

Anarchist Influences on the Mexican Revolution

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“The dreamer is the designer of tomorrow. Practical men... can laugh at him; they do not know that he is the true dynamic force that pushes the world forward. Suppress him, and the world will deteriorate towards barbarism. Despised, impoverished, he leads the way... sowing, sowing, sowing, the seeds that will be harvested, not by him, but by the practical men of tomorrow, who will at the same time laugh at another indefatigable dreamer busy seeding, seeding, seeding.”

– Ricardo Flores Magon

During the decades between 1910 and 1930, Mexico was swept into the maelstrom of revolution. Throughout this period, the ideology of Anarchism was a very strong force internationally. In fact, before the 1917 Russia Revolution, Anarchism was arguably a more significant radical force than Communism and the followers of Karl Marx.

Anarchism literally means “no rulers”. The origins of Anarchism date back at least to the French Revolution and the Enrages. At the time, aristocrats labeled these libertarian radicals as “anarchists”. The first person to proclaim himself as such was French Socialist, Pierre Joseph Proudhon. At this time, Socialism was a term that encompassed a wide variety of anti-capitalist views. Anarchism gained recognition as distinct from Socialism, and later Communism, when Mikhail Bakunin openly broke with Karl Marx’s International Workingmen’s Association.

The task of completing a coherent body of thought was left to the Russian Anarchist Peter Kropotkin, who envisioned a world of “anarchist-communism”. This idea was similar to Communism in that it was interested in evolving beyond private ownership of the means of production, but they disagreed over the idea of what that kind of society might look like and how they should get there. While the followers of Karl Marx, especially Lenin, argued for a strong state and a revolutionary vanguard which would crush the capitalists, the Anarchists wanted something much more libertarian.

Anarchism is an ideology that fights for a world without the need for a state. Anarchists foresee a society where workers would manage themselves and the means of production is controlled by those who produced — directly, as opposed to capitalist or Communist Party managers. Politically, Anarchists strive for a decentralized system where power rests on the smallest possible unit, either with the individual or the community. From there, coordination on a larger scale is accomplished with confederation and the use of a delegate system. Nowhere in such a system would one person govern another — hence the name: Anarchism.

During the period of the Mexican Revolution, Anarchism was a significant force in other parts of the world, such as in the Russian Revolution and later in Spain, 1936. Not surprisingly, Anarchism was a significant force in the Mexican Revolution as well. These ideas infiltrated the turbulent events in Mexico, through a variety of individuals, groups and organizations.

Ricardo Flores Magon, whose remains rest at the Rotunda of Illustrious Men in Mexico City, was an outspoken advocate of Anarchism. His political organization with the confusing name, the Mexican Liberal Party, was able to influence a large portion of the Mexican revolutionaries. His followers even attempted an armed revolt in Baja, California, in order to create an anarchist society. In the urban centers, the Anarcho-syndicalist union, the Casa del Obrero Mundial, was a very important player during the period of 1912–1916. In the south, while not openly Anarchist, the Zapatistas held views that echoed, to a large extent, the ideals of Anarchism. The Mexican Revolution would not have been the same without these influences.

Ricardo Flores Magon and the Partido Liberal Mexicano

Ricardo Flores Magon was born on Mexican Independence day, September 1874 in San Antonio Eloxochitlan in the state of Oaxaca. Ironically, this was also the homeland of his great enemy: Porfirio Diaz. His two brothers, Jesus and Enrique, participated in the anti-Diaz struggle that Ricardo committed his life to. While Jesus was active in the Anti-Reelectionists and later became the Minister of the Interior under the Madero regime, it was Enrique who worked very closely in Ricardo's political endeavors. All three brothers participated in the student-led demonstrations against Diaz's reelection in May of 1892. Soon after, Ricardo became an editor of *El Democrata*, and slowly began his further move towards radical left-libertarianism. Ricardo went to law school but never completed his studies.

On August 7, 1900, Jesus and Ricardo, along with Licenciado Antonio Horcasitas, founded *Regeneracion*. While *Regeneracion* began as a periodical for discussion law reform, it soon began to attack the Diaz regime. By December, 1900, Horcasitas left and *Regeneracion* became the sole endeavor of Ricardo. Until his death, *Regeneracion* would be a significant vehicle for propagating Ricardo's brand of radicalism.

Many of prominent Liberals, such as Ricardo, his brother Jesus and Antonio Diaz Soto y Gama were repeatedly arrested for their anti-Diaz stance. It was at this time that his brother Jesus left the movement disillusioned. Because of this repression *Regeneracion* temporarily ceased publication and Ricardo, with his other brother, Enrique, left Mexico for the United States on January 3, 1904. While Ricardo never returned to Mexico alive his career significantly influenced the Mexican Revolution, even in exile.

Ricardo's trouble with government repression didn't end when he crossed the Rio Grande. On the contrary, it had just begun. For the entire time that Ricardo remained in the United States, the American government, at the behest of the Mexican dictatorship along with privately hired detective agencies, harassed Ricardo and the PLM — arresting him on numerous occasions throughout his revolutionary career, ending only with his death in 1922. Because of this, Ricardo spent most of his time that the Revolution unfolded sitting in American jail cells and expended much of his energy trying to regain his freedom.

Regeneracion resumed publication from San Antonio, Texas, on November 5, 1904. It was smuggled into Mexico clandestinely and continued to remain an annoying thorn in Diaz's side. *Regeneracion* was influential enough that Diaz worked repeatedly to have it shut down, even though it was what turned out to be a deceptively false, freedom of speech in the United States.

Ricardo's paper continued to be a nuisance that Diaz wanted to end, even though it was published in the United States. So by June, 1906, Diaz actually asked the U.S. government, through Ambassador Thompson, to stop *Regeneracion* from publishing, by whatever mean. By this time, *Regeneracion* was a very important medium in the struggle against Diaz. *Regeneracion's* circulation grew to 30,000 in this year. In fact, even moderates like the Governor of Yucatan and

Madero were receiving *Regeneracion*¹. And later, when Ricardo's Anarchism was more apparent, prominent Anarchists, such as Voltairine de Cleyre became involved in the Mexican paper².

Shortly after the founding of *Regeneracion*, on August 30, 1900, Camilo Arriaga published the *Invitacion al Partido Liberal* manifesto in San Luis Potosi. This document started a movement that eventually formed the Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM) five years later — Ricardo's main vehicle for organizing the anti-Diaz struggle and later on, for spreading the ideals of Anarchism throughout Mexico. Ricardo formally joined the emerging Liberal movement at the Congreso Liberal on February 5, 1901.

Within a year of the founding of the PLM, the organization issued a formal platform, the *Programa y Manifiesto*. The manifesto was "one of the most important documents in modern Mexican history."³ The Program had 52 specific proposals and ended with the influential slogan, "Reform, Liberty, and Justice".

Among the proposals, the Program including: a four year term for the President and no immediate reelection; the replacement of the army with a national guard; the lifting of restrictions on free speech; the death penalty would only be used in cases of treason; the creation of a government sponsored compulsory education program for children under the age of 14; foreigners that owned land would have to become Mexican citizens or renounce their title to the land; Church business and any money received would be subject to taxes, plus all Church property would be nationalized; Landowners would have to reimburse renters for improvements made to the property; any landowner that held land that was unproductive would forfeit it to the state, who would make it available to landless Mexicans or Mexicans residing in another country; the state would create a bank to provide capital to poor farmers to purchase land; and communal and individual lands taken from indigenous tribes would be returned.

The Platform also included a number of reforms for Mexican labor, including: an 8-hour work day and a minimum wage of a peso per day would be established; children under the age of 14 would not be permitted to work; employers were to be responsible for paying the cost of on the job injuries to their workers and Sunday was a "obligatory day of rest". The PLM Program was to be very influential in the preceding years of revolution and the platform's section on labor "would be adopted in great part by the major labor movement of the Mexican Revolution."⁴

The document's influence went well beyond merely the urban laboring classes of Mexico. Of the 52 individual proposals contained in the PLM platform of 1906, 23 were eventually adopted in the Constitution of 1917, while 26 were adopted in a more mild form, not going as far as the original PLM platform — while only three were entirely neglected.⁵

¹ James D. Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution, 1900–1913*, Austin: the University of Texas Press, 1968, page 124.

² Colin M. MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution: The Political Trials of Ricardo Flores Magon in the United States*, Berkeley: University of California, 1991, page 52.

³ Ward S. Albro, *Always a Rebel: Ricardo Flores Magon and the Mexican Revolution*, Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1992, page 44.

⁴ Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution*, page 130.

⁵ Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution*, page 239.

1906: Strikes, Uprisings and the Beginning of the End of Porfiriato

“The most dramatic” instances of increasing opposition to the Diaz regime were the strikes of 1906 — one at the Cananea Copper Company in Sonora and the other at Rio Blanco.¹

The Cananea strike began suddenly on June 1. The workers demanded “an eight-hour work day and a higher minimum wage” and were “protesting racial discrimination against Mexicans.”² The workers rioted for two days and put up fierce resistance for another two days with firearms in hand. Interestingly, the first forces on the side of the Cooper Company to arrive were Arizona Rangers, because the nearest Mexican army troops were a day’s journey away. But by the 6th of June the strike ended when the Governor of Sonora, backed by 2,000 Federal troops threatened the strikers with conscription into the Yaqui Indian war in the southern part of the state.

In the end, between 30 and 100 Mexicans were killed. The results were severe and immediate. On the one hand, “the government suffered a severe setback in national popularity”; plus, with an obvious contingent of PLM supporters who helped to agitate the striking workers, the governments of Mexico and United States “began a concerted drive to break the PLM.”³

The second major strike occurred at the Rio Blanco factory in Orizaba in central Mexico. In April of that year, a number of Rio Blanco workers formed the Gran Circulo de Obreros Libres (GCOL) which immediately affiliated with the PLM. The GCOL helped to stir up unrest there, and on December 7, a large meeting was held by the GCOL which numbered about 3,000 workers. They drew up a series of demands that included the prohibition of company stores, shorter working hours and overtime pay among others. A strike ensued and within a few days, the number of strikers number nearly 7,000.

The factory owners retaliated by locking out workers on December 22, affecting 57,000 people in Puebla, Orizaba, Mexico City, Veracruz, Queretaro and Guadalajara. “The workers turned to Diaz for mediation: he agreed to intercede but supported the factory owners on almost every point.”⁴ But since the strike fund had been exhausted within four days of the beginning of the strike, the GCOL attempted to end the strike, and it did on January 4, 1907, in most parts of Mexico — except for Rio Blanco.

The one-sided agreement caused an immediate reaction against the government in Rio Blanco. Protesters shouted slogans like “Death to Diaz!” and “Down with the dictatorship!”⁵ Then, on January 7, a group of dissidents met workers arriving for work outside the factory. As the crowd enlarged, they then attacked and burned the company store. From there, they moved into the

¹ Friedrich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981, page 30.

² John M. Hart, *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class, 1860–1931*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987, page 91.

³ Hart, *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class*, page 92.

⁴ Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico*, page 30.

⁵ Hart, *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class*, page 96.

city, attacked the jail and released all the prisoners — all the while chanting: “Death to Porfirio Diaz!”.

News of these events spread quickly and later in the day, they linked up with workers in the nearby towns of Santa Rosa and Nogales. These combined forces then participated in armed skirmishes with the army for the next two days. Katz reports that the German minister in Mexico stated that when asked by the factory owners to crush the strike by force, Diaz replied, “Thank God, I can still kill.”⁶ And kill he did. It all ended on the 9th, leaving nearly 200 workers and 25 soldiers dead, 400 workers sat in jail-cells and some 1,500 lost their jobs.

Cananea and Rio Blanco was important because the events “revealed the growing working-class unrest that fueled the PLM [and] the coming revolution.”⁷ Of course, these events did not go unnoticed by the government either. “After the stormy summer of 1906, the Mexican government feared a projected general uprising on September 16, Mexican Independence Day. Trying not to alarm the populace, the government quietly canceled many of the traditional celebrations.”⁸ In fact, the PLM was planning an uprising.

By this time, the PLM had be able to organize some 44 clandestine guerrilla groups throughout Mexico — some as large as 300 men, though the average was around 50. In turned out that groups in the United States were easier to arm than in Mexico. Because of this, many of the PLM units were located just across the border.

The main center of this activity was in Arizona in the border town of Douglas. The PLM’s plans were foiled when the Governor of Sonora, Rafael Izabel, successful planted an agent amongst the PLM in the Douglas. The Arizona Rangers were notified of the PLM activities, and between September 2nd and 5th, much of the Liberal apparatus was arrested and the most of their arms were confiscated before the actual uprising could occur.

Undaunted, the PLM continued to plan an uprising. While their numbers were relatively small, the PLM wanted to capitalize on the recent social unrest. According to Albro, the armed revolt of 1906 was purposely done in the shadow of the strike at Cananea.⁹ The uprising was planned for late September at which time, coordinated guerrilla groups would simultaneously attack various parts of Mexico. Things did not quite go according to the original plan, to say the least.

The revolt started on September 26, at the town of Jimenez. “With a force about sixty men, [Juan Jose] Arredondo seized the customs house and looted it and the town treasury of about \$100, giving a receipt in the name of the junta [of the PLM]... The attackers withdrew the next morning and were then attacked themselves by federal troops while attempting to get supplies at the Hacienda Victoria nearby. After further fighting, additional troops were able to kill, capture or disperse the remaining rebels. Most fled across the border and into the United States.”¹⁰

A similar revolt occurred in Veracruz. led by Hilario C. Salas. This revolt numbered about 1000 men which was divided into three main units. “Salas led his force [of about 300 men] into Acayucan and met with considerable success in heavy fighting. In the leading assault on the palacio municipal, however, Salas was wounded; deprived of their leader the untrained forces withdrew from the city.”¹¹ The two remaining units made other unsuccessful attacks on the cities

⁶ Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico*, page 30.

⁷ Hart, *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class*, page 93.

⁸ Albro, *Always a Rebel*, page 57.

⁹ Albro, *Always a Rebel*, page 58.

¹⁰ Albro, *Always a Rebel*, page 62.

¹¹ Albro, *Always a Rebel*, page 64.

of Minatitlan and Puerto Mexico. The remaining revolutionary forces of the PLM, over the next several days, were killed, captured or sent fleeing back into the hills.

Diaz publicly ignored the attack, describing it as an “affair of no political significance” and the work of mere “outlaws.”¹² But this was merely propaganda and damage-control on the dictator’s part. Certainly the revolt was a failure — the PLM units did not actually hold any towns for any length of time, and they did not lead to other, spontaneous, uprisings in other parts of Mexico, as the PLM had hoped. Nevertheless, the revolt was a “great milestone on the road to the Revolution of 1910. Not only would this revolt help to undermine the Porfiriato but it would give greater credibility to the Liberal Party program.”¹³ Unfortunately from Ricardo’s standpoint, this recognition also had very disastrous consequences. It helped to foster a situation of constant imprisonment and harassment, both in Mexico and the United States, that lasted for the duration of the Revolution.

¹² Albro, *Always a Rebel*, page 63.

¹³ Albro, *Always a Rebel*, page 58.

Anarchism Emerges From the Liberals

Before this uprising, the PLM was, at least on the surface, a fairly unified group with a unified plan of action — oust Diaz and restore civil rights to Mexico. In 1905, Francisco Madero gave \$2,000 (U.S.) to the Liberals to help finance Regeneracion. In fact, he wrote to Ricardo, stating that he found “all your ideas congenial.”¹ But this unified view was soon to become very complex and increasingly divergent, especially on what would replace the dictatorship and how that replacement would occur. Moderate collaboration quickly dissipated as Ricardo’s cryptic-radicalism transformed into his overt anarchism.

As early as 1900, Ricardo had been familiar with the works of Kropotkin, Bakunin, Jean Grave, Enrrico Malatesta and Maxim Gorki. Ironically, it was Camilo Arriaga who was responsible for exposing many of the leaders of the PLM to the political ideology of Anarchism. It is ironic because Arriaga never could embrace the full extent of Ricardo’s radicalism — he always remained more conservative. According to Cockcroft, even Madero was familiar with the Russian Anarchist Kropotkin.² Familiarity is one thing, while advocacy is quite another. According to Albro, the exact time of Ricardo’s conversion to Anarchism is controversial, but it is clear that Ricardo didn’t publicly admit his true beliefs until 1907.³

Madero disagreed with the PLM’s proclamation in September, 1906, that all peaceful methods for achieving civil rights under Diaz were exhausted. So when the PLM uprising occurred in 1906, the split became obvious. Between 1906 and 1910, a complete break between Madero and the majority of the PLM became a reality. This was inevitable because of the combined effect of the 1906 uprising, Ricardo’s open embrace of anarchism and the subsequent support and solidarity that the PLM lent to the emerging labor movement.

The *Le Temps Nouveaux*, an influential French anarchist journal, in an editorial blamed Ricardo for his failure to openly proclaim his anarchism, arguing that it was a fatal political error. MacLachlan agrees, stating that the “most important mistake remains the PLM’s failure to publicly convey its anarchistic program prior to 1911.”⁴ Basically, Ricardo was building the wrong kind of organization with the wrong kind of people for the goals he ultimately fought for. Consequently, the PLM experienced widespread defections from the party in the subsequent years after the 1906 uprising, an increasingly after Madero’s triumph over the Porfiriato.

Interestingly in the end, Ricardo blamed Arriaga for the split between Madero and the PLM — “Madero and I were good friends until that miserable turncoat Arriaga started slandering me” — but the fact remains, Ricardo’s increasing radicalism was in no way acceptable to Madero and the other, non-revolutionary, Liberals.⁵

¹ Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution*, page 120.

² Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution*, page 70.

³ Albro, *Always a Rebel*, page 29.

⁴ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 113.

⁵ Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution*, page 122.

After his break from the moderate Liberals, Ricardo continued to become increasingly radical. By November 1914, after Madero's downfall, Ricardo was still attacking the Mexican State and all who tried to reestablish it. In his declaration entitled, "To the workers of the United States", he stated:

"If to the surface of this tremendous conflict come the names of Villa, Carranza or any other personality, who, as shown by their actions, do not have any other objective than the acquisition of power. The truth is that those men are not the revolution, but mere military leaders that pretend to profit to their personal wishes out of the popular movement"⁶

But more importantly than this attack on those who would rule a Mexican state, the internationalism, inherent in Ricardo's Anarchism, came through clearly. Prophetically, he warned that:

"If the economic revolution is crushed, the American workingmen will suffer the consequences, for an immigration of Mexican workingmen still greater than the one that has been taking place during the last ten or fifteen years, will take place, and the salaries in this country will be lower still... The wealth of the magnates of American industry will flow into Mexico, to them, a field for all the adventurers and all the exploiters; the manufacturers of the United States would be transplanted to Mexico, that would become an ideal land for business because of the cheapness of salaries, and the American workingmen will find their factories and firms in this country closed down because it will be more profitable to their bosses..."⁷

The manifesto of 1914 was fully of fiery tracts like "We tell you: lend us solidarity and we will bury the capitalist system in Mexico."⁸ But according to MacLachlan, "such propaganda efforts probably had little impact."⁹ The reason for this was Ricardo's political and physical isolation. Since he remained in the United States, mainly in Los Angeles or in jail, he was perceived by many as being removed from the struggle. To be sure, this was not of Ricardo's choosing.

⁶ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 121.

⁷ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 123.

⁸ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 124.

⁹ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 55.

The Biggest Obstacle: the United States Government

Ricardo and his Magonistas were never to become a significant threat to the Mexican state — no matter who sat at the helm. This was largely the result of the repression and harassment, not from Mexico, but from the United States government.

Dating back at least to the Haymarket affair in 1886, the U.S government had been extremely antagonistic to the ideology of Anarchism and leftist radicalism in general. In the aftermath of the assassination of president McKinley in 1901, the government basically declared war on all Anarchists. This often took the form of severe repression. At its height in 1919, the government even resorted to mass deportations to rid the country of Anarchism. This all-out assault didn't end until Anarchism largely disappeared from the United States in the late-1920s and early 1930s.

So why worry about a Mexican who was working to overthrow, not the U.S. government, but its neighbor to the south? According to MacLachlan, “the United States government initially viewed [Ricardo] as a Mexican problem, but in the end, it considered him a danger to internal security and responded accordingly.”¹ MacLachlan goes on to argue that Ricardo’s failure “to galvanize the working class into revolutionary action and posed little real danger to the government.”² This ability to “galvanize” was totally impossible while Ricardo was under constant harassment, imprisonment, threats of deportation, and attempted assassinations on his life. It seems that the U.S. government was entirely successful in its efforts.

Not surprisingly, under the ideological conditions that existed in America, the U.S. government was less interested in the PLM’s effect on Mexico than they were for its implication on United States soil. The U.S. judicial system attacked Ricardo and his fellow Magonistas more for their ideas than their actual actions. MacLachlan, speaking of the 1912 court proceedings against the PLM leaders which grew out of the PLM’s invasion of Baja California, argues that the United States “appeared more interested in controlling radicalism than attempting to uphold the neutrality laws.”³

In reaction to this political witch-hunt, the Magon brothers were forced to defend, not necessarily their often flagrant violations of U.S. neutrality laws, but instead their radical political ideas. Enrique, while addressing the Federal court in Los Angeles, on June 22, 1916, tried to garner sympathy for their cause from their American audience by stating that Thomas Jefferson was “the anarchist of his time.”⁴ Trying to justify and create a better understanding of their politics before a belligerent court, Enrique said, “the revolution in Mexico is... not a political but a social and economic revolution and it is necessary to educate people, to teach them the real causes of

¹ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 115.

² MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 117.

³ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 115.

⁴ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 131.

their misery and slavery, and to point out to them the way to freedom, fraternity and equality.”⁵ Enrique closed his final arguments by maintaining that “the court may choose between law and justice.”⁶

Sanctioned by the Mexican and United States governments, in August, 1907, almost entire PLM Junta was arrested in Los Angeles by Furlong Detective Agency, hired by industrialist William Greene. Subsequently Ricardo, and many others of the PLM leadership, were repeatedly arrested over the years that spanned the Revolution. Ricardo spent the remainder of his life sitting in U.S. jails. Of the nineteen years Ricardo was in the United States, more than half that time was spent in jail. During this time, he watched helplessly as the PLM movement slowly lost momentum and deteriorated in his absence. With Madero’s popular Anti-Reelection campaign and the subsequent uprising in 1910, and the PLM’s state of disorganization, Madero’s forces were able to win over a large section of the PLM.

This forced sabbatical was detrimental to the Magonista cause. During Ricardo’s years in U.S. prison, often in the company of other fellow PLM leaders, the Mexican political landscape changed dramatically. When opposition to Madero took the form of three main groups, headed by Zapata, Villa and Carranza, it had the effect of splintering the remaining followers of the PLM. As a result of Ricardo’s physical absence from the center of the events, most of the PLM membership, including much of the PLM leadership, gradually aligned themselves with one of the three major forces.

⁵ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 132.

⁶ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 133.

1911: the Liberation of Baja California

While the U.S. government essentially paralyzes the PLM leadership for most of the period of the revolution, there was one, albeit small, glimmer of hope for the Magonistas — Baja, California. Their first major success was the capturing of the town of Mexicali, on January 29, 1911. With a small force of only 18, led by Jose Maria Leyva and Simon Berthold, they easily took the town. It was a victory, albeit small, to be sure; “it proved that the Liberals were able to take a strategic objective without assistance from another revolutionary group.”¹

Within two days the force swelled to 60, the day following, it reached 120. This number included approximately 40 Wobblies of the American Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), who were recruited on February 5, at the Labor Temple in Los Angeles. There a manifesto was read, written by Jack London, in support of the Magonistas. He stated humorously that “we socialists, anarchists, hobos, chicken thieves, outlaws and undesirable citizens of the U.S. are with you heart and soul.”²

In total, the Magonista forces numbered about 500 in Baja, which included approximately 100 Anglo-American Wobblies³. Among these Wobblies were the famed martyrs of the IWW cause, Frank Little and Joe Hill.⁴ To put a stop to this movement before it could grow any larger, Colonel Vega, the governor of the region, sent a force of 100 to dislodge the Magonistas from Mexicali. But he was entirely unsuccessful — it took him more than a week to get there, he experienced large numbers of desertions and his forces were finally routed on February 15.

The Magonistas held this area for some time, and ended up capturing small pockets of other areas in Nuevo Leon, Chihuahua, and Sonora. In a despatch from the U.S. Consul in San Antonio, Texas, dated March 2, 1911, it was reported in *Regeneracion* that Prisciliano Silva, of the PLM, captured Guadalupe, Chihuahua, on February 8, and “secured many munitions of war, provisions, much clothing and many things for a campaign of war.”⁵ In late June, Silva captured Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, lost it, and then recaptured it again. In Sonora, the rebels, numbering about 200, captured Sasabe, and later took Hermisillo, Arizpe and Bacoachi⁶. They were not as successful as their counterparts in Chihuahua or Baja. Jose Cardoza, the leader in Sonora, and 27 others in his group were captured and executed in March.

By late May, the Magonistas forces in Baja consisted of a mere 100 men, including 35 Mexicans, 30 Cocopah Indians and 35 Wobblies. At this point, the PLM’s army hardly could be said to exist.

¹ Lowell L. Blaisdell, *The Desert Revolution: Baja California, 1911*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1962, pages 39–40.

² Blaisdell, *The Desert Revolution*, page 42.

³ Despatch from U.S. Consul to the Secretary of State, June 16, 1911, from *Documents on the Mexican Revolution*, edited by Gene Z. Hanrahan, Salisbury, N.C.: Documentary Publications, 1976, Vol. 1, Part II, pages 377–382.

⁴ Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, page 209.

⁵ Despatch from U.S. Consul to the Secretary of State, March 2, 1911, from *Documents*, Hanrahan, Vol. 1, Part I, pages 198–202.

⁶ American Consul to the Secretary of State, Oct 7, 1911, from *Documents* Hanrahan, Vol. 1, Part I, pages 60–61.

They were exhausted, without much provisions and ill-armed. The summer was to prove to be a severe downturn for the PLM armed forces.

In June, Madero turned his attention to the Baja peninsula. He had hoped that the U.S. Department of Justice would rid him of the Magonista problem, but the PLM still persisted despite the persecution for the north. Madero decided to send a detachment of his forces into the PLM-held territory to oust the Anarchist revolutionaries. It didn't take much, for on June 17, before any clashes with the Madero forces took place, the Magonistas at Mexicali surrendered. On June 22 the Magonistas in Tijuana, 230 strong, met the regrouped forces of Colonel Vega. After 3 hours of fighting, the revolutionaries were defeated — 30 rebels were killed and the rest fled across the border.

During the summer of 1911, the Magonistas experienced a severe defeat politically, when General Ferris, attempting American filibuster in Baja, was somehow successfully associated with the PLM in the public mind. During this time, the PLM became completely isolated — from the American Socialists, the people of Baja, the pro-Diaz forces and Madero. To make things worse, Ricardo and Enrique Magon were jailed in the U.S., again, at this time. It wasn't until the winter of 1911 that the PLM would again play any significant role in the armed battles of the revolution — then, they joined forces for a time with General Reyes, on November 20, 1911⁷. But this limited success, always in the shadow of Reyes' superior forces, quickly came to an end.

The Magonistas were entirely unsuccessful in their attempt to create an Anarchistic society in parts of Mexico during 1910 and 1911 through means of armed revolt. They held only very small pockets of territory for only very short periods of time — no major changes, political, social or economic, could be effected under these circumstances. But certainly it would be incorrect to say that they had no influence, what so ever, on the course of the revolution. According to Cockcroft, however pitiful the Magonista forces were, they were crucial in the emergence of the Madero victory over the Diaz dictatorship:

“The November, 1910 — February, 1911, period of the Mexican Revolution was characterized by major PLM military successes, military failure in the Madero camp (even in March, when Madero lost his first major engagement, at Casas Grandes), and a scission between Maderistas and PLM moderates on the one hand, and PLM radicals on the other. There is abundant evidence to justify the hypothesis that the PLM played a critical role in maintaining revolutionary impetus during the November-February period, as well as during 1906–1910, without which impetus the Madero revolt might never have started or, ultimately, succeed.”⁸

⁷ Report by the Attorney General, from Documents, Hanrahan, Vol 1, Part II, page 313.

⁸ Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution*, page 183.

The Urban Centers and the Emergence of Anarcho-Syndicalism

In 1910, the population of Mexico was slightly over fifteen million. Of that, nine and a half million were listed as either peons or landless agricultural laborer class.¹ Obviously, there was only a very small urban working class. While the urban laboring population may have been small, they organized themselves into a strong force over the course of the Revolution.

The combined efforts of Mexican laborers, a hand full of exiles from the radical and powerful Spanish Anarcho-syndicalist union, the Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), and the propagation of ideas through the pages of *Accion directa*, succeeded in making the Casa del Obrero Mundial the premier labor union by the end of 1912. The importance of this group is upheld by Hart, who called the Casa, “the omnipotent labor organization in Mexico” by 1913.² In fact the Casa was the only labor group during this early period to claim national representation and the “Casa dominated the labor movement in Mexico from 1912 to 1918.”³

The Casa was opened in July 1912 and was founded on the ideals of Anarcho-syndicalism. As such, their goals included creating a society based on workers’ self-management and coordination of production based on a syndicate system of federated unions of producers. Like other Anarchists, they saw the state as nothing more than a mechanism of repression, and therefore worked, not to transform it, but to abolish it. Primarily, the preferred weapon of the Anarcho-syndicalists was the General Strike to destroy capitalism, which they saw as the their main goal.

Many of the most important ideas in the Casa were expressed by the Luz Anarchist group in the *Manifiesto Anarquista del Grupo Luz*. The Luz group, led by Juan Francisco Moncaleano, was to fill the most important posts of the Casa after it’s founding. The *Manifiesto*’s ten points included:

1. To Enlighten an enslaved and ignorant people.
2. To overthrow the tormentors of mankind: clergy, government and capital.
3. To not serve the ambitions of any political charlatan, because no man has the right to govern another.
4. To make known that all men are equal because they are all ruled by the same natural laws and not by arbitrary ones.
5. To demand explanations from the opulent rich regarding their wealth, from the government regarding its lying authority, and from the representatives of the bandit god for his celestial powers.
6. To devastate the social institutions generated by torturers and loafers.

¹ Majorie Ruth Clark, *Organized Labor in Mexico*, New York: Russell & Russell, 1973, page 15.

² Hart, *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class*, page 118.

³ Clark, *Organized Labor in Mexico*, page 23.

7. To gain freedom for the enslaved worker.
8. To use truth as the ultimate weapon against inequality.
9. To struggle against fear, the terrible tyrant of the people.
10. To march forward towards redemption, toward the universal nation where all can live with mutual respect, in absolute freedom, without national political father figures, without gods in the sky or the insolent rich.⁴

“For the first time, Mexico’s proletariat acted in a definitive manner on the stage of history, and the urban workers were mobilized for the most part by the anarchists.”[46]

While strikes were certainly used, and they were often effective, the Anarcho-syndicalists also used education as a weapon against the system they despised. Rafael Pez Taylor, of the Escuela Racionalista (a school based on the ideas of Spanish Anarchist Francisco Ferrer), said: “...all one has to do is enlighten the soldier in order for him to cease being one.”⁴⁷ In fact, education, based on mutual aid, was not only an ideal, but was used very successfully to recruit workers into the Anarcho-syndicalist movement. They organized schools, like the Escuela Racionalista, in which they taught illiterate workers to read. This was very popular and was effective in reaching out to the working-class, who were then exposed to these new ideas.

⁴ Hart, *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class*, page 113. ⁴⁶ Hart, *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class*, page 103.

Anarcho-Syndicalists and the Competing Government Factions

While the government of Madero was obviously antagonistic to the idea of an independent, let alone Anarcho-syndicalist, union, he never really had enough room to destroy them because of his own problems maintaining power. “Fearful of its influence in labor circles, Madero shut down the Casa, suppressed its newspaper, arrested its Mexican leaders, and exiled its foreign spokesmen... Concurrently, government officials encouraged the formation of a rival, less militant Gran Liga Obrera.”¹ But Madero had no time to deal with the anarchists on any kind of continual basis, and up until February 1913, when Madero was finally overthrown by Huerta, he had remained more worried about the collapse of his government.

But Huerta was different. Huerta’s regime was arguably even more antagonistic to labor than Madero. But more importantly, two main reasons were responsible for the severity of Huerta’s repression of the Casa. First, he had more room to maneuver than Madero and his coalition, devoid of any pretenses of idealism, which was almost entirely opposed to the needs of labor. Secondly, the Casa had grown more powerful. On May Day, 1913, the Casa organized a march of 20,000 through downtown Mexico City for the labor holiday.

Huerta reacted by imprisoning many prominent Casa leaders and banned the labor organization. Later, many petitioned the Congress for the release of the Casa leadership. When Congress then stated its intention to stay in session until it investigated the situation Huerta just dissolved the Congress.² To keep them under control, Huerta simultaneously appointed “able reformers”, like Andres Molina Enriquez and Rafael Sierra, to head the Department of Labor.³ So Huerta, unlike Madero sought to counter the Anarcho-syndicalists by creating rival labor institutions. This would become the standard response from later governments as well.

By July, 1914, Huerta was driven from power and the Anarcho-syndicalists watched once again as various groups competed for the seat of government. With Pancho Villa to the North, Zapata to the South and the forces of Carranza in the center, the Casa found itself in a dilemma: who to support?

Zapata had attacked the timid reforms of the Carranza administration, stating that Carranza offered “freedom of the press for those that cannot read; free elections for those who do not know the candidates; proper legal proceedings for those who have never had anything to do with an attorney.”⁴ Certainly this echoed the sentiments of the Casa, but the Zapatistas were very religious, largely catholic, which the Anarcho-syndicalists found repulsive.

¹ Ramon Eduardo Ruiz, *Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries, 1911–1923*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, page 37.

² Hart, *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class*, page 122.

³ Ruiz, *Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries*, page 40.

⁴ Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico*, page 260.

On November 7, 1915, Zapata finally issued a proposed labor law. But it merely exposed Zapata's lack of understanding of his urban counterparts. It included an eight-hour day, the prohibition of work for children under that age of fourteen, worker cooperative to run factories abandoned by owners, and a fixed minimum wage. But "it failed to respond to some of the most important demands [of the] Mexican labor movement", which included "more control of foreign property, equal payment and treatment for foreign and Mexican workers, and extensive and clearly defined right to strike, and a guarantee of the status of trade unions."⁵ More importantly it came too late, the majority of the Casa forged an alliance with the Carranza's Constitutionalists the February before.

Ruiz explained how this alliance came into being:

"From the Casa's perspective, none of the squabbling factions offered much hope. Yet at the last moment, the painter Gerardo Murillo, better known as Dr. Alt, a stalwart of the Casa and a follower of Alvaro Obregon, prevailed upon his colleagues not to publish a declaration of neutrality... Alt and his cohorts, however, perhaps speaking for the Obregon wing of the revolutionaries, ultimately won over the patrons of the Casa to the Constitutionalists' cause... Alt's plea, endorsed by the anarcho-syndicalists in the Casa del Obrero Mundial, pitted labor against peasants."⁶

The Anarcho-syndicalists did not agree on this in a solid bloc. When the forces of Villa and Zapata forced Carranza and the Constitutionalists to flee Mexico City, membership in the Casa split into three factions. Most of the membership left with the Constitutionalists, and to a lesser degree, many joined the Villistas. Only handful joined the Zapatistas, such as Antonio Diaz Soto y Gama and Luis Mendez.

Cockcroft speculates that the Anarcho-syndicalists joined the forces of Carranza because of feelings of political impotence in the face of the revolution's intensified civil war. Hart totally disagreed, arguing that the Casa-Carranza pact was sanctioned by the Casa because they felt that they could use the resources Carranza could offer in order to destroy him and his government. Ironically, Carranza felt the situation was just the opposite – he would use the Anarcho-syndicalists.

In fact, the pact was a concession on both sides. In return for promises of support against the opposing factions (Villa and Zapata), including military support, Carranza promised the Anarcho-syndicalists independence and a free hand to organize labor as they saw fit. This was the impetus for the creation of the famous "Red Battalions", filled with members of the Casa, who participated in battles with the Zapatistas on the outskirts of Mexico City.

John Tutino argues that the "reasons are clear" for the urban workers' support, including the Casa, of the Constitutionalists rather than the Villistas or Zapatistas. "Organized urban laborers lived in the rapidly commercializing, industrializing world that the Constitutionalists represented – and promoted". Plus, "city labor leaders were shocked by the deep religiosity of the Zapatistas who occupied Mexico City."⁷ In fact, even much of the American Left, mostly Socialist and moderates like Samuel Gompers though, also supported Carranza.

⁵ Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico*, page 275.

⁶ Ruiz, *Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries*, page 49.

⁷ John Tutino, "Revolutionary Confrontation, 1913 – 1917", from *Provinces of the Revolution: Essays on Regional Mexican History, 1910–1929*, edited by Thomas Benjamin and Mark Wasserman, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990, page 62.

Ricardo Flores Magon and Soto y Gama vehemently disagreed with this alliance. While Ricardo languished in a U.S. jail and Soto y Gama organized in the Zapatista controlled South, they could only protest from afar — they argued that the anarcho-syndicalists “sold out.”⁸ Certainly Carranza also was forced to give up power in the process as well. The Anarcho-syndicalists received “much-needed food, money, equipment, meeting halls, and printing presses, as well as guaranteed freedom to act.”⁹ Even people like Rosendo Salazar, a strong apologist for the Casa-Carranza pact, later admitted that “they had signed the Casa’s death warrant.”¹⁰ Ruiz agreed, stating that “in return for short-run advantages, according to critics, the Casa betrayed its principles and the welfare of labor.”¹¹

⁸ Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution*, page 228.

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¹⁰ Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution*, page 229.

¹¹ Ruiz, *Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries*, page 49.

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John Tutino described the ideology of Carranza as the following:

“The ideological program of the Constitutionalists was liberal, statist, nationalist, and populist. It was liberal in promoting an entrepreneurial, capitalist vision of Mexico’s future, insisting on private property, social individualism, and a limited role for the traditional church. It was statist in demanding a strong national state as the necessary means to promote liberal economic goals. It was nationalist, not by seeking to isolate Mexico from international influence, but by demanding more Mexican control over Mexican politics and Mexican involvement in the international economy. And it was populist in insisting that the state and economic elites would provide for the well-being of the masses.”¹

It is obvious that the ideologies of the Constitutionalists and the Anarcho-syndicalists severely clashed. The Casa was not liberal, statist, nor nationalist — even their brand of populism was entirely different. This “strange pact” between the Casa and Carranza was not to last for long.² Almost from the start, there was trouble. Dr. Alt, who helped to forge the pact, even warned workers against cooperating with Carranza’s Department of Labor.

On the other side, Carranza was also very wary of the pact, but most especially the Red Battalions. Carranza “correctly interpreted the Casa’s Red Battalions as a step towards the building of a strong and independent labor base from which to challenge his authority.”³ In fact, the Casa’s members, organized into six Red Battalions in all, enjoyed surprising success. According to a memorandum of the Department of Labor, by July, 1916, the Casa “controlled every society club and labor syndicate in Mexico and many in the provinces.”⁴

Carranza’s own Department of Labor recommended strengthening ties with the Casa to in an attempt to combat it’s success, mainly by minimizing it’s independence. Carranza disagreed and chose to pursue a more belligerent plan of action by attacking the Casa instead of trying to co-opt them — which was the pact failed to do. In early 1916, Carranza disbanded all of the Red Battalions. Ironically, this came back to haunt Carranza, for an “important part of Obregon’s army after March 1915 came from urban labor organized in Red Battalions, not from the countryside at all.”⁵ But Carranza’s troubles with Obregon were still on the distant horizon. In the mean time, the Casa was to be eliminated.

¹ Tutino, “Revolutionary Confrontation, 1913 – 1917”, page 50.

² Ruiz, *Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries*, page 52.

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⁴ Ruiz, *Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries*, page 53.

⁵ Linda Hall, “Alvaro Obregon and the agrarian movement, 1912–1920”, from *Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution*, edited by D. A. Brading, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, page 126.

In later part of 1915 and early 1916, strikes swept across many parts of the country. Dock workers in Veracruz and Tampico, electricians and streetcar operators of Guadalajara, miners of El Oro, and bakers and streetcar operators of the capital, went on strike. Carranza probably was concerned about these occurrences, but as long as they were aimed at private interests, and not himself, he remained indifferent. That changed as the reasons and subsequent targets of the strikes changed.

By mid-1916, the devaluation of paper currency issued by the Carranza's government became a major problem for the working-class. Their wages may have appeared to remain steady, but their buying power was severely compromised. In reaction strikes, such as the port strike in Veracruz, began to vocalize against this situation. Correspondingly, they targeted the real problem of depressed wages: the government. Instead of paper money, the workers demanded gold for compensation. Clark maintains that the "depreciated paper currency was the immediate cause of the open break between the working class and the First Chief [Carranza]."⁶

The issue finally came to a head in July, 1916. Carranza had not attempted a frontal assault on the Anarcho-syndicalists until he felt powerful enough — until his consolidation of power was complete. When the Anarcho-syndicalists planned a General Strike for July, 1916, Carranza felt that the time was now. The strike involved about 30,000 workers of the Casa. Carranza immediately attacked by banning the Casa. He sent troops to occupy the offices of the Casa and arrested its leadership.

But Carranza went too far in the minds of many, even some of his past supporters, when he reinstated the 1862 statute which made it treason, punishable by death, for striking against the government's interest. Carranza attempted to prosecute the leaders of the General Strike, but surprisingly the military courts acquitted them. While in the end no leader of the Casa was executed, the organization was struck with a fatal blow.

Carranza did not waste anytime, he immediately used troops to breakup the Casa affiliates across the country, jailed every leader they could catch They even ordered state governors and military leaders to confiscate all radical literature, and if possible, arrest the authors.⁷ Enraged, Enrique Flores Magon publicly chastised Carranza, emphasizing that Carranza, "like every shrewd politician, talked and acted as a radical only when he needed labor-class support."⁸ There was little that the Magon brothers, or the beleaguered Anarcho-syndicalists could do — the Casa was defeated.

Labor was defeated only temporarily. Certainly Anarcho-syndicalism was waning at this time — in Mexico and much of the world. But in 1921, after Carranza was out, radical elements which included communists, members of the IWW, and the old Casa, formed the Confederacion General de Trabajadores (CGT). This independent labor, like the Casa, did not carry government sanction so the movement was forbidden even to use the mails to distribute its newspaper, *Via Libre*.

Influence of the CGT and any other independent union had competition after 1920, when the government recognized the national Confederacion Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM), which claimed a membership of 350,000. The CROM was essentially gained this government recognition because it was now tied to the wishes of government. Carranza, unlike Porfirio Diaz and Madero, understood the inevitability of labor unions and sought to control it, rather than con-

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⁷ Ruiz, *Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries*, page 56.

⁸ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 54.

stantly working to destroy it. Not surprisingly then, “despite a platform that incorporated radical labor rhetoric, the CROM established a reputation for seeking an ‘equilibrium between labor and capital’. Opportunistic and practical, it quickly came to terms with capitalism, government, and employers.”⁹ With the hegemony of CROM, the Anarcho-syndicalists were never to regain the power they had during the 1912–1916 period.

⁹ Ruiz, *Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries*, page 60.

The Case of Zapatismo: Agrarianism and Communalism

“The immense majority of Mexican pueblos and citizens are owners of no more than the land they walk on... because lands, timber, and water are monopolized in a few hands” states Article 7 of the Plan Ayala.¹ This plan was issued in November, 1911, and until 1918, represented the issues that Emiliano Zapata and his rural followers were fighting for. While a large portion of the Plan was reserved for attacks upon Madero for his failings to uphold his own plan, that of San Luis Potosi — the document reveals the primary importance the Zapatistas placed on agrarian reform.

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The means to this reform took the only form left available to them: armed revolt. The chosen method of reform was de facto expropriation. As the Zapatistas fought, they dismantled the hacienda control, often with little or no compensation. Instead of giving the land to individuals, “for the most part, [the land]... was given to the village communities, which, in keeping with their old customs, put it at the disposal of their members.”² In other words, the land was to be used in the service of the community, not just for personal gain. This reflected the Zapatista’s commitment to what might be termed: agrarian communalism.

Zapata and his forces were very successful for the significant fact that they were mostly from the same background and social class. The Zapatistas were the “most homogeneous of all revolutionary movements... the great majority of them were free peasants, some of whom had been employed for several months as agricultural workers; a minority consisted of hacienda peons.”³ This was the “great strength of the Zapatista movement”, according to Tutino – their ideology and organization were both “grounded in the peasant communities of Morelos.”⁴

This shared past allowed for a united movement which translated into an effective military advantage. “That coherence rooted in Morelos communities made the Zapatistas long impregnable on their home ground. Opposing armies might march through and win battles, but the Zapatistas could fade into the hills and into the villages, to reappear as locally predominant once the troops left.”⁵

Organizationally, Zapata’s military structure was much different than his counterparts, like Carranza and even Pancho Villa, for he was more of a coordinator than the classic strongman – the caudillo. While Zapata was responsible for specifying operations, the overall structure of command was relatively decentralized. This worked very well. Womack states that the “Morelos chiefs learned to synchronize their attacks, so that in a single day federal commanders would have to repel raids on three or four district seats, not knowing whether any or all of them were in earnest.”⁶

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⁶ Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, page 181.

The entire military organization was tied, intimately, with the local communities. The actual guerrilla units were fairly small, usually composed of only 200 to 300 men each. But this was the result of where the base originated: the villages. “For much of the year the soldiers lived in their home villages, but they banded together when an important battle was to be fought, and, after the fighting was over, withdrew to their villages once more.”⁷

This localism also had its drawbacks, for the peasants “were simply unwilling to leave their local terrain for any length of time; what happened outside hardly concerned them.”⁸ This limitation was not an oversight on Zapata’s part. “The oft-noted inability of Zapata to project his movement beyond its regional base was not caused by ignorance or naivete. It revealed instead his fine understanding of the values and goals of the peasant villagers he led — and the inherent defensive strength and offensive weakness of a mobilized peasant society.”⁹

These components of Zapatismo were very much akin to the ideals of Anarchism. Their “agrarian communalism” was antagonistic, deliberate or not, to capitalism and its inherent need for the sanctity of private property. Organizationally, their military methods reflect a bias against rigid and institutionalized hierarchy. Again, this is very similar to structures created by other Anarchists, such as Buenaventura Durruti in the Spanish Civil War and Nestor Makhno in the Russia Revolution. Power, social and political, tended to be founded on the community level, flowing upwards when needed.

⁷ Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico*, page 124.

⁸ Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico*, page 125.

⁹ Tutino, “Revolutionary Confrontation, 1913 — 1917”, page 47.

Libertarian-Municipalism and Anarchism

While the Zapata-style military organization was somewhat anarchistic, the Libertarian-Municipalism that was instituted in the villages under Zapata control was very close to the Anarchist ideal.

“The Ideology of the movement focused insistently on village rights to land for peasant production and on local independence. And the Zapatista political organization built on the local tradition of village councils... [Zapata’s] movement developed as a league of community governments. Until Zapata’s death in 1919, leadership remained with the men from the villages. Intellectuals with urban roots might join and serve the movement [like Diaz Soto y Gama]; they could not lead it.”¹

The Zapatistas “dreamt of a political system in which villages could command their own destiny, with the land distributed among individual proprietors without state intervention.”² In other words, government based on the idea that a class of elite political managers would make decisions for the nation as a whole was rejected. The Zapatista method reflected the Anarchist ideal that decision-making power should rest with those that it most affects.

Libertarian-Municipalism fit well within the agrarian plans held by the peasants of Morelos. Local political control was seen by them as a prerequisite for the equitable redistribution of land that the Zapatistas demanded. In fact, the “violent expulsion of local officials (jefe, magistrate, tax-collector and police chief) was the most common and widespread expression of the popular will.”³ These were the most visible obstacles to their goals.

These community ideals were codified in the General Law on Municipal Liberties, decreed by Zapata on September 1916. It declared that:

“Municipal liberty is the first and most important of democratic institutions, since nothing is more natural or worthy of respect than the right which citizen’s of any settlement have of arranging by themselves the affairs of their common life and of resolving as best suits them in the interests and the needs of their locality.”⁴

This had the effect of abolishing all federal and state control over town councils — for the Zapatistas, the foundation of political and social organization. The Decree charged that election must be direct. Zapata felt that unless citizens participated directly in their town’s affairs, a new “despotism” would emerge — local bosses could reassert their influence and the system would

¹ Tutino, “Revolutionary Confrontation, 1913 – 1917”, pages 46–47.

² D. A. Brading, “Introduction: national politics and the populist tradition”, from *Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution*, edited by D. A. Brading, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, page 15.

³ Alan Knight, “Peasant and caudillo in revolutionary Mexico, 1910–17”, from *Caudillo and Peasant in the Mexican Revolution*, edited by D. A. Brading, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, page 27.

⁴ Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, page 264.

no longer reflect the wishes of the community as a whole.⁵ This General Law also placed further restrictions on the municipal process in the hopes of avoiding this situation. The General Law included: a term limit of one year; re-election was only allowed after an official waited for two terms while the post was filled by someone else; minorities were protected by the ability to initiate impeachment hearings; and anyone was allowed to view the financial records at anytime.

Not surprisingly, when the Carrancistas regained control over Morelos, they immediately removed these provisions for libertarian municipalities. Carranza wanted to maintain a tight grip over the country while he consolidated his power and local control undermined this goal. The system was completely abolished and in December, 1920, the Governor of Morelos decreed that municipal councilors would be appointed by the executive. Local democracy was not something Carranza felt to be important. In fact, Womack asserts that the “only vote the Carrancistas prepared for was the presidential election.”⁶

⁵ Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, pages 264–65.

⁶ Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, page 352.

Zapata, Ricardo Flores Magon and Anarchism

While the Zapatistas often sounded like Anarchists and often behaved as such, a controversy surrounds the question of whether or not Zapata was in contact or had any close relations with the prominent Anarchists in other parts of Mexico, especially Ricardo Flores Magon.

Clark states bluntly that the “Magonistas and the Zapatistas joined forces against Madero. They maintained during the revolution and later during the brief presidency of Madero a system of couriers and secret communication” (Clark, 16). But she provides no source for this assertion nor offers any notion of what form this took. Womack, on the other hand, disagrees. “There is a version that Zapata dealt with the notorious anarcho-syndicalist Ricardo Flores Magon... But this is impossible. Ricardo was in American jails from 1907 to August 1910, and then went to Los Angeles to direct the invasion of Baja California.”¹ Certainly the two groups could have maintained communication even though Ricardo was in jail, for he never stopped conversing with members of his own movement during his imprisonment. In fact Womack does note that Zapata probably received copies of *Regeneracion* from the capital.²

Interestingly, Zapata’s Plan of Ayala contained some fairly obvious allusions to earlier PLM rhetoric. “Many of the concepts and phrases that the Liberals harped on most intensely, and most recently in the September manifesto [1911], flash repeatedly through the Ayala plan.”³ Words like, “tyrants”, “usurpers”, and the “bosses” are used throughout the Zapata document – echoing words that the PLM also used. In fact, Womack asserts that some of the measures in the Plan de Ayala were so extreme that “no other revolutionary group except the anarcho-syndicalists would advocate, much less adopt as a policy.”⁴ Even the ending motto of Zapata’s plan. “Liberty, Justice, and Law,” is very similar to the motto of the Liberal platform of 1906: “Reform, Justice, and Law.”

This isn’t to say that the document was anything close to a copy of the Liberal/Anarchist program of the Magonistas. “In passages the anarcho-syndicalists must have gagged on or laughed at, it recognized ‘God’ as well as ‘the people’ helping to initiate the revolution in 1910.”⁵ Certainly the religious character of the Zapatistas that emerges in the Plan of Ayala was conflictual with the secular ideals of the Magonistas and the Anarcho-syndicalists.

While the Magonistas and the urban Anarcho-syndicalists never worked closely with the Zapatistas, “Ricardo had a number of opportunities to ally himself with active revolutionary groups. Emiliano Zapata, in particular, was receptive to PLM influence.”⁶ In fact, Zapata actually proposed that Ricardo’s *Regeneracion* be moved to Morelos as early as 1912, where it would no longer be subjected to government harassment. Zapata even offered the PLM the use of the *Fabrica San Rafael*, which could have supplied the necessary materials to support a national newspaper.

¹ Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, page 62n.

² Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, page 398.

³ Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, page 397.

⁴ Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, page 397.

⁵ Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, page 398.

⁶ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 55.

Ricardo had to decline for a number of reasons. First, he was imprisoned for much of this time and had no way of physically getting to Morelos. Second, Ricardo felt that Regeneracion was helping to maintain America sentiment against any moves by the United States to intervene in the Mexican revolution. If he moved the paper, he felt it would not have the same level of impact on America. Ironically, Ricardo's intent of influencing America may have gone farther than his original intent. For a time, he was probably better known in the United States than in Mexico and perhaps even more popular. At a meeting for Ricardo's cause in Portland, Oregon, organized by the editorial writer for the Oregonian, the sum of \$46.22 was raised. That was a fairly substantial sum considering the "poor economic conditions and widespread unemployment in the Northwest."⁷

One influence on Zapata is certain – that of Antonio Diaz Soto y Gama. Soto y Gama was a "passionate disciple of Tolstoy and Kropotkin" and was an Anarcho-syndicalist leader in Mexico City. He joined the Zapatistas with a few other former members of the Casa, such as Rafael Perez Taylor, Luis Mendez, Miguel Mendoza Lopez Schwerdtfeger, and Octavio Jahn – who was a French syndicalist and was even said to be a veteran of the Paris Commune of 1871.⁸

Soto y Gama quickly became the main ideologue of the Zapatistas. "Soto y Gama took the lead in elaborating and refining ideas [for the Zapatistas]... "the doctrine of agrarismo and the cult of the agraristas that emerged were chiefly his work."⁹ Soto y Gama denied that he actually wrote the political tracts issued by the Zapatistas, only admitting that he helped to polish the wording.

Soto y Gama also played an important role for propagating Zapatismo at the Convention in Mexico City on October 26, 1914. There, he gave a long and impassioned speech denouncing Carranza and praising Zapata. Even though the Constitutionalists were in the majority, "the cries that followed his speech and shook the building were vivas for Villa and Zapata."¹⁰ Two days later, a compromise was forged, the Convention agreed to approve some of Zapata's agrarianism at least "in principle."

⁷ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 50.

⁸ Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, page 193.

⁹ Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, page 194.

¹⁰ Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, page 217.

Zapata: the Quasi-Anarchist

Was Zapata an Anarchist? It seems that the only answer is negative. Certainly the Anarchist influences were apparent and the goals were quite similar, but they were not the identical.

Millon argues that while the Zapatista movement has been characterized as strongly socialist, anarchist, or 'Indianist', the "Zapatistas undoubtedly were influenced by these concepts, but in this respect, one should be careful not to make a mountain out of a molehill."¹ He goes on to state that:

"Although anarchist concepts undoubtedly influenced some of the revolutionaries of the South, nevertheless... these ideas did not penetrate the revolution of the South sufficiently to warrant designating that movement as 'anarchist'... Thus, the men of the South wished to democratize the state, not eliminate it, and although they sought to distribute property widely, they also would have left sufficient lands in private hands to permit a bourgeois agriculture to flourish in Mexico."²

Millon continues his argument by emphasizing that Zapata's program looked to improve the workers', but mostly the peasants' conditions, but without a clear opposition to a capitalist framework. "Indeed, rather than anarchism per se, the intellectuals associated with the Zapatistas demonstrated as agrarian oriented, petty-bourgeois romanticism similar to that of Rousseau and Jefferson."³ Millon concludes that instead of Anarchism, the "goals sought by the Zapatistas may be summarized in one term: human freedom."⁴

¹ Robert P. Millon, *Zapata: The Ideology of a Peasant Revolutionary*, New York: International Publishers, 1969, page 83.

² Millon, *Zapata*, page 99.

³ Millon, *Zapata*, page 99.

⁴ Millon, *Zapata*, page 132.

The Government Anarchists in the 1920s — the Ideal Wanes in Mexico.

By the 1920s, the ideals of Anarchism were on their way out of the Mexican political landscape. The CROM had edged out the once politically potent Anarcho-syndicalist Casa as the dominant labor force. Zapata was killed in 1919 and his agrarian rebels were subdued. And in November, 1922, Ricardo Flores Magon, “the foremost Mexican Anarchist of the twentieth century”, died still imprisoned in the United States.¹

Interestingly, at this time, the prominent Anarchists that were still significant players in Mexican politics, moved away from their earlier ideals. Soto y Gama — inspired by many classic anarchist theorists such as Elisee Reclus, Bakunin, Proudhon, Malatesta, Tolstoy and Peter Kropotkin, a former member of the PLM leadership and a prominent ideologue for the revolutionary Zapata — made a sharp turn to the right in later years.

By the early 1920s, in a speech before the Chamber of Deputies, he stated that socialism was “unfit for the needs of Mexico.” He continued, “the proletariat lacks technical skills, moral integrity and intelligence” due to “his ignorance and poor education” the worker “can never replace the capitalist” (Ruiz, 100). This statement would have disgusted his fellow Magonistas years earlier.

Soto y Gama continued to fight for change, but now it was reformist, not radical. In June, 1920, Soto y Gama, with the support of Obregon, founded the National Agrarista Party. In August, the Agraristas won seven seats as deputies. According to Womack, because of their connection to Obregon these Agraristas “exercised authority in the chamber ten times what their numbers warranted.”² Party members at times occupied the position of the Chamber’s first and second vice president, and they held key committee seats — credentials, constitutional questions, foreign relations, and agrarian affairs.

Antonio Villarreal, also once a prominent member of the PLM, became the secretary of the Department of Agriculture. There, he managed to begin “serious efforts at general agrarian reform.”³ In 1921 the Agraristas pushed the Chamber of Deputies into an extraordinary session in an effort to produce and pass a proposal on agrarian reform. They convinced Obregon to support them, and finally they passed the Agrarian Regulatory Law of April 10, 1922. “Until the mid-1930s [this was] the most drastic use of the new Constitution to provide official protection for the country poor.”⁴ Soto y Gama and Villarreal moved from radical Anarchists, to statist progressive reforms.

¹ Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits*, page 208.

² Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, page 366.

³ Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, page 366.

⁴ Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, page 373.

An Evaluation: Anarchism in the Revolution

While many, historians and politicians alike, have proclaimed Ricardo Flores Magon to be a “precursor” to the Mexican Revolution, to state it this way, “is to define him by what followed. And Flores Magon completely rejected what followed, whether headed by Madero, Huerta, Carranza, or Obregon. From 1910 onward he loudly proclaimed the anarchism that he had hidden in the origins of the movement against Porfirio Diaz.”¹ Ricardo’s quest for Anarchism ended without success, but without his efforts the Revolution would have unfolded in a much different way. Ricardo helped to built the struggle against the Diaz dictatorship. While the Revolution took a direction that Ricardo had not encouraged, it nonetheless, it was forged in the work he did.

MacLachlan, maintains that “Success or failure is relative when assessing an individual’s importance in radical politics in the United States. Radicalism subjected to virtually unremitting pressure from industrialists and the state could not succeed.”² Certainly this must be kept in mind; Ricardo remained a significant factor even in the face of this kind of repression — so intense that he spent most of the later part of his life in prison.

Albro asserts that “Even in death, Ricardo Flores Magon worried the government of the United States, just as he had worried them most of the last eighteen years of his life.”³ If this is taken along with MacLachlan’s statement that “one must evaluate Flores Magon’s importance not by his failures, but by the recognition accorded him by the Left and government of the United States” — Ricardo was important indeed.⁴

MacLachlan enters the historical “what-if” game by charging that “if the PLM had allied itself with other Mexican revolutionary groups, undoubtedly Ricardo’s influence on the course of the Mexican revolution would have been greater.”⁵ Certainly the PLM failed to forge better links with the Casa and the Zapatistas, to be sure. Arguably, such a coalition would have be a significant force — even for Carranza. But coalitions always have their own internal contradictions, friction develops over differences fairly quickly, especially when faced with victory over the alliance’s enemies. The urban Anarcho-syndicalists, unlike Ricardo’s PLM, did ally with other forces — the forces of Carranza — which arguably led to their demise. So it is not clear what the most successful course could or would have been.

Like the PLM, the Casa and the Anarcho-syndicalists also ended their struggle in apparent failure. Capitalism and the state, the two eternal nemeses of Anarcho-syndicalism, had survived and their union had not. But looking broadly, from before to after the Revolution, labor did make significant, albeit small gains. While the Constitution was written in the wake of the demise of

¹ Albro, *Always a Rebel*, page xii-xiii.

² MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 110.

³ Albro, *Always a Rebel*, page xi.

⁴ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 111.

⁵ MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, page 113.

the Casa's General Strike, "Article 123 of the constitution granted every major petition voiced by the strikers at Cananea, Rio Blanco."⁶

Certainly this was a small victory from the view of the Anarcho-syndicalist. In fact, "no shift of any importance occurred in the ownership of Mexican industry, mines or petroleum" during the two decades of the Revolution.⁷ One example is the Standard Oil company, which by 1924, controlled nearly 60 percent of Mexican petroleum production. Hardly a victory for Mexicans in general, let alone labor.

As with the other groups, the Zapatista movement also ended in defeat. They were not successful in instituting their vision of the unmolested peasant, made free with open access to the land that they required. Like Article 123 for labor, the Constitution also contained an Article, 115, for the municipal freedom that the Zapatistas had fought for. But Article 115, unlike Article 123, subsequent regimes that have held power "have not put this reform into practice" — they have basically ignored it.⁸ In fact, the current struggle in Chiapas, which chooses to adopt the title of "Zapatistas" is basically struggling for similar goals that remained allusive to the followers of Zapata during the Mexican Revolution.

In the end, and to this day, the state remains alive in Mexico, and for that, Anarchism did not achieve its goal. Interestingly, the Mexican government, Ricardo Flores Magon's sworn enemy, offered his widow funds to have his remains returned to Mexico. She refused, choosing instead to "accept money from the railway workers for that purpose."⁹ It seems that to the end, even in defeat, the ideals of Anarchism still remained alive.

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⁶ Ruiz, *Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries*, page 101.

⁷ Ruiz, *Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries*, page 103.

⁸ Millon, *Zapata*, page 130.

⁹ James C. Carey, *The Mexican Revolution in Yucatan, 1915–1924*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1984, page 135.

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