The 1928 Massacre of Striking Banana Workers in Colombia

Writing Essays Using Primary Sources

Directions
The best essays combine good storytelling with insightful analysis. Use the following eight primary source documents to write an essay that:

• has a relevant thesis and supports that thesis with evidence from the documents
• critically uses all of the documents
• does not simply summarize the documents
• analyzes the documents
• takes into account the sources of the documents and the authors’ points of view

Use simple parenthetical citations; for example, “blah, blah, blah” (Document #1). You may refer to relevant historical information not mentioned in the documents.

Document #1: Photograph

Image: This photograph of Colombian labor leaders accompanied an internal United Fruit Company memo. The numbers marked on the photograph correspond to the descriptions of the labor leaders discussed in the memo. Note that leaders labeled “1” and “5” have “out” inscribed onto the surface of the image. Photograph courtesy of United Fruit Company Letters, Bocas del Toro Division. Philippe Bourgois.
MEMORANDUM

March 6, 1929

The attached photograph shows five of the principal leaders in the recent disturbances in the Colombian Division. Their names are as follows:

1. Bernadino Guerrero
2. Nicanor Sarreno
3. P. M. del Rio
4. Negi Eduardo Mahecha
5. Eramo Coronel

No. 1 was secretary to Mahecha, the leader, and is now serving a term of fourteen years, seven months in the federal penitentiary in Tunga. No. 5 was killed in the fighting at Sevilla. Nos. 2 and 3 were simple laborers and were practically only figureheads in the organization.

No. 4, Mahecha, was the brains of the entire outfit and is one of the most dangerous communist leaders in the country. He fomented the oil field strike in 1924 and last year was the leader of a bad strike in the coffee region in the interior. He came to Ciénaga about August of 1928 and immediately started fomenting the movement which culminated in the disturbance of December 6th. He is a ex-army captain, has a remarkable personality and an undoubted genius for organization. At the time the strikers were fired on in Ciénaga he fled and it is known that he was wounded in one leg. Since then he has disappeared completely and it is now reported in the press that he has escaped to Costa Rica.

Att. photograph
Document #3: Excerpt from Tela Railroad Concession from Honduran Government, 1912.

Article 1. –The concessionaire [the United Fruit Company] undertakes to build a pier on the point that he chooses between Cape El Triunfo and Puerto Sal in the bay of Tela and Puerto Sal, department of Atlántida, and a railway, which, beginning at said port and connecting to it, will end in El Progreso, department of Yoro [Honduras].

Article 16. –The [Honduran] Government will grant the concessionaire, in property, six thousand acres of free public lands, with the trees of all kinds that they contain, for every twelve miles from the main line and branches that the concessionaire builds. These lands are given in alternate lots, for the concessionaire and the Government, of four thousand hectares on each side of the railway.

Document #4: Declassified Telegram, U.S. State Department, December 5, 1928
TELEGRAM RECEIVED

EG

FROM

BOGOTA

Dated December 5, 1928

Recd. 11:56 a.m., 6th

Secretary of State

Washington

183. December 5, 9 p.m.

Department’s 80, December 5, 6 p.m.

I have been following Santa Marta fruit strike through United Fruit Company representative here; also through Minister of Foreign Affairs who on Saturday told me government would send additional troops and would arrest all strike leaders and transport them to prison at Cartagena; that government would give adequate protection to American interests involved.

Martial law was declared today.

I shall see Minister again in the morning and report developments if any.

WSB

CAFFERY
Situation outside Santa Marta City unquestionably very serious: outside zone is in revolt; military who have orders "not to spare ammunition" have already killed and wounded about fifty strikers. However I have now before me original telegram sent today from Governor to the President saying "Santa Marta City completely quiet and railroad traffic restored as far as Cienaga".

Government now talks of general offensive against strikers as soon as all troopsships now on the way arrive early next week. I am concerned about some 20 Americans still in outside zone and hope to learn they are in safety before any such offensive begins in view of danger otherwise of possible repercussions on them.

CAFFERY

OX
The Honorable
The Secretary of State,
Washington.

Sir:

With reference to my previous reports concerning the Santa Marta strike, and with especial reference in that connection to my Dispatch No. 55 of December 29, I have the honor to report that the Bogotá representative of the United Fruit Company told me yesterday that the total number of strikers killed by the Colombian military exceeded one thousand.

I have the honor to be, Sir,
Your obedient servant,

Jefferson Caffery
"The great strike broke out. Cultivation stopped halfway, the fruit rotted on the trees, and the hundred-twenty-car trains remained on the sidings. The idle workers overflowed the towns. The Street of the Turks echoed with a Saturday that lasted for several days and in the poolroom at the Hotel Jacob they had to arrange twenty-four-hour shifts. That was where José Arcadio Segundo was on the day it was announced that the army had been assigned to reestablish public order."

"... more than three thousand people, workers, women, and children had spilled out of the open space in front of the station and were pressing into the neighboring streets, which the army had closed off with rows of machine guns. At that time it all seemed more like a jubilant fair than a waiting crowd. [...] An army lieutenant then climbed up onto the roof of the station where there were four machine-gun emplacements aiming at the crowd and called for silence."

Next to José Arcadio Segundo there was a barefooted woman, very fat, with two children between the ages of four and seven. She was carrying the smaller one and she asked José Arcadio Segundo, without knowing him, if he would lift up the other one so that he could hear better. José Arcadio Segundo put the child on his shoulders. Many years later that child would still tell, to the disbelief of all, that he had seen the lieutenant reading Decree No. 4 of the civil and military leader of the province through an old phonograph horn. It had been signed by General Carlos Cortes Vargas and his secretary, Major Enrique García Isaza, and in three articles of eighty words he declared the strikers to be a "bunch of hoodlums" and he authorized the army to shoot to kill.

For my interpretation of this primary source material, see: