

# **Sink the Chiquita Horizon**

**A Century of Corporate Colonization**

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In the histories of the banana industry, New Orleans is well-known as the primary port and birthplace of the Standard and United Fruit Companies. As they grew into their current forms as Dole and Chiquita, the two companies would come to violently and permanently alter landscapes and lives from Louisiana and throughout the Gulf, to Guatemala and across Central America and the wider Caribbean.

In New Orleans today there remain numerous monuments to the towering wealth both companies extracted from Central America. Some are concrete: the mansion of former United Fruit Company (UFCO) president Samuel Zemurray serves as the President's House at Tulane University, where Mayan artifacts removed from UFCO plantations are still housed in its Latin American Library, itself endowed by the banana magnate and named for his daughter Doris Zemurray Stone. The Roosevelt Hotel was named by the Vaccaro Brothers, founders of the Standard Fruit Company to honor President Theodore Roosevelt, whose support of the Panama Canal and US military intervention in Central America opened the region south of the Gulf to new levels of trade and exploitation. Other legacies of Standard and United Fruit are less visibly but equally enduring in the form of foundational financing for New Orleans educational, philanthropic, cultural, and economic institutions, from Touro and NOMA to the Port.

New Orleans' enrichment at the expense of Central America and the Caribbean is still too often overlooked as a cornerstone of the city's early growth and development. Described by Sué Gonzalez Hauck as a "missing link" between charter companies like the British East India Trading Company and today's transnational corporations, the UFCO laid the groundwork for the physical and political infrastructure that facilitated the global scale extraction and displacement we recognize now as neoliberalism. A look at the histories of the Standard and United Fruit Companies describes how the political and corporate elite of New Orleans have favored the prosperity of commercial interest, the port, the railroads, and private enterprise over the survival and longevity of the lands and people of Louisiana and Latin America.

## **100 Years of Corporate Colonialism, Guatemala**

Nowhere was this more evident than in Guatemala where, at the turn of the 20th century, the country's oligarchs granted a 99 year land concession to American railroad magnate Minor Keith to complete the stalled construction of a national rail system. Guatemalan elites dreamed of connecting the country's interior to the Atlantic coast to introduce foreign markets to local export commodities, including coffee which many grew on their own haciendas. In the same year that he completed the nation's new railroad, Keith transferred land concessions to his other company, United Fruit.

Through state concessions and the outright seizure of Indigenous land, the UFCO acquired a monopoly over Guatemala's land and infrastructure, including its telecommunications, postal service, railroads, and Puerto Barrios, the nation's primary Atlantic port. In the construction of its neocolonial empire, the UFCO dispossessed the Q'eqchi', K'iche', Poqomchi', Poqomam, and Chortí Mayas, as well as Afro-Indigenous Garífuna communities from their ancestral lands, and forced campesinos, landless farmers, into a cycle of vagrancy and forced labor. By the time New Orleans-based Samuel Zemurray seized control of the UFCO in 1930, the UFCO had become the largest single landowner and employer in Guatemala.

In 1944, Guatemala's October Revolution ended decades of successive US-allied dictatorships. With the overthrow of his totalitarian regime, former President Jorge Ubico fled into exile in New Orleans as Guatemala entered a period of liberal democracy and social reform. The defining legislative act of this period was the 1952 Agrarian Reform Law that took surplus lands from private agricultural estates and redistributed it to campesinos. The reform specifically targeted larger landholdings of over 89 hectares (220 acres), including those owned by the UFCO, 85% of which were not being used. Along with a new national labor code that enabled UFCO workers to strike and plans to construct a national highway and port to rival the UFCO-owned Puerto Barrios, the policies of Guatemala's new leadership directly challenged the company's material and political monopoly.

Two years after Guatemala enacted its landmark agrarian reform, the UFCO conspired with the CIA and senior US officials with deep ties to the company to engineer a coup of the democratically elected administration of President Jacobo Árbenz. Reframing his liberalism as a communist threat, the US installed a military government whose leaders were handpicked to be friendly to US corporate interests.

In 1954, with the training of the CIA, Carlos Castillo Armas and his far-right National Liberation Movement party, immediately repealed the recent agrarian reforms and returned holdings to large landowners, including the UFCO, through the violent eviction and arrest of campesinos. With productive zones again concentrated in the hands of elites and foreign multinationals, the military governments promoted the colonization of state land through parcelamientos—small, individually titled plots—designed to replace communal land with private property, legally subject to sale or seizure.

To counter the campaign of state repression, terror, and displacement, a guerrilla movement formed first in urban settings and later in the highlands beginning a 36-year civil war known in Guatemala as the Internal Armed Conflict. From 1960 to 1996, a succession of US-backed military regimes committed a genocide against the Maya people in Guatemala. Widely considered the most brutal, sustained period of state violence in the history of Central America, the war would not have been possible without first US and then Israeli military training and support. Both of which have extensive experience with the systematic destruction of Indigenous communities.

The military's genocidal counterinsurgency included deliberate attacks on subsistence bases and territorial connections, burning milpas—a Mesoamerican agricultural method based on intercropping corn, beans, and squash—slaughtering livestock, contaminating water sources, forcing starvation, and forcibly displacing entire communities. In total, the violence displaced 1.5 million and led to the first wave of mass migration to Mexico and the United States. The genocide severed relationships between people and their land, creating profound, long-term struggles for food and territorial sovereignty for Original People in particular across Guatemala.

The terms of the 1996 peace accords that ended the conflict once again opened Indigenous territory to corporate colonialism but with an unprecedented transnational dimension. Written into these accords meant to address land inequality and campesino rights were neoliberal reforms like the privatization of the public sector and increased funding for the World Bank system of "market-led agrarian reform". The years that followed were marked by a deluge of multinational megaprojects and the country's entrance into the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), codifying the methods of subordination to corporate interests the UFCO had established a century before.

The UFCO was the first to bring forms of uneven and globalized capitalism to Central America from enclave economies to a tourism industry pioneered on the same ships and routes used to transport bananas. The extractive industries that remain the basis of Guatemala's economy entered a nation already structured for corporate control: infrastructure built for export commodities, productive land concentrated under elite private ownership, and a labor force rendered dependent through decades of attacks on subsistence and autonomy.

One month after the 1954 coup, the US government brought an antitrust lawsuit against the UFCO that had been postponed until after the intervention for "national security interests." The company divested from its monopolies as corporate agribusiness in Guatemala shifted its strategy from large direct landholdings to a system of contract production that shifted risk and labor costs onto local growers. In its current form as Chiquita, the company is now one of many actors in a diversified export economy that continues to benefit from the corporate consolidation and labor precarity the UFCO helped to create.

In this model of globalized capitalism, the migration caused by dispossession and environmental destruction is a core strategy for enforcing corporate control and reproducing a precarious labor force. 100 years later, this is the legacy of the UFCO in Guatemala: an economy reliant on privatizing and dispossessing Indigenous territories, forcing people to migrate across ever more militarized borders.

## **100 Years of Exploiting the Gulf, Louisiana**

The same forces that restructured Guatemala for the interests of private capital are at work here in Louisiana, treating land as a disposable resource, people as a mobile and replaceable workforce to be imported or deported according to corporate labor demands, political agendas, and the suppression of dissent. Since the early days of their emerging commodity markets, New Orleans and Guatemala have been linked by ongoing patterns of migration, mobilized through dispossession, poverty, deportation, and other forms of manufactured precarity.

This connection was clear from the outset. The same railway project that initiated the dispossession of Guatemala's Indigenous majority and made the UFCO its largest landowner also recruited Black migrant laborers from New Orleans where the wage of unskilled labor had dropped after the Panic of 1893, a depression caused in part by the overexpansion of American railroads. The Guatemalan state offered homesteads to American laborers who immigrated to lay railway and cultivate land, linking their flight from the violence and feudalism of the Jim Crow South to displacement and exploitation of Indigenous and campesino communities across Guatemala as well as the birth of a corporate monopoly which set in motion a century (and counting) of extractive industry and US military intervention.

For the 2,000-2,500 Black migrant railroad workers who migrated to Guatemala at the turn of the 20th century, the promise of better labor conditions, wages, and freedom from racist discrimination fell short. Many died shortly after arrival. Others found themselves trapped in debt peonage to companies that paid not in cash, but in provisions sold at inflated prices by their employers. Following railroad strikes, the Guatemalan government increasingly enforced the same vagrancy laws used against Maya communities to force Black American railroad laborers to choose between prison and work.

In New Orleans, a simultaneous project was underway to shorten trade routes for private capital. Inspired by the commercial possibilities promised by the newly completed Panama Canal, city officials drew plans for a waterway that would connect the Mississippi River to Lake Pontchartrain as a shortcut to the Gulf of Mexico. The link between the two projects was explicit. An early survey for what would become the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal (IHNC) cited Panama as both a model and future partner in trade. When construction began, it was under the direction of the Panama Canal's chief engineer. The mostly rural area that stood in the IHNC construction zone was declared uninhabited, although the 1910 census showed a population of 5,000 mostly recent European immigrants and free people of color. The city seized their properties through eminent domain, giving residents 30 days to vacate. In shortening the passage from the river to the Gulf, the canal also brought saltwater into freshwater marshes and swamps, killing the cypress trees that act as a natural defense against storm surge and erosion.

It took just three years after the canal's completion to see the extent of the risk it posed. In 1927, facing unprecedented water levels and pressure from local bankers, Port and City officials dynamited the levee south of New Orleans, flooding St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes to spare the city. Thousands were left homeless and injured. None received compensation. The historic devastation wrought by modern hurricanes is directly tied to the construction of artificial waterways. In 1965, it was the combination of storm surge ushered in by the just-completed Mississippi River Gulf Outlet and the failures of the levees along the IHNC that caused unprecedented flooding and loss of life after Hurricane Betsy, a disaster repeated during Hurricane Katrina to even more catastrophic ends.

In the ports of New Orleans and Louisiana, the banana has been far outpaced by oil and gas, industries that in part owe their infrastructure to companies like United and Standard Fruit. In 1960, Louisiana opened Port Fourchon to compete with Mississippi efforts to create a nearer dock for banana shipments on the Gulf. Instrumental to the expansion of offshore drilling, today Port Fourchon is responsible for 90% of Gulf deepwater oil production and about 20% of the nation's oil supply. The oil and gas industries are among the interests now advocating to replace and widen the IHNC lock, a \$4.7 billion project whose risks include the dredging of toxic material and increased vulnerability to flooding, once again placing commercial interests over the water, the land, and the people who live there.

## **Corporate Control and Land Defense, Guatemala**

In the 21st century, corporate land grabbing under neoliberalism has intensified the economic and environmental pressures forcing mass migration from Central America, extending the historical patterns of displacement initiated by US military interventions. Today, Guatemala has one of the most unequal land distribution patterns in the world. Private agribusiness controls 65% of all agricultural land, while over half the population consists of rural Indigenous and campesino communities that farm small generational plots for partial or total subsistence.

The agribusiness strategies of dispossession and extraction are laid bare at every step of the supply chain, beginning with the forced eviction and state-sanctioned criminalization of entire communities. Across Guatemala, thousands of communities have been displaced and thousands more live under ongoing threat of eviction on behalf of private agribusiness, local elites, and for-

eign markets. Their testimonies describe military and police occupations, the burning of homes and crops, mass arrests, physical attacks, disappearances and assassinations.

Private industry uses the State apparatus to obtain land titles and eviction orders based on the historic and current non-recognition of Indigenous land and labor rights, so that many cases of mass evictions of communities have an ostensibly legal defense. For more than a century, the US has maintained deep economic and political interests in the violent reorganization of Guatemala's land and communities. It is through their funding and equipment of the Guatemalan military apparatus that the state has been able to continually displace, surveil, incarcerate, and kill Indigenous land defenders who resist the conversion of their territories into resources for US and global extraction.

On the Caribbean coast, the present struggles against the convergence of multinational corporations in the Maya Q'eqchi' territory in the Polochic Valley trace back to a concession of 40,000 hectares (nearly 1 million acres) to the UFCO, which converted their ancestral homeland to private property. In 1964, the military government granted land and mining rights to a Canadian company that constructed the Fénix nickel mine in El Estor near Lake Izabal, Guatemala's largest freshwater lake. The mine's construction brought forced evictions and kidnappings of community leaders. After a decade of displacement and violent repression, Maya Q'eqchi' people mobilized in 1978 to demand state recognition of their territorial rights. In what is now known as the Panzós massacre, the Guatemalan army opened fire on the crowd of land defenders, murdering at least 140 and injuring hundreds more.

In the 1990s, banana plantation owners in El Estor began selling Q'eqchi' territory to companies cultivating African palm. What began as an alternative crop introduced in response to banana blight is today its own monocultural frontier, supplying global food and beverage giants with cheap vegetable oil and foreign nations with biofuel. Many people displaced by violence during the war returned to their lands after the peace accords, only to face new waves of eviction and militarization, now driven by the next generation of agribusiness, the illegal and ongoing operation of the Fenix mine under the ownership of four different international mining companies since its construction, and other corporate interests that converge on their land. In 2021, the fisherman's guild and the Q'eqchi' Ancestral Authorities declared a formal state of resistance against the Fenix nickel mine and the corporate cultivation of African palm for the contamination of Lake Izabal. For years, the communities in El Estor have lived under prolonged states of siege for defending land and water from these extractive industries and their ongoing ecological harm.

The African palm oil trade in Guatemala is controlled by a handful of business groups, the largest of which is the Hame Olmeca, owning more than 45,000 hectares (over 1 million acres) of oil palm planted across the departments of Petén, Escuintla, San Marcos and Quetzaltenango. On the Pacific Coast in the Escuintla department, the town of Tiquisate was the center of banana production for the UFCO in the 1930s and a locus for worker strikes and collectivization against the company during the October Revolution of 1944. In Tiquisate, the economy remains dominated by the successors of corporate agriculture like the Hame Group. Many residents work in these plantations near UFCO company town structures that still stand in the landscape. The banana and other agro-commodities, though still grown in the region, were surpassed by the monoculture production of African palm, a crop first introduced for commercial cultivation in Central America by the UFCO and planted in Tiquisate 1937. Surrounding communities are in resistance to the Hame Group for polluting local waterways and draining and diverting the Madre Vieja for palm

oil plantations. Exploiting Guatemala's lack of national water legislation, the Hame Group has claimed control over a canal inherited from the UFCO plantation system, drawing on a history of corporate extraction to justify its continuation.

Since the 2000s, corporate-owned sugarcane and palm oil plantations have invaded rural Guatemala, driven by a growing global demand for biofuel and accelerated by neoliberal reforms like CAFTA and US biofuel mandates. Existing sugarcane plantations have likewise expanded as Guatemala has increasingly produced ethanol for export to the US and Europe, yet another monocultural export displacing subsistence agriculture and escalating the militarization of Indigenous communities.

Private agribusiness undermines food sovereignty by eroding material bases, ecological cycles, and ancestral knowledge, sustaining a global capitalist food system built on dispossession. Across the country, agro-industrial production degrades subsistence harvests while contributing to anthropogenic climate change, which accelerates the collapse of autonomous food systems. In Guatemala, this has led to widespread food insecurity and the highest level of chronic child malnutrition in the Western Hemisphere.

This crisis is compounded by neoliberal trade policies like CAFTA, which eliminated tariffs on all US agricultural products, flooding local markets with subsidized and genetically modified food grown in the US, increasing the volatility of food prices, and decimating local agriculture. Despite entrenching a shift to export-oriented agriculture, this unequal trade agreement has allowed the US to sell nearly twice what it buys from Guatemala, destroying its rural economies and food systems.

Guatemala by its Maya name is Ixim Ulew, meaning the "Land of Maize," where humans themselves were born from the grain. The US federal government provides billions every year in domestic corn subsidies, exporting large quantities of US-grown corn to Guatemala at the expense of local maize production.

This manufactured dependence on US imported corn has threatened to replace a traditional Maya staple essential to ancestral milpa-based farming, constituting an ongoing form of colonial violence against the survival, autonomy, world views, and wellbeing of Original Peoples in Guatemala.

Many communities are surviving collapse of subsistence through migratory networks. Over the last three decades, migration routes out of Guatemala have increasingly led to the US across heavily militarized borders, where even compliance with prohibitive immigration requirements offers no guarantee of freedom from state violence. Neoliberal trade agreements like CAFTA also drive migration by increasing the demand for cheap labor in a US agricultural system historically rooted in the exploitation of dispossessed and precarious workers, including those made vulnerable through landlessness and lack of legal documentation.

## **A Historic Dependence on Forced Migration, Louisiana**

Louisiana consistently ranks among the top states employing migrant workers through the H-2A visa program, which provides legal status for up to ten months for temporary or seasonal agricultural work. Like the Bracero Program before it—described by then Department of Labor official Lee G. Williams as "legalized slavery"—the H-2A program exposes workers to abuse and coercion by tying their legal status to a single employer. The rise of third-party recruiters and a

failure to enforce requirements to provide housing and travel expenses mean over half of workers arrive with such significant debt that their contracts are insufficient for repayment. Exploitation will be even easier after recent reforms to cut pay and abandon protections like expressly prohibiting the withholding wages, passports, and other forms of identification, which are signs of human trafficking.

In the history of the US and its agricultural development, dependence on forced migration is nothing new. When migrants from Central America arrive in the US, they inherit legalized forms of exploitation and dispossession developed to justify the removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands and the enslavement of Africans to cultivate it.

It is well-documented that the UFCO transplanted these techniques to Central America, from the racialized management of banana plantations borrowed from the Jim Crow South to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples through railroad colonialism, then well underway in the US. As the UFCO expanded its influence and land holdings throughout Guatemala and Central America, the imperialist roots of its exported tyranny continued to grow in their own ways within US borders.

The agricultural legacy of slavery includes the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers from federal labor protections—including child labor laws and the right to collective bargaining and overtime pay—a concession by Roosevelt and Congress to Southern legislators at a time when a majority of those workers were Black, recently and often only nominally free. Another is the endurance of incarcerated farm labor, notably the “farm line” at Louisiana State Penitentiary, the largest maximum security prison in the US, also known as Angola after the plantation that stood there before it. Where slaves once picked cotton, inmates are paid little to no hourly wage to harvest cash crops (including cotton) that make millions for the prison’s for-profit operator Prison Enterprises.

Meanwhile, the forced migration of Indigenous people from their ancestral lands—first through violent military campaigns and then through legislation and the courts—is intimately tied to the history of how US land, agriculture, and food came to be concentrated under corporate control. The Dawes Act of 1887 and amendments including the Curtis Act of 1898 directly facilitated corporate land ownership across the US by exempting resource-rich tracts from tribal land allotments to be leased or sold to big industry.

Louisiana has one of the highest rates of food insecurity nationwide, exacerbated by the corporate chokehold on food pricing, as well as federal and state subsidies incentivizing exports and the production of livestock feed, ethanol, and other non-food cash crops. In addition to flooding caused by commercial infrastructure and land loss accelerated by unregulated corporate interests, coastal Louisiana suffers from the Gulf Dead Zone as agricultural runoff is carried from the Midwest down the Mississippi River. These conditions are unevenly borne by people historically and currently subjected to poverty and migration but economic and ecological catastrophe is being increasingly felt by all stratas of the earth.

Across the Americas, the UFCO in step with growth of US imperialism charted the model of corporate colonialism that continues to structure transnational agribusiness today. The company established enduring methods of corporate-state alignment, land concentration, and export-oriented production that reproduce and intensify its forms of exploitation and dispossession. From Guatemala to coastal Louisiana and the wider US, rural dispossession, Indigenous land seizure, and the creation of environmental sacrifice zones are not separate histories but expressions of the same capitalist logic. Under corporate and market-led food systems, forced migra-

tions are interconnected outcomes of a historical process that has transformed movement and food from timeless relationships to capitalist commodities for corporate gain.

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Originally written for the *Earthbound Farmer's Almanac's* issue on migration, this piece is part of an ongoing collaboration between two infoshops on either side of the Gulf: Ch'o Tinimit in Xela N'oj and the Iron Rail in New Orleans.

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