

# **Ricardo Flores Magón & the Anarchist Movement in El Monte, California**

Yesenia Barragan, Mark Bray & Álvaro D. Márquez

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“Forward, comrades! Soon you will hear the first shots; soon the shout of rebellion will thunder from the throats of the oppressed...Land and Liberty!”

These were the prophetic words of the Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón printed in *Regeneración*, the bilingual, anarchist newspaper published by the Magón brothers and their comrades, on November 19, 1910—just one day before the Mexican Revolution began to radically transform world history. Decades later, the Zapatistas would shout these words of rebellion as they occupied San Cristóbal de las Casas in early 1994 in defiance of NAFTA and the neoliberal order. Nevertheless, Magón, one of the chief intellectual and political precursors to the Mexican Revolution, made this declaration not in Mexico, but in the United States, where he had been living in exile since 1903 due to his radical activities. In 1905, in St. Louis, Missouri, Magón co-founded the *Partido Liberal Mexicano* (PLM, Mexican Liberal Party), which despite its name was a radical political organization rather than a party. There in Missouri, he and his compañeros agitated against the Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz, and projected their anarchist vision of a world without bosses or borders.<sup>1</sup>

As an anarchist-in-exile, one of the many stops during his stay in “El Norte” was none other than El Monte, California. There, in 1917, just a year before he and his brother/fellow anarchist organizer Enrique Flores Magón would be sent to Fort Leavenworth Prison near Kansas City, Ricardo delivered a moving speech, likely to a diverse crowd of working-class and poor Mexican Angeleños, Italian-Americans, and others who formed the fabric of the greater Los Angeles area at the time. As a 1917 *Times* article warned to its readers, “If the people of Los Angeles knew what was happening on our border, they would not sleep at night...German nationals hob-nob with Mexican bandits, Japanese agents, and renegades from this country...Los Angeles is the headquarters for this vicious system, and it is there that the deals between German and Mexican representatives are frequently made.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the anarchist Magón brothers were the exact “bandits” that authorities had in mind, for US officials, at the behest of Díaz and Mexican authorities, sought to suppress the PLM’s activities on the other side of the border.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of the continual arrests and repression, Ricardo continued to propagate widely and everywhere, as he did on that day in El Monte.

The theme of Ricardo’s speech in El Monte was indifference, perhaps in response to his dismay of the state of the revolution in Mexico in 1917. Although the revolutionary Mexican Constitution was drafted that year, it was certainly not the liberatory vision that the anarchist brothers fought hard for. He railed against the tendency of the poor person who “looks after his own well-being and that of his family, and nothing more, without realizing that the well-being of the individual depends on the well-being of everyone else...”<sup>4</sup>

His voluntaristic focus on the latent potential of collective struggle rather than the ripeness of “objective” material conditions was indicative of an anarchist emphasis on action as opposed to the Marxist emphasis on social and economic conditions. More importantly, however, Magon’s argument that individual betterment required cooperation echoed the massive international in-

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<sup>1</sup> “Land and Liberty, Ricardo Flores Magón,” in *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, eds. Gilbert M. Joseph, Timothy J. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 335-338.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 167.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>4</sup> “Speech in El Monte, California, 1917,” in *Dreams of Freedom: A Ricardo Flores Magón Reader*, eds. Charles Bufe, and Mitchell Cowen Verter (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2005), 280.

fluence of Russian anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, which was published serially in the 1890s and circulated widely throughout the English and Spanish speaking worlds. In response to the rising popularity of Social Darwinism and the racist and imperialist use of the concept of "the survival of the fittest" (a phrase coined by Herbert Spencer but mistakenly attributed to Darwin), Kropotkin's scientific research demonstrated that cooperation and mutual aid were as important to animal and human evolution as competition.

Much to the dismay of many anarchists, Kropotkin supported the Entente Powers in the First World War as a signatory of the infamous 1916 Manifesto of the Sixteen. However, in this 1917 speech, the same year that the United States entered the war, Magón asked his audience, "Aren't we ourselves, the disinherited, the oppressed, the poor, those who lend ourselves to receiving from the hands of our oppressors the guns destined to exterminate our working class brothers...?" Like most anarchists, Magón dismissed the war effort as a capitalist scheme to divide the international working class. But as his words show, he, like most anarchists, considered anarchism to be an ideology not only of the standard (Marxist) industrial proletariat, but of the oppressed more broadly, thereby including peasants (utterly essential in the Mexican context).

But in private letters from El Monte and La Puente during their stay in 1917, we also get a different, perhaps more human, view of the firebrands Ricardo and Enrique. Like many activists in exile, the Magón brothers became restless and occasionally sick (both literally and metaphorically) about their time away from home. In a letter from El Monte, on June 28, 1917, for example, Ricardo expressed to a loved one that "the truth of the matter is that I can't stay here [in El Monte] for more than a week. The *compañeros* are wonderful, but it bothers me not being able to do anything, I feel like I'm missing something, because, although the reality is that I don't do much there [in Mexico], I entertain myself." Despite his seeming boredom and inability to be active, it appears that El Monte was treating him well, for his health had improved. "I have not suffered not even an evening of insomnia," he wrote, and talked about his relaxing baths in the nearby river that helped him sleep peacefully throughout the evening.

Enrique's time in what is known today as the San Gabriel Valley, however, was a bit more trying for his health. As he wrote earlier in February 4, 1918, from La Puente, California, his stomach was constantly bothering him, so much that one day in mid-February, he complained that his only meal was a cup of coffee before he set out to work his long ten-hour shift cutting and de-rooting trees at a nearby ranch where he worked with some friends. It wasn't ideal, but it was something at least. Talking about his co-workers, he added that "we are all equal, [and work] without preferences and in perfect harmony." As a working-class immigrant-in-exile, Magón had to look for any available job opportunities, including this gig at the ranch. Of course, he faced challenges experienced by any laborer in precarious, temporary work, as when he complained that the boss, "*el burgués*," hadn't paid them yet. Again, not ideal, but at least, he wrote, he didn't have to deal with "any *mayordomo*," who would otherwise scream at him.

From their letters, we also get a special insight into the dynamic political world of El Monte in the early twentieth-century. In his letter, Ricardo talked about a political meeting to be held at a man named Aguirre's house. "In my opinion," Ricardo noted, "the people now express much interest in the struggle," likely referring to the ongoing situation of the Revolution. But times were tough and the stakes were getting higher. Ricardo indeed lamented this when he relayed that few people had attended the last meeting at the "Italian Hall," located in Los Angeles, where they were only able to raise 1 dollar and 4 cents for the cause (as a comparison, Enrique made \$3 in one day's work at the ranch). One of the main problems, according to Ricardo, was that

organizers weren't announcing the meetings well in advance. "For me," he wrote, "the meetings in the Italian [Hall] are very important for the movement in general, and I get restless if I'm not able to speak there every time."

The stakes couldn't be made clearer than in a speech, later published in *Regeneración*, that Magón made in El Monte on September 23, 1917. Celebrating the sixth anniversary of the famous manifesto of September 23, 1911, issued by the Organizing Junta of the PLM, Magón expressed that the anniversary was an "incredibly important date in the revolutionary history of the Mexican pueblo," because it clearly marked a "revolutionary tendency" that was anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist, and anti-religious. Indeed, in 1917, towards the tail end of the Revolution, Magón railed against the legacy of Díaz and the "*científicos*," referring to Díaz's technocratic advisors, and the many presidents that came in and out of office during the tumultuous years of the Revolution. Maintaining his anti-parliamentary, anarchist stance, Magón reiterated before his crowd in El Monte that "many today realize that the government itself is the problem, no matter if Pedro or Juan is in power."

Enrique's letters also give us insight into El Monte's vibrant political networks, showing how Magonismo was being built on the ground in El Monte. After coming home late from work one evening, Enrique ran into some friends named Bakunin (after the famed Russian anarchist, certainly a pseudonym for Enrique's friend), Oscar, and Acracia (a term that was synonymous with "anarchy" and used as a title for anarchist periodicals). In a piece written by Enrique in *Regeneración*, he also reported on a benefit picnic near El Monte held on Sunday, August 26, 1917 to support the newspaper. Organized by the local anarchist groups "Acracia" of Puente, "Tierra y Fraternidad" and "Luz Libertaria" of El Monte, and "Regeneración" of San Gabriel, the picnic was held just south of the Bassett Bridge, between El Monte and La Puente.

Was this the site of Ricardo's infamous El Monte speech? Perhaps. But what we know for sure is that the picnic was both a social and economic success. The party lasted more than 9 hours, with entertainment provided by a "great Mexican orchestra," as "comrades, men and women" danced the night away. Overall, the four groups chipped in about \$85 to make the benefit happen, and nearly \$74.61 was collected to support *Regeneración*. Enrique was so pleased with his El Monte comrades that he encouraged others to look to the example of these groups when searching for ways to support *Regeneración*.

In the issues of *Regeneración*, moreover, we can find some of the names of residents of El Monte who supported the newspaper directly. For example, R. Andrade contributed 1 dollar and 5 cents in 1910; later he or she sent in 1 dollar in June 1, 1912. A person named A. Martinez contributed 2 dollars towards the paper on September 12, 1910, and 1 dollar on Jan. 11, 1913, while Tomas Mendoza sent in 60 cents on September 9, 1911. C. Martinez also sent in 1 dollar on September 21, 1912, Feliciano Macías and his compañera S. Morales sent in \$5, and an anonymous *compañero* also contributed an undisclosed amount on September 12, 1910. Without these vibrant political networks, in El Monte and elsewhere, *Regeneración* would not have been able to continue.

However, despite the warmth of his comrades in El Monte and La Puente, Enrique was also quite homesick. "How awful it is to be away from home," he said, "away from the people you hold dear, although the anarchists should not have any preferences!" A bit tongue-in-cheek, Enrique went on to describe his longing for Mexico: "But it's impossible for me, any other way. My *viejita*, my *compañita de vida*, my children, my close friends, everything is there [in Mexico]. My daily life, all the years, in other words a large part of me, *me*, and my affections, my love, it's all there."

But for the moment, El Monte was his loving, albeit temporary and imperfect, home away from home.

In the end, Ricardo Flores Magón died in Leavenworth Penitentiary in Kansas in 1922, where he received a sentence of 20 years for violating the 1917 Espionage Act. The circumstances of his death remain in dispute, as some claim that prison guards murdered him. Nevertheless, his legacy remains stronger than ever. In 1997, for example, indigenous communities fighting for self-determination and autonomy in Oaxaca formed the Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca, “Ricardo Flores Magón,” (CIPO-RFM) in his honor.

## The Authors

**Yesenia Barragan** is a PhD Candidate in Latin American History at Columbia University, where she studies slavery and abolition in the Americas. An anarchist and activist in the labor justice, immigrant rights, and student movement for many years, Yesenia first fell in love with Magonismo when she met a comrade from the Consejo Indígena Popular de Oaxaca – Ricardo Flores Magón.

**Mark Bray** is a longtime political organizer and PhD Candidate in European History at Rutgers University researching anarchism, terrorism, state repression, and human rights in late 19th century Spain. He is also the author of *Translating Anarchy: The Anarchism of Occupy Wall Street* (Zero Books, 2013).

**Álvaro D. Márquez** is a freelance artist and educator. Informed by his experience growing up in a migrant farm-working community in Salinas, California, his work explores questions around the coloniality of power, labor relations, and interiority/exteriority.

## Further Reading

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