receive any wages, and when they do, it is a meager amount. Thus, the production groups dealt with problems faced by both leaders and members.

They discussed the options that all the members of the group had and what they wanted to do. One problem was that intermediaries used to decide what were the best crop and technique for the area. For instance, a union employee complained that many consultants had tried to impose new crops in the Imperatriz region, but that there was not market for these crops there, and the small farmers did not want to produce them:

“The agricultural engineer hired by the Catholic Church tried to make us plant sesame and produce honey. They wanted to sell it in Brasília and São

Paulo, but there is no way to take it there. In addition, no one buy or consume this kind of thing here. This is what I call hippie agriculture, and it did not help us at all.”²⁵

With the production groups, the farmers choose what and how they want to produce.²⁶

To avoid that the creation of associations and cooperatives emptied the union, they created a clause in the cooperatives’ bylaw: “all the members of the groups of production must be affiliated with the union.” Although this determination is illegal because no one can force someone to register in an association or in an union, it did not prevent unions and intermediaries to disseminate the work about the groups of production and the cooperatives.

In Imperatriz, workers and union leaders formed the Cooperative of Small Farmers and Producers of Imperatriz (COPAI) which deals with the commercialization of native savanna fruits that are typical of the region.

The strategy of creating production groups is very interesting, because it has brought peasants together and created a new goals for the unions. Furthermore, union leaders and intermediaries have realized that the small producer needs to survive and that they have to respond to this new demand. However, only in a few places has the union responded to the new demand for production organization.

4.2. Competition, coordination, and specialization of social action

Similar to Caxias, in Imperatriz cooperation and competition occurred among non-governmental organizations, government agencies, and rural labor unions, giving birth to a network of organizations. In Imperatriz, it was the opposite: the presence of myriad organizations empowered and supported the whole grassroots movement.²⁷

²⁵ Interview with Joscelito, 1997. Indeed, the CPT gives incentives to bee farming and honey production, and it is becoming a large crop in the Parrot Beak region.

²⁶ The groups do not necessarily think alike. One of the most successful projects concerns with fishing, and another typical local fruits.

²⁷ The literature acknowledges the transition for the democracy as a period for atomization, fragmentation, and competition among organizations for a niche in the market (O’Donnell 1993). Although cooperation in the industrial sector is seen as a symbiotic and synergetic way to boost production and achieve economies of scale

Furthermore, the existence of multifarious political and social organizations was based on need for expertise, financial resources, and on altruistic willingness to collaborate. The combination of many factors contributed to collaboration and cooperation among workers' organizations, among them, the degree of political awareness of local members; the social bonds created among actors; the constant pressure from external and local organizations, causing a tension between cooperation and competition; and again, the fact that some of the functions of workers' organizations were defined and restricted to the rural labor unions (Alter and Hage 1993).

Here I show how competition indeed led to specialization and coordination among union and non-union groups. Table 9 shows the activities performed by each specific organization. The meanings in table 9 are identical to those in table 8.

and agglomeration effects, through the creation of systemic production linkages and networks the realm of civic society and nongovernmental organizations, the existence of many organizations is sometimes seen as a way to increase competition for membership, atomize civil society, and hamper collaboration instead of inducing it (Alter and Hage 1993:362). For a discussion of cooperation, coordination, and competition see (Polenske 1996).

Table 9: Activities and representation by organization in the 1980s and 1990s in Imperatriz, Maranhão.

	Activities						
	Peculiar to the union		Non peculiar to the union				
	Legal	Welfare	Political	Financial & Trade Negotiations w/ state	Training	Technical	Advocacy
Unions							
Labor union	+			+			
Federation	+						
<i>Centrals</i>			+				
Religious Groups							
CARITAS			+			+	
CEFAS					+		
FRENCH MISSION					+		
CPT			+		+	+	+
CEBs			+		+		
MEBs					+		
NGOs							
CENTRU			+/-		+	+	
FASE							
Associations							
Community Associations				+			
Government							
Local		+					
State		+			+/-		
Political parties							
Left			+				
Right			+				
MST			+				
UDR			+				
Human Rights Others							
Cooperatives							
Production Groups				+			
Small farmers				+			
Large Farmer				+			

Source: Field research.

In the table above, I grouped technical training for productive sake and basic education. Financial and trade means the mediation with banks, donors, and government agencies; welfare service is provision of medical and dental care. Legal means defense in judicial arenas.

Looking at table 9, we can see that unions that were performing more activities in 1980s are becoming more specialized. In the fields where the union do not have monopoly of representation, many other organizations are working. Comparing to table 8, which listed the activities of organizations during the 1980s, we can observe that there is an increase of number of organization assisting the workers and some degree of specialization.

4.2.1. Which roles?

All the organizations involved with rural workers' organizations in Maranhão started advising workers on how to deal with land conflicts and were intrinsically involved in the evolution of rural labor unions. One of the first organizations that appeared in the area was the Catholic Church that worked very close to rural workers through the Christian Base Communities (CEBs—Comissão Eclesial de Base) and Land Pastoral Communities (CPTs—Comunidade Pastoral da Terra). The CEBs surged in the 1950s and were greatly responsible to stimulate and nurture some involvement of poor Catholic workers in social, religious, and political life.²⁸ Later, the younger brother of CEBs, the CPTs, was created as an ecumenical organization to aggregate other churches and to work with secular issues, such as political strategies concerning land distribution and the fixation of the peasant in the land. Although the church has been by and large always present in Brazil, two major facts pushed it into a commitment with the poor and towards social justice: the first was the competition from other religions, such as the Protestants and other groups (Mariz 1995), and the second was a change in the mind frame of church leaders of the signed in the National Bishop Conference, occurred in 1968).²⁹ Maranhão was privileged in terms of numbers of CEBs and CPTs when compared with other Brazilian states.³⁰

Yet the Catholic Church was not the only organization acting in the area. There were also numerous non-governmental organizations, many of them composed by members of the Catholic

²⁸ Much has been written about the role of the Catholic Church and its branches and organization. For the literature on the work of the Catholic Church in the Latin American see: Levine and Mainwaring (1989, chapters 6 and 9), Levine (1986), Bruneau (1982), Bruneau (1974) Adriance (1986).

²⁹ For a more accurate discussion of the National Bishop Conference for Latin America, followed by the events in Puebla and Medellín, see Adriance (1986).

³⁰ Adriance alleges that the greatest number of CEBs are located in Maranhão (1986 and 1996).

Church and of the CEBs and CPTs. Among them, the Maranhão Association for the Defense of Human Rights (SMDDH); the Cultural and Educational Center for Rural Workers—Imperatriz (CENTRU); the Association for the Worker Education (FASE); and the Caxias Center for the Defense Human Rights (CDDH).³¹

In the late 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, lay people and professionals who did not belong to the Catholic Church, who were dissenting from the church or who wanted to have more autonomy started forming other organizations. Their objective was also to involve other sector in the society and to guarantee more room for discussions about social justice. For instance, the Maranhão Association for Human Rights Defense (SMDDH) was composed of liberal professionals, mainly lawyers and professors, who would intervene in land conflicts as human rights' advocacy entities. These professional entities had a very broad responsibility and covered the whole state territory. Many of their members were the instructors that flew from one place to another to teach in the labor schools or in political courses. For instance, it seems to be no coincidence that Caxias and Imperatriz, located in the two extreme frontiers of Maranhão have developed the same policy towards production. Union leaders travel to different areas to support grassroots initiatives even in the farthest places.

At that time, most of the individuals involved in the organizations above mentioned were the same individuals who were participating in many other arenas: they were at CEBs, in the CPT, in the Catholic Church (CC) (and some times in other church meetings too), and in the non-governmental organizations (NGO). The target of all these organizations was to provide the rural workers with tools to fight for their rights and for their legitimate organization: the rural labor union.³² It is easy to understand why: the union represent not only the legal mechanism to “legalize “ workers’ action, but the institutionalized power.

³¹ Presently there are many more organizations in Maranhão such as the Assema and ACESA, see list of acronyms.

³² In all the published material in the 1970s and 1980s in the different organizations that deal with the rural workers, it is stated that the worker must get organized and take over of the union. It is not only the intellectual material that conveys this idea. In the numerous literature de cordel that were published and sold in the rural areas it is also the main topic.

Non-governmental organizations played different roles: they complemented and monitored each other and other organizations. They competed with the other set of actors—private and governmental—for services and resources. It was very interesting to talk to them and to find out that they were either born from previous organizations in the area, or from the CC. This fact provides support and opposition in different ways, i.e., a NGO sometimes gave support to political parties, sometimes acted against them, according to the problem that was been discussed. Most non-organizations are backed-up by international NGOs and have connections in other localities such as in the Federal Capital. For instance, in a mobilization for land invasion political parties and community organizers are able to act together in order to invade land and to mobilize contacts to draw national attention for a problem; however, once they got the land they manage it separately.

When the democratic process was launched and some possibility of forming political parties appeared, political parties such as the Workers' Party (PT),³³ the Labor Democratic Party (PDT); the two Brazilian Communist Parties (PCB and PCdoB), many of which were already present in the region, became official. All of these organizations were to some extent targeting the rural labor unions. Numerous agents circulated all over Maranhão carrying their experiences with them, linking many organizations in the most remote places.

The most interesting fact is that the overlap of membership did not weakened the organizations. Most of my interviewees were taking part in more than one organization, sometimes confronting each other in one arena, and supporting each other in others. For instance, in Imperatriz, an agricultural engineer had been an employee for CENTRU, had been a educator for FASE, and, presently was holding a office for agriculture consultant and association formation. He told me that he did not agree with CENTRU strategies and employment techniques, but the he still supported the work done by the organization. "They are not as democratic as they claim, mainly in terms with their employees. We disagreed with the way associations were formed and I left the organization."³⁴

³³ Keck, *passim*.

³⁴ Interview with August, 1996.

In the case of rural labor unions, alliance was pushed by the fact that the unions have the legal monopoly of workers representation, resources, and know-how that other organizations do not have. Then, instead of competing and vanishing, unions took advantage of their peculiar functions and specialized. On the other hand, organizations that were competing for the workers' loyalty and could not do it formally because of the monopoly of representation, looked for other niches of action and a division of social action labor emerged.

On the other hand, as *Dona Querubina* said, union members have more responsibility and do not feel that they are betraying their principles. It is even the opposite, the unions' leaders sense of ownership toward the union confers authority to their acts. The participation in other organizations provide the other facets of the *raison d'être* of having that authority. So the participation in other organizations provides the excuse and the forgiveness to keep being in the union, even when the goals of the institution changed and, at the same time, the it built credibility of other bank and state agents in the workers work.

4.2.2. Cooperation or competition?

In my first day in Imperatriz, June 1996, I visited the CENTRU (Cultural and Educational Center for Rural Workers). In CENTRU, a meeting was being held and I was immediately invited to take part of it. After telling them what my research was about, they were introduced to me. There were 5 union representatives (from different municipalities: João Lisboa, Amarante, Estreito, Imperatriz, and Carolina), members from governmental agencies, members of an indigenous group, members of local religious groups and political parties, CENTRU members as well as some technicians. Recently, the rural labor union of Imperatriz, CENTRU, and other local organizations were engaged in the coordination the plan for utilization of savanna fruits—tropical fruits to be processed by local cooperatives—and in the negotiation of subsidy and credit with banks for small farmers and their cooperatives. They were discussing the project to develop local production advantages—the savanna Fruits Project—and the Carajás Project, a project designed to develop the Pre-Amazon area (Andrade 1995).

Production has not always been the activity developed by the unions and the CENTRU. Until few years ago, the rural labor union of Imperatriz was coordinating land invasions and fighting for

agrarian reform and CENTRU functioned basically as a labor school, aimed at educating politically and administratively rural workers in the Tocantins region. Also they were responsible for training and advising many workers that became union leaders and where involved in land conflicts. In 1996, CENTRU and the other organizations, including many unions from across the Tocantins River, were dealing more with production than with labor education and land vindication. Although CENTRU and other organizations kept promoting seminars with political contents in the curriculum, lately they are worried with creating organizational skills among the workers.

In my second day in Imperatriz, a group of landless people invaded the regional headquarters of INCRA, the Brazilian Institute for Agrarian Reform. The invasion was organized by the Landless Movement (MST), a radical revolutionary movement that coordinates struggles for land reform. When I arrived at the INCRA's headquarters I met most of the people who I had met the day before, even though the MST does not share the same political beliefs pursued by CENTRU, some local labor unions, and political and religious organizations.

CENTRU and the Imperatriz RLU leaders claim that the difference is methodological: the Landless Movement (MST) is more aggressive and prone to make justice through violent methods: they invade land and fight with violent methods to stay in the land. The Landless Movement (MST) claimed that the rural labor unions and associations were being coopted by the government and are lured by the discourse that the government will provide land to rural workers without a drastic land redistribution policy.³⁵ They also claim that rural labor unions were entrenched monopolistic organizations and are not willing to give up their power prerogatives.³⁶ The difference among the MST and the CPT is philosophical: some branches of CPT believe that the MST instructor followed the Leninist-Marxist strain and denied some catholic dogmas, such as the catholic version of the origin of the world and of society.

³⁵ One of the methods of the Landless Movements is to invade non-productive land and then request the government to declare the land as object of agrarian reform. Recent legislation has been enacted in Brazil establishing that the areas that were invaded would not be object of agrarian reform, trying to enforce a pacific way of agrarian and diminish the proliferation of land invasion mainly initiated by the Landless Movement.

³⁶ This discourse is so strong among leftist organizations and unions that many leaders and militants express their disappointment with the own performance and their inability to keep fighting.

Although at a first glance, an environment of competition for ideologies and membership has dominated, at a second one, those organizations were indeed cooperating. Notwithstanding the ideological and methodological differences alleged by leaders in both sides of the movement, on the day of the invasion all the groups were gathered together in order to support the invasion, to cooperate, to help with the workers' needs in the invasion site, and ultimately, to negotiate with the INCRA to delivery the land reform. Indeed, in the battlefield of negotiations, each organization had a very well defined role and no organization would have denied the right to another organization to be there. For instance, the Imperatriz union was the legal interlocutor with the state agency not only because they were formally entitled to do that, but also because they knew whom to pressure and how to make pressure using some degree of formality. So was confirmed by the INCRA officers. According to Domingos Silva,³⁷ "union leaders know that we also have problems and they know how to talk. MST representatives do not want to hear and are too violent. They want to fight and disagree with everything. I respect the union because they have more good will and know how to talk, even when we do not agree with each other." MST leaders said that union leaders are too polite and that the situation demanded more than simple talk. However, they stepped back and let the union to negotiate.

The MST is the armed political arm of the workers' movement, the union is the mediator recognized by the state agents, and non-governmental organizations provide support and training. What has moved those organizations to work together and specialize when needed?

4.2.3. Imperatriz after the consolidation

In Imperatriz, the rural labor union accomplished to keep up performance not only because of their ideology, but also because they were pushed by the existence of other organizations. When there was only the union, the union was performing more activities than it was assigned to and enmeshed areas that were not in the exclusive jurisdiction of the union activities, such as production trade and cooperativism. Since there were many groups fighting for the influence on workers' political choices, competition forced union to hold to its primary goals and political

³⁷ Interview with the responsible for the negotiation in Imperatriz.

orientation, i.e., the union had to be democratic and support other groups that were also fighting to improve peasant farmers' working conditions, such as the Landless Movement (MST). It also forced the broadening of the union base and a democratic and collaborative attitude toward other groups.

Politically, the union is being pressured by numerous organizations, both other workers' organizations and distinct interest groups: such as the many religious groups, non-governmental organizations, and political parties. The intense competition existent in Imperatriz made groups move towards a specialization of functions and, presently, the union is forced to collaborate with other movements in moments of emergency to not fall behind in the legitimacy of representation.

Another positive effect of the collaboration among groups was the psychological effect on its members. As *Dona Querubina*, a union leader, said

“we are not doing the same we were doing before but we are where is necessary and still we support when the MST comes here and requests help. We respect them, because we know how hard is their struggle.”

And added proudly,

“at the end, we take part in all the fights, we were there when they invade the City Hall and we are in other important places as well, but we can not be everywhere and there is a lot to be done.”

In fact, I heard from three different union leaders the comment that

“if you chose our union because you consider us combative or because you heard our history, it was true. But it is not true anymore. Now we have to deal with the bureaucracy and we do not fight as much as we used to do before. We have other roles to fulfill and we do the best we can because the workers need this kind of service too.”³⁸

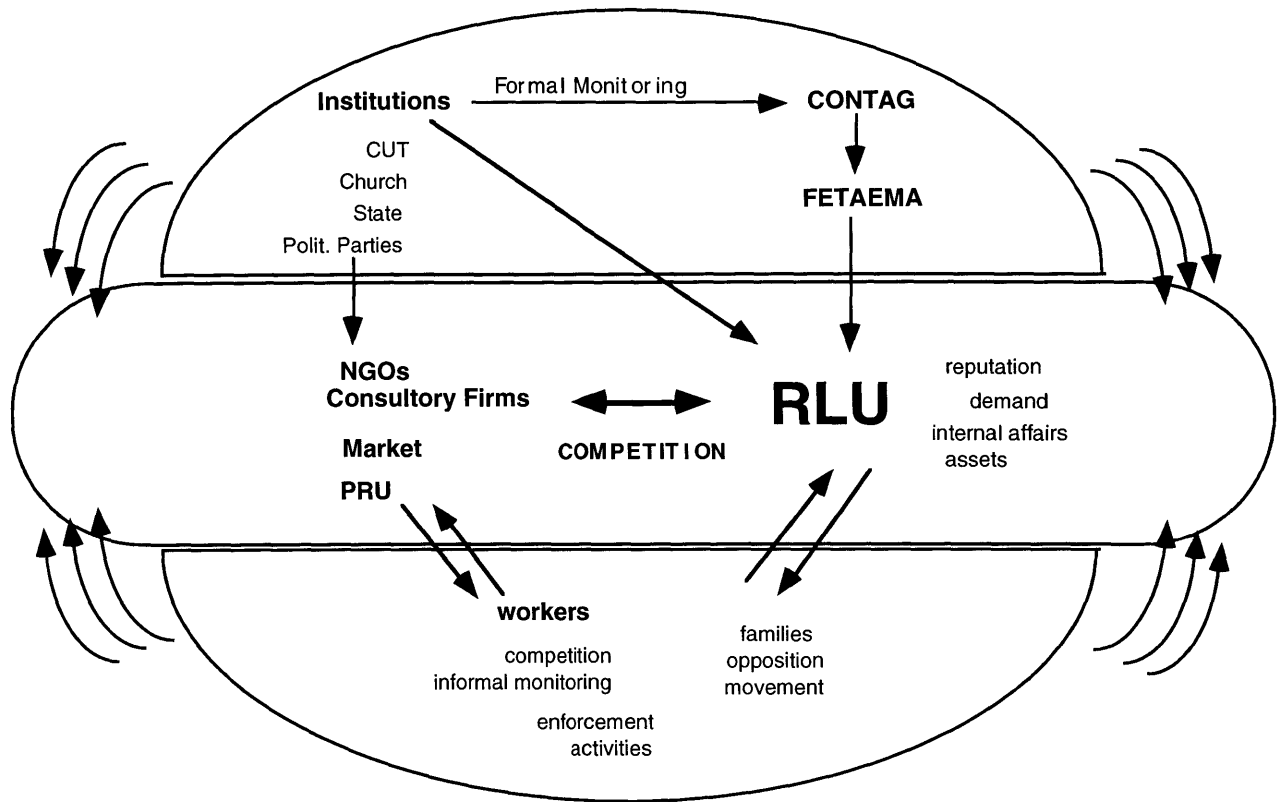
Overlapping did not weaken workers' organization in Imperatriz because there was a network based in strong ties and a coalition with deep references in similar past experiences. These common past experiences enhanced the recognition and the acceptance of values and eased the regeneration of the broken ties with dissent groups. For instance, the CPT has been supporting not only the union, but also the MST, besides divergence in political philosophies. It is similar to the

³⁸ Interviews with *Dona Querubina*, Luiz, president of Imperatriz RLU and with *in Arame*.

overexplored Prisoner Dilemma problem: the organizations may compete in one level, but if they compete in all instances, they lose because they do not optimize the result. Also different left-oriented political parties have opposed each other for local politics, however, when there is a negotiation with the state government all the left-wing parties work together. Ultimately the results here are the collective action and welfare.

The emphasis in certain conditions, such as local identity, strong commitment within group, the ability to compliance and alliance with other organizations, and multiples ties outside the union, were key for the perpetuation of the union's reputation and keep the faith that future members will have. The resulting effect, as can be depicted of figure 5, is what Fox (1996) calls the "sandwich effect": pressure coming from below—from the workers and their new demands--, from above—governments with new agendas, from international NGOs and other institutions (such as the church and workers unions); from outside the unions, such as associations, cooperatives; and from inside the unions, the competition for the union leadership itself through opposition movements.

Figure 5: The Sandwich Effect. Source: Combination of Ostrom (1990:53) and Fox (1996).



This circumstance seems to have enforced a division of labor and space among organizations so that it minimizes the cost of confrontation and making that community-oriented organizations co-exist in a very specialized way.³⁹ On the other hand, a priest told me that the real competition among the strong organizations does not occur simply because the “demand and space is so great that there is work for everybody.”⁴⁰ Indeed, Maranhão is such a large area and so great is the lack of services and assistance that this affirmation may be true. However, it is also true that concentration of organizations occurred in the municipalities where there was conflict and more demand for representation and conflict resolution. For instance, in Imperatriz there were enough

³⁹ See the case of the Babassu breakers and the movement for black land (quilombos) and indigenous rights in Almeida (1995).

⁴⁰ In the case of the Catholic Church, it seems that there is a division of territory among several congregations. However, I did not see much difference in the work done by congregation and by region.

organizations and still the MST decided to go there: because there was demand. Second, conflicts as showed before tend to occur where there is more agglomeration and peasant-peasant ties.

The emergence of numerous NGOs working with specific tasks, such as technical assistance for production and association formation, forced the unions to improve their performance and created an environment of peer pressure. The peer pressure is felt from within the union and from outside. The result is innovation and better performance. Actually, the survival of unions is also due to characteristics peculiar to the unions such as institutional reputation, knowledge (inherited and embedded), de jure and de facto legitimacy (entitlements for rural workers representation), and membership.

4.3. Competition as catalyst to better performance

Ultimately, the local competition catalyzed a better performance both as a response to the workers' needs, and to the competition with many organizations. It enhanced accountability and responsibility. In order to keep the power, union leaders who have power in the organization were willing to preserve or promote a good reputation to allow future beneficial transactions, such as negotiations with banks.⁴¹ However, they have to keep low profile and can not be identified as the catalysts of disorder to have the respects of financial institutions. Thus, they were forced to specialize, but they do support radical rebellious groups as the MST.

To fully understand how and why the demand for representation changed over time and competition from non-union groups, it is also necessary to understand that unions are pressured not only by the needs and fears of the rank and file members, but by the needs and fears of the leaders already entrenched in the organization. In the cases where the union transformation occurred through a process of conflict and competition, and where the leaders hold to democratic principles, chances are that the union leadership will try to be more responsive to the demands of the members. This would be an interesting research to follow in the future: what is the future of

⁴¹ Kreps (1990:93-5) makes some arguments considering the universe of firms. However, the ideas related to ownership and corporate culture can be applied to unions as well, mainly considering unions' hybrid character.

the leaders in these unions and will they keep indeed responding to workers' demand better than in other places?

It seemed to me that the political formation of the leaders counts toward better performance, but also provokes some crisis when leaders have to cope with the transformation, since some political maturity is needed as it seems to be suggested in the comparison of cases of Arame, Caxias, and Imperatriz. In those cases political maturity was pushed by external factors, such the increasing competition among organizations and associations and the necessity to collaborate.

In this context an unsullied reputation is crucial to keep representation with the counterparts and to increase the membership number what ultimately is the only financial resource that the union possesses. Then, unions' leaders such as those existent in Imperatriz and Caxias tended to try to improve performance in order to receive support—both political and economic—from other peasants. The nature of reputation is quite circular because it influences future trading opportunities and the way associations interact in the network of associations, the ultimate way to explain how a given organization are structured and arrived at their present state.⁴²

Moreover, this study also suggests that the presence of catalysts made the union and opposition leaders more responsive to workers. They have responded to the new demands of the workers because the leadership faced conflict and problems. The same also happened in Arame. In this case, the presence of mediators and other organizations working in the area was crucial to support and to form union leadership because leaders would learn, treasure the new information, and disseminate it to other workers, either as a sign of superiority, or as a sign of solidarity and sharing. In the community meetings, assemblies, and labor schools, peasants were valued and felt a need to share. Teachers, priests, nuns, and animators emphasized the need to share experiences and ideas towards solidarity.

It may happen that other organization may substitute for the unions or be more appropriated for distinct ends, threatening the union existence. However, this chapter also showed that in the presence of competition, cooperation and specialization may arise if there is a common ground for understanding among individuals and when individuals have been through common experiences. Indeed, the understanding of the process of transformation and consolidation into a more democratic environment include the understanding of individuals to take the trajectories and

⁴² For a discussion of institutions and networks see Powell (1991) and Granovetter (1992).

interactions and the richness of these interactions. Ultimately, the more dynamic and competitive the environment in which the organizations are immersed, the more likely that a thick social network will be formed and that the ties among groups will be strong and, even when broken, they will regenerate very soon.

Chapter V - Conclusion

Legal structures *per se* do not determine the organizational power and the latitude that collective action can reach. Indeed, the strictures imposed by the legal system were not enough to restrain collective action in Maranhão, one of the most backward state of Brazil, although the legal framework was important to conduce a more dynamic civil society.

This thesis investigated under what conditions a corporatist and monopolistic labor structure allow the formation of diverse and pluralistic union that represents the workers and responds to their demands. My research shows that the *de jure* monopoly representation does not necessary mean *de facto* monopoly, centralization, and uniformity because for the following reasons: workers organized opposition movements and make their demands attended through competition. Competition occurred in the places where the stock of social capital was high. Due to the common experiences of the peasants in a given region and the presence of catalysts, such as non-union groups with different ideologies, it was possible to create a critical mass reaction against unions that did not respond to workers' needs.

First, this study showed that unions are demand driven organizations which have a changeable local constituency, local constituency that changes over time in response to the way workers perceive themselves, the problems they face, and the allies they have. The demands varied from demand for welfare services to demand for legal representation and conflict resolution to production organization. However, not always workers were able to make their demands attended through the legal state apparatus of the union either because unions were controlled by local elites, or because were not aware of their rights, or because they could not gather critical mass to make their demands attended. The cases of Grajaú and Santa Helena illustrate this situation.

Second, and most important, this study observes that since workers could not convey their needs through the formal organizations, they formed parasyndical movements to compete for the union leadership, as happened in Arame, Imperatriz, and Caxias. The opposition movements competed for the union leadership because the union was legally entitled to workers' representation, resources, and access to the government services. The opposition movements guaranteed, in synthesis, some plurality to the labor movement, and, therefore, the existence of a

monopolistic labor structure did not raze pluralism completely, but instead became a fulcrum for workers organization. However, the fact the opposition movements were able to mobilize and make the union more responsive does not mean that the old corporatist system dominant should be kept. The case of Grajaú how destructive it can be to labor movement the intervention of the of the government. In the case of Caxias, the existence of the legal framework provided an protective apparatus to the labor movement; however, it took 14 years to the opposition movement win the elections.

Third, competition did not occur in a vacuum. Some conditions unleashed the process of transformation, such as the existence of non-governmental organizations like the catholic church and the political parties. In fact, since the government established that union would have the legal representation and resources, it provided a conduit for unionization so that social mobilization was never completely dead. In formalizing an institution that had to be maintained, the government actually created physical, organizational, and economic conditions to workers' organization revival, viz., the government created a mechanism to mobilize workers.

Non-union organizations moved by common ideologies gathered in the places where the need for legal representation was not fulfilled and catalyzed the process of transformation. It happened where peasants had experiences of displacement, were able to establish more horizontal ties, and to amass a critical amount of resources to convey their demands.

Fourth, the monopoly representation created a common goal for the organizations that were dealing with workers' organizations. The competition for the loyalty of the leadership of rural labor unions turned up to improve the performance of union and non-union organizations. Later, in the places where to many organizations were acting, leaders came to discover that cooperating and coordinating their actions would bring more efficient results, such as was the case in Imperatriz and Caxias.

Fifth, competition happened both under the stress of the dictatorship period and the perplexity of the democratization period because of the fixed structure. In the first moment, workers' groups competed for the union apparatus, outside the union. In the second moment, competition occurs outside the union and force union leaders to respond to workers demands and look for a niche of representation.

Sixth, the degree of commitment of the leaders with the workers, usually determined by the common past of experiences and struggles, influenced the path that the union took and how they acknowledged members' demands.

Seventh, some strategies used by workers and non-union groups which were compete fro the union leadership such as the mobilization of women and the formation of production groups show that although the goal of the movement was political it created a leitmotiv that kept the movement going and had positive side effects. Indeed, women mobilization occurred in consequence of their engagement in the political struggle and not vice-versa. Furthermore, the groups of production proved to work when there is a political motivation and some values and beliefs involved that keep people together.

Eighth, the factors that unleashed the sequence of facts that lead to union differentiation goes back to conflict over land, exploitation, and impoverishment of the peasant population. Differentiation occurred as a result of a variety of factors leading to the formation of a *de facto* new organizational arrangement emerged from reconstructed coalitions and the reorganization of the power balance. In doing so, a new institutional structure emerge, not more comprising only one rural organization, but encompassing both unions and other organizations. Pressures felt by competition within this new framework induced institutions and individuals--mainly considering the unions' leaders and delegates--to specialize and to develop a sense of ownership towards their organizations, innovating, and being accountable for the membership.

This study also shows that the analysis of the success or the failure of the legal structure can not be done isolated. Elements such as the symmetry or asymmetry of social relations (existence of patronage ties or horizontal ties), agglomeration, and political mobilization may influence the ability to gather a critical mass towards a common goal to enforce the workers' right. In the case of Maranhão, a rich environment flourished where there was more demand, more conflict, and more possibility of networking. By the same token, non-governmental organizations, union leaders, political parties were more diverse and competitive where there were more problems to be solved and more resources, human and material, to support them. Therefore, it is not coincidence that Imperatriz and Caxias are more likely to have a more competitive environment than Arame, Santa Helena, Grajaú, and São Mateus.

Policy implications: Is the Reform of the Labor Law necessary?

At the heart of this discussion resides the query on union pluralism or monopoly. Shall the government deregulate the labor organization in Brazil? Although this study shows that individuals may find ways to channel their demands and concretize their representation, be it in a pacific or convolute way, as Unger (1996:17) states, the existence of an organized and disciplined labor structure was a “facilitative device used by those who were already organized, who found in their legally sanctioned association reinforcement for the preexisting advantage.”

However, to keep an old and obsolete structure does not solve the problem of equality and justice that is desirable in the Brazilian society. Although, the previous regime accounts greatly for facilitating workers’ organization, it also hampered democracy in the areas where different groups did not reach an equilibrium. Government and politicians should create a structure that eases the participation and voice and enlarges participation.

On the other hand, the deregulation of the labor system may cause a legal fragmentation and exclude the individuals that are in the margin of the society and for whom special interest organizations would not fight for. In this case, peasants in many places might not be represented equally as peasants in the centers where agglomeration and competition takes place, as it already happen in many municipalities where the unions do not even perform the activities that they are supposed to do by law.

I do not have doubts that where competition already exists and the web of civil society is thick enough to promote spillover effects to all the individuals, pluralism will occur, such as in Imperatriz. There and in other places where workers organizations are well structured, the union became a fulcrum that engendered a responsive and combative union. However, in places like Arame, where there is a weak civic society and where local governments are unresponsive and unaccountable to workers’ demands, the rural labor union, through the union delegate, is the only mechanism to peasants to become more vocal. Also, in the places where services are delivered by landlords and local elites, the union might be the only structure able to provide a mechanism to defend the workers’ rights and to oppose the power of local elites.

I think that the thrust of the discussion is not only pluralism, but whether or not plural unions are able to coordinate and collaborate to make demands for the role category, and whether they will be able to amass resources to convey those demands. The debate on pluralism is a debate on the distribution of human, social, and material resources among the different groups in the society. Moreover, in Brazil, the end of monopoly representation is linked to the end of mandatory union contribution. I do not believe that rural unions will survive in the remote areas, such as in Arame without the contribution of a formal union structure. It will be very likely that the union leaders and delegates will not be able to mobilize resources to keep representing workers. Therefore, I believe that to maintain unicity in the union structure is advisable because it guarantees that a minimum channeling of workers' demands.

Modern democratic governments should take care that relative power relation among contending interest groups be balanced (Turner 1991:239) and guarantee cohesiveness in the social movements, cohesiveness that would allow broad political and economic strength and synergy in the labor movement. Whether changes are to be made, and they might be necessary, I think that they should be in the sense of ease participation and increase efficiency of the existing labor unions, not to split them. Whether individuals will be able to affect the reality and reconstruct the laws and structures that enforce or undermine formal institutions on the street level is an opened question.

However, the government should also guarantee the existence of a diverse universe of organizations in order to allow that different interest groups be represented and create norms that allow the refashioning the conditions of associations, as proposed by Cohen and Rogers. Indeed, these authors endorse that the government should deliver a system that increases the capacity of associations to coordinate the actions of a diverse range of individuals who might otherwise have gone underrepresented (1995:63). Whether a regulated "associative democracy," as posed by Rogers and Cohen, will succeed may depend on people's values and beliefs.

Is a competitive environment enough to enhance democracy?

At the core of my study, I show that workers' demands were only satisfied in the places where leaders committed with workers were able to take advantage of the formal labor structure and

change the union's roles. The variation only occurred where there was a competitive and rich environment, and in spite of the law workers competed for the union structure, a fulcrum that facilitates the channeling of workers' demand. Competition among union and non-union groups for the union leadership and for the workers' loyalty occurred where workers gathered together, had common experiences, class-bond organizations, and in the presence of catalysts. The combination of these factors increased the stock of social capital.

Still, the question remains whether or not social capital can be promoted, solidarity can be taught, or otherwise, whether the democracy depends on the deterministic and fatalistic course of the history. A union leader suggested me an answer when I asked him whether he thought that labor schools were good and how he learned history, cooperation, and solidarity:

*“Dona [Ma’am], the church was very important for us as well as all the other groups that helped us. And do you know why? Because we, rural workers, value what we learn and we learn more and better than you. Yes, I learn better than you! Because I had to memorize everything since I did not know how to read. Because I do not know how to read, I go home and I repeat many times, to my friends, to my wife, to my kids, to myself. I know by heart everything and I will never forget it. And I live it”*¹

Although institutions, governments, and legal structures supposedly preserve entrenched interests and hamper opposition to reform, people learn and change and change the institutions around them. Truly democratic governments should facilitate the process of change and allow more coalitions and coordination in social and labor movements in order to accomplish their democratic goals. Yet people's choices of actions and decisions, even when constrained by the institutional context in which they operate, will determine the course of events, even in an antagonistic environment, as showed in the cases studied in this thesis.

¹ Interview with a union member, Imperatriz, 1996.

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