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Anarcho-syndicalists in the Mexican revolution

the Casa del Obrero Mundial

Anarchist Federation

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Excerpted from a longer article “The union makes us strong?”

A critical account of the Mexican anarcho-syndicalist union
the Casa del Obrero Mundial which took up arms against
revolutionary peasants.

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During the first twenty years of the 20th century Mexico was engulfed in revolutionary turmoil. Various ‘constitution-
alist’ (i.e. democratic) capitalist factions vied for power whilst attempting to overthrow the dictatorship of General Porfirio Diaz . Meanwhile the Agrarian (landless peasant) movement of Emiliano Zapata and the emerging urban working class attempted to defend their own interests amidst the chaos. The Agrarians engaged in guerrilla activity against the various ‘revolutionary’ governments with the aim of reclaiming and defending the land of the indigenous population from the landowners. During the years 1906 to 1915 the Partido Liberal Mexicano (P.L.M.) played a leading in role in attempting to bring together Agrarian and proletarian revolt. Beginning from an advanced left liberal-democratic position the P.L.M., under the influence of the Magon brothers, developed into an anarchist communist organisation with its own guerrilla units involved in the expropriation of land in the Baja California region and leading strikes in Veracruz, amongst other areas.

The P.L.M. called for “Tierra y Libertad” (Land and Freedom), the immediate expropriation of the landlords and bosses and the abolition of the state.

In 1912 the anarcho-syndicalist Casa del Obrero Mundial (House of the World Worker) was formed and rapidly attracted the urban workers of Mexico City to its ranks. Yet, within three years the anarcho-syndicalists were organising Red Battalions to fight in defence of the Mexican state! Although the Casa emerged with a typical anti-politicism and a desire to concentrate on economic struggle several factors led it to give support to one bourgeois faction, the Constitutionalist forces of Venustiano Carranza, against the Agrarians and their P.L.M. allies. Firstly, the anarcho-syndicalists viewed the industrial proletariat as the organised vanguard of the social revolution, in spite of the fact that they constituted a tiny minority of the Mexican working population. This vanguard, they argued, had to be developed and expanded as rapidly as possible and the anarcho-syndicalists sought what they hoped would be the best conditions for this. Secondly, the anarcho-syndicalists considered the Agrarian movement as an essentially reactionary one, committed to turning back the clock, and rejecting the ‘advances’ in technology and understanding that capitalism had brought. They pointed to the Zapatista’s “religiosity” and general ‘backwardness’ as proof of their danger to the ‘advanced’ sections of the working class. Finally, and most importantly, the anarcho-syndicalists believed that the progressive, democratic bourgeois state which was offering the Casa freedom to organise (and in fact was actually encouraging the Casa to organise!) should be defended against ‘reaction’, Agrarianist or anti-constitutionalist.

After the anarcho-syndicalist Red Battalions had played their part in ‘saving’ the Mexican state, the inevitable happened. In the spring of 1916 the Constitutionalist government turned on the Casa, disbanded the Red Battalions and forcibly closed down the syndicates following the second of two Gen-

eral Strikes that year. The failure of the anarcho-syndicalists to recognise the class nature of the state, despite all their verbal anti-statism, had led them to take sides against genuinely revolutionary movements.