

Self-Employed Proletarians in an Informal Factory: The Case of Cali's Garbage Dump

CHRIS BIRKBECK*

Centre for Development Studies, University College of Swansea

Summary. – This paper presents data on the organization of work among the scavengers on the garbage dump in the city of Cali, Colombia. Garbage pickers can be characterized as working for the large industrial consumers of recuperated materials, but as not being employed by them. Hence their activities are organized, but in a special way. There is a certain degree of regularity in the hours and forms of work, and a certain amount of management by the dealers in waste materials. However the majority of the garbage pickers work independently and are effectively paid on a piece work basis. While this encourages competition, conflict between pickers is surprisingly rare. Garbage pickers have organized themselves to defend their right to work, but for a number of reasons are unlikely to press for improvements in their working conditions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the interest shown by academics in the employment problems of the urban poor in underdeveloped countries – as evidenced by the expanding literature on the so-called 'traditional' or 'informal' sectors, or 'petty commodity' producers – we know remarkably little about how such people organize themselves at work. Such issues are of interest for two reasons. At the practical level, if we are hoping to promote policies to help low-income workers then we should know something about them. Too often they have been characterized as unskilled, unorganized, unproductive and unenterprising. At the political level it is important to review the chances of material advancement that these workers may or may not enjoy, and to examine the part that they themselves play, or could play, in this situation. This paper attempts to describe the organization of a group of garbage pickers, who go to work each day on the garbage dump in Cali, Colombia's third largest city.

It may seem rather strange to call Cali's garbage dump a factory, for the first impressions that the visitor gets have nothing in common with a typical industrial workplace. One is confronted by an unforgettable sight – some 400 people busily at work amidst flies, vultures and garbage. It is small wonder that the

garbage pickers who work here are nicknamed 'vultures' by the rest of Cali's populace – an allusion to the supposedly dirty and undignified work involved in sorting through what other people have chosen to throw away. How different is this image from that of any of the clean well-ordered factories that can be found on the north side of the city! Yet I choose to describe the garbage dump as a 'factory' and its workers as 'proletarians' largely to remind us that the garbage pickers are not so different nor so divorced from Cali's industrial sector as we might think.

Elsewhere I have described the very close ties that link the garbage picker to the big industry.¹ Garbage pickers are not municipal employees, nor are they concerned with garbage collection. The latter activity is undertaken by the municipality with a fleet of 50 trucks and its own work-force – the Empresa de Servicios Varios (EMSIRVA) – collecting at

* This research formed part of a larger project on 'Policies Towards Urban Informal Services in Cali, Colombia', directed by members of the Centre for Development Studies, University College of Swansea, in collaboration with the Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA) in Colombia, and financed by the Ministry of Overseas Development in the United Kingdom. The author would like to thank Ray Bromley and Chris Gerry for comments made on an earlier version of this paper.

least twice a week in most parts of the city and disposing of the garbage in the municipal dump. Garbage pickers are part of a recycling network, which feeds some large factories and a few small industries in Cali and elsewhere. Materials such as paper, bottles, scrap metal and bone are collected, either on the dump or elsewhere, and sold to a series of dealers who eventually sell them to industrial consumers. Garbage pickers are not the only recyclers in Cali, for there are some large-scale, capital-intensive companies which are also in the same business, but the majority of recuperated material still appears to come from the pickers. Because of the nature of their relationship with the industrial market for recuperated materials, the garbage pickers in effect work for the factories but are not employed by them. They are little more than casual industrial outworkers, yet with the illusion of being self-employed. They may be in a position to decide when to work and when not to, but the critical factor is control over the prices of recuperated materials, and that control very definitely lies with the industrial consumers. It is for this reason that I call the garbage pickers 'self-employed proletarians' thereby underlining the essentially contradictory² nature of their class location. They are self-employed yet in reality sell their labour power.

Hence this 'factory' is but one facet of a larger industrial organization. Nor is the word 'factory' merely a conceptual gimmick — it has some base in reality. Despite the fact that there are no written rules, no overseers or supervisors, and that each garbage picker works independently, there are certain internal and external factors which help to organize and regulate the work in an informal way. The garbage that is dumped from the municipal trucks is sorted, packed and sold at the same location, and with a certain amount of 'management' on the part of those who buy the recuperated materials. The pickers have developed informal mechanisms for containing the competitive tendencies that inevitably develop under these conditions of work. They could be usefully characterized as a mass of workers operating in a coordinated fashion in the interests of a small group of 'bosses' — the large factories that eventually buy the materials.

This paper will begin with a brief description of recuperative activities in Cali, and will then describe the work of the garbage pickers who make a living on Cali's garbage dump. This will be followed by a description of the garbage pickers themselves, with particular attention being devoted to the ideology of work that has

developed among them and the consequences of this in terms of organization and 'industrial relations'.

2. RECUPERATIVE ACTIVITY

The city of Cali lies in the Cauca Valley in south-west Colombia. Its population has grown rapidly in the 20th century and is now approximately one million. Industrial development has been quite rapid, especially in the post-war period, and Cali makes important contributions to the national economy in the fields of paper, non-ferrous minerals, rubber products and electrical machinery. Despite such development, and in common with many other cities in underdeveloped countries, large-scale industry and commerce have not been able to offer sufficient jobs for the rapidly growing labour force. Hence relatively large numbers of people work in small-scale enterprises, ranging from artisan establishments to a whole range of personal services. These are generally low-income opportunities, and within them must be included garbage picking.

Garbage picking is the oldest component of the recuperative system in Cali. Recuperation itself has undergone changes in scale and nature over the last 20 years, and it is worth analysing these very briefly in order to understand how the garbage picker relates to such a changing system. Twenty-five years ago the only significant recuperation was performed by the garbage pickers, who sorted through domestically generated garbage either on the municipal dump or in the streets. Those who have worked for longest as garbage pickers tell of how they dedicated themselves to the search for cutlery, jewellery, shoes and clothes, all of which were sold to second-hand dealers in the centre of Cali and which eventually found their way into low-income households. Some time after this, a market for certain recuperated materials grew up among Cali's smaller industries. This has continued to the present day, with large tins being used to make charcoal stoves, and a variety of bottles going to small cosmetics laboratories. Finally, the development of large-scale industry at both local and national levels, and increasing problems of raw material supply for those industries, promoted the selection of raw materials, rather than objects, to be used in industrial processing. This aspect of recuperation began to expand some 15 years ago and now represents the bulk of all such activity. With the growth of the industrial market the recycling companies which I have already men-

tioned began to appear. These concerns deal mainly with industrial and commercially generated waste, and rarely deal with domestic waste except through purchasing from garbage pickers.

Because of the nature of domestic waste, it has been difficult to subject to capital-intensive processes of recuperation. Given the great mixture of materials that are found, it requires relatively sophisticated technology and a large amount of capital to carry out selection and sorting on anything other than a manual basis. For this reason neither the recycling companies nor the municipality have as yet become directly involved in recuperation from domestic garbage — it remains as the preserve of the garbage picker. However, there is a quite strong possibility that change will occur in the future. The municipality has been considering whether or not to purchase a processing plant, and is under pressure from salesmen who are anxious to persuade it of the benefits of such a plant. It is abundantly clear that garbage pickers are very dependent in their work — dependent on the *lack* of technical change in recuperative activity. If modernization were to come, then the garbage pickers would not be able to participate, owing to their lack of access to the means of production — the garbage itself, and the capital necessary to technify its recuperation. Whilst the future of recuperation is assured, that of garbage picking is not.

It is important to point out that garbage pickers are not found only on the dump in Cali, indeed the majority of them work elsewhere. There are no precise figures for the total number of pickers, but my own calculations suggest a figure of between 1,200 and 1,700. Of these, some 400 people work on the dump, whilst the rest work in the streets of the city. Of the latter group, there are about 300 people who work directly in conjunction with the municipal garbage trucks. Once the garbage cans are brought out of the houses, the garbage pickers take out what they can in the few seconds before the truck arrives. In addition there are between 500 and 1,000 people who work independently of the municipal collection system, buying articles such as bottles and newspapers that would lose their value if thrown into the garbage. These latter workers are typical 'rag-and-bone men' whose activities can be observed in any large city.

Thus a picture of the garbage pickers at the dump begins to emerge. In many senses, as we shall see below, they are the most vulnerable of all their occupation. If anyone is to have their work interrupted or severely hindered it is these

people. Yet their interest lies not simply in this precarious existence, but also in the fact that they represent a work complex which is far more ordered than first impressions would warrant — and ordered in a somewhat complicated way.

3. THE WORK

The municipal garbage dump at the time that this research was carried out,³ was sited by the banks of the River Cauca on the eastern side of the city. The location of the dump has changed quite frequently over the years, but this could not be said to be the product of any particular plan. Rather it represents the exercise of managerial whim, coupled from time to time with vague notions of what would be environmentally acceptable. The laws which govern the siting of municipal garbage dumps have not been applied with any regularity in Cali.⁴ In addition, the discussion as to who has access to a garbage dump, and access to the garbage itself, is shrouded in baffling complexity.⁵ As a result many of the activities related to the dump are carried out in a *de facto* rather than a *de jure* sense.

The site under question is publicly owned. EMSIRVA switched its dumping operations there in early 1976 with a view to raising the level of the land close to the river bank in order to prevent the near perennial flooding that used to occur as the river rose in the wet season. This process is known as sanitary infilling, and involves the use of bulldozers to flatten the garbage as it is tipped from the garbage trucks. Heaps of soil are then tipped on top of the garbage by dump-trucks and finally the bulldozers level out the soil to provide the rubbish with an even covering of 6 inches of soil. It is around this activity that the garbage pickers on the dump organize their work. No attempt is made, either by the institution that owns the land, or by EMSIRVA itself to deny the pickers access to the dump; nor is there any question of stopping the pickers from sorting through the garbage either before or after it has been levelled by the bulldozers. EMSIRVA, of course, does not accept any responsibility for any accidents that occur on the dump during the course of the garbage pickers' work.

Like any factory the garbage dump has fairly fixed hours of work. The pickers arrive any time after 6 a.m. to begin sorting through the previous day's garbage, and the main body of workers is present by 8 a.m. Between 8 a.m. and 2 p.m. the garbage trucks arrive to dump

their load, and this is when activity is at its height. On a busy day there may be as many as 500 people milling over the dump, not all of them engaged in picking garbage. But numbers can vary quite markedly. Wednesday and Saturday are generally reckoned to be bad days since on those days the municipality collects in the poorest of Cali's *barrios*, where there is relatively little garbage, and where that which exists is, from the point of view of the picker, poor quality. On Saturdays many garbage pickers go into the centre of the city to look for buyers for any articles of special value, such as a piece of jewellery or cutlery that has been kept to one side during the week. As there is no municipal collection on Sundays, there is very little picking activity.

Nearly all of the pickers, including members of the same family, work independently on the dump. Whilst there is a division of labour between pickers and buyers, there is no division of labour within the work of picking. Separation, sorting and packing is carried out by each picker, who divides his time between these three activities. Why the various aspects of picking should be organized in this way is not clear, but it appears to be related to the marked dislike of lower class Colombians for partnerships or teamwork. While respect for fellow workers may exist, trust generally does not. Working with sticks and sacks, the pickers sort through the garbage as it comes out of the trucks and as it is moved and flattened by the bulldozers. They take out anything that could have value: paper, cardboard, scrap metals, bottles, bones, plastic, cloth and wood. Each picker marks himself out a special 'lot' by the side of the dump, where the material is emptied for sorting later in the day. Collection goes on until the trucks have stopped arriving and between noon and 4 p.m. the pickers devote themselves to the sorting of their materials. Once sorted these are packed into sacks (especially the paper and cloth) and carried to one of the many buyers who arrive at the dump between noon and 1 p.m. Although each picker tends to prefer certain buyers to whom he will nearly always sell, there are no formal contracts on the dump. Each picker is paid according to the weight or the volume of material that he sells. Thus garbage picking is piece work, as is nearly every other link in the chain of recuperative activities. The picker has to sell each of the materials that he has collected separately, since the buyers generally specialize in one kind of material only. By 4 p.m. the activity on the dump is beginning to decrease and those that remain are generally looking for materials to

take home — very often wood for cooking or construction, or food for the numerous pigs and chickens that are kept in many low-income *barrios*. By nightfall most of the people have left for home.

The majority of the materials that are recuperated on the dump are destined for industrial use in either Colombia or Ecuador. It is very difficult to estimate the amount that is collected and sold each day, but it would appear that it produces something like 7 or 10 tons of paper, 2 tons of cloth, 2 tons of bottles, 1 ton of tin and half a ton of bone. Paper and cardboard are processed to make a number of products such as tissues, cardboard and asphalted cardboard roofing tiles. The price paid to the picker reflects the generally lower quality of these materials on the dump, and is usually between 0.80 and 1.50 pesos⁶ per kilo. Tin is bought at 0.80 pesos per kilo, and scrap metal at 2.00 pesos per kilo. Most of these materials find their way to one of Cali's foundries or to the steel works on the north side of the city. Bottles are worth between 0.05 and 0.60 pesos each, and perhaps the biggest single consumer is the state-owned liquor factory in Cali, although substantial proportions also go to laboratories and cosmetic firms. Bone extracted from garbage (2.80–3.00 pesos per kilo) is an important raw material for one section of the animal food industry, since, unlike bone direct from the slaughterhouse, it is dry enough to be used in the ovens. Finally plastics (3.00–5.00 pesos per kilo) are a fast growing market for the waste business, but the limiting condition is that the material must be clean — a factor which reduces the amount that is worth gathering on the dump.

The garbage dump is a spectacular example of the possibilities of recuperating materials. It is both productive and efficient. The price paid for waste paper, for example, is but one-third of the cost of pulp for the paper industry.⁷ But it is efficiency based on poverty. The average income of the pickers is around 80 pesos per day, with some earning as little as 30 pesos and others as much as 100. This income must be analysed from two points of view. Firstly it is the prices paid for materials by the buyers that sets the general limits on what a picker may earn. It is within these limits that the picker operates. The system of payment by 'the piece' means that to a large extent the income of an individual will vary with his personal characteristics, as we shall see below.

As I have shown elsewhere,⁸ the price of any recuperated material is usually set by the factory or similar establishment that buys it.

This price becomes lowered as it passes through the various intermediaries that are engaged in the buying and selling of waste materials, so that there is a difference in the price paid by the factory and the price paid to the picker. Within these general limits the price paid to the picker depends upon the degree of competition that exists between the buyers on the dump. There is a certain amount of competition between the buyers of the different materials. For example, if the factories are paying good prices for bone, then this will also be reflected in the price of bone on the dump. More people will be encouraged to collect bone, and to some extent the collection of other materials will suffer as a result. In this sense the garbage pickers can be seen as little more than workers who are waiting at the factory gates. At any particular moment they will be working for the factory that has the most demand for their labour, i.e. the one which pays the best prices. Yet the situation is not as simple as this, for the pickers always tend to collect a variety of materials. They have other materials which will support them whilst working for that particular 'factory' and hence the degree of competition between the buyers of the different materials is limited. More common is the tendency for competition to occur between the various buyers of one particular material. However competition is not simply related to the number of buyers but also to their organization. There are, for example, six paper buyers who regularly work on the dump. Due to the efforts of the most powerful of these, an informal oligopsony has been established whereby the prices paid for waste paper are controlled. These prices are almost exactly half the price of the same materials paid in any other part of Cali — prices which are so low that they over-compensate for the supposedly poor quality material that comes from the garbage dump. Any attempts by a new paper buyer to establish himself in the garbage dump, or any attempt to raise the price of waste paper, is met firstly with verbal opposition, and if the attempt continues, with *machetes*.

There have been many people who have looked with a gleam in their eye at the possibility of obtaining a monopoly of the garbage dump by becoming the sole buyer. This is because the volume of waste materials coming from the dump is such that there is a large amount of money to be made through handling it as an intermediary. Not only this, but some would-be monopolizers have imagined that one sole buyer could maintain very low prices on the garbage dump. This latter point is,

however, somewhat debatable since it is possible that the pickers could unite in their opposition to one buyer, whereas under the present system the proliferation of buyers helps to fragment the essentially exploitative relationship that exists between buyers and pickers. All attempts to monopolize the dump have concentrated on negotiations with EMSIRVA, although it is not clear whether EMSIRVA has direct responsibility for garbage picking or for the garbage pickers. Various people, including a group of wealthy waste material dealers, have made offers to EMSIRVA to rent the 'rights' to pick the garbage, paying out a certain amount each month. The usual offer has been to pay 40,000 pesos per month (about 1,600 pesos per day), which is a very low price indeed for the monopoly of the waste materials that come from the garbage dump. EMSIRVA has always required that anyone who wishes to rent the rights to the dump should also provide the garbage pickers with decent working clothes and a free medical service. This has been unattractive to potential renters because they feel that not only would this push up the costs to around 80,000 pesos per month, but it would also increase their responsibility for the garbage pickers. This in turn would raise the risks of some kind of organization being formed among the garbage pickers to fight for their rights. Exactly this situation has arisen in Bogota, where a dealer pays 30,000 pesos per month to the local garbage collection authority.⁹ Here a union of garbage pickers is in the process of formation. In Bogota, the rent for the garbage is so low because of the chronic state of the finances of the garbage collection authority, giving it a great need for whatever financial support it can get, and a resulting lack of bargaining power. In Cali, EMSIRVA has had relatively healthy finances until recently, which perhaps explains its willingness to rent only under certain conditions. This situation could change, however, as municipal finances have taken a turn for the worse and EMSIRVA is undergoing a financial crisis.

Within the general level of prices set by the factories and by the degree of competition within the garbage dump, the prices to the picker remain fixed. There is no question of bargaining over prices, presumably to avoid exacerbating the already difficult problem of competition, but there is plenty of bargaining over the weight of the material. Once again this is seen most explicitly in relation to waste paper. It is not surprising that the pickers are concerned to get the best possible weight that they can for their own paper, and most indulge

in the practice of throwing water on to the paper in order that it might weigh more. Occasionally they put stones in the sacks as well. The buyers usually make some attempt to check the quality of the material and its moisture content, but whatever the quality they usually discount some of the weight. This quite often results in a fairly heated discussion between buyer and seller, with the latter generally losing. The most powerful of the paper buyers possesses a weighing scale which is generally known to rob the picker by as much as 20%. Why do the pickers keep selling to him? Largely because they are economically dependent upon him in some way. Of all the buyers on the dump he is the one who always has money and thus the pickers can be paid immediately – no picker can go without money for a day. At the same time, many pickers have obtained small loans from him and are thus under moral obligation to sell to him.

The work that takes place on the garbage dump is quite highly organized, yet at the same time precarious. It is efficient and productive, yet based upon the continued poverty of the majority of the workers. Who works as a garbage picker, and how do they work?

4. 'THE WORKER'

The garbage picker may be male or female, and of any age between 5 and 70. It is work which is open to virtually anyone. Table 1 lists some important social and economic characteristics of 13 garbage pickers who were interviewed on the dump during the course of fieldwork.¹⁰

Given the impossibility of employing a sampling frame in a study such as this, too great a weight should not be placed on the statistics, particularly as the sample is so small. Nevertheless certain interesting features can be drawn out. Firstly, the age distribution of the pickers is relatively wide, including a substantial number of children, who, although they may work independently, are expected to contribute to the family budget. Secondly, nearly half of the garbage pickers have never gone beyond second grade primary school in their education and hence can barely read or write. This low educational level is, of course, another reflection of the lack of funds for education within the family, and the necessity of sending children out to work at a relatively early age. While most of the people who work on the garbage dump live in one of the peripheral low-income *barrios* of Cali, most of which

Table 1. *Socio-economic characteristics of garbage pickers on Cali's garbage dump*

Variable	%
Sex	
Male	69
Female	31
Age distribution	
0–15 yr	15
16–30 yr	46
31–45 yr	31
46+ yr	8
Birthplace	
Cali	31
Outside Cali	61
No information	8
Education	
None	15
0–2 yr Primary	32
3–5 yr Primary	31
Secondary	0
No information	22
Marital status	
Single	46
Consensual union	39
Married	15
Residence	
Rented rooms/house	39
Own house	39
No information	22
Length of time in job	
0–3 yr	39
4–6 yr	15
7–9 yr	0
10+ yr	46

started off as illegal invasions, a substantial number do not even earn enough to own their own house there. Thirty-nine per cent are renting either a room or a shack. The rest are fortunate enough to own their own shacks.

The information on the length of time that the pickers have worked as pickers shows a relatively high proportion of people who have entered the occupation within the last 3 years. In part this is a reflection of the casual fringe that uses the garbage dump as an income opportunity when there is no other work. One woman, for example, normally worked selling avocados in one of the nearby *barrios*, but for some reason she had given up, either because of a shortage of supplies or because of a shortage of capital, and was working on the garbage dump until such time as she might have the luck to borrow some money to set up as a seller of fish. In this sense, garbage picking is a refuge occupation, which can support people when they have no other opportunities for earning. Yet it is also clear that the numbers at work on the dump have increased quite rapidly in the

last few years, a feature which may be partly explained by the recent rises in the price of waste materials. In contrast to the casual fringe and the newcomers, however, is the existence of a group of pickers who have been working for at least ten years on the dump, some for as many as 25 years. In connection with this point it is very important to emphasize that opportunities for jobs outside of the garbage dump are limited. In addition a fairly large proportion of the pickers are unable to obtain what work there is. Any job in the large-scale industrial and commercial enterprises requires the completion of military service, a complete set of identity papers, quite often the completion of primary education as well, and most of all the necessary influence to be able to get the job at all. For those people who wish to set up in their own business, for example, as a street seller, or a small-scale transporter, capital is required, and capital, even as little as 200 pesos, is something not easily available to these people. Yet we should not necessarily visualize the garbage picker as someone who always wants to work elsewhere. There are many who prefer working 'for themselves' under the more flexible and paradoxically lenient conditions of the garbage dump, than working in the lower echelons of some more formally organized enterprise where the work can often be long, arduous and badly paid. In particular, women with few skills and little capital to invest are often faced with a choice between domestic service or prostitution if they want a job in Cali. The only other obvious possibility apart from the garbage dump is to break into some section of the retail business which may be both risky and expensive. There are many people on the garbage dump who profess no desire to leave.

Why are some pickers content to stay on the garbage dump? Some are satisfied because they make enough to live on, and others eagerly look for the chance of getting ahead. While the prices for waste materials may be outside the control of the pickers, there is a striking variation in work characteristics, income and aspirations. It is noticeable that the young men tend to earn the most money, largely because they are able to compete successfully for the best garbage as it comes straight out of the truck. These young men are often called *voladores* (literally, flyers) by the rest of the pickers, and whenever a new garbage truck arrives to unload they immediately surround it, pushing and kicking the women and children out of the way. A common practice among these *voladores* is to get on good terms with a particular truck driver in order to be able to get

inside the truck and take out the best waste materials before the rest of the pickers get any chance to work over them. In return for this favour the picker may give the driver two or three pesos, or may undertake to clean out the truck for him once the dumping has finished.

Physical skill is also required in being able to endure the strong sun or the rain, and the ever-present smell of the garbage, and at the same time to select the waste materials very rapidly. Once again, it is noticeable that the young men do best at this. Knowledge of waste materials is also highly important, particularly with regard to waste paper and bottles; i.e. knowing what is useful and what is not. These skills have to be learned on the job, so that initially the picker will earn very little. Many earn only 15 or 20 pesos in the first days at work, but with the experience of two or three months they gradually improve their income. Hence the occupation may be easy to enter, but to earn a decent income requires experience.

The garbage pickers can also at times be relatively skillful entrepreneurs, exploiting the possibilities in some rather unusual material. This particularly occurs with the materials dumped directly from factories. There are several people who are willing to pay 200 or 300 pesos to the truck drivers in order to become the 'owners' of these loads. They may then employ people at 50 pesos per day to sort this material for them and later guard it, whilst they go off in search of a potential buyer in some part of the city. This frequently happens with rubber and leather thrown out from a shoe-making factory. On a smaller scale, glue is very often collected from the plastic bags in which it has been dumped, poured into tins pulled out of the garbage and sold at 5 or 10 pesos per tin in the nearby municipal market. One youth had the good fortune to gain possession of a whole drum of rejected lard packages from a factory. He lit a fire under the drum and worked sporadically for two days draining off the oil into tins (also recuperated from the garbage) ready for sale in the market. Each of these tins of oil would be sold for 5 or 10 pesos – substantially cheaper than any similar product available through the normal commercial channels, although not perhaps as hygienic. It is possible that anything between 20 and 40 tins of oil were recuperated in this way, which, if all went well, would bring in an extra income of between one and four hundred pesos. One final example of the innovative capacity of the garbage pickers can be seen in front of the advancing 'sanitary infill'. Since the present site of the dump was also used for

dumping some 15 or 20 years ago, there is much rubbish that is buried. At that time scrap iron and bone were not recuperated from the garbage, as there was no market for them, and these have survived the processes of decomposition which have affected the rest of the garbage. At least 20 men are to be seen busily digging holes into this old dump in order to take out the bone and scrap iron, which, although its price is somewhat lower due to inferior quality, can give them a reasonable daily income if they are lucky enough to have dug their hole in the right place. In this particular case it is tranquility as much as necessity which is the 'mother of invention', for these men prefer to work away from the main group of pickers where working conditions can at times get hectic and violent.

Perhaps this picture of the 'informal factory' gives too strong an impression of dynamism, when I have elsewhere emphasized the structural constraints which appear to make it very difficult for the garbage picker to be anything but poor. How can this small-scale dynamism be matched with large-scale stagnation? The answer to this question is, by its very nature, difficult, and somewhat hypothetical.

Why should this be? It is doubtful whether all the garbage pickers could earn more by working harder, since it is evident that there is a limit to the amount of material that can be taken from the garbage. Furthermore, even if there were the possibility of working harder, many would find that this extra income did not raise their overall income by any great amount. Not only do many already work an 8-hr day, but also, once the garbage trucks have stopped dumping there is less chance of finding material as most has already been sorted by other pickers or flattened by the bulldozers. The entrepreneurial opportunities which I have mentioned represent occasional opportunities to make extra money, but they are confined to a few individuals who either have the luck to gain possession of the material, or who have the capital to exploit it. What is more, these opportunities are relatively occasional and cannot be counted on to bring in a regular income. Anyone who wishes to better their income has two possibilities: to leave the dump and work in some other occupation; or, to become a dealer in waste materials, preferably on the dump. On the first of these possibilities I have little evidence of what goes on. But in all probability, a move away from the dump is quite likely to be to a different job which yields a similar income. Moreover any capital that may be necessary to start this new job is

unlikely to come from personal savings. Garbage pickers in general earn enough to subsist, but not more.

Becoming a dealer represents almost the only way to make money in the recuperation business, since it is the dealer who handles materials in sufficient quantity to become profitable. There are some 20 dealers who regularly buy at the garbage dump. They have grown in numbers as recuperation has become more important over the years, and their income is variable, but of the order of 200 pesos per day. They have accumulated a working capital of anything between one and two thousand pesos, but this capital was usually initially lent by the larger dealers who buy from them. In fact, to become a dealer one needs both access to capital and the possibility of breaking into the market. To illustrate this I will examine the case of a new dealer who has been trying to get established for nearly 2 years.

Oscar is 29 and came to Cali 5 years ago with his mother, sister and nephews. Having worked in a variety of jobs in the city, in early 1975 he decided to try his luck as a garbage picker on the dump. At that time the dump was outside Cali in El Carmelo, an area about ten kilometres east of the urban periphery, and the garbage pickers were being harassed by the police as they worked (see below). Since Oscar's brother was a policeman he was able, along with some of the other garbage pickers, to gain special 'access' to the dump. He sold his paper to a dealer called Angel, who is the biggest and most powerful of the paper dealers on the dump, and who himself was once a garbage picker. Because of the problems with the police, there were some days when Angel did not come to buy, so Oscar would organize five or six other pickers and they would pay the cost of a truck to carry their paper into one of the big warehouses in Cali, where prices were much better than on the dump. Occasionally Oscar would make some money on this, but it was rather a sporadic enterprise.

In early 1976 the dump was moved back to Cali to a site by the side of the River Cauca. Here Oscar struck up a relationship with Orlando, a fairly enterprising dealer who did not buy on the dump but had a waste paper business very close to it. Orlando gave Oscar the money necessary to buy waste paper on the dump each day, and in addition fixed a price at which he himself would buy the material from Oscar. In many ways Oscar was little more than an employee of Orlando, being paid on a piece work basis but having some room to

manoeuvre. However, after five months Orlando ran into problems owing to a temporary downturn in demand for waste paper in the city. He was thus unable to continue supplying Oscar with capital or buying paper off him. The business therefore folded, but Oscar had built up a reasonable clientele among the pickers, owing to his reputation for fair dealing, and was unwilling to see himself working as a picker again. As a result he got together with Angel, and came to an arrangement whereby Angel would provide him with the necessary working capital each day, and would pay him 80 pesos per day to buy material that later would be handed over to Angel. He was, in effect, a direct employee of Angel and a second buyer for Angel's business, but by paying the pickers for slightly less than the weight of the paper they sold to him he was able to push his income up to about 120 pesos per day.

However, it was obvious that such an arrangement was never going to make him his fortune, and so in early 1977 he was back in business with Orlando. Orlando had made contact with one of the smaller paper factories which was offering to buy recuperated newspaper at three pesos per kilo, about twice the price which all other factories were offering. Orlando was offering to buy from Oscar at two pesos per kilo if he could get the material. At that time newspaper was being bought at 80 cents a kilo on the dump, and Oscar saw his chance to make a very good profit. But his problem was that very few pickers were collecting newspaper because its price was too low to merit the effort of sorting. It was far easier to collect *mixto* (all kinds of waste paper) and get 1.50 pesos per kilo for it. In order to increase the collection of newspaper he raised the price to the picker to 1 peso per kilo and offered to pay the other paper buyers 1.50 pesos per kilo for any newspaper that they sold to him. Since the latter were unwilling to agree to this, he then raised the price of newspaper to the picker to 1.60 pesos, and all the pickers started collecting newspaper to the neglect of other types of waste paper. There was an immediate protest from the other buyers, led by Angel, who said that Oscar was taking their living away from them. In the end it was agreed that the other buyers *would* sell newspaper to him at 1.50 pesos per kilo, if the price to the pickers could be dropped a little. Oscar agreed to this and the price was dropped, but to 80 cents a kilo again, as a result of which the supply of newspaper dwindled. To raise the price it was very clear that Oscar would have had to wield

his machete against the other five buyers. In addition Orlando ran into more financial problems in June, and Oscar was forced to borrow 1,000 pesos from elsewhere in order to be able to continue buying. By August he had been able to put the price of newspaper on the dump up to 1.20 pesos per kilo without opposition from the other buyers, and was beginning to make some headway. In November, as things were beginning to go as he wished, two of his nephews were involved in an accident which cost him 13,000 pesos in medical bills. He lost all his capital and valuable time. His future will depend yet again on a loan from another dealer and on a genuine run of good luck.

The case of Oscar illustrates in a very clear manner the problems that a picker faces if he wishes to become a dealer. Not only does he need capital, but he has to effectively compete with other buyers. As the number of buyers goes up, the competition increases. The logical conclusion is, of course, that there can never be more buyers than pickers. The mobility of the few is conditional upon the stagnation of the many.

Yet it is not clear that this is how the situation appears to the pickers. Not only do they *not* direct criticism at the buyers, but they themselves seem to think that it is a natural progression from garbage picking, and one which, with hard work and a bit of luck, can be achieved by anyone. In this sense the few examples of those who have become rich from the recuperation business fuel the hopes of escape for the many. A garbage picker will point to Costalito, the bottle buyer, and tell how he used to own a large house and two trucks. If only he had not taken to drinking, they say, he would still be as rich today. Nearly all of the buyers on the garbage dump were once garbage pickers themselves. Far from being seen as parasitic exploiters, they have achieved status and are looked upon as the natural leaders of the garbage pickers. They are living proof that there is money to be made in this world, and as such they provoke admiration rather than criticism. The revolution will be a long time coming to the garbage dump, and any radical change in garbage picking is unlikely as long as these 'success stories' tend, at least in part, to reproduce the motivation among pickers to persevere in the hope of one day becoming a buyer.

Yet to suggest that the garbage picker does not attack the economic system of which he is a part simply because his assessment of the chances of progress does not correspond with

reality is to greatly simplify the matter. There are indeed many who do not seem to care about progress, but are content to carry on with the work each day and nothing more. The attitudes of the garbage picker range between two polar types. On the one hand a person like 'El Indio' is very definitely interested in making money. He quotes the story of the ant that stores up food during the summer in order to last through the winter. His aim is to work hard, to save, and to engage in small but safe business deals when he can. On the other hand Chavela, who has been a friend of 'El Indio' for at least 20 years, presents an attitude that is almost the reverse. Chavela has worked on the garbage dump for about 20 years, and has oscillated between buying and picking according to the capital that he has. He has never found it difficult to get credit, and he has at times managed to build up three separate buying businesses — paper, cloth and tin — with a capital of 7,000 or 8,000 pesos. This could easily give him an income of 300 or 400 pesos per day, but he has always managed to lose the money in some way or other. He is not a hard-headed businessman, and professes no dislike for being poor. As a result he will give money to those who need it, or lose money in a bad deal. Sometimes he takes to smoking marijuana and forgetting about the business, or to drinking. Once, he had begun to breed pigs at the back of his house, feeding them on food taken from the garbage. The pigs were growing fast and would have given him 20,000 pesos in another few months. Chavela had an argument with his woman over something and killed them all.

In a different way Chavela's attitude is mirrored by those pickers who, having earned enough in one day's work to last them for two, will take the second day off and not go to work, but rather spend the day drinking with friends. How can this be explained? Perhaps these people have got wise to the problems of making money and have resigned themselves to poverty. Whatever the reason, this is not to argue that poor people are inherently poor and incapable of thinking ahead, but rather that *under these conditions* that kind of attitude tends to be generated. Given the difficult working conditions in the garbage dump, it is an attitude that can perhaps be understood.

5. WORKER SOLIDARITY AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

The variety of attitudes and work charac-

teristics that the garbage pickers exhibit are directly reflected in the ways in which they interact, both with each other and with outside agencies. Very little has been written about the organization of low-income workers who are not organized formally as in a factory or office. Nevertheless, the general impression would seem to be that such workers are in more or less constant competition and conflict with each other, and hence incapable of organizing themselves. This would be compounded by the piece work system which tends to set worker against worker. As Karl Marx commented: '... the wider scope that piece wages give to individuality tends to develop the competition of the workers with each other'.¹¹ Since the garbage pickers not only work independently but are also paid by the piece it is inevitable that conflicts should arise, particularly over the possession of certain choice materials that come out of the garbage. At best this may be resolved by argument, although in the somewhat impulsive and violent atmosphere of Cali's lower class such conflicts have even led to murder.

To suggest that the garbage dump is characterized by the fragmentation of its workers, and by open conflict between them, is however, a misrepresentation of the real situation. In the light of the work conditions conflict is surprisingly rare, and indeed the garbage dump has at times witnessed impressive attempts at solidarity. One small feature which gives evidence of this is the almost total lack of robbery of materials on the dump. Each picker generally leaves his materials unguarded on his sorting lot and the odd case of robbery almost always affects the young boys who work on the dump. This is particularly striking given the large number of people who now work on the dump, and the near impossibility of recognizing stolen material. The garbage dump continues, however, to maintain an image of crime and lawlessness for the rest of the city. To a certain extent this is a survival from previous years when the garbage dump was a more dangerous place, and when the pickers defended their work against newcomers by fighting them off. Angel, the paper buyer, who started as a regular picker 15 years ago, had to fight with his *machete* in order to stay there for the first few days. Others tell of how they could not get anyone to buy their materials except by selling them through friends. Even to this day there are many garbage pickers in the rest of the city who say that they will not go and work on the dump because it is a dangerous place. The era of defence through fighting would appear, however, to be over, and in recent years any

kind of attempt to do something for the group has been done in a different way. In reality of course, the fights of the 1950s and 1960s did not reflect real solidarity or collective action, but rather the presence of certain individuals who acted to defend themselves, and indirectly, the whole group. Despite the difficulties of reconstructing the history of the garbage dump (told mainly by those who have worked there for a long time) it is clear that more ordinary forms of collective action have not been lacking.

In December 1973 EMSIRVA began to dump garbage near the small settlement of El Carmelo, to the east of the city. However, it appears that the residents of El Carmelo did not want the garbage pickers, presumably because they were afraid that these 'vultures' would rob them. Thus for much of the period that EMSIRVA was dumping in El Carmelo (December 1973 to December 1975) the local Community Action Council in El Carmelo was using the police to try and keep the garbage pickers off the dump.

The pickers were, however, persistent, and got round this problem in a number of ways. Initially, many of them took to working at night, since the police were very rarely there at that time. Gradually they each became accustomed to paying the police five or ten pesos in order to be allowed into the dump to work each day. Such periods of 'detente' alternated with periods of repressive action by the police when shots were fired at the pickers and materials were destroyed. Early in 1975 two of the pickers decided to go to talk to the management of EMSIRVA about the problem. They were concerned that the garbage pickers were not being allowed to work and wanted to put an end to this situation of extreme harassment. As a result of this move an agreement was reached whereby the garbage pickers, in conjunction with the buyers, were asked to pay 5,000 pesos to the Community Action Council in El Carmelo as a contribution to the forthcoming 'Day of the Peasant', in return for which they would be allowed to work without problems. The pickers and buyers organized themselves and collected the money and were thus able to work untroubled for several months.

Eventually, however, the police reappeared, most probably at the instigation of local residents, and one of the buyers went to the Community Action Council to make a new agreement. The Community Action Council was to receive 5,000 pesos per week from the pickers and buyers in return for guaranteeing

that the work could go on. As a result, a mass meeting was held on the garbage dump, at which the 'Junta y Asociados de Basuros' was formed, with Angel as President and other buyers filling the other posts. It was agreed that the buyers should each pay 100 pesos per week and that the pickers should each pay 5 pesos per day. A secretary was appointed to collect these fees, and was instructed to collect only from the men, but also to collect from the women and children if the Junta was short of funds. Every picker was supposed to have an identity card and at least 100 of these were issued. In cases of sickness the secretary was authorized to make a payment, and it was also agreed for the good of the pickers that 20 pesos be paid each day to each of the two bulldozer operators engaged in the sanitary refilling so that they might not work so fast and hence leave the garbage more accessible for a longer period of time.

These arrangements soon ran into difficulty as the pickers were not particularly eager to pay up each day. As a result the Community Action Council reduced its demands from 5,000 to 3,000 pesos per week. Yet even this figure could not be met. The week 3.11.75-8.11.75 shows us how this arose.¹² During that week an average of 94 people¹³ are recorded as going daily to the dump, of which an average of only 39 paid. The total amount collected during the week was 1,379 pesos, but of this, 200 pesos were paid out to garbage pickers who were ill, 240 pesos went to the bulldozer operators, and 600 went to pay the secretary collecting the money. There were thus only 339 pesos left to pay the Community Action Council.

The problem therefore looked like being as serious as previously, but for the fact that in December 1975 EMSIRVA decided to cease dumping in El Carmelo because of the high costs involved. With the move of the garbage dump back to Cali these problems disappeared and the garbage pickers could work without disturbance. With the disappearance of external pressure the 'Junta y Asociados de Basuros' also ceased its activities.

What do these events tell us about the organization of the garbage pickers? Firstly, it is clear that they do have some capacity for organizing in order to achieve some objective. But there are important limiting conditions. Much of the potential for organization comes from the buyers themselves, since they are the ones with the most time and money to do the necessary work. Secondly, and related to this point, the buyers are able to act in this way because of the nature of the perceived problems

on the garbage dump. The garbage pickers, faced with a precarious hold on the garbage, have organized to safeguard that hold. They have been concerned with the *right* to work, not the *conditions* of work, and this is obviously very much in the interests of the buyers as well. In a similar way, the pickers talk wistfully of the idea of forming a new organization. Their prime motive would appear to be that of restricting entry to the garbage dump in order to protect their own work, a tendency noted with other low-income occupations in Cali. For two reasons, therefore, the garbage pickers have not directed their efforts at a fundamental change in the structure of the recuperative business. First, they have to worry about the possibility of being prevented from working, and second, as I noted previously, they do not, in general, view themselves as exploited. The buyer is the symbol of the success rather than the failure of the system.

In connection with this latter point, it is significant to note that the only attempt to improve the terms of work for the garbage pickers originated from outside the dump. The early 1960s were witness to an attempt by a local charitable foundation, in conjunction with certain students, to organize the work of the dump. A cooperative was set up with its own warehouse and transport, buying from the pickers at a good price and attempting to redistribute the benefits of sales amongst all the members. Approximately 70 pickers became involved with this cooperative and it functioned for over a year. However, external pressure from the large companies and internal administrative problems, forced the cooperative to close down. From the experience of a similar cooperative which still exists in Colombia's second largest city, Medellin, it is clear that outside agencies are essential in maintaining this kind of organization. It is also doubtful that such organizations can ever achieve any radical changes for the garbage picker. Not only is there a limit to the price which can be paid for recuperated materials,¹⁴ but the means of pressuring for a rise in price are limited. A strike would be impossible since there are few garbage pickers who could subsist while not working.

It is clear, therefore, that certain kinds of organization have been present among the garbage pickers. Nevertheless such organization has been of a very particular kind, appearing in response to external threats to the work, and appearing only at such times. When there has been no perceived threat, such quasi-formal organizational activity has ceased. There is a

certain functionality in this, for resources are mobilized only in times of crisis. However, a more permanent organization, devoted not only to defending the right to work, but also to improving the income and working conditions of the garbage pickers, is unlikely to develop.

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have described an informally organized work complex, both in terms of the nature of its work and in terms of the characteristics of its workers. I have tried to show that, as the garbage picker is little more than an industrial outworker, he is organized in his work, but organized in a special way. Each picker works independently, and all are effectively paid by the piece, while 'direction' on the part of the buyers is kept to a minimum. There is not the conflict that we would perhaps expect between the pickers, but neither is there a degree of trust sufficient to induce some people to pool resources and work together. The organization of the work represents a balance between these two forces, with each picker doing all his own separation, sorting and packing.

Whilst the overall picture is one of continuing poverty for the garbage picker, at the micro-level there is evidence of a good deal of entrepreneurship and innovation. The same characteristic is reflected in attitudes towards the buyers, where the feeling among the pickers tends to be that if one wants to get ahead then one can do so. Yet many pickers do not appear to be particularly concerned with making money, and partly as a result of this, the only *indigenous* collective action has been generated by the need to defend the right to work.

It is clear that the garbage pickers are not unskilled, unorganized, unproductive or unenterprising. Nevertheless, the way in which these characteristics present themselves is not one which is likely to lead to a long-term solution of their problems. Nor should we necessarily expect this to be so, for the structural barriers to any real improvement in their livelihood are very large. What I have tried to show in this paper is that the activities on the garbage dump constitute *work* – and work which not only provides income for the workers, but valuable inputs for the industrial economy. Indeed, to some degree we can think of policies and programmes which would stabilize the work of the garbage pickers and marginally raise their income, at least in the short-term. In this sense, one envisages the

formation of some kind of permanent occupational organization which could bargain for better access to the garbage dump and the garbage, and which (perhaps) could negotiate for better prices with the waste dealers. There may even be additional possibilities for raising the productivity of the work through the introduction of simple machinery.

Yet in the long term, we have to ask ourselves just how viable it is to plan for the continued existence of such relatively large numbers of people in this type of work. There is no doubt that garbage recycling is very important to the industrial economy; but in terms of income derived from that work, one needs to handle large volumes of material in order to be able to make anything more than a subsistence wage. The alternatives are relatively clear: a large number of low paid jobs, or a relatively small number of highly productive, better remunerated jobs.

But if the alternatives are relatively clear, the issues are complex. How do we decide what constitutes an acceptable level of income for these workers? How far can this be provided within garbage picking, and how far should we look for the creation of more and better paid jobs in other sectors of the economy? More

fundamentally, how much political change will be needed to effect any of these improvements? The garbage pickers have adapted themselves to the demands and constraints of a problematic economy. They are locked into the lower end of capitalism, where the system is at its most brutal and divisive. Although they are in a 'factory', the illusion of their dependence remains, and carries with it two consequences. On the one hand, it avoids the large-scale consumers of waste materials having to accept some of their social responsibilities towards these workers – responsibilities which are set out in existing labour legislation. On the other hand, the hierarchical nature of this productive system, with the inherent possibility of opening up the channels of mobility to only very few of the garbage pickers, paradoxically carries with it the feeling that anyone can get on in life if only they work hard. The talents of the garbage pickers will not help them in this problem. How to *really* capitalize upon their skills and ability, how to make them aware of the realities of their position – in short, how to fundamentally attack their problems – are matters which require a great deal of thought, and an analysis extending far outside the confines of Cali's garbage dump.

NOTES

1. C. H. Birkbeck, 'Vagrant vultures or industrial workers? The garbage pickers of Cali, Colombia.' Paper presented to the CLACSO Employment-Unemployment Group Seminar on 'The Urban Informal Sector' (Santiago: August 1977).

2. For a full discussion of contradictory class locations see: E. Olin Wright, 'Class boundaries in advanced capitalist societies', *New Left Review*, No. 98 (July–August 1976), pp. 3–41.

3. The research on which this paper is based was carried out between October and December 1976.

4. Ministerio de Salud Pública, *Código Sanitario Nacional*, Artículo 220 (Bogotá: 1953).

5. A. Sfeir–Younis, 'Institutional arrangements and economic development: access to the solid waste economy', World Bank, Urban and Regional Economics Division (April 1977).

6. In November 1976 one US dollar was valued at 36.50 Colombian pesos.

7. C. H. Birkbeck (1977), op. cit.

8. *ibid.*

9. A. Sfeir–Younis (1977), op. cit.

10. These interviews were conducted using purposive sampling.

11. K. Marx, *Capital*, Volume I (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 697.

12. This information is taken from the records of the 'Junta y Asociados de Basuros'.

13. This figure is lower than the number of people who are at present working on the garbage dump for a number of reasons. First, since the dump was relatively distant from Cali and was subject to periodic harassment from the police, there was less incentive to go and work there. Second, it is quite possible that the Secretary, whose job it was to record the number of people at work, did not record everybody – particularly the women and children, who normally did not have to pay.

14. C. H. Birkbeck (1977), op. cit.