

Impressions of the Movimiento Campesino de Cajibío Assembly
Patricia Rodriguez and Paul Weichselbaum

The CNY-Cajibío Sister Partnership was established in 2003 to work in solidarity with the Small Farmers Movement of Cajibío (Movimiento Campesino de Cajibío or MCC), learning from each other and supporting our mutual struggles for economic justice, environmental protection, and peaceful communities. Three CNY communities---Cortland, Ithaca, and Syracuse---and the township of Cajibío, Colombia send delegations to promote that solidarity. In March 2008, Patricia Rodriguez and Paul Weichselbaum attended the biannual general assembly of the MCC.

First Impressions: “No Ordinary Affair”

Patricia:

Having studied land-related grassroots movements throughout Latin America for several years now, I was pretty sure that I would come across many familiar themes during my participation in the CSN-CNY delegation at the General Assembly of the Movimiento Campesino de Cajibío (MCC), held on March 13-15, 2008 in Cajibío, Colombia. But, as I found myself riding in the back of a very bumpy jeep on the way to the assembly, listening to stories about hectic last-minute efforts by MCC leaders to find and transport enough mats, food, and other logistic necessities for all the participants (about 150 total) in the Assembly, it hit me that this meeting was in no way an ordinary affair.

Perhaps part of this realization happened when, about half way up the road from Popayan to Cajibío, I heard one of the MCC leaders whisper to me: “See that white cross? That is where a massacre happened back in 2001; some *campesinos* were rounded up and taken in this bus, and suddenly the military officers stopped the bus and killed ten of them.”

Indeed, as I learned later, violence permeates the life of most, if not all, of the *campesinos* from Cajibío. Some of them had experienced the loss of a loved one in the hands of military, paramilitary, or guerilla forces. Others had had some sort of harsh encounter with armed groups, whether in their homes or other surroundings. For these peasants, one of the prime challenges of the MCC and its sister community partnership in CNY is to bring attention to the indiscriminate peasant killings and imprisonments that occur often in the region, many of which pass without a full investigation. Though they know how hard it is to gather complete testimonies because of the fear among the population, the leaders of the MCC have great hopes of pressing the government on these human rights issues, even at the international level, through the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the US legislature.

Judging from the perseverance of its leaders, this and other goals can and will be achieved. Even as we arrive at the Assembly, which was held at an elementary school in the indigenous community of Chapux’ce Fiw, I begin to understand a bit about the strength of the peoples’ belief in the idea of *poder popular* (popular power). There is hardly anyone there as we first arrive, but the organizers diligently begin to get the tarps up to protect from the threatening clouds which eventually bring lots of rain. A few minutes later, I stand back to see an amazing influx of people coming in from all corners of the community, particularly from within the green

fields, with their children and their packs on hand. Soon the *chiva* (bus) arrives, bringing the rest of the organizers and MCC members who have caught a ride from more distant places.

The scene seems straight out of a Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel, a feast of sorts. And though it is a feast, and people celebrate their coming together, very soon they get down to business, as there is a lot to discuss, about the past and future challenges of the MCC. All present have something to say.

Paul:

The Assembly was alive with warm greetings, songs, cultural shows, prayers, and a ubiquitous sense that the MCC directly expresses the community's concerns, hopes, conscientiousness, and empowerment. The Assembly also flowed on a steady stream of information, with PowerPoint presentations, projections of spreadsheets, videos, and a very full agenda of updates, discussions, and decision-making. The MCC was physically present, making these decisions---not that every member came but probably it seemed that every family was represented and every community had a full complement of activists.

The people decided on the MCC's direction for the next two years, they elected a new Junta Directiva (Executive Council), they amended their bylaws in minute detail, and they closely examined and ultimately approved a complex fiscal report. Every step was highly deliberative and sometimes chaotic. Membership is diverse and members have a wide range of education and cultural backgrounds. Everyone, it seemed, had an opinion, yet there was a remarkable absence of personal agendas and ideological rigidity.

Having dedicated their lives to the creation and flowering of the MCC, organizers Marylen Serna and John Henry Gonzalez are a source of guidance and leadership. Discussions about bylaws went off in sometimes unexpected directions; John Henry or Marylen often brought us back to the precise question that had to be decided that morning. The fiscal report was highly detailed. Marylen and John Henry made sure that we all understood the ways in which funds have been raised, the limitations on how monies may be used, and the need for transparency and clarity in using support from major organizations that require extreme care and documentation of every dollar spent. The MCC is a very complex movement, registered with the Colombian government, yet bureaucracy is kept to a minimum to make sure that the political and social program occupies everyone's full energies.

The Heart of the Matter: Creating a Political and Social Program

Paul:

In the end, the political and social program or proposals are the heart of the matter. The next two years will see resources and effort flow into women's and youth groups. Every sector of the community will work on both mundane environmental sustainability---like managing trash---and more complex agricultural sustainability---like nurturing organic seed stocks and improving water management (probably without adequate capital investment by the local, departmental, and national governments). The MCC will promote the Colombian opposition's petition to explicitly make access to potable and agricultural water a Constitutional right, and thereby prohibit or strictly limit the privatization or commodification of water resources. The MCC will continue

efforts to defend human rights, prevent future violations against the community, and seek justice for paramilitary massacres against the community at the beginning of this decade.

Nearly 37,000 people live in Cajibío, many of them in very small *fincas* (farms) or hamlets (*veredas*) widely separated from each other. Through vigorous interaction and commitment, the MCC hopes to build on the energies and strengths of the Assembly to move the community forward in the hard work of more (though much smaller) meetings, petition carrying, data collection, and rapid response to threats that together strengthen the MCC's position as the people's voice and vehicle for creating the community they have imagined for themselves.

Patricia: There are many issues, not the least of which is how to help individual land-owning peasants resist pressure from Carton Colombia (a multinational paper packaging company owned by Irish-based Smurfit Kappa Group) to sell them their lands. The communities also need to fight to keep access to water out of the hands of private "special operators," as the government wants. They are aware; aware of all the threats, of the slow infiltration by outsiders, of the threat of loss of their communities. But they fight back, with words, with actions, with others' words. With our words!