



TÍTULO: El patrimonio intangible de la industrialización mexicana del siglo XIX: un régimen laboral revolucionario.

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Introduction

Like most countries in the world, Mexico began the 19th Century with no industry, certainly not in the modern sense of the term. To be sure, both pre-industrial manufacturing and mining played significant roles in the colonial economy, but the first “modern” factory dates to 1835, when Esteban de Antuñano built La Constancia Mexicana in Puebla. Born in colonial Veracruz, Antuñano was raised in Spain, from where he traveled to England where he observed first-hand the country’s new textile mills and the beginnings of England’s industrial revolution.

One factory led to another, and eventually Mexico experienced its own industrial revolution. The first section of this paper will briefly describe this industrial revolution – the 19th century expansion of the cotton textile industry. Industry brought industrial workers, of course, and a system of owners and workers meant a labor relations system, however informal and unofficial. The second section of this paper will briefly describe the functioning of labor affairs in Mexico’s 19th century textile industry.

Political life for most of 19th century Mexico was rather chaotic, characterized by numerous coup d’etats and foreign invasions. General and President Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910) ended the chaos and his reign in office brought unprecedented political stability and economic growth. It also brought increasing poverty, landlessness, and inequality in the distribution of wealth. Combined with the political disaffection of northern elites, this led to the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), which will be discussed in the third section.

While most observers have seen Mexico’s revolution as an agrarian revolt over land, it turns out that there was a significant workers revolution within the revolution as well.¹ The growth of industry, the growth of an industrial proletariat, and Mexico’s broader revolution were the perfect recipe for workers in Mexico’s largest factory industry, cotton textiles, to launch their own revolution, the subject of section four.

Mexico’s workers revolution profoundly shaped Mexico’s labor regime from then until now, and that is what we will explain in section 5. Finally, the last section will suggest that this non-material heritage of Mexico’s industrialization has been even more lasting and powerful than the material heritage of buildings, machinery and products.

The 19th Century: industry and workers

¹ Jeffrey Bortz, *Revolution within the Revolution: Cotton Textile Workers and the Mexican Labor Regime, 1910-1923* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

After eleven years of civil war, Agustín de Iturbide declared Mexico's independence on September 28, 1821. Independence, however, brought neither peace nor tranquility. The next half century brought political chaos and dismemberment more as Central America quickly abandoned the Republic followed by an invasion by the United States, which eventually annexed more than half of Mexico's national territory. Despite these difficult political and economic circumstances, a few Mexicans were aware of Britain's recent industrial revolution, which in its early phase built railroads and cotton textile factories. Stimulated by this example, these Mexicans labored to build their own textile mills, and supported the country's effort to construct a railroad system. Thus, both industries were in the forefront of Mexico's industrial revolution. Cotton textiles became Mexico's first, and for next hundred years, largest factory industry.

Following Antunano's lead, the next year Lucas Alaman built Cocolapam in Orizaba, Veracruz. Orizaba and Puebla City quickly became the early centers of the textile industry, soon followed by Atlixco, 30 kilometers southwest of Puebla City, and Mexico City. By 1862 there were 57 cotton mills in Mexico, a number that grew to 118 in 1898.² Towards the end of the Porfiriato, Dr. Antonio Peñafiel of the Dirección General de Estadística published his definitive Cuadro Sinóptico Informativo de la Administración del Señor General Don Porfirio Díaz, Presidente de la República, and noted that by 1904 there were 145 cotton textile factories in Mexico.³ The manufacture of cotton textiles had become "the largest industry in Mexico, accounting for almost one-quarter of the total value of manufactured goods produced in the Republic."⁴

The growth of industry is simultaneously the growth of an industrial proletariat. Prior to La Constancia Mexicana, there were no industrial workers in Mexico in the modern sense of the term. By 1904, Peñafiel noted that 27,706 "operarios" labored in Mexico cotton mills.⁵ While not a large group relative to Mexico's total population, about fifteen million in 1910, it was a proletariat concentrated in an industrial corridor that ran from Orizaba in the mountains of Veracruz, just across the border from Puebla, to Puebla City and Atlixco, and then on to neighboring Mexico City and the surrounding Mexico State. This zone contained the overwhelming majority of Mexico's cotton factories and operarios. There was an easy communication among workers within this zone.

The growth of 19th century industry and the growth of a 19th century industrial proletariat was also the emergence and growth of an industrial labor regime, however informal. The labor regime is "the set of social relationships, organizations, and institutions that define the appropriation of labor and its products, the parameters of workplace rules, concepts, and behaviors....which include the formal and institutional labor relations system...."⁶ Through the 19th century, laissez faire and liberal governments saw no need to regulate labor, believing, as do neo-liberals today, in a self-regulating market, in this case a labor market, that provided the best of all possible worlds. Other than the prohibition of slavery in the 1857 Constitution and the prohibition against "employing physical or moral" violence to increase wages in the 1871 Federal Penal Code, there was little in law that would regulate labor affairs. Nor were there any government offices strictly dedicated to labor affairs.

The early owners built many of their mills in haciendas, taking advantage of rivers and water power. From the haciendas they translated rural labor relations into industrial labor relations. Thus the old mills often had housing inside the mill compound, where the owners ruled with an iron hand tempered by traditional paternalism. In 1904, the work rules at El Carmen included the clause "any complaint will be

² Fernando Pruneda and Miguel A. Quintana, "Estudio sobre la modernización de la industria nacional textil de algodón . . .," STyPS, Mexico City, April 1943, 37, in AGN, Archivo Gonzalo N. Robles, Caja 76, Exp. 9.

³ Dr. Antonio Peñafiel, *Cuadro Sinóptico Informativo de la Administración del Señor General Don Porfirio Díaz, Presidente de la República*, Mexico, 1910, 52.

⁴ Rodney Anderson, *Outcasts in Their Own Land* (De Kalb, 1976), 100.

⁵ Dr. Antonio Peñafiel, *Cuadro Sinóptico Informativo de la Administración del Señor General Don Porfirio Díaz, Presidente de la República*, Mexico, 1910, 52.

⁶ Bortz, 2008, 15.

useless.”⁷ Despite the difficulties – owners and government firmly opposed unions – mill hands attempted to unionize their workplaces and often carried out work actions in order to gain better wages and working conditions.

Incipient textile unions, often called sociedades or agrupaciones de Resistencia, but rarely sindicatos, often had success but even more often failure. There was no provision in law for collective contracts, strikes were illegal, and there were no government offices to define labor affairs. In the late 19th century, factories became larger and labor relations therefore became more impersonal. This led to various strike waves in the 1880s and 1890s. While some strikes yielded modest successes, it was not uncommon for the strike leadership to get fired, and if in a mill that housed workers’ families, often strike families were forced out of their houses, and often, the community. Even if the agrupacion was victorious, however, law recognized neither unions nor collective contracts, so that any victory tended to be ephemeral.

On the other hand, these early unions and conflicts trained generations of textile workers in the arts of organization, leadership, and solidarity. In the context of a strong anti-union government, powerful anti-union owners, and the 19th century belief in the self-regulating power of the market, these skills appeared inadequate to the task of modernizing labor relations, but if there might be a sudden change, who knew?

What the modernizers confronted was a growing industry with long hours of work (14 hours days, six days a week), low wages (real wages actually declined during the late Porfiriato), and absolute owners’ control over the workplace, where supervisors hired and fired at will, constrained only by local labor markets and local customs. While work in the mills was not necessarily worse than work in the countryside, it was hard work under often oppressive conditions and with little recourse other than following orders.

During the years immediately prior to the revolution, these problems in the mills generated significant labor activism. In Metepec, the large and modern mill outside Atlixco, mill hands organized The Circulo Fraternal de Obreros in 1900, then struck in 1909, followed by two more strikes in 1910. In 1908 and 1909, workers in Mexico City, Puebla and Orizaba carried out important strike movements.⁸

Francisco Madero, a wealthy landowner from the north, challenged the old dictator, Porfirio Diaz, in the 1910 elections but found himself thrown in jail. When released, he called for revolution on November 20, 1910. What followed far surpassed his moderate calls for political reform and would eventually lead to his premature assassination.

Almost immediately following his call, revolutionary violence broke out. As the fighting spread, particularly in Morelos, led by Emiliano Zapata, and in Chihuahua, led by Pascual Orozco and Pancho Villa, Diaz appeared to lose control of the situation, and when Orozco and Villa defeated the Federal Army at Ciudad Juarez in May, 1911, he saw the handwriting on the wall. He resigned the Presidency later that month, leaving Francisco Leon de la Barra as interim president before setting sail for retirement in Paris.

Leon de la Barra organized new elections, which Madero won, taking office on November 6, 1911. Madero thought that his victory signaled the end of revolution, but the revolutionaries had social goals far beyond his modest call for political reform, and he took office facing defiant revolutionaries in Morelos, uncertain allies in the north, and a nationwide textile strike, the largest demonstration of workers’ power in the Republic to that time. Frightened Porfirian elites and foreign investors rallied behind the head of the Federal Army, General Victoriano Huerta, when he imprisoned and assassinated Madero in February, 1913. Just as Madero thought the revolution ended when he became President, so did Huerta, and he was equally mistaken. Venustiano Carranza, Governor of Coahuila, led the Constitutionalist opposition to Huerta, joined by forces from the Northwest, particularly Alvaro Obregon and Plutarco Elias

⁷ Julio Gómez Abascal, *Aviso a los Operarios*, January 1, 1904, AMA, Presidencia, gobernación, 1904, Caja 91.

⁸ John M. Hart, *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class, 1860-1931*(Austin, 1978), 99-100.

Calles, by Villa and his Division del Norte, and Zapata and his Division del Sur. The revolutionaries defeated Huerta, who fled the country in July, 1914. The revolutionaries met in Aguascalientes, but this only exacerbated the split between the Constitutionalist on one side, led by Carranza and Obregon, and Villa and Zapata on the other side. At this point the revolution evolved into civil war, and not until 1917 did the Constitutionalist gain the upper hand, imposing their new Constitution in February.

Textile workers, radicalized before the revolution, took advantage of each stage of the political chaos to launch and then further their own revolution in the mills. The resignation of Diaz led to strike waves throughout the country, accompanied by a rapid unionization of the larger factories. Then, on December 21, 1911, weeks after Madero took office, textile workers carried out the first general strike in Mexican history, shutting down the industry with wage, working conditions, and unionization demands. The workers struck after a wave of labor activism that included violence in the mills, with numerous physical attacks on supervisors as well as looting. During this period of political uncertainty in the National Palace and also in local statehouses and thus for local officials, repression was out of the question, so instead President Madero brokered a meeting of the owners on January 20, 1912, to resolve the labor question. At that meeting, owners agreed to a reduction in hours of work (to ten hours a day) and a 10% across the board increase in wages. They also agreed to meet again at a convention whose goal would be a definitive solution to the country's apparently new labor problem. Meanwhile, workers intensified their challenge to authority in the factories by unprecedented actions, such as collecting union dues during work hours, or engaging in spontaneous walkouts in defense of activists and union leaders.

In response to the labor strife that struck the textile industry following the collapse of the Diaz presidency, interim President De la Barra founded an Oficina de Trabajo, the first federal office dedicated to labor affairs. The Oficina became the Departamento de Trabajo, later the Departamento Autonomo de Trabajo, and finally the current Secretaria del Trabajo y Prevision Social. Madero ordered the first director of the Labor Office, Antonio Ramos Pedrueza, to organize the convention of textile owners, with the goal of solving labor conflict in the mills. The Convention brokered an industry-wide Reglamento de Trabajo and Tarifa Minima de Salarios. Lacking a legal basis for collective contracts, the government ensured enforcement through a tax break for firms that complied with both documents.

Recently unionized workers saw the Convention and its documents as their victory. Their strike had forced owners to negotiate and yield industry-wide work rules and wage standards that increased their pay and reduced their hours of work, as well as work rule interpretation that virtually mandated unions. The agreements also needed unions to serve as a counterpart to owners. Following the Convention, strengthened unions launched another wave of strikes as workers sought enforcement of the accords. Aggressive workers also wanted more: control over working conditions.

One of the reasons that workers enjoyed unprecedented success in their 1912 strike movement was the weakened authority of government, not just the Federal Government, but also of local authorities who felt increasingly unsure of their situation. This made it greatly more difficult to employ the traditional repression of rebellious workers, which is what allowed mill hands to unionize the mills, to pressure owners, and win some important concession. During the process that followed 1912, central authority weakened even more, and by 1915 there was no central government at all. Despite the chaos that ensued, the economy more or less functioned as did most of the mills, although there were occasional closures, some quite lengthy. Nonetheless, there was demand for the products that the factories churned out, which allowed for continuing militance. During this period, 1913-1916, mill hands succeeded in unionizing the industry and engaging in numerous work actions, ranging from strikes to walkouts to violence against owners and supervisors. It was a violent time in Mexico and it was a violent time in the mills. Slowly, power devolved on regional caciques, often local military commanders who sometimes became state governors. These men realized that they needed to pacify the regions under their authority if they were to rule effectively. This was especially true in the core of the textile zone, Veracruz and Puebla, where violence in the mills was a significant component of revolutionary activity. Constitutionalist generals needed to pacify owners and workers alike in order to calm the mills and keep a vital sector of the economy functioning.

From late 1912 to late 1916, there were constant work actions in the mills as operarios fought for any number of goals: getting rid of hated supervisors, changing work rules, getting better hours of work and more pay, defending union organization and union leaders, and getting better treatment in the factory. What these actions had in common was that they disrupted work, they challenged the old authority of capital to rule the factory, and they posited worker control. In a short space such as this, it is impossible to do justice to these actions, but one example is illustrative.

In December 1912, the administrator of the La Trinidad cotton mill in Tlaxcala tried enforcing rules "in which it is strictly prohibited that any worker bring any food, fruit or drinks into the mill, as well as smoking, and any worker violating this will be expelled immediately."⁹ Millhands responded with a wildcat strike against the new rules, adding a new demand, the firing of a supervisor. The Jefe Politico of Apizco convened a meeting of the factory administrator and the union leaders, at which the mill indeed rescinded the rules and also agreed to fire the administrator.¹⁰ This would have been inconceivable eighteen months earlier. Workers now challenged and changed work rules and, in effect, fired supervisors. A later visit to the factory by one labor inspector led to the comment that "the workers of this factory frequently violate the Reglamento, missing work without reason."¹¹ Capital never could return to its former authority.

With the factories almost ungovernable, Military governors in Veracruz and Puebla, and later other states with textile operations, began to issue military labor decrees. These decrees virtually gave to workers what mill hands had demanded, and in most cases, already achieved through their labor actions in the mills. Between 1913 and 1916, Governors and Military Commanders issued labor decrees in Aguascalientes (August 1914), Chiapas (October 1914), the Federal District (September 1914), Guanajuato (December 1914), Jalisco (October 1914, December 1915), Michoacan (October 1914), Puebla (September 1914, September 1915, December 1915), Tabasco (June 1913, September 1914), Tlaxcala (September 1914), Veracruz (October 1914, January 1916), and the Yucatan (September 1914). The Colonels and generals who issued these decrees established a new path in law if not in practice, because in practice, much of what they decreed had already become reality in some mills, though certainly not all. These decrees legalized unions and strikes, mandated minimum wages, the eight-hour day, overtime pay, and numerous benefit packages for working people.

Since most of the labor decrees emanated from Constitutionalist military leaders, by late 1916 it was clear what the Constitutionalists would do in labor affairs if they attained power. Their Constitution, promulgated in February 1917, contained Article 123, Del Trabajo y de Previsión Social, a radically new chapter in Mexican constitutional law. Basically, Article 123 carried forth the propositions of the Military decrees, which in turn recognized gains that textile workers had achieved in practice through their violence and labor activism in the mills. With Article 123, the new Constitution guaranteed workers the right to unions, to strike, to an eight hour day, to minimum wages, and other benefits and protections. It was landmark legislation that put into law what textile workers had won in practice and then seen ratified in the military decrees.

After 1910, unionization spread strongly but spontaneously. The 1917 Constitution would change that since it provided unprecedented legal protections for unions, and in fact a legal framework for their presence. In 1918, a number of labor leaders founded the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM), the dominant Mexican labor federation until the rise of CTM in the 1930s. Meanwhile, labor activism, amply rewarded by the outcome of the 1912 Convention, by military labor decrees, and then by Article 123, continued unabated in the mills as workers sought to strengthen their unions and to gain control over the workplace, always a central goal. So, for example, a Puebla strike in 1918 forced the owners to request that local authorities station policemen inside the mills because they saw no other way to maintain a semblance of control.¹² In 1921, a representative of the Puebla textile owners commented that "In the factories.... . . . workers are entering work with armed objects including pistols.... . . . For this

⁹ Leandro García to Antonio Ramos Pedrueza, December 24, 1912, AGN, DT, Caja 8, Exp. 26.

¹⁰ José María Alnaten to Antonio Ramos Pedrueza, January 9, 1913, AGN, DT, Caja 8, Exp. 26.

¹¹ Manuel Ortega Elorza, June 14, 1913, AGN, DT, Caja 51, Exp. 15.

¹² Higinio Cosío and Ignacio Cardoso to Gobernador del Estado, May 28, de mayo de 1918, ASSR, 6, 1918, Exp. 6250/21.

reason, administrative personnel have reported to their superiors that they cannot continue working in that manner, because they are not resigned to losing their lives, at any moment, for carrying out their job of command and order within the factories¹³ As workers power grew, factories became an armed camp.

Article 123 provided Constitutional mandates but left implementation and statutory law to state governments which were required to draft state labor codes to be in compliance with the Federal document. With unions stronger than ever, with the emergence of powerful national labor federations, and with militant workers armed and willing to commit violence in the mills to obtain their goals, it is not surprising that state labor codes, particularly in textile states like Veracruz and Puebla, ceded even more to workers and unions. Candido Aguilar had been Constitutionalist leader in Veracruz who drafted two military labor decrees, then a representative to the Constituyente that wrote Article 123 of the new Constitution, and the Governor of Veracruz in 1918 who issued the states labor code. The code recognized collective contracts, which previous law and decree only hint at, included numerous protections for workers and unions, and made firing a unionized worker almost impossible.¹⁴ The Puebla code (1921) built on the Veracruz code (collective contracts, restrictions on firings, etc), but added a series of provisions that virtually mandated union hiring. In short, state labor codes that implemented Article 123 gave to workers control over hiring, firing, and discipline.

Through their workers revolution, what did workers gain between 1910 and 1923. First, they won an increase in real wages for a rather lengthy period, at least through the end of the 1920s. Second, they won a reduction of the workday from 16 hours to 8. Third, they won numerous benefits: a Sunday paid day of rest, numerous holidays, paid medical care, and housing and educational benefits. Fourth, they won protections for unions, union leaders, and strikes. Fifth, they won representation on the various labor boards. Sixth, they won control over hiring, firing and discipline in the mills, which meant that unions came to control the shop floor.

As Ernest Gruening comment on the labor situation in the Veracruz mills,

“In these last mills labor is ruinously undisciplined. The Convencion Textil has not served because labor does not do its part. The abuse is worst in the four mills of the French-owned Compania Industrial de Orizaba, employing 5000 workers, one of which at Rio Blanco was the shambles of 1907. From the ill treatment of the workers twenty years ago the pendulum has swung far the other way. The men often refuse to do as they are told, and it is not possible to discharge a man without the unions’s consent. Not infrequently weavers, when the spirit moves them, quit their machines for the street, to sip a locally bresed cervecita, leaving their looms unattended. If while they are away a thread breaks and no one is there to tie it, the resulting defect spoils the coloth. The fines which formerly would have resulted are now forbidden under the Vera Cruz labor law. The management has no redress.”¹⁵

Mexico’s old cotton textile industry, the site of the workers revolution, later died as foreign competitors with artificial fibers and new technologies pushed them out of business. The old factories stand idle or no longer exist. The old machines are now museum pieces. But the gains of the workers revolution – the eight hour day, overtime pay, collective contracts, protections for unions, the aguinaldo, medical, educational and housing benefits, protections for working mothers, and others have survived to the present, even during the neo-liberal assault of the last two decades. Thus the non-tangible heritage of Mexico’s industrialization has long outlasted the physical heritage of buildings and machines. The workers revolution was one of the great and permanent gains of Mexico’s broader revolution.

¹³ S. Gavito to Gobernador del Estado, December 22, 1921, AGN, DT, Caja 305, Exp. 8.

¹⁴ See Bortz, 2008, 143.

¹⁵ Ernest Gruening, *Mexico and It Heritage* (New York, 1928), 350.

