

A Grave Error

The Mexican syndicalists

Anarchist Federation

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The birth of the workers' movement in Mexico was profoundly influenced by anarchism. This movement proclaimed independence from the political parties and the State. Yet in 1915 a pact was signed with the Constitutionalists led by Carranza. Organise! Looks at why this might have happened.

The workers' movement in Mexico was relatively young and inexperienced. At the time the population counted 11 million who lived in the countryside as opposed to 4 million who lived in urban centres (a comparison with Russia during the 1917 Revolution could be made).

The first two decades of the 20th century were marked by a radicalisation of the Mexican workers' movement, with an influx of Spanish immigrants, bringing with them new forms of organising. The traditional forms of organising began to give way to new and radical unions based on the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism.

When Madero came to power in 1911 the legislation workers' organisation that had existed under the regime of Porfirio Diaz did not disappear. However the fall of Diaz had encouraged this movement and strikes of transport workers, bakers and clothes makers and the dockers of the port town of Tampico broke out during that year.

A Colombian anarchist, Juan Francisco Moncaleano, arrived in Mexico in 1912 and with 7 others set up the Luz (Light) Group formed mostly of manual workers. They founded a paper of the same name and proposed the setting up of a free school modelled on the principles of the Spanish anarchist Ferrer. The paper was suppressed and Moncaleano was expelled by the Madero regime. However those remaining set up the Casa del Obrero Mundial (House of the International Worker), the name being also used for a local federation of unions. New papers supported by the Casa began to appear in 1913.

The Casa carried out intense activity, advancing the ideas of direct action and rejected the intervention of the Ministry of Labour created by the new leader of Mexico, Huerta, in conflicts between the workers and the employers.

However, a section of the movement began to ally itself with another contender for power, General Carranza. The Casa building was closed down by the authorities with the planned demonstrations of May 1st 1914 being used as a pretext. With the fall of Huerta, Carranza now intervened and allowed the Casa to establish itself at a commandeered convent.

The Carranza regime inaugurated a period of normalisation into the Mexican revolution. Intrigues multiplied, a whole host of careerists and profiteers inserted themselves into the administration, and norms were established controlling negotiation with the employers, demonstrations on the streets, political meetings etc. The State now became the legal arbiter in workplace disputes.

In this climate the Casa established a pact with Carranza on 17th February 1915 and workers organised by the Casa in Red Battalions and Anarchist Sanitary Battalions reinforced Carranza's troops. They were used to counter the detachments of the peasant revolutionaries of Zapata and Villa!! Seven thousand Mexico City workers went to the Constitutionalist military training centre and their participation was significant in victories over Villa and Zapata. The Casa justified this on the grounds of the religiosity and the primarily "agrarian" outlook of the Zapatistas and Villistas, accusing them of being backed by the Church and bankers!! In exchange Carranza gave the Casa some offices and allowed the publication of their papers. Eulogies to heroic Constitutionalist leaders started appearing in these papers with such comments as: "the triumph of constitutionalism is the triumph of liberty"! All of this did not stop Carranza shutting down the Casa H.Q. one year later when the Casa attempted to start organising again in the workplaces.

This appalling mistake was argued against by the Magonistas and by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the USA, and was rejected by the railworkers, the oil workers and the textile workers of Puebla and Veracruz. An attempt was made to set up a revolutionary central of anarcho-syndicalist unions in July 1915, and a little later a worker's conference took place in Veracruz and the CNT (Mexican region) was created. However this organisation was stillborn and after an attempt at a general strike in August 1916 it was savagely repressed by the Obregon regime. This now set up an official union central the Regional Workers' Confederation of Mexico (CROM). This new organisation was completely corporatist, tightly aligned with the State, with a well-paid and large bureaucracy, acting as a direct control by the politicians over the workers. Even a large number of old activists active within Mexican anarcho-syndicalism entered its ranks.

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