

# LIFE

'THE DANGEROUS LUXURY  
OF HATING AMERICA'

OUR POWERFUL RED  
NEIGHBORS IN GUATEMALA



BACKS ARE BACK IN FASHION

20 CENTS

OCTOBER 12, 1953





BESIDE SHACK IN WHICH 28 PEASANTS LIVE, SORE-EYED CHILDREN LOOK UP TO COMMUNIST PELLECCER WHO TELLS PARENTS, "I WILL SEE THEY GET MEDICAL ATTENTION"

# THE RED OUTPOST IN CENTRAL AMERICA

## Guatemala's Communists thrive under fellow-traveler government

PHOTOGRAPHED FOR LIFE BY CORNELL CAPA

In Guatemala, only two hours bombing time from the Panama Canal, this man in the checked shirt goes daily among the people, openly and diligently toiling to create a Communist state in Central America. He says boldly, "I am a Communist." His name is Carlos Manuel Pellecer (pronounced pay-yay-sayre) and he is a political paradox. Holding no government office except that of a mere deputy in congress, member of a political party whose very existence violates the country's constitution, he enjoys honor, prestige and power both in government and among the people.

Guatemala's Reds, a compact group in which Pellecer ranks No. 2, began to progress eight years ago by making themselves useful to Juan José Arévalo, first president after Dictator Jorge Ubico was overthrown in 1944. Making themselves useful, in turn, to Arévalo's successor, President Jacobo Arbenz, the Communists have prospered mightily. The Reds electioneer for Arbenz and help run his political machine. To assist him, they run the government radio and two dailies, using them only incidentally

for their own propaganda. President Arbenz, an intense, humorless reformer, has two pet programs: land reform and elimination of "foreign (*i.e.*, U.S.) monopolies." In each aim the Reds are his strongest backers.

In return the Communists enjoy what amounts to palace protection. They control the labor unions and the powerful National Confederation of Peasants, a farm workers' union. They have four deputies in congress, including Pellecer, elected as government-sponsored candidates. Government sound trucks spread the Red propaganda, including allegations of U.S. "germ warfare" in Korea. Recently the president of the congress pleased them by ordaining a moment of silent grief for Stalin. Their own party, the Labor Party, was set up in 1949 without a murmur of dissent, though the constitution expressly forbids "political organizations of international or foreign character." Arbenz, who is no Communist himself, looks upon the Reds as Guatemalans first and Reds second. He says he is using them; the evidence is at least as ample that they are using him.





**RED LEADER** Pellecer, now 33, learned his Communism in Central America. While a cadet in military school, he was jailed for writing against Dictator

Jorge Ubico, later exiled. Working in U.S.-owned mine in Mexico, he studied Marx, led strikes. After revolution he returned home, became union organizer.

## A COMRADE TO PEASANT AND PRESIDENT

Shrewd, persuasive, a dedicated Red, Pellecer knows how to hobnob with presidents. And, though a fancy dresser by peasant standards, he knows even better how to keep the common touch. He keeps it best through Arbenz' Law 900, by which land taken from big landlords (compensated by long-term bonds) is given to peasants. Because the program's local executive committees are drawn from the Red-run unions, the Communists virtually control it.

Pellecer is always there when land is given out. He is there not to give it, for this is the government's function, but to make it seem that he did. To a people 73% illiterate, 64% barefoot and 86% landless after 30 centuries

under Indian *caciques* (chiefs), Spanish conquistadors and dictators, Pellecer seems a messiah of overdue salvation. When Santo Tomas, the confiscated estate of ex-Dictator Ubico, was distributed Pellecer told the *campesinos* (farm hands), "Comrades, we must go ahead. Let's ask for Concepcion!" Three months later they got Concepcion, a plantation.

At another, still private plantation, he told the *campesinos*, "Take the land; it is yours by right." Taking land, they quarreled in some cases, and some were killed. No problem is too small for Pellecer. He is as willing to promise a new baseball field as better drinking water—and to give Communism the credit for both.



**WITH THE PRESIDENT**, Pellecer exchanges handshake at Guatemala's independence day celebration.





**TAKING CHARGE** as unofficial boss, Pellecer speaks at land distribution ceremony. Actual government

functionaries, behind, look on tamely as Red tells peasants, "A new world is on the march, comrades."



**INSPECTING WATER**, Pellecer hears laborers say it is putrid. He advises strike against employer.



**TALKING BASEBALL** with village team, Pellecer promises "all I can do" to get a new diamond built.



**VISITING WAREHOUSE**, Pellecer chats with workmen sacking up last of coffee. He answers questions

of workers about land reform, promises to telephone somebody's sister on his return to Guatemala City.



**ORGANIZING FARM HANDS**, he says that Arbenz (big picture on wall), plans to give them plantation.





UNITED FRUIT'S 65,000-ACRE TIQUISATE PLANTATION, ALL IT HAS LEFT OUT OF 299,000-ACRE FARM, ENDS AT JUNGLE EDGE (BACKGROUND) WHERE GOVERNMENT HAS TAKEN OVER



## UNITED FRUIT AS

Forever in need of something to hate, Communism finds itself sharing a ready-made target with the obsessively nationalistic President Arbenz in Guatemala. The U.S.-owned United Fruit Company has a long history of unpopularity there. At first it was resented legitimately as an exploiter; since 1945, after recognizing its errors, it has been attacked despite the \$2 million it spends each year to better the welfare of its workers.

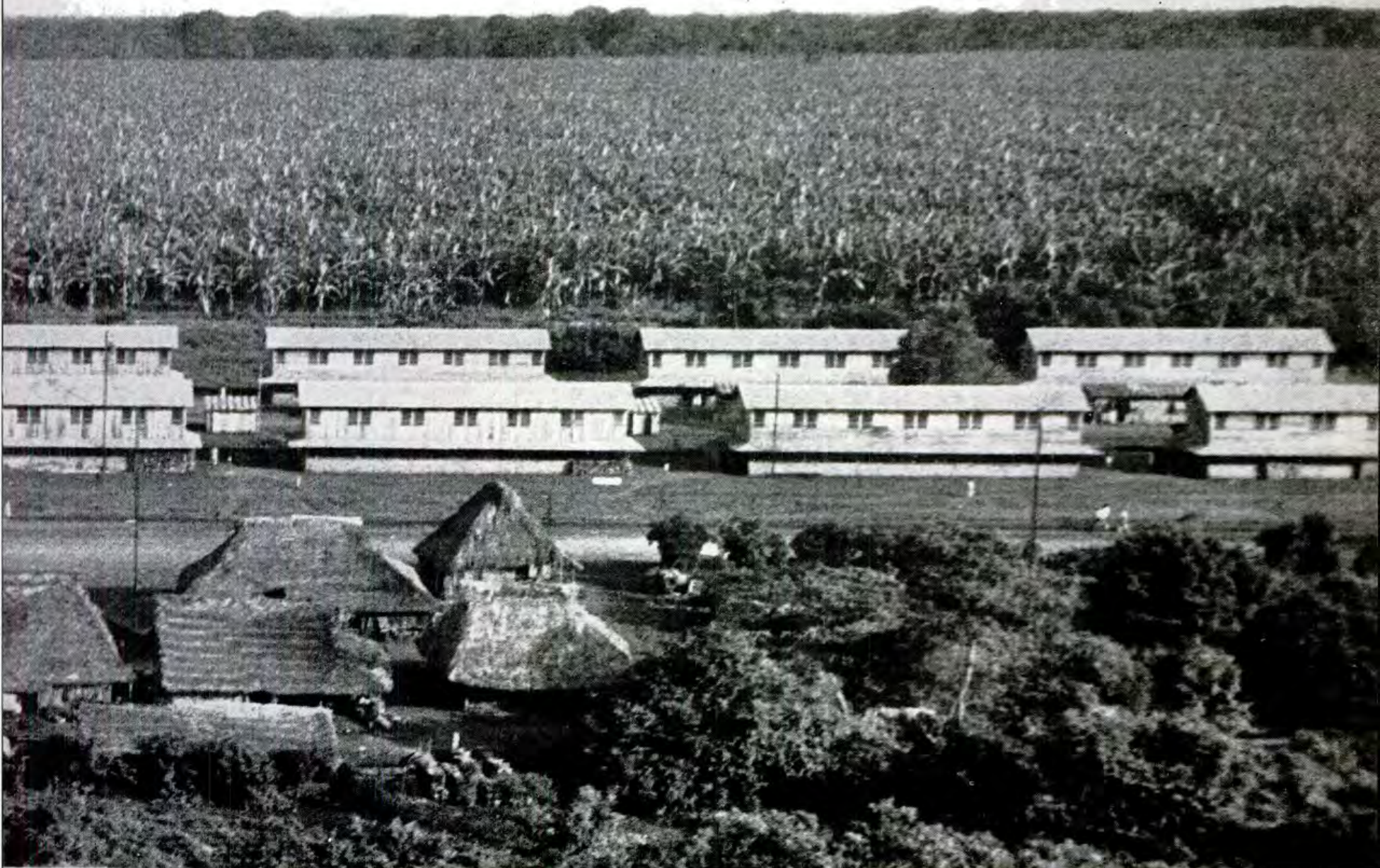
Recently, because it pays higher wages than the usual 26¢ a day, United Fruit has been hated by Guatemala's old-line feudal plantation owners who, paradoxically, also hate Arbenz and the Reds. Even longer and more generally, the company has been hated by Guatemalans who accuse it of manipulating dictators, taking its profits to the U.S. and paying imported



PROCESSING BANANAS, workers carry stems to wrapping station. Each is hung up while a plastic bag is pulled down from the rack (upper left) over the fruit.

← ALMYR BUMP, UNITED FRUIT MANAGER, IS FLANKED BY THE SYMBOLS OF HIS JOB





LAND BEYOND. THATCHED NATIVE SHACKS IN FOREGROUND CONTRAST WITH MODERN DORMITORIES BUILT BY THE COMPANY IN AN EFFORT TO BETTER THE LOT OF ITS EMPLOYEES

## A WHIPPING BOY

employees better than native. Many other Guatemalans hate it too for controlling the Puerto Barrios waterfront, where the United Fruit's white ships dock, and the railroad to Guatemala City, on which, they say, United Fruit gives more consideration to a banana than to a Guatemalan.

Hatred, however, never cost United Fruit anything until last winter when, egged on by the Reds, the government expropriated 234,000 acres of the company's reserve land. Gloomily watching 2,000 squatters move in, the company was hit again in August when 174,000 more acres were taken. The government has offered to pay, at official tax valuation, a price so low that the company refuses to accept it. Now, though still making money, United Fruit talks about being forced to get out altogether.



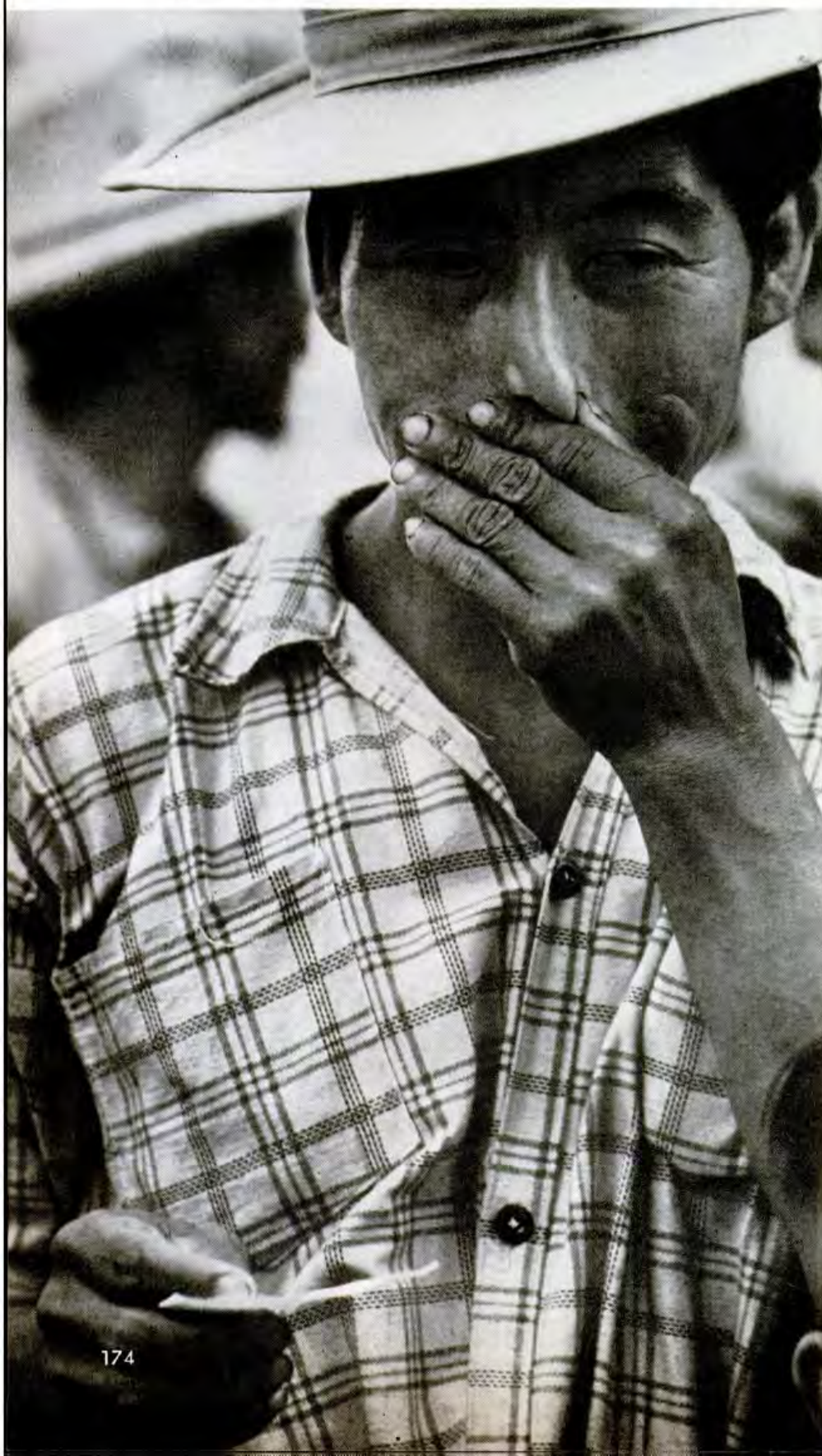
TAUNTING COMPANY on home grounds, sign "against foreign intervention," put up by union, hangs over building in banana loading depot at Puerto Barrios.

WORKER'S SICK, UNDERFED BABY GETS WELL IN THE UNITED FRUIT HOSPITAL →





**LIVESTOCK BY LOTTERY**—most equitable way of distributing animals—sends a peasant's hand into hat for name of cow, calf, horse, mule or pig he will get.



**GUATEMALA** CONTINUED

## BENEFITS, BOONDOGGLES

The strange Arbenz-Communism partnership has brought some undeniable benefits to Guatemalans. Land is being distributed among people who have always been landless. Livestock and seed loans are being distributed to put the new farmers in business. Diversification is being taught to keep them in business and to save Guatemala from the perils of raising only two crops, coffee and bananas. Great dreams are in progress; schools are being built and a 193-mile highway is being pushed, in a frenzy of energy and pride, from the capital to the coast; a huge hydroelectric development is being planned.

But the dreams outrun the reality, and the land is littered with the dismal failures of revolutionary boondoggles. The half-finished National Library stands gaunt and bookless in Guatemala City, deserted in favor of more urgent dreams. The Pan-American highway ends in a blank, 35 miles short of the Mexican border. The 1,000-bed Franklin D. Roosevelt Hospital, planned boastfully as the finest in all Central America, stands useless in a field—staffless, patientless, \$1.5 million short of completion. A model village that cost \$4.5 million stands empty and scorned in a jungle; no road was built to reach it. Despite the failures, President Arbenz foresees a modern, transformed economy in 20 years. Doubters, viewing his sinister partners and remembering the example of the Communist "agrarian reformers" of China, fear another sort of transformation.



**SIGNATURE BY THUMBPRINT** registers illiterate new landowner for government seed loan. Borrowers get money at once and in cash, from \$55 to \$90 each.

**A PRIVATE JOKE** draws satisfied, half-hidden smirk from winner of mule. When somebody sneered mule had no tongue, he retorted, "Mules aren't for talking."





**HIS OWN LAND**, the first he has ever owned, brings a grizzled farmer down on his haunches to feel of the soil while his eyes look out proudly over the 30 acres

which have been allotted to him. Though he gets occupancy and the right to till the soil, actual title remains vested in the government and he cannot sell it.



**UNFINISHED HOSPITAL** is mules' backdrop. Job was dropped when funds ran low and government discovered there were not enough nurses, doctors to staff it.



**UNTENANTED VILLAGE** of Poptún shelters only caretaker and his dog. Nobody would live in these 26 model houses because village can only be reached by air.





**RICH MAN'S REFUGE** (left) is Guatemala Club, where the rich plot against Reds. Here directors sit under Spanish conquistador's picture.

**PRESIDENT AT HOME** with wife, daughter of wealthy El Salvador family, takes his ease amid modern furniture. An ex-captain, he is only 40.

## CHAMPAGNE FOR THE PEONS

The Communists have opposition, but it is divided, leaderless and not efficient. It comes most ardently from the wrong place, the coffee barons who for too long have themselves exploited the land and their fellow citizens. They mutter and scheme against the Reds and Arbenz' reforms. But having no great stomach for the fight, some of them are cannily exporting their wealth against the day of flight. The Catholic Church also resists the Reds as do many students of Guatemala University and, oddly enough, many among the work-hardened market women of Guatemala City. They get no help from Arbenz. Though he knows Communism's upsurge has cost him the profitable U.S. tourist trade and caused the withholding of U.S. aid, the president still has reason to hold his course with confidence. Guatemala still has a rock-hard currency, a piddling public debt, a healthy dollar reserve. Bad times might come with a crop failure or a drop in coffee prices. But meanwhile the Communist leaders know they have little to fear in a land where José Manuel Fortuny, Guatemala's No. 1 Red, can summon a cabinet officer at will, and where barefoot peasants, unaccustomed as they may be, are learning to sip champagne.



**RED BOSS'S HQ** (left) is bare Communist party office. Here Fortuny, secretary of party, sits under pictures of Stalin and early patriot, Barrundia.

**RED AT WORK**, Fortuny has confab with Foreign Minister Osegueda. The cabinet was meeting, but Osegueda came out when Fortuny sent for him.



