

“Without Any More Law Than Their Own Caprice”: Cotton Textile Workers and the Challenge to Factory Authority During the Mexican Revolution*

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SUMMARY: Much current literature argues that the Mexican revolution was not a revolution at all, but rather a series of rebellions that did not fundamentally alter the social order. Similarly, many scholars assert the changes in the Mexican work world during the Mexican revolution were the result of a paternalistic state rather than the product of the actions of workers. This article examines cotton textile workers' relationship to authority in the workplace during the most violent phase of Mexico's revolution, 1910–1921. The results suggest that revolution indeed gripped the country, one that energized the country's still emerging factory proletariat. There is compelling evidence that millhands throughout Mexico continuously and successfully challenged the authority of owners and supervisors, fundamentally altering the social relations of work. It is this “hidden” revolution in the factories that explains changes in labor law, labor organization, and worker power in the immediate post-revolutionary period. The effectiveness of the workers' challenge to authority is what explains: 1) the new regime's need to unionize; 2) the development of pro-labor labor law after the revolution; 3) the power of unions after 1920. In short, workers' challenge to authority during the revolution is what explains the labor outcome of the revolution afterwards.

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago David LaFrance noted that “one of the most important, if not the predominant, themes running through the historical literature that examines the development of the Mexican labour movement following the revolution of 1910 is the relationship between labour and government. The focus of these studies has been the means by which government came to control the workers – repression, cooptation, favourable legislation, etc. – and the consequences.”¹ The decade since LaFrance's article has not significantly changed the literature. Despite the emergence of the new

* The support of the Social Science Research Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities is gratefully acknowledged. Wherever possible, the spelling in Spanish reflects the original documents, leading to some inconsistencies with standard Spanish.

¹ David G. LaFrance, “Labour and the Mexican Revolution: Presidente Francisco I. Madero and the Puebla Textile Workers”, *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* (June 1983), p. 59.

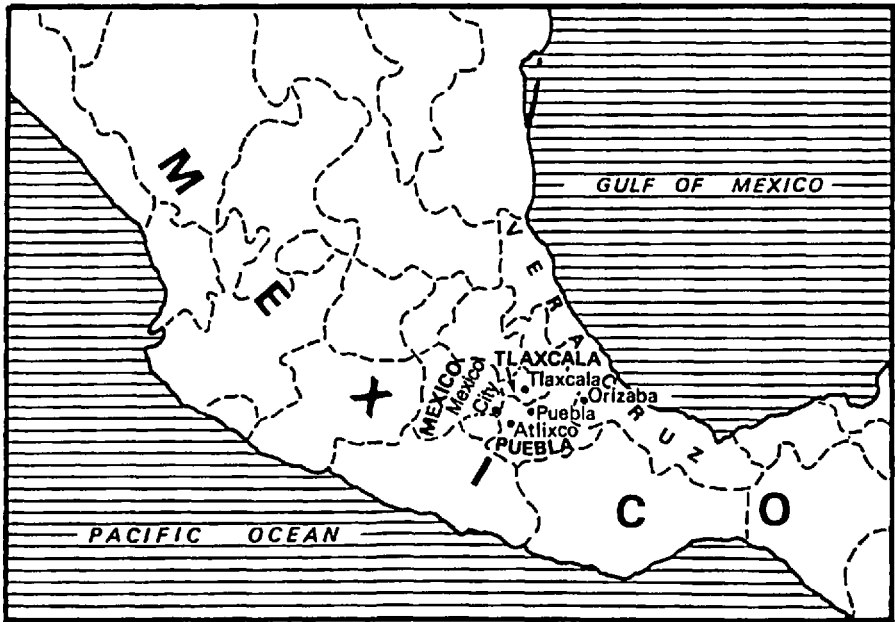


Figure 1. Mexico, showing main towns and regions

social history, it remains the case that Mexican labor studies have examined unions more than workers, leaders more than rank and file, official relationships more than workplace behaviors.²

While we have come to know a lot about the formation of union federations after the revolution, there is a problem with the historiography of Mexican workers. It is generally accepted that the Mexican revolution brought great and progressive changes in Mexico's formal work world, ranging from Article 123 of the 1917 Constitution to the dramatic growth of unionization between 1910 and 1920. How these changes came about, however, is either ignored or explained in terms of a paternalistic state. Since some historians have concluded that the state crushed independent labor organizations after 1916 and that workers were not a major factor in the revolution, then it follows that workers' gains were handed down from above. Yet the question remains, how did laborers receive so much

² Important examples include Marjorie Ruth Clark, *Organized Labor in Mexico* (Chapel Hill, 1934); Joe C. Ashby, *Organized Labor and the Mexican Revolution Under Lázaro Cárdenas* (Chapel Hill, 1967); Ramon Ruiz, *Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries, Mexico, 1911–1923* (Baltimore, 1976); and Kevin J. Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution* (Baltimore, 1995). Each of these books – pathbreaking when they were published – focuses on unions and their relationship to the state. John M. Hart, *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class, 1860–1931* (Austin, 1987) is less about unions, more about radical leaders. The series edited by Pablo González Casanova, *La Clase Obrera en la Historia de México* (Mexico, various years) is organized by presidential sexenios.

from the revolution – strong unions, written contracts, benefits and minimum wages – if they themselves did so little to earn it?

The problem with Mexican labor history parallels a debate within the historiography of the Mexican revolution. On 2 February 1915 famed revolutionary Dr Atl told the public at the Teatro Arbu in Mexico City that “Our Revolution is a social revolution, the greatest social revolution of our times”.³ When Frank Tannenbaum divided more than four hundred years of Mexican history into five periods, he did not hesitate to reserve the last for “the agrarian revolution from 1910 to the present”.⁴ Contemporaries like Atl and Tannenbaum had few doubts about the depth of Mexico’s great upheaval from 1910 to 1920. Afterwards most historians of contemporary Mexico assumed revolution.

During the last two decades, however, several revisionist schools have challenged the older viewpoint. According to Katz, “As more and more regional studies emerge, it is becoming increasingly clear that what is known as the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20 never was the general uprising and revolt it has so frequently been made out to be, most notably by Frank Tannenbaum in his remarkable book, *The Mexican Agrarian Revolution*. Not one but, at least, four distinct revolutions took place during that period. Although their primary centers were in the state of Morelos and the northern states of Coahuila, Sonora, and Chihuahua, they had secondary ramifications in a series of other states.”⁵

Some recent scholars have gone further and concluded that it was no revolution at all, merely an extremely violent skirmish that did little to alter the country in fundamental ways. While few doubt the generalized violence from 1910 to 1920, some have concluded that Mexico never experienced true social revolution. There are a number of arguments: Mexico had a bourgeois regime before the revolution, it had a bourgeois regime after the revolution; land reform did not fundamentally change social relations in the countryside; oil expropriation transferred resources from foreign firms to a state-owned enterprise without leading to democracy, let alone socialism. Many scholars downgraded the status of Mexico’s upheaval from revolution to rebellion. “Still the rebellion, which at some junctures had seemed an out-of-control nightmare, never exploded into a full-scale revolutionary upheaval. Despite its radical rhetoric, which often verged on socialism, the rebellion stayed within the bounds of a capitalistic framework, the traditional formula of the day.”⁶

John Womack concluded “For all the violence this is the main historical meaning of the Mexican Revolution: capitalist tenacity in the economy

³ Dr Atl, “La Importancia Mundial de la Revolución Mexicana,” Confederación Revolucionaria, Conferencias Públicas, Teatro Arbu, 2 February 1915.

⁴ Frank Tannenbaum, *The Mexican Agrarian Revolution* (New York, 1929), p. 2.

⁵ Friedrich Katz, “Villa: Reform Governor of Chihuahua”, in George Wolfskill and Douglas W. Richmond, *Essays on the Mexican Revolution* (Austin, 1979), p. 27.

⁶ Ramon Ruiz, *The Great Rebellion, Mexico 1905–1924* (New York, 1980), p. 409.

and the bourgeois reform of the state [. . .]"⁷ In the countryside, instead of revolutionary transformations, historians found "the armed band and its caudillo".⁸ Part of the problem has been the alleged lack of a revolutionary proletariat to lead the overthrow of the regime, such as occurred in the contemporaneous Russian revolution. John Hart's comprehensive study of Mexican anarchism clearly shows that socialism and communism never developed a mass following during the revolution. Anarchism was the leading radical ideology among the workers and even that, according to Hart, declined seriously after 1916.⁹

Curiously, industrial workers were one group for whom the revolution immediately and drastically improved their lives. In 1910 unions were mostly not legal, often persecuted, and generally disdained by authority. Factories hired and fired at will, without the constraints of labor law and labor contracts. In 1920, and certainly by 1927, unions were not only legal but often mandated, labor contracts had become the norm in the most important industries, and union leaders had become powerful figures in local communities. By 1927, unions hired (and fired), enforced written contracts, and played a critical role in establishing and enforcing work rules.

This change is difficult to understand in light of the conclusions on Mexico's missing social revolution. How did industrial workers make such impressive institutional gains if there were so few of them, so weakly organized, without the support of a surrounding social revolution? The historian is left with the problem of dramatic victories for workers who did not participate in a revolution, in a country in which there was no revolution at all.

If the legal situation of industrial workers improved, somebody must have wanted it to get better. There is a literature that credits the state with this desire. Some historians argue that the new state created labor organizations in order to strengthen itself and its legitimacy. As early as 1934, Marjorie Ruth Clark attributed explosive union membership to the post-revolutionary state. "Blessed with government benevolence, membership in the union [CROM] rose steadily from fifty thousand in 1920 to an estimated 1.2 million in 1924."¹⁰ Mexico's most important labor organization in the 1920s, the CROM "became more and more an apparatus of state control rather than a labor organization, strictly speaking".¹¹ Sixty

⁷ John Womack, "The Mexican Revolution, 1910–1920", in Leslie Bethell (ed.), *Mexico Since Independence* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 129.

⁸ D.A. Brading, "National Politics and the Populist Tradition", in D.A. Brading (ed.), *Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 1.

⁹ Hart, *Anarchism*.

¹⁰ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History* (New York, 1991), p. 575.

¹¹ Jaime Tamayo, *La clase obrera en la historia de Mexico* (Mexico, 1987), p. 290.

years after Clark, Kevin Middlebrook spoke of “the emergence of a state-subsidized labor movement in the 1920s and 1930s”.¹²

The explanation is not without its problems. Why would an admittedly bourgeois state strengthen the proletariat, its potential enemy? Why did the new political class perceive industrial workers – a numerically insignificant group – as important? If Alan Knight is correct and the revolution not only strengthened the underclass but armed it, wouldn't labor organizations (and presumably armed workers) represent a threat to the new order? If the *campesinado* was armed, weren't the workers? If workers were downtrodden during the Porfiriato, why would they not rebel when the *campesinado* did? If the government collapsed after 1910, what maintained discipline in the factory? In short, how did industrial workers go from a position of weakness in 1910 to a position of strength in 1921 if the factory was quiet and the workers quiescent? Why would Womack's bourgeois state want to arm and strengthen its potential enemy?

It is not clear that the traditional labor histories have answered these questions. Most Mexican labor studies have focused on the state, union federations or anarchist groups rather than the activities of workers themselves. Of these, the state has garnered the most attention. From González Casanova's influential *La Historia de la Clase Obrera*, which organizes Mexican labor history according to presidential sexenios, to Middlebrook's *The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State, and Authoritarianism in Mexico*, which tries to explain not the labor but rather the political regime, the state is seen as the principal cause of change in labor affairs in Mexican history.¹³ That these studies and the much larger literature they represent have come to the conclusion that the state and not the workers created the Mexican labor regime is not surprising. In Mexico, if you look for the state, you will find it. Salvador Novo, who lived through the country's revolution and reconstruction, commented that “In Mexico everything happens according to the spasmodic ejaculations of its politics.”¹⁴

Without doubt, Mexicans fought their revolution over control of the state. Madero led a rebellion to remove the head of state, only to be assassinated by another who aspired to the presidency. The revolution appeared to be over in 1913 when José Fernández Rojas wrote *La Revolución Mexicana de Porfirio Díaz a Victoriano Huerta 1910–1913*, in which he celebrated the end of two Mexican revolutions, one that ended the tyranny of Porfirio Díaz, the other, the tyranny of Francisco Madero.¹⁵ For him, the Mexican revolutions were about the state. Not everybody accepted

¹² Middlebrook, *The Paradox*, p. 5.

¹³ González Casanova, *La Clase Obrera*; Middlebrook, *The Paradox*.

¹⁴ Salvador Novo, *The War of the Fatties and Other Stories from Aztec History* (Austin, 1994), p. xl.

¹⁵ José Fernández Rojas, *La Revolución Mexicana de Porfirio Díaz a Victoriano Huerta 1910–1913* (Mexico, 1913).

Huerta's grab at state power, and when Venustiano Carranza succeeded in defeating Huerta and making himself president, Manuel Aguirre Berlanga wrote *Revolución y Reforma, Génesis legal de la Revolución Constitucionalista*, in which the Mexican revolution was still about the state, except that now the hero was Carranza rather than Huerta and the revolution was finally over because a good man held state power.¹⁶ It wasn't over, of course, and the head of Carranza's army, Alvaro Obregon, assassinated Carranza in order to become president. Succeeded in the presidency by Plutarco Elias Calles, Obregon was assassinated while running for election, prompting Calles to found the precursor of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, which effectively solved the problem of Mexico's state. Within the Mexican revolution, it is not hard to find a history of the state.

The state made a difference. From Article 123 to the 1931 Federal Labor Law, the new state dramatically changed, indeed revolutionized the institutional framework for labor relations in Mexico. Workers won what they had not had: the right to organize, to strike, to a minimum wage, to labor contracts with detailed work rules that protected them from abuse, and to powerful organizations that controlled hiring and firing. This is a fact. The state changed labor relations. Nonetheless the question remains, why did this take place? State-oriented studies assume away the problem – labor relations changed because the state wanted them to change. Those who didn't or couldn't understand the state simply became the losers. According to González Casanova, the state “would impose a new class struggle, a new social constitution, that through political groupings, would demand new behavior [. . .]”.¹⁷

This leads us back to the dual problem of Mexico's industrial workers and Mexico's revolution. Much current literature would have us believe that a revolution took place in labor affairs without a revolution in the country and without the participation of workers themselves. It does so, however, without having studied the attitudes and behaviors of workers themselves. This article examines workers' relationship to authority in the workplace during the most violent phase of Mexico's revolution. Instead of looking at prominent radicals, labor unions and the state, it looks at individual and collective behaviors inside the factory. The Mexican revolution is not only a question of who ran the country but who ran the workplace.

The data from Mexican cotton textile factories suggest that revolution gripped the country, one that energized the country's still emerging industrial proletariat. It is this heretofore “hidden” revolution in the factories that explains changes in labor law, labor organization and worker power

¹⁶ Manuel Aguirre Berlanga, *Revolución y Reforma, Génesis legal de la Revolución Constitucionalista* (Mexico, 1918).

¹⁷ González Casanova, *La Clase Obrera*, Tomo 6; idem, *En el Primer Gobierno Constitucional (1917–1920)* (Mexico City, 1980), p. 12.

in the immediate post-revolutionary period. There is compelling evidence that the revolution: 1) emboldened the industrial working class; 2) radicalized workers; 3) strengthened the internal cohesion and solidarity of the class; and 4) contributed to building labor organizations. The revolution did this because of: 1) the breakdown of ruling class hegemony after Díaz fled the country; 2) a subsequent lack of effective repression, particularly between 1911 and 1916; and 3) an opening to workers' challenge to authority in the workplace through the early 1920s.

Despite the revolutionary attitudes and behaviors of Mexican industrial workers, their movement lacked the political organization that characterized later twentieth-century workers' revolutions. Instead of proclaiming a workers state, most laborers fought for: 1) better wages and working conditions; 2) more dignity in the workplace; and 3) the right to challenge authority in the factory. The ordinariness of this challenge has led many historians not to see revolution. However, the effectiveness of the workers' challenge to authority is what explains: 1) the new regime's need to unionize; 2) the development of pro-labor labor law after the revolution; 3) the power of workers after 1920. In short, workers' challenge to authority during the revolution is what explains the labor outcome of the revolution afterwards. In an act of revolutionary creation – since institutional memory was as short as the history of the industry itself – the workers' challenge from below led to a fundamental change in class relations in the workplace. The decade of violence from 1910 to 1920 emboldened Mexico's industrial working class, legitimated their questioning of workplace authority, and changed social relations inside the factory.¹⁸

In 1910 the most important factory industry in Mexico was cotton textiles. In this industry, archival sources suggest that workers revolutionized workplace social relations during the violent decade, 1910–1921. Far more than some literature would indicate, it now seems that changes in the formal rules and organizations that govern the workplace came about because of the revolutionary behavior of workers. In fact, there is some evidence that labor's challenge to authority combined with the breakdown of Porfirian hegemony to present an insurmountable challenge to Mexico's new political elites, a challenge the latter could solve only by making major concessions to workers themselves. If this is true, then a revision of the current historiography of Mexico's revolution is in order.

The conclusion must be that the legal Mexican work world improved because revolutionary workers demanded that it improve. They succeeded because a larger revolution broke the old hegemony. The larger revolution presented itself as a generalized challenge to authority in the countryside, in the city, in the state. Ultimately, the state was not only the armed men

¹⁸ Even though the revisionist school is influential, the consensus still defends Mexico's revolution. Knight's massive study represents this ambiguity, yet its very title – *The Mexican Revolution* – expresses its conclusion.

who took power at the top, but also the social relationships of work at the bottom. Only by understanding the attitudes and behaviors of workers and the change in workplace relationships can we comprehend the depth of Mexico's social revolution. Atl and Tannenbaum were not wrong.

Perhaps what led historians astray is that the theme had been difficult to study because the most important Mexican labor archives were mostly removed from scholars until Ruiz consulted the records of Madero's Labor Office. Since then, most analysts have continued to ignore workplace behaviors. Nonetheless, an examination of the records of the Labor Office, state governments, local archives in mill towns, and newspapers reveals a story different from the official one. In at least one industry, cotton textiles, a picture emerges of workers who challenged authority in the workplace as much as the *campesinado* challenged land tenure in the countryside. To understand this, one must use the documents to study workers rather than organizations.

THE COTTON TEXTILE INDUSTRY

In 1910 Mexico was a rural and agrarian world. What happened in the countryside influenced everybody. It was also a world ruled by cities and urban elites, some of whom understood that the country's future lay in its ability to modernize and industrialize. Although mining and oil generated more profits, the largest and most important factory industry in the country was the manufacture of cotton textiles (Table 1).

Lucas Alamán, Esteban de Antuñano, and Pedro Sáinz de Baranda founded the Mexican cotton textile industry in the 1830s with mills in Puebla, Orizaba and the Yucatan. The first two became some of the country's leading textiles centers, joined later by Mexico City and Atlixco, a booming mill town south of Puebla. Early factories imported textile machinery, a continuing characteristic of the industry. Of particular importance were English machines; future industrialists would also import English wage scales and work rules.

By 1900 the country's 141 cotton textile factories employed 30,000 workers. At the onset of revolution in 1910, these millhands represented the most important factory proletariat in Mexico. They operated the country's most modern, large-scale factory industry. Many worked and lived in industrial zones, magnifying their strength.¹⁹ Some of the establishments were large and modern, utilizing hydroelectric power and automatic looms, with more than 1,000 workers each. Atlixco and Orizaba were genuine mill towns in which a few large factories dominated local life. The plants often provided housing for the workers, creating

¹⁹ Although there were many scattered factories, Puebla/Tlaxcala, Mexico City and Veracruz (Orizaba) generated 71 per cent of national production.

Table 1. *The Cotton Textile Industry in Mexico, 1900–1925*

Year	Factories	Looms	Spindles	Workers
1900	141	18,553	600,707	28,192
1901	134	18,478	593,617	26,709
1902	125	29,271	632,601	n.d.
1903	120	20,506	641,060	27,706
1904	131	22,021	678,058	n.d.
1905	131	22,774	688,217	n.d.
1906	129	23,507	693,842	n.d.
1907	131	24,997	732,876	n.d.
1908	137	25,327	726,278	n.d.
1909	131	25,921	732,888	n.d.
1910	127	26,184	723,963	n.d.
1917	99	20,489	573,092	22,187
1918	104	25,017	689,173	27,680
1919	114	27,020	749,237	33,185
1920	120	27,301	753,837	37,936
1921	121	28,409	770,945	38,227
1922	120	27,819	758,624	39,677
1923	113	27,770	752,255	38,684
1924	109	26,536	721,580	37,080
1925	124	28,934	780,691	42,359

n.d. indicates no data available for those years.

Source: Mexico, Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía, e Informática, *Estadísticas Históricas de México* (Mexico City, 1994), pp. 616–617.

intensely working-class communities. In the large mills, the workforce was overwhelmingly male; women were relegated to lower-paying occupations, smaller factories, or associated industries such as cotton clothing.

Foreigners owned much of the industry. The French controlled some very large mills in Orizaba and Mexico City while Spaniards controlled many small and medium-sized mills in Puebla and Tlaxcala. Foreign technicians and managers, particularly Spaniards but also English and American, often ran the mills. Although the labor force was overwhelmingly Mexican, and even though many of the owners themselves were born in Mexico, there was a sense of foreignness to many of the enterprises.

Despite suffering serious economic dislocation during the revolution, the industry continued to operate. In 1910 there were 127 factories; in 1920 there were 120 establishments with almost 38,000 workers. By this time, the Mexican cotton textile industry had trained generations of workers, established authentic working-class communities, and created a genuine factory proletariat which had an understanding of itself as a factory proletariat. This was the core of working-class Mexico during the revolution.

LABOR CONFLICT IN THE MILLS DURING THE
PORFIRIATO

Under the long Porfirian dictatorship, the textile industry grew, in number of factories and workers as well as productivity and output. The mills became larger and more capital intensive, importing increasingly sophisticated machinery. In some enterprises, the structure of ownership changed from individual or family-owned businesses to joint stock companies. The modernization of Mexican mills modernized the work process, labor relations and labor conflict. Large size led to increasingly impersonal labor relations while the factories themselves created ever larger, urban, working-class communities around them. Millhands, more and more recruited from working class rather than rural backgrounds, organized unions, demanded rights, and entered into conflict with management.

In *Las Huelgas Textiles en el Porfiriato*, Moisés González Navarro narrated a long history of capital-labor strife in the mills.²⁰ The conflicts culminated in the Rio Blanco strike of 1906, followed by the famous massacre of January 1907. The Rio Blanco workers were crushed, suffering some 50 to 70 dead.²¹ Permanent labor organizations did not take root, workers did not win their rights and managers fired labor leaders at will. Subsequent studies confirm the basic picture of labor relations during the Porfiriato: industrial workers sometimes rebelled against owners and supervisors. However, they did not construct durable labor organizations, develop successful revolutionary parties, nor even make inroads in the legal system. In short, workers were weak.²²

Equally important, the daily challenges to authority in the factory were usually and regularly defeated. Although workers won some battles, they mostly lost because they lacked strength and organization, their methods and goals were often timid, and the owners could usually count on local and national authorities to repress the millhands if the demands seemed excessive. For example, in 1889 the owner of La Carolina, a large mill in Atlixco, reduced wages by a small amount. The workers elected a three-person commission to speak with the owner. When the committee failed to convince management, the workers struck for two weeks. The factory then brought in strike-breakers accompanied by a group of *rurales* for protection. When one of the strikers attacked a scab, he was sent to prison for almost a year. The other strikers had to emigrate from the region to find work. La Carolina restored order because it was able to fire the rebelli-

²⁰ Moisés González Navarro, *Las Huelgas Textiles en el Porfiriato* (Puebla, 1970).

²¹ Rodney Anderson, *Outcasts in Their Own Land, Mexican Industrial Workers, 1906-1911* (DeKalb, 1976), ch. 4.

²² Anderson, *Outcasts*; Hart, *Anarchism*.

ous workers, replace them with strike-breakers, and count on the government and the armed forces to maintain order.²³

During the great strike movement of 1906/1907, the same combination crushed the workers: dissidents lost their jobs, there were enough strike-breakers to replace the malcontents, and the *rurales* were there for the dirty work, which that year meant killing dozens at the Rio Blanco factory. By the end of 1909, textile workers did not enjoy the protection of written labor contracts, favorable labor laws, or strong national unions. Quite the contrary: their legal and political situation was almost as unfavorable as at the beginning of the Porfiriato.

This is not to say that the struggles of the period were in vain. It is clear from the events of 1910–1912 that millhands had learned the value of solidarity, of organizing and of winning strikes. They had obviously mastered some of the techniques of fighting management and maintaining organization. They did not know enough to challenge owners supported by a strong government, but perhaps their knowledge would be sufficient to contest the workplace if the owners had only a weak regime behind them.

IN THE BEGINNING, 1910–1912

The Mexican revolution began slowly and fooled many. It started with a political revolution led by Francisco Madero, a wealthy landowner from the north and a member of the “decent classes”. He did not challenge Porfirio Díaz, who had ruled since 1876, over questions of social justice or the nature of authority.²⁴ Madero wanted an opening of the political system for others like him, hardworking, prosperous, “decent folk”.²⁵ Nonetheless, by successfully questioning the authority of the state, Madero legitimated the quest of workers and peasants to question the authority of their own dictators, bosses and landowners. In the countryside and in the city, many Mexicans asked themselves new questions, then responded with innovative answers. This was not foreseen at the beginning, however.

Upon taking office, Madero in effect completed his revolution. The dictator was gone. The country had only to prepare for democratic elections. Mexico could now enjoy “sufragio efectivo, no reeleccion”. Unfortunately

²³ Unión de veteranos del trabajo, *Sucesos del Trabajo y sus Luchas de Antaño. Obra que narra los sufrimientos del trabajador desde 1800 a 1907* (Puebla, 1938), p. 111.

²⁴ For an excellent summary of the Díaz regime, see Friedrich Katz, “The Liberal Republic and the Porfiriato, 1867–1910”, in Leslie Bethell (ed.), *Mexico Since Independence* (Cambridge, 1991). For the situation of industrial workers, see Anderson, *Outcasts*.

²⁵ For Madero, “the aim was the realization of the great democratic ideal; and the means were free and fair elections, municipal freedom, and a respect for states rights”: Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution* (Lincoln, 1986), vol. 1, p. 58. The decent folk – “la gente decente” – was a popular term at the time, aptly expressing the divide between Mexico’s upper and lower classes.

for the new president, however, Porfirio Díaz had done more than run dishonest elections. He also provided a combination of repression and concessions that effectively pacified Mexico. He supported wealthy elites while isolating rebelliousness from below. Now, with the old general gone, the ability of a new, unsure president to repress or negotiate was greatly more limited. Madero lacked the skill, the connections, perhaps even the capacity. In any case, the collapse of the Díaz presidency was also the collapse of the country's reigning hegemony. Discontent from below and collapse from above is the classic formula for revolution, leading to a deepening of the challenge to authority by the subaltern classes.²⁶

Scholars from Tannenbaum to Knight have described the challenge from below in the countryside.²⁷ In the cotton textile mills, workers also sensed change and weakness above. They responded quickly. On 2 November 1911, the Mexican Congress declared Francisco I. Madero president-elect. Fresh from his quick and surprising triumph over Díaz, Madero took office on 6 November. Just six weeks later, what one newspaper called "the first labor action of great importance in the Republic" erupted.²⁸ On 21 December workers from fifteen Puebla textile factories walked out, initiating the revolution's first general strike.²⁹

In the next few weeks, the strike spread to other mills, other regions and other industries. It was a labor action with repercussions beyond the Puebla/Tlaxcala/Mexico City textile industry. From the perspective of the new government, it set a bad example for the working classes everywhere. In Puebla and other textile regions, even rural workers began to organize and strike. In late December, *El Imparcial* reported that "besides the strike in the factories, strikes have erupted in the haciendas, since it is confirmed that peons have abandoned the fields in the Valley of Nativitas, and it is known that tomorrow the peons on the haciendas of San Juan de los Llanos

²⁶ With regard to similar situations in France, Russia and China, Skocpol said "No longer reinforced by the prestige and coercive power of autocratic monarchy, the existing class relations became vulnerable to assaults from below. Social-revolutionary political crises emerged, as Lenin once so aptly put it, when it became 'impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule in an unchanged form'": Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 51.

²⁷ Tannenbaum, *The Mexican Agrarian Revolution*; Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*.

²⁸ *El Imparcial* (Mexico City), 21 January 1912, p. 1. Although contemporaries understood the importance of the strike, later historians ignored it. Ramírez Rancaño has the strike beginning in mid-January and circumscribed to Mexico City. Carr also starts the strike in mid-January without mentioning it was a textile movement. Hart completely ignores it. Mario Ramírez Rancaño, *burguesía textil y política en la revolución mexicana* (Mexico, 1987), pp. 39–42; Barry Carr, *el movimiento obrero y la política en México 1910–1929* (Mexico, 1991), p. 50; Hart, *Anarchism*, ch. 8.

²⁹ The factories were La Economía, Patriotismo, Molino de Enmedio, Amatlán, Mayorazgo, La Constancia, La Teja, Santo Domingo, Santa María, Santa Cruz, Independencia, Covadonga, El Valor, as well as Metepec and El León in Atlixco: *El Imparcial*, 22 December 1911, p. 1.

will join them".³⁰ On 12 January peons in Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco, threatened a strike.³¹ On 15 January 2,000 *jornaleros* from various ranches in Tlaxcala struck over wages and hours of work,³² and on 17 January *jornaleros* in Guanajuato walked off the job.³³ While factory and rural workers organized unions and carried out strikes, in Morelos, with one border on Puebla and another on Mexico City, *zapatistas* burned haciendas.³⁴ These were the multiple rebellions of Mexico's working classes, with a dangerous potential for linkage.

On 4 January the miners of Santa Eulalia, Chihuahua, walked out.³⁵ The *panaderos* of Chihuahua threatened to strike if the authorities did not stop prison laborers from producing competing products. Surrounded by conflict, the local government invited owners and workers to a meeting to implement rules on wages and hours of work.³⁶ Also on 4 January millhands at "La Experiencia" in Guadalajara walked out over wages and hours of work.³⁷ By mid-January, textile factories in Guanajuato, Hidalgo, Nayarit and Jalisco had joined the movement.³⁸ Two days later, a group of railroad workers struck, demanding the removal of their boss.³⁹ By early January 1912, Madero's government confronted armed revolution in the countryside, dangerous strikes in the cotton mills, and threatening workers in urban and rural industries.

Madero could not respond like Díaz; he lacked the experience, the networks, the power. In any case, it was not clear that striking workers would accept the kind of minor concessions Díaz would have offered, or that the new president had the influence to force millowners to provide concessions to workers. Furthermore, it would have been risky in the extreme to send in the troops; the army was already fighting *zapatistas* dangerously near the Puebla textile factories – later in the revolution, *zapatistas* would take control of Atlixco. To find a way out of this impasse, the government convoked a meeting of the textile owners on 20 January. That day the owners agreed to sign an accord that reduced the workday to ten hours while increasing wages by 10 per cent. Having won something, the strike leaders accepted a provisional return to work. Meanwhile, the owners established a commission to discuss wage uniformity and other industry issues.⁴⁰ In perhaps the most important settlement, everybody agreed that

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29 December 1911, p. 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 13 January 1912, p. 2.

³² *Ibid.*, 15 January 1912, p. 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 20 January 1912, p. 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13 January 1912, p. 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5 January 1912, p. 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 13 January 1912, p. 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5 January 1912, p. 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 16 January 1912, p. 6; 18 January 1912, p. 1; 20 January 1912, p. 5; 23 January 1912, p. 8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 18 January 1912, p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 21 January 1912, pp. 1, 10.

the 20 January accord was temporary until a permanent labor solution was found. However, a new political reality hung over the industry: without institutionalized unions or labor laws, textile workers had shut down the industry, resisted government pressure, and forced management into concessions. For textile workers, the Porfiriato was over, the revolution had begun.

The decisive resolution of 20 January was the decision to organize a convention of the industry to solve its labor problems once and for all. Antonio Ramos Pedrueza, Madero's appointment to the new Labor Office, took credit for the idea of a tripartite convention. He claimed to see "the necessity of procuring the greatest number of supporters for the work rules, and to get the largest number of factory owners to adopt and use the wage scale [. . .]".⁴¹ It took months of organizing – by workers and owners – to prepare for the meeting, but on 2 July 1912 Rafael Hernandez, Madero's Minister of Development, inaugurated the "Convención de Industriales" in Mexico City. It was a "memorable date in the annals of the Mexican industrial movement. For the first time the representatives of Capital and Labor have discussed all these points under the protection of a Ministry of State [. . .]".⁴²

On 17 July the Ministry of Development published the "Reglamento para las Fábricas de Hilados y Tejidos en la República".⁴³ Approved by the industrialists, the Comité Central de Obreros, and the President of the Republic, it was the first and shortest of the three labor contracts that would rule the industry until the 1940s. Its twenty articles already contained the kernel of what would eventually evolve into Mexico's future labor code.⁴⁴ Most important, it was a *de facto* industry-wide labor contract, the first of its kind in Mexico and a revolutionary breakthrough in Mexican labor relations. The industrialists then approved "la tarifa de hilados y tejidos", the new wage scale that guaranteed a minimum wage of not less than a peso a day.⁴⁵

The industry-wide labor contract came on the heels of the overthrow of Porfirio Díaz, tension between the old army and the new president, uprisings in the countryside, the inability of the military to crush the *zapatistas* quickly, a successful nationwide textile strike, provisional concessions to workers and a tripartite convention that forced millowners to talk with labor leaders. Mexico had changed indeed. Although some chose to ignore

⁴¹ Antonio Ramos Pedrueza, "A los obreros de las Fábricas de Hilados y Tejidos de la República", 4 August 1912, Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Departamento del Trabajo (DT), Caja 50, Expediente 25.

⁴² Ramos Pedrueza, "A los obreros", 4 August 1912, AGN, DT, Caja 50, Exp. 25.

⁴³ Contrato de Trabajo, AGN, DT, Caja 978, Exp. 3.

⁴⁴ The 1912 contract was replaced by the 1927 contract. After the approval of the latter, in 1928 the government convened a tripartite group to draft a national labor code, which became the 1931 *Ley Federal del Trabajo*.

⁴⁵ Sesión, 29 July 1912, AGN, DT, Caja 15, Exp. 18; and *El Imparcial*, 2 August 1912, p. 8.

the power of discontent from below, others saw what was happening. In 1913 José Fernández Rojas noted that “the government of Mr. Madero was characterized by constant agitation and by the complete lack of guarantees, which brought as a logical result a great depression in business and a complete economic unbalance [. . .]”.⁴⁶ The old ruling classes were threatened.

Even before the fall of Madero, textile owners recognized the threat to their domain. Two of them – the González Cosío brothers – identified the problem. For two years the country had suffered the warfare that brought down Díaz and the subsequent intransigence of some of the rebels, notably those led by Zapata. Armed men in the countryside now seemed to determine national politics. In this ambiance of revolution, class violence and generalized challenge to authority, millworkers had begun to fight for control of the factory, thus threatening the very authority that capitalists needed to run the production process. Writing about the laborers in their “El Pilar” factory in San Martín Texmelucan, Puebla, the brothers noted that the workers’ recent triumph – the 1911 strike and provisional settlement – so emboldened them that they no longer accepted counsel or punishment. They complained that when the factory tried to discipline millhands, even one who showed up drunk, his comrades supported him to the point of leaving the factory.⁴⁷

Fellow factory owner Alberto Sánchez Vallejo also believed that workers were an undisciplined lot. He claimed to observe similar problems in his “La Sonrisa” factory. Millhands, he wrote, neither worked hard nor obeyed. They had bad habits which, instead of correcting, they worsened by sticking together stubbornly to defend their vices. His list of complaints was long: the workers drank too much, they came to work inebriated (which made sense if they drank too much), they would sneak into the bathrooms to smoke cigarettes, chat with comrades, and take naps. They often showed up late at the factory doors and left their posts early. They didn’t clean or take care of the equipment; they even fell asleep on top of the machines. They wasted material. Whenever they felt like it, without any more restraint than a child, they threw a party – the infamous “fiestas” that made workers leave the factory despite being in the middle of an important task.⁴⁸ Summed up by Sánchez, “hacen todas cuantas fiestas se les ocurre [. . .]”.⁴⁹ Writing in 1912, Sánchez knew where these problems came from: “We understand that it is a consequence of their recent triumph [1911 strike and provisional settlement], but it is the case that they no longer accept either comment or punishment of any form [. . .]”.⁵⁰ The

⁴⁶ Fernández Rojas, *La Revolución Mexicana*, p. 216.

⁴⁷ Alberto Sánchez Vallejo to Presidente de la Oficina del Trabajo, 10 February 1912, AGN, DT, Caja 8, Exp. 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*: “Comprendemos que sea efecto del triunfo que acaban de tener, pero es el caso que ya no admiten ni observaciones ni castigos en ninguna forma [. . .]”

factory owned by José González Soto called them “these foolish workers [. . .]”.⁵¹

Although the complaints – foolish, undisciplined, drunken – were not new, the response was. During the Porfiriato, owners often griped about workers. Nonetheless, they had the ability to control them, to put them out of the factory, out of work if necessary. Now, after two years of revolution, Sánchez expressed the owners’ frustration about the “effect of the triumph” on his laborers. Revolution emboldened workers at the same time it undermined the ability of the owners – through the state – to repress them. This indiscipline was therefore different and more dangerous than its Porfirian counterpart. The millhands had won a general strike in 1911 and a contract in 1912. The new indiscipline represented not only labor’s protest but also its strength and its victories, victories born of revolution.

The absence of labor discipline bothered the manager of the large San Ildefonso plant near Mexico City. In June 1912 he wrote to the Labor Office to complain about the “fiestas”. He noted that most religious holidays had been suppressed for some time, with notable exceptions that included the feast of Corpus Christi. Recently, however, the Church itself had minimized the importance of this holiday. As a consequence, the factory notified the workers that 6 June would be a regular workday with no time off for the customary celebration. The manager received no complaints when the millhands showed up at the factory that morning. After lunch, however, half of them neither returned to their posts nor advised the supervisor; they went to the fiesta.

The manager fired those who left their jobs without warning or justification. He was, he insisted, a reasonable man who treated his workers well. Nevertheless, he knew that if you “pampered” them, “authority would lose its prestige and then the work would depend on the will of the millhands, who would enter and leave the factory on their own, without any more law than their own caprice”.⁵² Clearly this was no way to run a factory or a society. The caprice of workers could never replace the solid good sense of the owners.

For the owners, the collapse of presidential hegemony strengthened rebellious elements inside the factories: successful strikes, widespread unionization and worker solidarity were now protected by a written contract. Unions, according to the proprietors, supported bad habits. Try to discipline one worker, they said, and the unions facilitated solidarity and weakened discipline. Sánchez Vallejo noted that if the factory tried to fire malcontents, it was often difficult to replace them.⁵³ This was clearly a period in which the owners longed for the days of yore, when authority received respect.

⁵¹ José González Soto y Hno. to Director del DT, 10 August 1912, AGN, DT, Caja 7, Exp. 28: “estos insensatos obreros [. . .]”.

⁵² Gerente to Director, Departamento del Trabajo, 6 June 1912, AGN, DT, Caja 6, Exp. 1.

⁵³ Sánchez Vallejo to Presidente, 10 February 1912, AGN, DT, Caja 8, Exp. 4.

Lack of respect spewed forth after the 1911 strike. When the strike ended, the Santiago millhands insisted on reentering the factory with their *sombreros* and *zarapes*, something they had never done before. The administrator reminded them that this was not usual behavior and would not be tolerated. The workers did not hesitate in walking out again. In the El Leon mill, returning workers demanded the plant fire the twenty scabs who had worked during the strike. When the factory refused, they also walked out. In Orizaba, union leader Juan Palafox sent representatives to collect funds among the workers in the San Lorenzo plant. The administrator fired Palafox because plant rules prohibited collecting union dues. The San Lorenzo workers then walked out, forcing CIDOSA to close its plants in the region: San Lorenzo, Rio Blanco, Cocolapam and Cerritos. Although Labor Office chief Ramos Pedrueza ended the strike by traveling to Orizaba to negotiate a solution, the new walk-out demonstrated that the times had changed, that workers were using their new-felt power to demand and receive respect, dignity and authority in the workplace.⁵⁴

Some of the new power was a consequence of the presence of unions in the mills. The general strike and subsequent contract legitimized unions and collective bargaining. Indeed, a national textile contract to which the government was party made unions inevitable. Furthermore, by the end of 1912 radicals in Mexico City had organized the Casa del Obrero Mundial, a focal point for radicalizing workers. The millowners could no longer rule the factories as before and millhands knew this. The Labor Office also recognized the change and made the government part of a new labor process. By the end of 1912, workers used unions, Labor Office inspections, the national contract, and their own solidarity to deepen their challenge to authority in the workplace.

THE REVOLUTION ADVANCES, 1913–1917

In February 1913 Madero was assassinated in front of Lecumberri Prison, allowing General Victoriano Huerta to become president of a newly restored Porfirian government. To the south, Emiliano Zapata accepted Huerta with as little enthusiasm as he had Madero. To the north, the Porfirian governor of Coahuila, Venustiano Carranza, decried the illegality of the Huerta coup and organized resistance to the usurper. Revolutionary bands led by men such as Francisco Villa challenged the federal army, as did a new revolutionary army organized by Alvaro Obregon. When Huerta finally resigned the presidency in July 1914, it was thought that another Maderista government would assume office, particularly given the similarities between one wealthy northerner (Madero) and another (Carranza). Instead, the victorious revolutionaries fought among themselves. Only in 1916 did Carranza emerge triumphant; even then he had not fully defeated

⁵⁴ *El Imparcial*, 23 January 1912, p. 8 and 27 January 1912, p. 1.

Villa or Zapata. With the fighting unabated, in late 1916 and early 1917 the Carrancistas wrote a new Constitution. It would be their victory, their government, and now their law. The Constitution included Article 123, one of the most progressive labor codes in the world.

From the victory of Huerta in February 1913 to the passage of the Constitution in February 1917, the country was aflame in revolution. During these years, the workers' challenge to authority did not recede. To the contrary, as ruling class hegemony waned, workers became bolder, sometimes instigated or protected by revolutionary bands, wily politicians and new laws. Furthermore, their conquests under Madero – widespread unionization, a labor contract, the Labor Office – continued to prosper, protecting rebellious workers. Meanwhile, clever revolutionary leaders saw the wisdom in creating new hegemonies in regions under their control.

On 19 October 1914, Candido Aguilar, governor and military commander in Veracruz, issued Decree Number 11. It reduced the workday to nine hours, established overtime pay of 100 per cent for night work, made rest obligatory on Sundays and national holidays, forced owners to provide medical assistance and pay to injured workers, made rural mills responsible for maintaining primary schools for the children of mill families, determined that education in such schools would be non-religious, allowed the "juntas de administracion civil" or civil authorities to arbitrate conflicts between workers and owners, and prohibited the infamous "tiendas de raya".⁵⁵ Not incidentally, the mill town of Orizaba was located in Veracruz. If the revolution did not bring a soviet to power in Orizaba, it did bring workers' power to the fore. In a state filled with violence and contending armies, the revolution brought new men to power, men who owed their position to the revolution. Aguilar was one of them and he dramatically changed the legal parameters of the work world in his state. He did this because if he couldn't pacify Orizaba, he couldn't control his state.

Almost immediately, workers sought to implement Aguilar's decree, the state government to enforce it and owners to obstruct it.⁵⁶ In December 1914, the millhands of the large Cerritos mill wrote to Marcos López Jiménez, the new head of the Labor Office, complaining that the factory was not carrying out the terms of the 1912 contract.⁵⁷ López Jiménez traveled to the mill town to investigate. He asked the workers in each department whether they had a union representative. When they responded that they did not, he then proceeded to help them elect union officers, tantamount to helping them organize a union.⁵⁸ The very next month the newly elected union officers, led by José Natividad Díaz, demanded that

⁵⁵ Candido Aguilar, Número 11, 19 October 1914, AGN, DT, Caja 88, Exp. 19.

⁵⁶ See, for example, the complaint in Viuda de Mier to Director del Departamento del Trabajo, 18 November 1914, AGN, DT, Caja 88, Exp. 20.

⁵⁷ José Natividad Díaz *et al.*, 11 January 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 104, Exp. 10.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

the company reduce work hours (to nine), increase pay (by 20 per cent), and officially recognize the union. The union based its petition on the provisional decree of 19 October. The company found itself in an awkward position. It did not reject the workers' petition outright, instead making their demands conditional upon all other factories doing the same. It did, however, grant a temporary raise of 10 per cent.⁵⁹ Under Porfirio Díaz, Mexico City often negotiated with workers, then sometimes repressed them, always successfully. Now that there was revolution, weakened central governments, including a Carranza operating from Veracruz, negotiated with workers and even organized them. The workers used the new organization to make demands on the owners. The latter were reluctant to resist because the threat of state repression was severely weakened. Now the workers had won, though not everything they wanted.

By 1914/1915 workers in some factories felt emboldened enough to strike without the earlier fears of being fired.⁶⁰ This was particularly true in Veracruz, where millhands and their families witnessed the arrival of Carranza's revolutionary government fleeing from Mexico City. They knew that a weakened revolutionary president would not, indeed could not, repress them. In fact, the state's revolutionary government needed all the allies it could find, including millworkers. As fighting armies roamed throughout the countryside, textile workers witnessed the decline of central authority and the consequent strengthening of their own position. The revolution did not arrive as a distant theoretical abstraction. For textile workers, the revolution was a fleeing president and cabinet, the savagery of rival armies, the millowners' inability to call in the forces of repression and, most importantly, the work of labor agitators, radicals, militants, propagandists, articulate ideologues and other undesirables who flourish in revolutionary environments. Not the least of these were the members of the Casa del Obrero Mundial.⁶¹ In early 1915, Casa leader Dr Atl and his comrades traveled to Orizaba to gain support for their movement. They organized meetings inside the factories, often stopping work in order to lecture and educate the millhands. Although their overt purpose was to organize the red battalions to fight for Carranza against Zapata, they also spread anarchist propaganda that criticized the state, attacked the established order and denounced the legal system. Their enemies claimed that they told the workers that the Labor Office was useless, that the 1912

⁵⁹ José Natividad Díaz and Luis Viveros to Gerente de la Compañía Industrial de Orizaba S.A., 8 February 1915; Gerente to Sindicato, 8 February 1915; José Natividad Díaz and Luis Viveros to Marcos López Jiménez, 12 February 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 98, Exp. 2.

⁶⁰ In December 1914, Cocolapam workers struck, brought in government inspectors to arbitrate, then returned to work without anybody losing their job. Daniel Galindo to Director, Departamento del Trabajo, 21 December 1914, AGN, DT, Caja 91, Exp. 19.

⁶¹ Hart worked with Casa publications and autobiographies to write a fine study of the organization, its strengths and weaknesses.

textile contract would not help them and that for workers to achieve their aims, “they would have to achieve them by bullets and not by laws”.⁶²

Although the Casa attracted the attention of many historians, it remains an open question the degree to which the institution exemplified the sentiments of ordinary workers. Despite its support of the conservative Carranza, the organization represented a left-wing alternative within a nascent labor movement that also included some tendencies further to the right. When Atl traveled to Orizaba, he found one local labor committee that opposed socialism and anarchism. The committee, headed by Enrique Hinojosa, expressed fears that Casa propaganda would undermine labor discipline. It nonetheless spoke of “a working class that has for a long time been abused and denigrated by the exploiters and the bad governments”.⁶³ The left and the right of the labor movement thus agreed that workers constituted a class, one that was abused and denigrated by another class, the owners/exploiters and their governments. There is little doubt, therefore, that that is how many ordinary millhands viewed their world. Even the Labor Office used the phrase “the servitude of the Mexicans” to describe the condition of Orizaba workers.⁶⁴

Factory owners, however, did not share the view of exploited workers. They defended their right to control the work process and sought to undermine worker organization. By 1915, the Orizaba mills – Cerritos, San Lorenzo, Cocolapam, Nogales, Santa Rosa, Rio Blanco – had instituted a blacklist of agitators and other undesirables. Factory managers blacklisted workers who: 1) became union leaders; 2) signed labor petitions; 3) demanded justice; 4) did not arrive to work early; 5) stayed too long in the bathroom; or 6) were simply suspected of standing idly in front of the machines. The factory administrators circulated the list among themselves. Once a millhand appeared on the list, he couldn’t work in any of the factories.⁶⁵ Blacklisted workers answered by applying for jobs under false names. If discovered, they were immediately fired.⁶⁶ It is interesting to note that the owners’ list did not distinguish between politics and work habits, correctly noting their relationship. The challenge to authority in the workplace was also the challenge to the authority of the ruling class’s right to rule.

The workers, meanwhile, continued to challenged authority. On 6 February 1915, the millhands in Nogales’ Mirafuentes factory simply didn’t show up to work. They did not tell the factory administrator nor give any

⁶² “hay que conseguirlo a tiros y no por medio de leyes”: Enrique H. Hinojosa *et al.* 15 March 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 104, Exp. 11.

⁶³ “la masa de obreros que por mucho tiempo han sido vejados y vilependiados por los explotadores y por los malos gobiernos”: Hinojosa, 15 March 1915.

⁶⁴ “la condición de servidumbre para los mexicanos”: Memorandum, “En el orden en que [. . .]”, n.d, AGN, DT, Caja 104, Exp. 11.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

warning. They just didn't go to work. When management asked the union why the workers stayed out, it responded that since the San Lorenzo workers didn't work that day, they wouldn't either. It added that millhands didn't want to clean their machinery at the going rate; they preferred to leave the machines dirty rather than clean them for the low pay management was offering. The Mirafuentes workers combined solidarity (uniting with the San Lorenzo millhands), challenge to authority (refusing to clean the machines), and self-regard (walking out without warning).⁶⁷

On 8 February, José Natividad Díaz sent a letter to CIDOSA demanding a reduction of the workday to nine hours, 20 per cent and 30 per cent pay rises, and official recognition of his union. He argued that his petition was just, based on Aguilar's Decree Number 11, Article 1.⁶⁸ The company neither accepted nor opposed the petition. Instead, it answered that Cerritos would cut the workday and raise wages if Puebla and Mexico City factories followed suit. Meanwhile, it agreed to an immediate though provisional 10 per cent pay raise.⁶⁹ The union refused to back off and ordered a slowdown in the factory, which led to immediate conflict inside the mill.⁷⁰ For both sides, the change in state power determined their positions, the workers using the governor's pro-labor decree, the owners hiding behind the federal government's national labor contract.

The unions now stood tough because the revolution weakened national authority while bringing new governors to power, some of whom were unwilling to crush labor organizations. A second conflict at Mirafuentes illustrated the nature of the problem. On 22 April Manuel Sánchez Martínez, the new union head, took advantage of Decree Number 11 to lead a commission to see the Nogales Municipal President. The members complained about "*maltrato*" on the part of department heads.⁷¹ The municipal president then sent a letter to Joseph Taylor, who ran the factory, asking him to get the department heads to improve their behavior.⁷² Taylor denied the workers' accusations, substituting his own charges that the millhands were no longer willing to "conform to [...] established customs" and that they now refused to clean the machines twice a week.⁷³

An angry letter followed in which the workers reiterated their earlier complaints, focusing on "el maestro Pascual Pérez", whom they accused of being "an inept despot and abandoned of his obligations [...] if we

⁶⁷ Norcross and Taylor to López Jiménez, 7 February 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 97, Exp. 13.

⁶⁸ José Natividad Díaz and Luis Viveros to Gerente de la Compañía Industrial de Orizaba, 8 February 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 98, Exp. 2.

⁶⁹ Gerente to Sindicato, 8 February 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 98, Exp. 2.

⁷⁰ José Natividad Díaz and Luis Viveros to Administrador de la fábrica Cerritos, 12 February 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 98, Exp. 2; Norberto Castillo to Marcos López Jiménez, 12 February 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 98, Exp. 1.

⁷¹ Federico Hernández to José Taylor, 22 April 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 97, Exp. 14.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ "conformarse con [...] las costumbres establecidas": Joseph Taylor to Marcos López Jiménez, 23 April 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 97, Exp. 14.

insist with him, he says that if one goes along, fine, if not, the street is wide [. . .].”⁷⁴ Some days later the conflict escalated when there was either a lock-out or a work stoppage in the Department of Weaving. A federal labor inspector, Manuel Díaz, intervened with the Presidente de la Junta Civil, where he was joined in a meeting by the president and vice-president of the Mirafuentes union and by Taylor and Pérez. During the encounter, Sánchez Martínez repeated the accusations against Pérez and insisted that the factory fire him. Díaz sided with the union, forcing Taylor to fire Pérez. Taylor then agreed to allow the strikers back to work, excepting Sánchez Martínez, whom he fired on the spot because “this one for no reason will return because he is constantly making accusations and refutations without any basis [. . .].”⁷⁵ The firing was in vain, however, as Díaz used his authority to protect Sánchez Martínez’s position in the factory.⁷⁶

Taylor was furious. He fired off a letter to the Labor Office in which he denied the workers’ accusations. He exclaimed that “to give in to the desires of the workers to fire directors [department heads] is to invite disorder and disaster, because without discipline and supporting them outside of any logic or proof, would make it impossible for us to work”.⁷⁷ Taylor demanded respect for the authority of bosses. Nonetheless, Pérez lost his job, Sánchez Martínez kept his, and the factory and the union signed an agreement which left the millhands with a new maestro with whom they were “muy contentos”.⁷⁸ For these workers, the revolution meant that the factory could not fire them at will, could not bring the army in to repress them, and could not keep bosses they didn’t like. The workers may not have invited “disorder and disaster”, but whatever control they gained over the workplace was at the expense of management, which management understood.

For the next two years, labor conflict in the factories continued unabated. Revolutionary military commanders issued more labor decrees – virtual state labor laws – that conceded benefits to workers while restraining the threat to management. In early January 1916 General Salvador Alvarado, military commander and governor of the Yucatan, issued a decree with the preamble that “nobody has a right to extra while those

⁷⁴ “un hombre despota inepto y abandonado de sus obligaciones [. . .] si incistimos llega a decir que se le parece a uno y si no que la calle es ancha [. . .]”: Manuel Sánchez Martínez *et al.* to Manuel R. Díaz, 28 April 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 97, Exp. 14.

⁷⁵ “que a ese por ningun motivo lo ocuparia por que constantemente le estava asiendo cargos y refutaciones sin ningun fundamento [. . .]”: Manuel R. Díaz to Marcos López Jiménez, 8 May 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 97, Exp. 14.

⁷⁶ Manuel R. Díaz to Marcos López Jiménez, 25 May 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 97, Exp. 14.

⁷⁷ Joseph Taylor to Director del Departamento del Trabajo, 12 May 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 97, Exp. 14.

⁷⁸ Díaz to López Jiménez, 25 May 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 97, Exp. 14.

that work lack the necessary".⁷⁹ The Yucatan labor code established an eight-hour day, a 2.00 peso minimum wage, and the right to organize.⁸⁰ In late January General Aguilar promulgated another decree in Veracruz which legalized unions, establishing them as "the intermediary between workers and capitalists". It also required each union to register with the local government. The decree thus made unions necessary while implementing state regulation over their behavior.⁸¹ Interviewed by reporters, Aguilar responded that his law would "strengthen the conquest of their liberties and rights that the Revolution owes them [...]".⁸² In mid-February Heriberto Jara, who replaced Aguilar as governor of Veracruz, issued his own decree, creating three arbitration commissions for labor conflict: a "consejo de explicación", a "comité de conciliación" and a "tribunal de arbitraje".⁸³

In Veracruz Aguilar and Jara legalized unions, but it was the revolution that gave them fire. Thus legalization decrees could not end conflict. Workers pressed forward, increasingly contesting wages. Piece-work, daily rates, overtime and other wage matters excited workers, sometimes exposing their feelings about class and authority.⁸⁴ When the Santa Rosa union demanded 100 per cent overtime pay for Sunday and holiday work, industrialist Camilo Maure argued that he was only willing to pay 50 per cent, the same as the nearby Rio Blanco mill. The Santa Rosa millhands, aware that Rio Blanco mill paid higher wages, responded that they would accept his proposal if daily wage rates at Santa Rosa rose to Rio Blanco levels, which Maure immediately rejected. The new Labor Board tried to negotiate, offering the workers 75 per cent. Union leaders declined the offer.⁸⁵

At the next union meeting, members expressed outrage at the company's position. One worker disputed the mill's position that overtime work was inferior to regular work, claiming that the company was responsible for late delivery of materials and the delays in production. Another argued that the factory administrator was out of line in stating that over-

⁷⁹ "que nadie tiene derecho a lo superfluo mientras los que trabajan carecen de lo necesario": *El Dictamen* (Veracruz), 5 January 1916, p. 1.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 25 January 1916, p. 1.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 27 January 1916, p. 1. Aguilar was a key political ally of Carranza. His use of "the Revolution owes them [...]" later became post-revolutionary code in Mexico, where "the Revolution" symbolized legitimacy. During the actual fighting, however, the use of this term meant that workers were winning their conflict with owners, to whom the revolution owed little.

⁸³ *El Dictamen*, 21 February 1916, p. 1; *El Pueblo* (Mexico City), 22 February 1916, p. 4.

⁸⁴ Most factories paid a daily rather than hourly wage. Overtime was the rate paid for work beyond the standard workday, the "jornada". Textile factories also employed piece-work systems, sometimes in conjunction with the daily wage.

⁸⁵ Acta del Sindicato, 13 June 1916, Archivo General del Estado de Veracruz (AGEV), Departamento de Economía y Previsión Social (DEPS), 1916, Exp. 703 (21-c).

time and Sunday work was inferior to regular work because the man was a paper pusher and therefore not competent to judge real workers. Class and hierarchy were at the center of the debate. A third worker reminded the assembly that Sundays were for “resting, cleaning up, and amusing oneself”. If one worked that day, one would be denied the right to “rest peacefully at home”. It was unjust for the factory to deny them 100 per cent overtime as compensation for their loss of recreation and the right to a home life. The revolution had made them feel like human beings! One union member concluded that it would be better for the millhands to refuse to work on Sundays if *their* conditions were not met. At the end of the speeches, his comrades agreed to refuse overtime if the factory turned down the demand for 100 per cent.⁸⁶

The local labor board ruled against the workers, voting that Sundays and holidays merited only a 75 per cent premium. Maure immediately accepted. The union, however, did not. It then got the board to agree that workers could not be forced to work overtime; they exercised their rights by simply refusing to enter the factory on Sundays and holidays.⁸⁷ In this way, Candido Aguilar’s and Heriberto Jara’s labor boards protected workers even if they did not always rule in their favor.

Despite the defeat of political organizations such as the Casa, the years of revolution did not lessen workers’ enthusiasm for their struggle; on the contrary, they grew in self-confidence and disdain for authority. In 1910 they watched Madero challenge Díaz. In 1911 they witnessed Zapata resist Madero. In 1913 they saw Huerta depose, then kill Madero. They observed a member of the landed class, Venustiano Carranza, challenge Huerta’s presidential authority in the name of revolution; the Porfirian governor then allied with an ex-Porfirian bandit, Francisco Villa, to lead the resistance to authority. Huerta fell to the Constitutionalists, after which the Constitutionalists fell to fighting among themselves. “The struggle within the Mexican regime to restore its constitutionality had resulted in its destruction – the collapse of all the labyrinthine national, regional and local political and business deals developed over the previous 30 years [. . .].”⁸⁸ At each crucial moment, the working class learned from its rulers that authority no longer had to be taken for granted. If the ruling classes now decided authority by murder, why couldn’t the working classes? Direct action in the factory, the local rebellion, became legitimate.

Meanwhile, the ability of workers to challenge authority had grown considerably since 1910, particularly with the rapid expansion of union membership.⁸⁹ The repressed proto-unions of the Porfiriato sprang to life after the fall of the dictatorship. Madero’s Labor Office supported the

⁸⁶ Acta del Sindicato, 14 June 1916, AGEV, DEPS, 1916, Exp. 703 (21-c).

⁸⁷ Acta, 15 June 1916.

⁸⁸ Womack, “The Mexican Revolution”, p. 154.

⁸⁹ A review of Labor Office archives – AGN, DT – indicates that virtually every large mill in the core textile regions had its own Mesa Directiva by 1915.

formation of unions even though it opposed radicals and anarchists.⁹⁰ Subsequent governments did not close the office and were mostly unsuccessful in suppressing unions. After a wave of strike activity in Mexico City in 1915 and 1916, Carranza crushed the capital's August 1916 general strike with some violence, leading to the demise of the Casa del Obrero Mundial. Some historians interpreted this as the beginning of a decline in the workers' revolution. Nonetheless, factory-level activity continued unabated, particularly in the textile zones.⁹¹ In Puebla, a new Confederación Nacional del Trabajo organized a meeting in November to press for wage increases; they obtained the support of the governor.⁹² At the same time, Veracruz workers sent a commission to Mexico City to get the federal government to support gold equivalents for money wages.⁹³ Candido Aguilar, now the Minister of Foreign Relations, backed the commission, as did Jara.⁹⁴ A few days later, the millhands obtained an important victory as Mexico City authorized state governors to regulate a new wage system based on gold equivalents.⁹⁵

On 18 November the military commander and governor of Mexico City, General Cesar López de Lara issued regulations to protect workers' salaries. Three days later, the city's newspapers announced that "El Congreso Constituyente Inicia Sus Labores", as the Carrancistas met to draft a new constitution.⁹⁶ One of the powerful voices at the Constituyente was Candido Aguilar, who had written Veracruz's first labor decree. The Constituyente wrote a revolutionary constitution that also contained Article 123, one of the most progressive labor codes in Latin America, guaranteeing the rights to organize, to strike and to enjoy a minimum wage.

THE 1917 CONSTITUTION AND AFTER

The 1917 Constitution was a benchmark in Mexican history and labor affairs. Article 123 "gave both labor and capital the right to organize for the defense of their respective interests and allowed that the workers had the right to bargain collectively and go on strike".⁹⁷ It is the great dividing

⁹⁰ Hart, *Anarchism*, p. 116.

⁹¹ Hart clearly sees the end of anarchism as the predominant ideology among workers in the defeat of the 1916 strike. One is left to conclude that this left the field open to the collaborationist policies of the CROM. For national confederations this may be true, but what happens inside factories is more complicated and contradictory. Sometimes the confederations strengthened rebellious workers in spite of their pragmatism: Hart, *Anarchism*, ch. 10.

⁹² *El Demócrata* (Mexico City), 3 November 1916, p. 5.

⁹³ *El Universal* (Mexico City), 4 November 1916, p. 1.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6 November 1916, p. 1; 8 November 1916, pp. 1, 3.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10 November 1916, p. 1; 11 November 1916, p. 1.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21 November 1916, p. 1.

⁹⁷ Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History* (Oxford, 1991), p. 545.

line in labor affairs, before which unions were outlaws and after which they were partners in Mexico's industrialization. The literature describing the period immediately following the passage of the Constitution concentrates on Luis Morones, the rise of the CROM, the alliances between Morones and Calles and between the CROM and the new state. The CROM, wrote Clark, "like other Mexican labor organizations, has been singularly free from theory. From the first the program of the Mexican labor groups has been entirely practical and opportunistic. They have concerned themselves little with the ultimate transformation of society."⁹⁸

According to Ruiz, "By late 1916 the rulers of Mexico had given a death blow to the Casa and to the independent labor movement."⁹⁹ Middlebrook argues that the crushing of the general strike in 1916 and the new protections offered by the state in Article 123 convinced labor leaders that an alliance with the state offered the only "real economic and political opportunities for the labor movement [. . .]".¹⁰⁰

In its old form, the Casa was indeed crushed. However, some members joined the CROM while others later founded the Confederación General de Trabajo, the anarchosyndicalist federation that enjoyed some success in the mills. Some of these activists became influential in the future course of Mexican labor affairs. Meanwhile, there was little indication that rank-and-file workers in Atlixco, Puebla, Orizaba and other industrial zones were crushed by the Mexico City strike. They continued to challenge authority. In fact, it may be the case that the new legal and constitutional changes spurred challenges to authority, extending them to other industries. For example, in March 1918, Abraham Franco, owner of a small workshop in Toluca, was interrupted at home when two local labor leaders, Espridio Márquez and Felix Lazo, led a break-in of 150 workers. The two men threatened Franco for having fired some of his workers. Although Franco complained to the governor, the case was sent to the local Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje in Toluca rather than the criminal court.¹⁰¹

Later that year, the Compañía Industrial Veracruzana changed the width of cloth in the Santa Rosa plant. Piece-work rates were very sensitive to changes in raw materials. Thicker cloth, more pay, said the weavers. No, replied the company. On 6 September twenty-three weavers simply destroyed the new cloth, cutting up the unwanted material. On their own caprice, they substituted the older, narrower twill. A decade earlier, this

⁹⁸ Clark, *Organized Labor*, p. 68.

⁹⁹ Ramon Eduardo Ruiz, *The Great Rebellion, Mexico 1905–1924* (New York, 1980), p. 293.

¹⁰⁰ Middlebrook, *The Paradox*, p. 77.

¹⁰¹ Abraham Franco to Gobernador del Estado, 19 March 1918, Archivo Histórico del Estado de Mexico, Trabajo e Industria, Vol. 74, Exp. 51. The workshop was a *taller de zacatón*. Franco claimed that the group included *albaniles*, *carpinteros*, and many workers except *raiceros*.

act of rebellion would have cost them their jobs. The company would have discharged them without discussion. The events of the last few years, however, had changed the balance of forces. Instead of the old hegemony and owners supported by the state and its army, now there were labor boards mediating between millhands and management. Whether the owners liked it or not, the very existence of the boards reduced company control inside the factory.

As in the days of old, the company fired the rebellious weavers. It was 1918, however, not 1908 or 1898. This time the other millhands struck in support of their comrades. In response, the company announced that it would close the facility for a week "claiming it was impossible to impose administrative authority within the factory".¹⁰² Authority, not twill, caused the strike/lock-out.

Management agreed to arbitration in order to get the striking workers back on the job. The union agreed to return to work because the factory accepted arbitration. It also appealed the firings to the labor board. After months of wrangling, the board found the twenty-three workers guilty of bypassing established procedures; it also found the company in violation of its own rules. Juridically, both were in the wrong. Almost a year after the event, the Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje assessed a penalty of two days wages on the twenty-three workers; it likewise restored their jobs. The JCA then fined Camilo Maure 100 pesos, so that both labor and management suffered a penalty. The millhands refused to pay, preferring to serve 36 hours in jail.¹⁰³ In the end, Maure could easily afford his fine, most workers recovered their jobs, management found that its right to fire and therefore discipline was limited, and direct action and worker solidarity were vindicated. The weavers' protest was not in support of the 1917 Constitution, Luis Morones or an incipient CROM. It was in defense of workers' interests and their right to defend those interests through direct action in the factory. This they won and this is what is so often ignored.

By 1920, the violent fighting that had characterized Mexico's revolution was beginning to wind down. In cotton textile mills, however, workers – fortified by a decade of struggle, much of it successful – continued their challenge. Although the death of Zapata in 1919 and the assassination of Carranza in 1920 signaled the end of revolution for some, the industrial working class stayed the course inside the factory.¹⁰⁴ The year opened with a strike at Mexico City's Santa Teresa mill, owned by Camilo Jean. On 14 January Mario Leautaud, the administrator, was making the rounds

¹⁰² "alegando imposibilidad de hacer prevalecer su autoridad administrativa [. . .]": Acta, Junta Central de Conciliación y Arbitraje, 20 September 1919, AGEV, JCCA, 1918, Exp. 59.

¹⁰³ Acta, 20 September 1919.

¹⁰⁴ The *campesinado* also continued to exert pressure. Certainly in the two major textile states, Puebla and Veracruz, the *agraristas* continued with their own demands throughout the 1920s.

when he discovered a weaver, Inocencio Chávez, away from his assigned post. In his report, Leautaud claims to have told Chávez to return to his loom. A half hour later he found the weaver in the factory's cleaning room, so he again ordered the not-so-innocent millhand to get back to work. Leautaud wrote that Inocencio responded with the sarcastic "no le daba gana hacer lo que se le ordenaba", to which the administrator threatened that if Chávez did not return to weaving, he would throw him out of the building. Angered, Chávez pulled a knife and tried to stab Leautaud, who dodged the blade while delivering a blow to the rebellious worker. The Municipal Delegate, who happened to be in the factory at that moment, helped remove Chávez from the building. They failed to calm him, however. Inocencio continued to scream insults at the French administrator, challenging his manhood and asking him to step outside to settle the affair.¹⁰⁵

In his report to Labor Department Inspector Francisco Sánchez de Tagle, Leautaud claimed that union officials were responsible for the agitation that followed Chávez's expulsion from the building. He said they gathered the other weavers to harangue them until a hundred "operarios" declared a strike at 10 a.m. that morning. Local authorities arrested Inocencio and jailed him, prompting the weavers to continue their strike for three days before returning to work, which union leaders Cecilio Napoles and Carlos González opposed. They wanted to continue the strike until Chávez got his job back, even though he had attempted to murder the French factory administrator. Napoles was so angered by what he claimed was the weavers' lack of solidarity that he immediately resigned from the union and his job at the mill. González returned to work with the others but resigned his union post.¹⁰⁶ Although the weavers did not win their job action, a three-day work stoppage to defend a comrade who was standing idly in the factory, who refused to obey orders, who tried to murder a supervisor, and who threatened the Frenchman's manhood, was symbolic of the attitudes of workers after a decade of revolution. Furthermore, after the three-day labor action, the protesting millhands recovered their jobs.

The spirit of revolution exhibited by the Santa Teresa workers traveled quickly from industrial zone to industrial zone and from factory to factory. Militant socialists, angry anarchists, confirmed unionists, determined organizers and disgruntled workers learned about activities in one factory and carried the news to the next. If one worker could get away with refusing an order, so could others. If one millhand could stab a boss, so could others. Radicals and militants and just plain gossips spread the news from region to region. Although the owners labeled all of them "agitadores de

¹⁰⁵ "he didn't feel like doing what he was told": Francisco Sánchez de Tagle to Jefe del Depto. del Trabajo, 19 January 1920, AGN, DT, Caja 222, Exp. 4.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

oficio" (professional agitators), they were the voice of revolution inside the factories.

According to Puebla millowners, the month of January was filled with outside agitators from neighboring Orizaba infiltrating their factories. In the mill at San Juan Amatlan, the owners claimed that "agitadores de oficio" had redoubled their "perverse" efforts to call factory meetings during the day, thereby disrupting work. Although the workers had formally agreed not to call meetings while at work, in late February they took an entire Friday afternoon to assemble inside the mill, effectively taking it over. The next day, as the second shift entered work, management claimed that there was a deliberate attempt to create tumult and anarchy. It accused workers of whistling, shouting and using the machines to create chaos. The factory administrator sent one of his trusted employees to restore order; a worker blocked his path, insulting the poor man.¹⁰⁷ The employee nonetheless insisted on obeying his superior, who came to his aid and ordered the workers out of the factory. At that point, he noticed eight or ten workers pinning the employee to the ground; one was about to stab him with a long knife.¹⁰⁸

In his report, the administrator noted that he shot a pistol into the air only in order to save the life of his employee. Meanwhile, Pedro Sosa – alleged outside agitator from Orizaba and a member of the successful 1916 worker commission to Mexico City – led a group of workers in a knife assault on the administrator, who was wounded in the arm. One of the employees who tried to help him was stabbed in the back. The administrator defended himself in spite of his wound. This time he shot to kill, though only wounding one of the assailants. Freed from the grasp of his enemies, he ran to get a rifle, climbed to the roof of the factory, and started shooting below. The rebellious millhands fled from the building, though not before starting a fire which destroyed two of the looms.¹⁰⁹

When the police finally arrived, they made some arrests, leading to a workers' demonstration in the town. The owners claimed to hear chants of "Long live Free Russia", "Long Live the World Revolution", "Death to the Government", and "Death to the Gachupines". In front of the Palacio de Gobierno, orators delivered incendiary speeches that demanded the immediate liberty of jailed comrades and threatened to take matters into their own hands.¹¹⁰

The owners were beside themselves with anger and indignation. In their letter to the governor of Puebla, they decried the rising tide of revolution

¹⁰⁷ The "empleados" were typically white-collar workers loyal to administration while the "obreros" were blue-collar workers generally disdained by the upper classes.

¹⁰⁸ Gómez Haro and E. Artasanchy to Srio. de Industria, Comercio y Trabajo, 27 February 1920, AGN, DT, Caja 213, Exp. 33.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*; *El Universal*, 4 November 1916, p. 1.

¹¹⁰ Gómez Haro and E. Artasanchy, 27 February 1920.

inside the factories. Meanwhile, the local government not only released the jailed millhands, it then incarcerated the factory administrator. Said the owner of Ruíz Santibañez y Cía, “the matter is extremely grave not only because of the absurd petition against Capital, not only because of strikes covered by a thin veneer of legality, but because of the eloquent demonstration of bolshevism, which, with an incendiary wick in one hand and the murderer’s knife in another, they confront Public Authority, trampling, without any scruples, the principle of authority [. . .]”.¹¹¹

The letter to the governor reminded him that the workers’ continued agitation not only threatened industry but also the state. Amatlan, it argued, was a case of “attempted arson, attempted murder, bodily damages, and attacks against the liberty of industry and work”. It claimed that following the release of the agitators, somebody shot at the proprietors of the Amatlan factory as their car passed by the bridge near the mill. Furthermore, workers released from jail showed up at the factory drunk the next day, inciting their comrades to riot and spreading fear among the employees.¹¹²

Revolution and alcohol were indeed an explosive mix. On a Saturday in November, Luis Sosa, a weaver in La Constancia, came to work drunk, loudly demanding his weekly pay. The widow of Francisco Conde owned the factory and her employees refused to satisfy the noisy millhand. This infuriated Sosa, who began screaming epithets. The factory administrator tried to remove him from the building but the millhand pulled a knife and threatened the man, who answered by grabbing a pistol and clubbing Sosa on the head, then dragging him outside. The administrator returned to lecture the other workers that “people of this sort couldn’t work there”. He also warned them that their comrade had lost his job.¹¹³

The following morning union leaders were rebuffed when they asked management to readmit Sosa. The workers then walked out, demonstrating that Sosa’s alcohol, knife and threatening words were perfectly acceptable to them, just as Inocencio Chávez’s behavior had been acceptable to his comrades.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, the defense of such behavior was important enough to convince many to lose work-time and pay over the issue. This indeed was revolution! The La Constancia strike indicated the fundamental transition that a decade of violence brought to the cotton textile industry. The challenge to authority was legitimate, and workers organized to defend themselves. They now used their organizations to strike in defense of knives, alcohol and fisticuffs. They were also willing to strike without warning, to unite with other workers, and to fight for control of hiring and

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ “gente de esta naturaleza no podía tener trabajo”: Vda. de Francisco M. Conde to Presidente del Centro Industrial Mejicano, 22 November 1920, AGN, DT, Caja 213, Exp. 21.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

firing, as a year of conflict inside the large La Trinidad mill in Tlaxcala indicated.

The Conde family owned not only La Constancia in Puebla but also La Trinidad in Tlaxcala. With more than 800 workers, La Trinidad represented a major part of Tlaxcala's industrial economy and a significant factor in labor affairs in the Puebla/Tlaxcala valley. On 13 March the millhands declared a strike because they did not agree with the way in which management determined piece-work rates. The company reported to the Labor Office that whenever it instituted changes in the past, the workers continued at their tasks while management drew up a new piece-work schedule. This time, however, millhands not only refused to continue working, they neither advised management of the walk-out nor provided the company with an explanation.¹¹⁵ They simply walked out. Following the action, both the company and the union appealed to the Labor Office. With the support of the governor, the Office appointed Antonio Juncos, a member of the Tlaxcala State House of Representatives, to arbitrate the dispute. Juncos found in favor of the workers.¹¹⁶

Labor relations at La Trinidad remained conflictive throughout the year. By the end of 1920 worker discontent began to spill over the walls of the mill. Locally, millhands sought to create a local revolutionary worker-peasant alliance in the Tlaxcala region. Nationally, they worked with textile unions around the country to create powerful umbrella organizations, like the nascent Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM).¹¹⁷ Workers were joining workers from other factories while reaching out to the rural proletariat.

On 12 October Gustavo Hernández, General Secretary of the Centro Sindicalista de Obreros del Ramo Textil, Estado de Tlaxcala, wrote to the state governor asking for authorization to organize *campesino* unions in nearby haciendas. He specified that permission was needed in those cases in which hacienda administrators would not allow him to speak with workers.¹¹⁸ A week later, *campesinos* from the Hacienda de San Diego Apatlahuaya, in Santa Cruz Tlaxcala, informed the governor that they had organized a union. On their own initiative and quite against previous custom, they began to work an eight-hour day.¹¹⁹ The hacienda administrator increased the workload and warned them that he would not employ

¹¹⁵ Manuel M. Conde Succ. to Dept. del Trabajo, 27 March 1920, AGN, DT, Caja 214, Exp. 5.

¹¹⁶ Letter to Gobernador del Estado, 31 March 1920; Antonio Juncos to Director del Dept. del Trabajo, 8 April 1920, AGN, DT, Caja 214, Exp. 5.

¹¹⁷ There are a number of institutional studies of labor federations, including Carr, *El movimiento obrero*.

¹¹⁸ Gustavo Hernández to Gobernador del Estado de Tlaxcala, 10 December 1920, AGN, DT, Caja 214, Exp. 6.

¹¹⁹ These agricultural laborers used the term "trabajadores campesinos" to describe themselves. Catarino Gutiérrez *et al.*, to Gobernador del Estado de Tlaxcala, 20 October 1920, AGN, DT, Caja 214, Exp. 6.

them for only eight hours unless other haciendas did the same. Since that was not the case, those who would not work as before were fired. The *campesinos* asked the governor to invoke the new Constitution to help them keep their jobs. The letter carried twenty-nine signatures.¹²⁰ However, it was not only the constitution that emboldened these rural workers, but the strong union in the nearby mill.

If textile workers had the self-confidence to organize *campesinos* in surrounding communities, they also had the self-assurance to intervene more directly in the life of the factory. They were particularly interested in control over hiring. A union shop was a principal demand of textile workers throughout the country and the millhands of La Trinidad demonstrated that they would stop at nothing to control who worked in the factory.

On 20 October Vicente Díaz, General Secretary of the first shift union, and Agustín Díaz, General Secretary of the second shift union, asked Anacleto Cortes, factory administrator, to give a job to Abundio Vázquez. Vázquez was an old union hand who had been requesting a position for six weeks. Cortes denied their petition. Vicente and Agustín believed that the administrator was simply boycotting the union. The matter quickly escalated as Cortes threatened not to pay any of the workers if the union insisted on putting Vázquez behind a machine. The union leaders decided to call a strike, with the goal of getting Cortes removed from his job. The strike/lock-out began almost immediately.¹²¹

Management defended its position, claiming that Vázquez had previously abandoned the factory without giving notice, that most millhands only wanted to work, and that a few union agitators caused problems for the rest, who were now out of work. The factory accused union leaders of holding secret meetings in the bathrooms in order to incite the workers against the owners. Cortes simply responded to personal attacks and was justified when he stopped work in the factory. The union, it said, was not justified in ordering the workers to carry out a successful sit-down strike in the mill and also a successful walk-out. The company claimed that the union enforced the strike/walk-out by beating up millhands and throwing things at workers who tried to return to their posts.¹²²

Despite the accusations, the Trinidad workers were tough and held their ground. By November their strike movement had spread to other mills in Tlaxcala and Puebla. The negotiations with the owners now included representatives from the Centro Sindicalista de Obreros del Ramo Textil of Tlaxcala and also Eulalio Martínez, the head of the CROM. The demands

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Vicente Díaz and Agustín Díaz to Gustavo Hernández, 21 October 1920; Eulalio Martínez *et al.* to Presidente de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, 17 December 1920, AGN, DT, Caja 214, Exp. 6.

¹²² Manuel M. Conde Sucs and Ramon Golzarri to Centro Industrial Mexicano, 22 October 1920, AGN, DT, Caja 214, Exp. 6.

included a job offer for Vázquez, the right to hold meetings and collect union dues inside the factory (without hiding in the bathrooms), changes in work assignments and procedures, and the assurance that no worker would be fired for participating in the strike movement.¹²³ By 18 November when Luis Morales Conde, Eulalio Martínez, and Macario Sánchez and Marcos Martínez of the Federación Sindicalista del Estado de Tlaxcala signed an agreement to end the strike movement, it appeared that the workers had won:¹²⁴

- 1 a commitment by Morales to review the performance of Anacleto Cortes;
- 2 the right to hold union meetings in the factory during each shift;
- 3 no firings or reprisals;
- 4 worker-approved changes in work rules and procedures.

Nonetheless, the agreement was not fully implemented and the strike movement spread to other local factories, including La Elena, La Estrella, San Luis and La Tlaxcalateca.¹²⁵ Meanwhile, labor federations in Mexico City and the State of Mexico demanded that the Labor Office use its influence to fire Anacleto Cortes.¹²⁶ As the strike progressed, union workers prevented non-union employees from entering the factory.¹²⁷

On 8 January 1921 the union finally agreed to go back to work. It only won from the Condes an agreement to reconsider the jobs of both Cortes and Vázquez. Although its victory was less than spectacular, the union was not crushed. Not only was it intact, its local and national alliances were stronger than ever. Furthermore, the federal Labor Office now confronted a violent strike at the State of Mexico's San Ildefonso plant, the use of dynamite by workers at the La Colmena mill, and an extension of labor conflict in Tlaxcala.¹²⁸ It is not clear that the Trinidad workers won the battle over Abundio Vázquez, but it was becoming more obvious that workers throughout Mexico were achieving significant control over factory life in Mexican cotton textile mills. By 1921 a decade of struggle had demonstrated to millhands that they could organize, strike and win. They could gain wage concessions, influence hiring and firing, change work rules and procedures, and stand up to the bosses. Now their caprice counted as much as the caprice of the owners. Authority still meant something inside the factory but now workers as well as owners exercised it. The Mexican revolution revolutionized social relations inside Mexican

¹²³ Gustavo Hernández and Vicente Díaz to Gobernador del Estado de Tlaxcala, 23 October 1920, AGN, DT, Caja 214, Exp. 6.

¹²⁴ Acta, 18 November 1920, AGN, DT, Caja 214, Exp. 6.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8 January 1921, AGN, DT, Caja 214, Exp. 6.

¹²⁶ Epifanio Gómez to Esteban Florez, 30 November 1920, AGN, DT, Caja 214, Exp. 6.

¹²⁷ Jesús Rivero Quijano to Srio. de Industria, Comercio, y Trabajo, 13 December 1920, AGN, DT, Caja 214, Exp. 6.

¹²⁸ Memorandum, n.d., AGN, DT, Caja 214, Exp. 6.

cotton textile factories. As the owners said about a general strike in August 1912, it was unjustified but “there only is a strike because some workers have ‘*espíritu revolucionario*’ ”.¹²⁹ The “spirit of revolution” emanated from a social movement not initiated by textile workers, but one that nonetheless infected and energized them and led them to challenge the authority of owners. This challenge revolutionized the social relationships of hierarchy in Mexican mills, which in 1920 did not at all resemble their status in 1910.

CONCLUSION

In 1910, when the Porfiriato came to a violent end, the breakdown of hegemony inspired and galvanized industrial workers. In the cotton textile industry, millhands took advantage of the weakness in national government to challenge authority in the workplace. In 1911 they led a successful general strike, not against the old dictatorship but against the new regime. The result was, in 1912, an industry-wide contract. The new contract strengthened rather than lessened their struggle to win power in the factory, and provided heretofore non-existent protections. The tenacity of millhands and their willingness to fight for rights, for control, for defense of each other, were rewarded in 1917 with a constitution that contained more legal protections for workers than Mexico had ever seen. There was clearly an intimate link between the struggles of textile workers in Orizaba, the attempts of Veracruz governor Candido Aguilar to find a solution to the labor problem, and his role in creating Article 123, the new labor code. Meanwhile, the constitution did not slow the workers’ struggle for power in the mills. By 1921 they succeeded in gaining government support for labor unions and virtual union shops everywhere. However, this was inevitable given the results of 1912: “the labor contract makes workers organized in unions even stronger”, boasted a government publication in 1924.¹³⁰

During the Porfiriato and revolution, the early labor associations were quite heroic. Labeled “*agrupaciones de resistencia*” by the workers, the “resistance groups” battled long odds, opposition by owners and local *caciques*, and the mistrust of government officials. These organizations fought for better wages, improved working conditions and greater dignity in the workplace. They also fought for their own survival, always in doubt. Workers lacked a centralizing ideology, a political party of their own and even stable employment. Civil war made for difficult times in the factories. Nonetheless, during the revolution many factories unionized; it is difficult to find even a single case of permanent de-unionization. By 1921 every

¹²⁹ *El Imparcial*, 7 August 1912, p. 2.

¹³⁰ Departamento de la Estadística Nacional, *La Estadística del Trabajo* (Mexico, 1924), p. 15.

large mill in the core textile areas had at least one union, usually a powerful one.

With Alvaro Obregon president, the country boasted of a new constitution with strong protection for labor, a national labor confederation whose boss became the Minister of Industry, Commerce and Labor, and well-organized, militant workers in the cotton textile mills. Throughout the 1920s this combination produced rising wages and better working conditions. Between 1919 and 1930 average wages in the mills almost doubled, from 1.70 pesos per day to 3.02.¹³¹

The revolutionary assault on workplace relations was not unique to Mexico. "During the 1905 and 1917 Revolutions in Russia, an attack by workers on foremen was an important feature of labor struggles."¹³² Clearly the Russian revolution was more worker driven and more worker directed than Mexico's. Nonetheless, an unappreciated aspect of Mexico's upheaval is the degree to which the revolution changed workers' behavior and, ultimately, the social relations of the Mexican factory.

Workers did not gain control over the workplace. Mexico did not become a soviet state. Furthermore, most analysts agree that many sectors of the working class lost control of their own unions in the 1920s.¹³³ This, however, is another and later story. From 1910 to 1921 a revolution challenged Mexico's industrial workers. The breakdown in national hegemony also collapsed the owners' hegemony in the factories. Millhands responded by challenging authority and ultimately creating a radically different laboring world in the post-revolutionary epoch, one characterized by progressive labor laws, powerful unions and strong rights for workers.¹³⁴ The Mexican revolution was not the Russian revolution, but it was more than rebellion.

The essence of class control is in the workplace. The Porfirian dictatorship was uniquely successful in supporting owners' control of modernizing factories. When national elites fell to fighting among themselves, the collapse of hegemony in the workplace became a by-product of the collapse of national hegemony. Millhands challenged authority at work. Their challenge was revolutionary because: 1) it wrested power from owners, transferring much to workers; 2) it led to permanent legal and organizational changes that strengthened workers' control; and 3) workers themselves restructured the social relations of work. The workers' revolution was limited, however, because ultimately it never coalesced into a political force that challenged the state. It cooperated with the new state,

¹³¹ Clark, *Organized Labor*, p. 192.

¹³² S.A. Smith, "Workers and Supervisors: St Petersburg 1905–1917 and Shanghai 1895–1927", *Past and Present*, 139 (1993), p. 131.

¹³³ A lively description of the corruption and control of the CROM is in Clark, *Organized Labor*.

¹³⁴ "Organized labor's entry into national politics was among the most significant consequences of Mexico's 1910–1920 social revolution": Middlebrook, *The Paradox*, p. 72.

but the terms of cooperation ultimately subordinated workers. Workers won much, but the revisionists were right in arguing that the new state was not a workers' state. They were also wrong, however, in not seeing that workers wrought a revolution inside the factories without taking state power. The one-sided hierarchy of 1910 was replaced by a complex world in which workers, unions and labor leaders participated in the determination of hiring, firing, sanctions and, ultimately, control over the work process.

In comparing Mexican mills in 1921 with those same mills in 1910, nothing makes sense without Mexico's social revolution and the social revolution of workers. In 1910 workers could be killed by *rurales*, fired by the factories, disdained by administrators. Unions could be crushed while collective bargaining and labor contracts were distant dreams. In 1921 workers prevented the factories from firing them, sometimes killed supervisors, other times got rid of abusive foremen. Unions were powerful, collective bargaining the norm, and a national labor contract was the law. National and state labor laws, a federal labor office and local boards of conciliation and arbitration protected workers. Federal norms dictated piece-work rates and local working conditions, and these were enforced by workers and their unions. This was Atl's "greatest social revolution of our times". To millhands who lived through the revolution, it must have appeared that Atl was not entirely wrong.