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Revolutionary Syndicalism in Mexico

John M. Hart

1990

A short history of Mexican revolutionary syndicalism, which dominated the early labour movement prior to and during the Mexican Revolution.

“The Mexican revolutionary syndicalists: their form of organization — anarchosyndicalist; their leadership — artisan and professional; their numbers — 150 000; their goals — the seizure and operation of the means of production and the onset of worldwide proletarian revolution; their means — revolutionary war against capitalism by workers’ militias and the general strike.”

Yet the anarcho-syndicalists entered a coalition of bourgeois forces and helped militarily suppress the rural revolts of the poor peasantry. Echoing, somewhat, later developments in Spain — the bourgeois state forces later turned on the anarcho-syndicalists and decisively crushed their movement.

Source; *Revolutionary Syndicalism — An International Perspective*, ed. by Marcel van de Linden & Wayne Thorpe; Scolar Press, UK, 1990.

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During the first 30 years of the twentieth century Mexican workers developed by far the largest and most revolutionary syndicalist movement ever known in the Americas. Rapid industrialization, ever growing foreign ownership of the means of production, and enmiserated living and harsh working conditions, provided the material basis for extensive and radical labour organizing. Those conditions combined with legal restraints against unions and working class-led political parties and a high level of political consciousness rooted in nineteenth century artisanal and cooperativist anarchism, combined to provide the basis for a massive revolutionary syndicalist movement that grew rapidly during the elite crisis that paralyzed the repressive apparatus of the state before and during the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

Industrial and urban working-class militancy, rooted in the labour struggles of colonial and post-independence Mexican society, grew rapidly during the political-economic crisis of pre-revolutionary Mexico between 1899 and 1910. During the revolution of 1910 militant workers created the anarchosyndicalist *Casa del Obrero Mundial* (Casa) (House of the Workers of the World), which grew rapidly until 1916 when an alliance of the state and capital successfully crushed it. The struggle between the worker-controlled anarchosyndicalist labour movement and the alliance of state and capital continued until 1931 when the largest syndicates represented by the *Confederation General de Trabajadores* (CGT – General Confederation of Workers) were finally forced to accept state authority in licensing workers' organisations, authorizing strikes, mandatory arbitration, and the virtually direct administration of syndicates by the state.

Artisan leadership played a central role in working-class mobilizations from colonial times through the revolution of 1910. Artisan competition with Spanish merchant and manufacturing importers created antagonisms between imperial and colonial producers and brought them into political opposition movements; but the artisans were severely limited in their capacity to lead lower-status

de la Gleba, attempts to whitewash his own deceits while offering keen insights into the actions of others.

Professional historians have given increasing attention to Mexican revolutionary syndicalism in recent years. Among those treatments my *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class, 1860–1931* (Austin, 1978); Ramon E. Ruiz's *Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries, 1911–1923* (Baltimore, 1976); and *Lombardo Toledano y el movimiento obrero mexicano* (Mexico, 1977), by Francie Chassen de Lopez are the most useful. Recent, more specialized, research has uncovered a high level of anarchosyndicalist organizing in the Mexican labour movement of the early twentieth century. Jose Luis Sariago, *Anarquismo e historia social minera en el norte de Mexico, 1906–1918* (Mexico, n.d.); Leon Diaz Cardenas, *Cananea: Primer brote del sindicalismo en Mexico* (Mexico, n.d.); and Bernardo Garcia Diaz, *Un pueblo fabril del porfiriato: Santa Rosa, Veracruz* (Mexico, 1981); are essential models of the genre. For a new interpretation which places the revolutionary syndicalists in the broader context of peasant, petit bourgeois and provincial elite revolution see my *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley, 1987).

parties of the left and the *Frente Democrático* headed by Cuauhtemoc Cardenas are based on their militant heritage.

Sources

The Ramo de Trabajo of the Archivo General de la Nacion in Mexico City holds by far the most complete collection of documents pertaining to Mexican revolutionary syndicalism. The Hermeroteca Nacional, located on the campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City, contains an extensive collection of newspapers including some of those listed below. The Centro de Estudios Historicos del Movimiento Obrero in Mexico City also holds some of these publications. The most important newspapers for the study of twentieth century revolutionary syndicalism are *Accion Mundial*, *Ariete*, *Luz*, *Lucha*, and *Regeneracion*.

The Nettlau Archive in the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, contains important 1920s letters from CGT secretary Jose Valades. Unfortunately, much of the most important syndicalist labour material is still missing. This includes the records of the *Casa del Obrero Mundial* and the CGT. Some records pertaining to the PLM and Ricardo Flores Magon are available in the archives of the Secretariat of Foreign Relations in Mexico City. Most syndicate records are still held by those entities. The availability of the documents depends on individual union policies.

There are a number of historical treatments of the revolutionary epoch of Mexican labour written by participants. These studies are extremely uneven and some are even unreliable. The best, despite its confusing organization, is Jacinto Huitron's, *Origenes e historia del movimiento obrero en Mexico*, (Mexico, 1974). To his credit, Huitron, who refused all forms of government support, positions and pensions for his entire life, revealed the more tragic aspects of revolutionary syndicalism's demise. Luis Araiza in his comprehensive *Historia del movimiento obrero mexicano*, (Mexico, 1975), offers the official story by one who witnessed much, but who has a great deal to hide. Another participant, Rosendo Salazar, in *Las Pugnas*

industrial workers because improved wages and working conditions for factory, large shop, transportation and raw materials-producing industrial employees meant higher basic materials and production costs for them. Equally important in the Mexican case, they were culturally distinct in an ethnic and colonial sense, and their technological base was more European, 'modern' and capitalistic, than that of the rural masses who in 1910 constituted over 80 per cent of the Mexican population.

Given the economic and cultural contradictions between artisans and the factory workers and peasants, only the most radical artisans participated in organizing them. In the urban context the public assertion of working-class unrest thus was made possible only by food crises and breakdowns in the jointly administered clerical and secular Mexico City authority structure. Those general conditions continued to prevail in the metropolis until the last third of the nineteenth century.

The limits of artisan leadership of labour organizing in the Mexican context took on overriding importance during the Independence Revolution of 1810. During eleven years of civil war, beginning when Padre Hidalgo's ethnically and culturally distinct rural and peasant forces marched to the gates of Mexico City, the artisans and urban workers were either silent or responded to elite-led mobilizations in defence of the city and the regime. The sacking of the town of Dolores and the city of Guanajuato by the revolutionaries had been rejected by the artisan leadership of the industrial working class of the capital.

The recruitment of workers to the rebel forces in the provinces demonstrated the rebels' attractiveness there in contrast to the more Europeanized people of Mexico City. The provincial base and ethnic cultural distinctiveness of the revolutionaries contrasted sharply with the antiprovincial, racial and cultural elite attitudes of the metropolis to alienate all but a very few in Mexico City. As citizens of the capital the artisans participated in a collective urban experience that included amenities such as Sunday prom-

enades, parks, outdoor music, fountains, the written word, and paved streets and lighting. Despite the differences between rich and poor, the city's public life had a unifying effect *vis-a-vis* rural miners and *campesinos* (those who work the land).

Hidalgo's abolition of slavery and his proclamation of the return of farmland from the commercial estates to the peasant villages pleased blacks, peasants and unemployed mineworkers, but he failed to reach the urban artisans, many of whom were slave owners. Only the most politically radical artisans supported revolutionary change that might grant greater power and wages to workers, miners and farm labourers producing basic materials.

During the 1860s and 1870s Mexican anarchist organizers, led by radical artisans, mobilized a labour movement highlighted by the appearance of the first workers' council in Mexico City (the *Circulo Proletario*) in 1869, the second workers' council (the *Gran Circulo de Obreros de Mexico*) in 1871, which eventually had 15 000 anarchist-led members in its affiliates, and finally the General Congress of Mexican Workers (*Congreso General de Obreros Mexicanos*) in 1876, which counted over 50 000 members in 1880 when it claimed affiliation with the 'Black' International in Amsterdam.

In the 1880s and 1890s radical labour activists fought back from disaster after the destruction of the labour movement between 1878 and 1883 by the American-supported regime of dictator Porfirio Diaz whose seizure of power was made possible by contributions of cash, arms, and manpower, by a consortium of US merchants, bankers, including James Stillman, the future Chairman of the Board of the National City Bank of New York, and the owners of large ranches in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, including Richard King of the King Ranch. The foreign-dominated growth of the national economy provided stability to the government and temporarily put the working-class movement on the defensive. Denied the right to organize unions without state approval and faced with the outright impossibility of an opposition labour party the workers created their own anarchist political culture. Often still led

tively defended their concessions. Also, the Obregon Salido regime needed a 'revolutionary' image to maintain its uneasy alliance with the lower classes, and the CGT counted some of the largest and historically most militant syndicates in the nation among its ranks, including many of the textile, petroleum and utility workers, and miners. By the mid-1920s the corruption of the CROM leadership was public knowledge. When Morones resigned from the cabinet of President Plutarco Elias Calles in 1928, in a dispute over the presidential succession, the CROM disintegrated in a fortnight.

During the mid- and late 1920s the anarchosyndicalist CGT had overcome penury and repression to establish itself as a potent force in the labour movement. After Morones's resignation from the cabinet many disaffected unions petitioned the CGT for membership. The CGT rapidly expanded, reaching a peak of 80 000 members. The CGT experienced the same problem that the Casa had: a sudden influx of ideologically unprepared workers with leaders disposed to re-enter the government's patronage when the opportunity arose.

In 1931 an alliance of Marxist and other radical syndicate leaders, who saw more to gain in cooperation with the now consolidated and socially active Mexican government, broke from the CGT and took most of the larger syndicates with them. They signed the *Ley del Trabajo* with the government, recognizing the role of the state in legalizing strikes, binding arbitration, and the certification of unions. During the 1930s the socially interventionist state headed by President Lazaro Cardenas supported myriad strikes and widespread workers' gains in wages and working conditions that effectively marginalized the CGT. The anarchosyndicalist challenges to the state's domination of labour and capitalist ownership of the means of production dissolved into ever smaller factions.

Today, most of Mexico's syndicates are still under the aegis of the state-controlled Confederation of Mexican Workers, but their frequently independent orientation, demanding voice in the government, and growing political activism on behalf of the political

bled at Saltillo approved the creation of the Morones-led Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM). The syndicalists in attendance walked out and the following year formed the General Confederation of Workers (CGT).

During the 1920s the state-dominated CROM gradually gained ground against the antistate CGT and attracted tens of thousands of workers. The precedence established by the CROM carried over into the creation of the state-dominated Mexican Confederation of Labor (CTM) during the 1930s. The CTM came to dominate the Mexican labour movement during the late 1930s after the large labour centrals were brought under control of the increasingly powerful government in 1931. The government, after years of struggle with radical and independent labour groups, encouraged and controlled the new CROM. Morones, who deserted the Casa during the general strike crisis of July-August 1916, became head of the Mexican Labour Party and served at the same time as Minister of Labour in the Obregon Salido government while also leading the CROM. His men, many of them naive workers who thought they served a revolutionary cause, joined specialized gangs of thugs, police and soldiers attacking CGT strikers in Tampico, Veracruz and the Mexico City area. Corrupt leadership deceived the rank and file of the CROM into opposing independent labour organizing. Morones's moral turpitude became public knowledge a few years later.

The struggle spread across the nation. The CROM claimed devout working-class radicals in its ranks, attracted by the organization's stunning successes. Despite the CROM's wildly exaggerated membership list, its probable 80 000 adherents nonetheless outnumbered their independent anarchosyndicalist competitor, the CGT, founded in 1921. Numbering about 40 000, the CGT operated virtually without financial assets. The government did not destroy it during the 1920s because it suffered challenges to its authority from the church, the remaining Porfirian right, army dissidents, continuing *campesino* unrest, and the foreign companies that ac-

by artisans, they formed secret workers' councils and underground unions, and even staged wildcat strikes.

During this period they established centres of syndicalist militancy in the industrial towns of Orizaba and Puebla in south-eastern central Mexico, in greater Mexico City, and in the mines. In 1883 textile workers went on strike at Orizaba, the site of a workers' uprising in 1907 and a centre of twentieth century revolutionary syndicalism. Between 1885 and 1895 textile workers in the factories near Mexico City (La Magdalena, La Victoria, San Antonio de Abad, and La Colmena) and the large Hercules mill 120 miles north at Queretaro staged paralyzing wildcat strikes. The rural police (*rurales*) violently intervened on these occasions.

The underground *sociedad de resistencia* 'against capitalism' formed by the textile workers at Rio Blanco (Orizaba) in 1892 provided direct continuity between the artisan-anarchist-led labour movement of the nineteenth century and the emergence of revolutionary syndicalism during the workers' rebellion there in 1906. In 1900 the era of 'industrial peace' began to crumble when a strike began at the El Mayorazgo textile factory in Puebla spread across the state, a national centre of textile production. At its peak the strike involved 3000 workers and had the effect of a general strike.

The strike in Puebla marked the turning point in the Ancien Regime's economic success. It was precipitated by rising interest rates for business loans resulting from the rapid expansion of the European economy which began in late 1898 and continued through 1904 causing the largely French owners of Mexican textile plants to attempt wage rollbacks and the imposition of longer working hours. Almost fifteen years of omnipotent control by state and capital over the industrial working class ended. The economic destabilization revealed Mexico's extreme vulnerability to foreign economic conditions.

Revolutionary syndicalism first surfaced with the 1 June 1906 miners' strike and rebellion at Cananea, in the north-western state of Sonora, a place characterized by economically disadvantaged na-

tive workers *vis-a-vis* their American counterparts, wage cuts and pay in devaluing currency, and anarchist organizing. The anarchist-led Mexican Liberal Party (PLM) (*Partido Liberal Mexicano*) had been agitating among the miners and other workers at Cananea for months before the outbreak. Led by former Mexico City law student Ricardo Flores Magón and his brother Enrique, the PLM operated out of Los Angeles, California, and had a hand in the organization of later strikes in Mexico City and the textile workers' revolt at Rio Blanco. Its newspaper, *Regeneración*, provided a working-class-oriented literature that stressed the right to organize and the need for workers to overthrow the government.

The miners and mill workers of Cananea were part of an enclave economy, a highly capitalized enterprise devoted to the extraction of raw materials, controlled by foreigners. Its impact on Mexican society, like enclave economies worldwide, was increased social inequality among the indigenous population and between it and the foreigners, increased spatial inequality, increased landowning inequality, more concentrated and capitalized industrial activity, higher levels of production and profit, production for export, more segmented, deskilled and alienated labour, higher salaries, far higher prices for necessities, widespread industrial pollution, the need for state-provided infrastructure, services, and a wealth of tax revenues.

Like the labour unrest in central Mexico, economic contraction combined with industrial working-class anarchist organizing experience to trigger the Cananea uprising. Most consumer goods were imported from the United States. Only corn and chile came from domestic sources. The 1905 Mexican devaluation of the peso by 50 per cent, which resulted from the weakening value of silver, the slow-down of American and European investments during the US banking panic of 1902–1903, and the Western European financial crisis of 1899–1904, devastated the real wages of the miners. They faced the continuing decline of their buying power because the American employer insisted on paying them in Mexican and script monies

tas, denied the urban working-class leaders' appeal for assistance against Carranza, suggesting instead that the Casa disband.

With electricity restored and troops patrolling the streets the stores and factories of Mexico City began to reopen. By 3 August the city began to take on an air of normality. The constitutionalist army working in concert with the foreign and wealthiest owners and managers of private enterprise broke the Casa and defeated the revolutionary anarchosindicalist movement. A dynamic combination of elite elements, the constitutionalist movement and the Obregonista *pequena burguesía*, blended with the most sophisticated and durable capitalists of the Ancien Regime to carry the victory. After the Casa's August 1916 defeat the state rescinded the gains made in the first general strike and used force to crush further working-class mobilizations that year. The emergent political and economic elite amalgam that emerged from the revolution was terminating working-class initiatives in the countryside and cities.

The victorious forces were forging a Mexico which allowed upward mobility and participation for the *pequena burguesía* and the nearly complete integration of the regional elites into the new ruling class. To the defeated groups, the workers and *campesinos*, it looked like the old system. While small groups of workers attempted to form new mass organizations, dozens of independent *campesino* insurgencies occurred and hundreds of localized rural rebel groups continued to occupy estates. The new government banned syndicate meetings for several months after the suppression that took place in the wake of the general strike of July–August 1916. During the Carranza years 1916–1920, government-endorsed labour meetings headed by Morones competed with regional gatherings called by the anarchosindicalists who were trying to reorganize. Morones, a friend of Samuel Gompers, attended meetings of the American Federation of Labor in the United States and received federation delegates and US government support for his efforts in Mexico. In May 1918 a majority of the 100 delegates assem-

exorable economic and political process was the polarization along class lines of the formerly allied urban sector of the revolutionary forces. The government recognized the threat of a powerful revolutionary working class dedicated to the destruction of the state and capitalism. It responded decisively and confronted the Casa 'reds' in a showdown during the second general strike of 1916.

In less than three months following the May general strike the paper currency pesos guaranteed the workers by General Hill had been devalued by the banking houses of Mexico City to only two gold centavos (equivalent to one cent in US currency) in purchasing power. Government inaction signalled approval of the situation. The industrialists and businessmen still issued devalued script money to the workers and the government ignored the syndicate complaints. Once again the Federal District syndicates declared a general strike for the Mexico City area. Again the workers demonstrated their solidarity. The walkout began on 31 July. It was the largest strike Mexico has ever seen. The entire economy of Mexico City closed down and thousands of workers converged on the centre of the city.

However, the police intelligence services and sympathizers in the syndicates warned the government of the Casa's plans. It responded energetically; troops attacked the working-class crowds, scattering them into small groups. They raided the Casa headquarters, arresting leaders. At the same time the first strike committee, in charge of negotiating the workers' demands, was arrested and charged with treason, a capital offence. On 2 August the government declared martial law to help quell the rioting crowds. The Casa electricians' syndicate leader, threatened with death by his army captors who held a gun to his head, showed them how to restore the city's electrical power service. The government declared the Casa subversive and outlawed. Troops seized the regional offices and armouries of the Casa. Obregon Salido, the Casa's erstwhile friend who had used its men and women against the Villis-

instead of gold or US dollars. The cost of staples increased dramatically when purchased with Mexican currency. The Cananea workforce demanded higher wages as a counter-demand for lowered pay, compensation for their lost real earnings, and protested against the discriminatory wages paid in devaluing Mexican scripts and currency, the inequitable work assignments, and their inferior living accommodation relative to that of the American personnel.

The miners' strike, the two-day gun battle and confrontation with the American owners (the Rockefeller-controlled Anaconda Corporation), represented by their manager William Greene who liked to style himself as the owner, state authorities and American vigilantes caused a nationwide sensation. The nationalistic Mexican public saw the Cananea uprising and American intervention as a Mexican challenge to the omnipotent foreigners in which the government sided with the aliens against its own people. The workers' actions at Cananea carry special significance because they associated revolutionary syndicalism with the challenge to the growing influence of foreigners at a time when nationalism was moving the nation towards the revolution of 1910. The uprising took place six months before the even more important workers' rebellion, at the Rio Blanco textile manufacturing complex in Orizaba.

The events that ensued at Rio Blanco were the next phase in the developing process of revolutionary syndicalism. In 1901 the workers at Rio Blanco reactivated their secret 'resistance society' from 'self-help' activities in order to regain their 'lost rights'. Rio Blanco, like Cananea, was one of the largest production complexes of its kind in Mexico. The conditions of labour maximized the workers' alienation. Relative to the smaller mills and artisan shops, jobs were more formalized, with a foreign-dominated administration.

The workers felt deep hostility toward the foreign owners and the administration staff. Following a strike in 1903 the Rio Blanco workers organized a *Gran Circulo* in 1904. In the Spring of 1906, agitators from the PLM joined the Rio Blanco workers. On 2 April a group of 27 Rio Blanco workers formed the *Gran Circulo de Obreros*

Libres (GCOL). The group affiliated with the PLM and elected Jose Neira, a PLM organizer, GCOL president. The militants published *La Revolucion Social*, which denounced Church and government as corrupt and called for workers' self-management and social revolution and promised to 'tumble that arrogant Frenchman (the owner) out of the clouds.' They also organized the nearby Santa Rosa and Nogales factories.

The government declared the GCOL subversive and the *rurales* raided the Circulo meeting place. The government disbanded the GCOL, and a few months later approved a new GCOL with its own leader in order to control the workers, a proven tactic, but too many workers were already politicized. Meanwhile the predominantly French owners of 93 factories throughout central Mexico formed the *Centro Industrial Mexicano*. The *Centro* hoped to standardize lower wages and higher prices, to set stiff production quotas, to lobby the government and to develop a common front in labour negotiations. Its approach contrasted sharply with the syndicalist goal of workers' control. In November the *Centro* prohibited uncensored reading materials in company towns and required workers to carry identification passbooks, which were to include discipline histories.

The GCOL and *Centro* negotiated bread-and-butter issues between November and December 1906. The 'Charro' (white union) GCOL leadership was caught between the workers' radicalism and the employers' intransigence. For weeks the Diaz government refused GCOL requests for arbitration. On 22 December the *Centro* declared a lockout affecting 22 000 textile and related workers in Puebla; 10 000 in Orizaba; and 25 000 more in the rest of central Mexico. The Puebla-Orizaba workers suffered greatly and over 2000 of them migrated in the nine days that the lockout endured.

On 31 December the government agreed to arbitrate and on 4 January 1907 promulgated defeat for the workers on all issues, but in Orizaba a large minority at the union meeting shouted denunciations, 'Death to Porfirio Diaz' and 'Down with the Dictatorship.'

foreign economic hegemony, radical urban and industrial workers staged demonstrations and strikes. State governors, including Jeriberto Jara of Veracruz, declared a state of siege in order to regain control.

The Casa leadership demanded a redress of grievances which included the government's return of its House of Tiles headquarters, the release of the arrested Casa leaders and economic reforms including the abolition of script money, fixed price ceilings to stop inflation, and work projects to solve unemployment problems. Thousands of workers marched on the Alameda plaza in the heart of Mexico City. The government, caught by surprise, agreed to meet with the Casa leaders. General Benjamin Hill, Commander of the Federal District, accepted the syndicates' demands. Hill, an ally of Obregon Salido and Luis Morones, pleased the workers by issuing an ultimatum forcing the businessmen and industrialists to attend a meeting over which he presided. He dictated the Casa's terms to the capitalists. The Casa restored electrical power and other vital services to the city when Hill promulgated the accord.

The general strike of May 1916 seemed a notable success; it demonstrated the power of working-class solidarity and the high level of motivation that the anarchosyndicalists had achieved in a brief span of time. But rather than heralding the demise of government and capitalism, the general strike encouraged the enemies of anarchosyndicalist labour to cooperate with the constitutionalist regime. The Casa anarchosyndicalists celebrated the outcome of the strike, but for a growing number of labour leaders such as Luis Morones, who accepted the post of labour secretary, the results confirmed the advantages of working with the government and enjoying its patronage. The constitutionalist government was coopting a rising generation of pragmatic, career-oriented *pequena burguesa* labour leaders. At the same time the government incorporated the more flexible members of the Porfirian intelligentsia and merged its interests and programmes with those of the Porfirian banking, industrial and landowning elite. The end result of this in-

conviction that the power of the working class expressed through strikes and militias was capable of toppling any capitalist state. They underestimated the capacity of the capitalist and the constitutionalist leadership. No era in the history of labour in the western hemisphere has witnessed the working-class belligerence that the Casa members, now over 100 000 in number and moving towards 150 000, demonstrated in 1915 and 1916. The confrontation of the working class with its capitalist rivals moved toward the general strikes of 1916. The sympathy for revolutionary syndicalism of even the most radical *pequena burguesia* 'Jacobins' in the government was exhausted.

On 13 January 1916, faced with increasing syndicate unrest, Carranza ordered the last elements of the Red Battalions to dissolve. When the contingents of discharged soldiers returned to their homes, they found the script currencies, inflation driving the urban working classes back toward a subsistence standard of living, and rising unemployment. They believed that all these problems could be alleviated by workers' control of production through workers' councils and committees. In Mexico City the Red Battalions veterans demanded the nationalization of industry and government compensation in the form of public services for their contribution to the constitutionalist fighting effort. Equally violent demonstrations took place in Veracruz and Tampico. In reaction, the government carried out almost simultaneous raids on Casa centres throughout the nation. A number of Casa leaders, jailed and badly treated, remained in custody for nearly four months.

In response, the leaders of the Casa called a general strike for 22 May 1916 which halted commerce, industry and public services in the greater Mexico City area. It was carried out by the Federation of Federal District Syndicates, an amalgam of Casa unions located in the area surrounding Mexico City. Including some of the most militant and powerful syndicates in the nation, the federation totalled some 90 000 members in the Spring of 1916. In the meantime in the provinces, especially in Tampico and Veracruz, centres of

On 7 January the textile workers in central Mexico returned to their jobs, but a stone-throwing crowd diverted the first shift of workers at Rio Blanco. They burned down the company store. When the *Jefe Politico* (political administrator) arrived with a contingent of *rurales* the crowd pelted him. The *rurales* refused to act. Soldiers arrived, arrested the *rurales* and opened fire on the crowd, killing 17 and wounding 80.

But other crowds were already on the move. One group marched into the town of Rio Blanco, seized the jail and released the prisoners. Another segment of workers joined contingents from the Nogales and Santa Rosa factories shouting 'Death to the Dictator Porfirio Diaz!' and 'Down with Oppressors and Company Stores!' They set the company stores on fire. The workers that had gone to Nogales and Santa Rosa were intercepted by troops on the road back to Rio Blanco. The troops killed scores of workers and wounded even more. Scattered remnants of the Santa Rosa-Nogales workers' contingent were able to get back to Rio Blanco where the main fighting was now underway. In Rio Blanco armed workers seized the downtown area, tore up railway tracks outside the town and cut down the telegraph lines. An angry crowd attacked and burned the houses within the compound where the GCOL president resided. When the army arrived, armed bands of workers engaged it in uneven street battles. The fighting continued all night before the troops regained control.

On the morning of 8 January the repression of the uprising was completed. The army fired on a crowd of workers in front of the Santa Rosa factory, killing five. Two Santa Rosa workers' leaders were killed that morning. The army killed almost 200 workers and the number of wounded defies estimate. Four hundred workers were taken prisoner. The workers killed approximately 25 and wounded between 30 and 40 soldiers in 24 hours of fighting. The employers then dismissed over 1500 workers in five factories. Smashed goods from the company stores littered the countryside. The American consul from Veracruz noted that there was no steal-

ing. The Rio Blanco affair began as a lockout; it turned into an attempted workers' revolution.

Despite the praise received from the American consul for 'decisive action', the Mexican state was badly shaken by the events at Rio Blanco. Its spokesmen at various times declared the episode 'communist', 'anarchist' and 'rebellion'. Rio Blanco continued to manifest worker discontent. In April 1907 and in 1909, despite the presence of troops and the use of imported peasant strikebreakers, the Rio Blanco, Nogales and Santa Rosa workers closed the plants. Continued industrial worker unrest made troop concentrations necessary in the Orizaba-Rio Blanco region until the revolution began in 1910.

Between 1907 and 1910, anarchist-led worker unrest continued in central Mexico. In January 1907 and 1908, contemporary with events in Rio Blanco, the workers in the La Magdalena and La Hormiga textile factories near Mexico City went on strike. In 1908 the struggle continued, prompting police occupations in the factories and army intervention. The workers in these plants had first organised between 1876 and 1882 and had carried out wildcat strikes during the 1880s and 1890s. In 1909 successive strikes closed the large Mexico City San Antonio de Abad textile factory. The factory owners blamed 'anarchist and communist agitators' from Rio Blanco for the disturbances. Special searches of workers' living quarters removed subversive reading materials and weapons. The church sponsored 'labor conventions' in a search for 'peace' and, with the government's blessing, formed a Christian labour movement.

Despite energetic repression, a tide of working-class militancy embraced central and northern Mexico. The factory, construction and artisan workers in central Mexico reorganized. A financially stricken national government and divided elite revealed their weakness and allowed revolutionary labour organizers to function who five years earlier would have been forcibly deterred. Labour organizing was facilitated when powerful landowner and industrialist

ened due to devalued script monies, persistent inflation, unemployment, food shortages and the efforts of Casa organizers working in the slums and factories. The first wave of strikes began in the early Summer of 1915, giving impetus to an urban working-class upsurge that threatened the survival of the capitalist economy and constitutionalist state.

The late Spring walkouts of 1915 by the schoolteachers and carriage drivers presaged the revolutionary show-down between labour and capital. On 30 July the Bread Bakers' Syndicate closed the bakery industry and the owners were forced to guarantee the quality of their products, to lower prices which had risen 900 per cent in just a few months, and to grant large wage increases. In October the petroleum workers closed Lord Cowdray's *Compania Mexicana de Petroleo 'ElAquila' S.A.*, and turned to the Casa for support. They became a Casa syndicate during the ensuing violence as the strikers and their Casa allies fought strikebreakers and the police. In October and November the Textile Workers' Syndicate shut down the factories of central Mexico. The French owners promptly granted a 100 per cent wage increase, the eight-hour day and six-day work week. Almost two dozen new syndicates joined the Casa in November and December.

In December 1915 and early 1916 the strikes became even more serious. The Casa Carpenters' Syndicate paralyzed construction in central Mexico, and gained a 150 per cent wage increase. The button makers and barbers followed suit. A mining strike spread rapidly throughout that foreign-owned industry amid violence, sabotage and assassinations of strikebreakers, police and syndicate members. The attacks by Casa labour against foreign holdings paralleled a new wave of assaults on American-owned mines carried out by Villistas in the far north.

The anarchosyndicalist Casa leaders heightened their demands for workers' control of production, wages and prices. They challenged the power of capital and a government which had just come to power by force of arms. Their confidence stemmed from the

In the late Summer of 1915 the Casa established its headquarters in the formerly posh Mexico City salon, the House of Tiles. The crowds overflowed into the streets and thousands marched on government buildings and strike-closed factories to express their demands forcefully. On 13 October 1915, the Casa inaugurated a workers' school (*Escuela Racionalista*), a goal of its former leaders Ferres and Moncaleano. The speakers denounced 'burguesa' and clerical 'brainwashing' in the government and church-run schools. To the anarcho-syndicalists the *Escuela Racionalista* represented workers' 'control of the learning process' and complemented anarcho-syndicalist culture found in their newspaper, and the goal of workers' control of production. By mid-1915 the Carrancista provincial elite and Obregonista *pequena burguesa*-led forces had defeated the rural Villistas and Zapatistas. The assertive Lucha leaders and Red Battalions veterans that had survived the fighting came together again in Mexico City ready to challenge for power. Ever larger and more threatening crowds marched through the streets. The Casa newspaper, *Ariete* (Sledgehammer), called for the restructuring of the society and economy around the growing Casa syndicates.

The Casa-promulgated working-class definition of the Revolution competed with the constitutionalist view. It included workers' control of the factories and the expulsion and nationalization of foreign capital. These doctrines were completely unacceptable to the Carrancista elite and Obregonista 'Jacobins' in charge of the government. *Ariete* also carried essays by European anarchists including Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, and a plethora of Spaniards. *Ariete* denounced 'burguesa government' and called for a 'final working-class revolution'. Working-class radicalism, which had devastated American properties across the nation since 1910, now threatened its *pequena burguesa* and provincial elite counterparts as much as it did the foreigners.

The recruitment of workers into the Casa continued through 1915 and the first eight months of 1916 while labour unrest deep-

Francisco Madero precipitated an elite political crisis by calling for a national revolution to oust Diaz. On that day in 1911 when the aged president left the capital, working-class crowds were rioting in wide areas of the city and fires raged in the downtown section.

Between 1911 and 1920 revolutionary Mexican miners, resentful of American wealth and power, would assault, dynamite and sack mines throughout the north. During the same period Mexican factory workers mobilized on a massive scale, providing critical manpower to the armies of the victors, and staged the most violent and crippling strikes in the nation's history, including general strikes. Their Red Battalions were important to the Constitutionalist victory during the revolution. Mexican women industrial workers formed syndicates and 1500 strong, they joined the *Acratas* (those opposed to all authority), the nurses' formation for the Red Battalions.

The Mexican revolutionary syndicalists: their form of organization — anarcho-syndicalist; their leadership — artisan and professional; their numbers — 150 000; their goals — the seizure and operation of the means of production and the onset of worldwide proletarian revolution; their means — revolutionary war against capitalism by workers' militias and the general strike.

While violence grew in the countryside in 1910 and 1911, the industrial and urban working class began a mobilization that was crucial to the outcome of the Mexican Revolution. In the Spring of 1911, shortly before Porfirio Diaz resigned, the typographic workers of Mexico City, led by Spanish anarchist Amadeo Ferres,

organized a *sociedad de resistencia*, the *Confederacion Tipografica de Mexico*, to take the lead in marshalling the working class. As labour unrest grew, especially in the textile factories and mines, PLM organizers smuggled propaganda into Mexico City and nearby states, further stimulating worker discontent. PLM clubs already existed in the capital city and 300 more in the *pueblos* and factories of Puebla and Tlaxcala. They popularized Flores Magon, who believed in a stateless society run by the workers. They called

for the workers to take revolutionary action. With Flores Magon incarcerated in the US, however, Francisco Madero inherited the role of leader.

Between 9 and 24 November 1910, as riots swept down-town Mexico City, the army defeated an insurrection headed by former PLM leader Aguilés Serdan in Puebla, but the unrest grew. In the Spring of 1911 the most radical workers coalesced in their respective factories; many supported Madero's revolutionary movement, but others formed groups that later joined the revolutionary anarchosyndicalist *Casa del Obrero Mundial*. In late May crowds marched through the streets of Mexico City calling for the president's immediate resignation. During the riots Diaz slipped away to Veracruz and the crowds, whose importance dates from the preindustrial uprisings of 1624 and 1692 and the overthrow of viceroys, celebrated. Diaz put it best: 'Madero has unleashed a tiger!'

The revolutionary anarchists of the PLM and the anarchosyndicalists of the formative Casa experienced troubles with the state at once. Madero disarmed PLM units totalling some 1500 men in Chihuahua and used the army to drive the PLM forces out of Baja California, where they had proclaimed an 'Anarchist Republic', back across the US border. The US government imprisoned the PLM leadership. Geographically isolated and its junta infiltrated by a US government agent, the PLM was easily defeated.

Throughout 1912 the working-class groups hostile to the Madero government multiplied. The railroad workers formed a syndicate and staged strikes, while the miners in Coahuila and Cananea, the textile workers and craftsmen of Mexico City, and the nation's other urban areas formed syndicates. Local groups formed independently and nationally coordinated attempts to organize labour were underway. The typesetters of greater Mexico City formed the *Confederacion Nacional de Artes Graficas*. Calling themselves the '*Obreros Intellectuales*' (intellectual workers), they produced a

ists and constitutionalist officials. Urban food shortages, runaway inflation, unemployment, public demonstrations by angry workers, script monies for factory payrolls, wildcat strikes and armed workers calling themselves 'red' created a volatile situation. The constitutionalist elites and Obregonista 'Jacobins' had armed the urban workers in order to defeat the agrarians. Now they faced the spectre of a working-class revolution. Yet, they could not crush the Casa at this early point in the revolutionary process without seriously damaging a unity needed while the Villistas and Zapatistas remained a force to be reckoned with.

The government responded to mounting working-class violence, sabotage, arson, and even rioting with fines for businessmen who overcharged in violation of profit guidelines. The governors of Veracruz and Puebla, confronted with hunger and food riots, resorted to the distribution of food and clothing, and to price controls. The urban and industrial workers in the provinces, organized by the Casa committees that followed in the wake of the constitutionalist armies, flocked into syndicates. During the first six months of 1915, dozens of new syndicates and tens of thousands of new members swelled the Casa's ranks. Thousands of workers in the American-owned mines joined the syndicates. Most of the newcomers had little ideological understanding. The membership of the Casa was enrolled in an anarchist regional organization and the Casa itself had links with the international revolutionary syndicalist movement.

Syndicate leaders and members were susceptible to appeals for cooperation with the 'revolutionary government'. 'Bread-and-butter' concessions obtained by non-syndicalist leaders attracted them. Despite the eroded purity of anarchosyndicalist ideology, the great bulk of the organized workers in the centre of the nation and the Gulf Coast had the most radical leadership imaginable in Latin America at the time. That radicalism propelled them into a fatal conflict with the government.

soned that their participation ushered in a new era of syndicate organizing and working-class power. They provided the constitutionalists with the personnel needed to man the newly acquired American weapons. The anarchosyndicalists intended to organize the working class and then to confront the divided constitutionalist movement, with its mutually antagonistic Obregonista radical *pequena burguesia* and the conservative Carrancistas. In that confrontation the Casa leaders counted on 'Jacobin' support including that of Obregon Salido.

The Casa delegates, representing 50 000 workers, recognised their importance to the constitutionalist movement and felt in control of the situation. An *agrarista* minority of the Casa directors dissented, but with minimal impact because the leadership clearly expressed its intent to initiate agrarian reform and incorporate the militant peasantry into its ranks after victory. During the Winter of 1915, about 9000 workers departed for the constitutionalist military training centre in Orizaba. Military commanders organized them into six 'Red Battalions'. The nationwide total of industrial labour militiamen that participated in the Revolution totalled at least 15 000. These forces included metropolitan and provincial Casa members, and independent units such as the miners' militias from Coahuila and Sonora, which joined the constitutionalist movement in the beginning, and industrial workers from Monterrey, Tampico, Guadalajara and Veracruz. The number does not include those workers at Cananea who supported Villa. The urban and industrial labour forces constituted a massive augmentation of the constitutionalist armies.

In the late Spring of 1915, the Casa directorate created a *Comite de Propaganda* numbering about 80 members divided into fourteen subcommittees to organize workers in the wake of the constitutionalist armies. After the defeat of the *Division del Norte* the constitutionalist unity of upper-class elements, *pequena burguesia* and industrial workers' groups unravelled. Casa anarchosyndicalism, workers' militias and strikes, provoked the concern of industrial-

steady stream of propaganda designed to help the growth of a nationwide anarchosyndicalist workers' movement.

In 1912 Juan Francisco Moncaleano, an anarchist fugitive professor from Colombia, formed an underground group known as *Luz* (Light) committed to the creation of an anarchosyndicalist labour front along the lines of the Spanish *Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo*. *Luz* aimed for the inclusion of the entire Mexican working class including the peasantry. The Madero government deported Moncaleano for 'subversive activity', but *Luz* plunged ahead, creating the *Casa del Obrero* in September 1912 as a workers' council. The Casa published a newspaper, recruited thousands, and in January 1913 won a series of victories in 'direct action' strikes and sit-ins in the Mexico City area. The crowds outside the establishments reached 2000, stoned windows and seized buildings. *Luz* changed its name to *Lucha* (Struggle).

The Madero government attempted cooptation through a trade union, *La Gran Liga Obrera*, but Casa interlopers took over the Liga and declared the group disbanded. The use of force was the government's alternative. A series of street battles ensued, fought between Casa militants and police in front of strike-closed establishments. The Casa emerged from these battles with the *cosacos* (Cossacks) with a heroic image among the working class. Among the Mexico City workers the Casa's struggle became their own.

In February 1913 General Victoriano Huerta overthrew Madero and established a new dictatorship. He ruled until the Summer of 1914. At first the syndicalists made important advances. The Casa benefited from the government's policy of seeking political stability by tolerating working-class organizations in industrial areas while fighting insurgency in the countryside. The syndicates quickly built up large memberships. In March and April 1913 *Lucha* coordinated strikes and organized the restaurant workers, retail clerks and weavers in central Mexico. On 1 May the Casa held the largest May Day rally Mexico City had seen. Because *Lucha* believed strongly in a worldwide workers' revolution, it added the

word *Mundial* (World) to the Casa's name. But the Casa's growing size and militancy led to suppression.

On 25 May Lucha confronted the government by joining in a public demonstration of 8000, including speeches denouncing 'military dictatorship'. Two days later Huerta rounded up a dozen Lucha leaders and deported three. The arrests disrupted Lucha until the late Summer when Amadeo Ferres led the typesetters and printers of the *Artes Graficas* into the Casa. They brought their own newspaper and considerable cash, giving syndicalism new life. The Casa leadership, working underground, constructed a national framework that could be fleshed out when the opportunity arose. That chance came a year later.

The Casa leaders began a propaganda campaign. Radical newspapers and street orators known as the *Tribuna Roja* (Red Tribunes) urged crowds to join the syndicates. During the rest of 1913 increasingly larger crowds, numbering into the thousands, attended the meetings and thousands of workers joined the Casa. The Red Tribunes propagandized for anarchosyndicalism and against the state and capitalism. Finally, with the *Tribuna Roja* talking revolution and the city filled with tension, the government raided Casa headquarters and arrested between fifteen and twenty militants, set the ransacked building on fire, and deported several leaders. A few of the most radical fled the city and joined peasant revolutionary Emiliano Zapata.

The Casa, as Mexico's workers' council, was disorganized when the Constitutionalist forces led by General Alvaro Obregon Salido occupied Mexico City on 20 August 1914. Obregon Salido recognized the importance of syndicalist support for the struggle against the rural Villistas and Zapatistas. In his speeches he addressed 'proletarian Mexico', a Mexico for the workers, and a revolution that would 'harness the capitalists'. With no strings attached, the Casa received meeting places and the authority to organize workers in those territories where the Obregon Salido forces were in charge. The organizing effort was intense, anticapitalist in its rhetoric, and

successful. The Casa found recruitment an easy task when accompanied by government tolerance, but its leadership remained vociferous in its opposition to official ties to the Constitutionlists.

During the fall of 1914 the Casa reorganized based on self-governing syndicates, with the locals connected to the national group by unpaid secretaries who sat on 23 committees which handled armed defence, education, health care, strikes, organizing, international affairs, relations with an international anarchosyndicalist organization headquartered in Amsterdam, and general policy. A typical Casa member affiliated with three organizations: the syndicate, the municipal Casa, and the national Casa. Membership also involved health care, education and workers' militia activities. The militias were more advanced in Morelia and Monterrey than Mexico City, probably because of the earlier breakdown of government controls in the north. The Casa created armouries wherever it could marshal the resources.

Obregon Salido gave the Casa food, clothing, buildings, all the help he could, and asked for nothing in return. He spoke of the peasant leaders as the 'reaction' and alleged that they represented the interests of the church and oligarchy. Nothing could have been further from the truth, but to many of the workers of Mexico City the Zapatistas and Villistas seemed regressive. Hostility toward possible rural political hegemony was not new to Mexico City's working classes. The capitaline workers had rejected the rural forces of Hidalgo and Allende during the Independence Revolution a century earlier.

In February 1915 a Casa delegation travelled to Veracruz, met with Carranza and Obregon Salido representatives, and committed organized labour to the constitutionalist military effort. The Casa leadership had no illusions about the 'bourgeois alliances' of President Venustiano Carranza, but reasoned that the constitutionalist movement, which had received Veracruz from the American government and masses of armaments through that port and Tampico as well as Pacific ports, was a likely winner. The Casa leaders rea-