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The Swan Song of Latin American Anarcho-Syndicalism

The Asociación Continental Americana de
Trabajadores

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Internationalism in Latin America: An Overview of Labour
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In May 1929, while communist trade unionists got together in Montevideo to create the CSLA, another founding congress was taking place across the river in Buenos Aires. Promoted mainly by the once-powerful Federación Obrera Regional Argentina (FORA) and the Mexican Confederación General de Trabajadores (CGT), a radical offshoot of the CROM, the event gave birth to a third Latin American international labour organisation, the ACAT, affiliated with the anarcho-syndicalist IWMA. Organisations from Argentina, Mexico, Paraguay, Bolivia, Guatemala and Uruguay were directly represented with delegates in the Buenos Aires founding Congress, while a Brazilian delegate represented seven small organisations from his country and indirect delegates represented groups from Bolivia, Peru, Costa Rica and the United States.

Even though several efforts had been made in previous decades to bring together anarcho-syndicalist organisations from different Latin American countries, they had failed. When a regional organisation finally came into existence in 1929, the influence of anarcho-syndicalists among labour ranks had been seriously weakened. However, the existence of transnational rival organisations—the PAFL and the newly founded CSLA—contributed to uniting anarcho-syndicalist groups in the attempt to build a continental organisation. The event was prepared by years of correspondence between activists from Mexico and Argentina, under the umbrella of the newly founded IWMA, and by ‘international propaganda tours’.¹

The founding Congress made clear that the new regional organisation was deeply rooted in an anarcho-syndicalist political perspective. The declaration of principles stated that there existed ‘two paths proposed by the proletarian and socialist movements to overcome the present situation: the conquest of the State, in order to operate the political transformation of society through decrees, and the organization of economic life based of the work of each and every one’. The ACAT, drawing upon ‘the experiences of the last century of struggles’ and taking into account ‘the lessons of reality and life’, made clear its rejection of the idea of conquering state power as a way to achieve the emancipation of the working class and instead concentrated ‘all its hopes on organizing work on the basis of its freedom, its usefulness and its solidarity’.²

With regard to its methods of struggle, the new organisation endorsed ‘the partial and general strike, as well as sabotage and boycott in those cases in which it is necessary to practice solidarity

¹ María Migueláñez Martínez, “Anarquistas en red. Una historia social y cultural del movimiento libertario continental (1920–1930),” *Actas del IX Encuentro da ANHPLAC* (Goiânia, Brasil, 2010): 7.

² “Acuerdos y resoluciones del Congreso Constituyente efectuado en Buenos Aires los días 11 al 16 de mayo de 1929. 1929,” *La Continental Obrera* 1, no. 1 (1929): 2.

later, in September 1932, when *La Continental Obrera* resumed publication, but only very briefly.

beyond the respective national levels'. State intervention in labour conflicts was explicitly rejected. Considering that the unity of the working class was to be achieved 'from the bottom up', the ACAT advocated for a federative organisational form, where 'individuals voluntarily form a union, and unions form federations'.³ A federative council should be composed of one delegate per member organisation. However, a three-member Secretariat was elected and headquartered in Buenos Aires. Among its tasks were spreading the objectives and mission of the new organisation, maintaining correspondence with member organisations and publishing a press organ, *La Continental Obrera*, the first issue of which appeared in July 1929.

The organisation declared itself the 'adversary of all politics' and rejected any sort of 'commitment or alliance with those parties that accept the collaboration of classes and with trade unions that act in the sphere of the state'. In its last point, the declaration of principles stated that, 'as an aspiration for the future', the ACAT 'recommended anarchic communism'.⁴ The first issue of *La Continental Obrera* indicated that it was 'necessary to clarify ideas, to define principles, to bring to the masses the social emancipation ideal, free from authoritarian deformations and from the fraudster communist demagogy'. It vowed that 'every anarchist and every activist in the libertarian field must contribute in moral and materials' in order for the new organisation to develop and succeed.⁵

Moreover, the new journal insisted in showing the gulf between the new organisation and its main rivals in the labour movement, specially their communist counterparts—those 'Moscow agents' who had just organised 'a parody of a conference in Montevideo in order to set up a Latin American labour organization that has no followers other than the members of the communist parties'. It

³ "Acuerdos y resoluciones": 3.

⁴ "Acuerdos y resoluciones": 3.

⁵ N.d. "La propaganda en el continente," *La Continental Obrera* 1, no. 1 (1929): 1–2.

was the task of the ACAT to ‘present itself in open belligerence with the political and reformist sectors that operate in the workers’ movement, whether they are democratic or dictatorial’. Without such a clarification, they would ‘end up playing the tortuous game of the Moscow agents, who exploit the label of communism in order to create the Russian government a base of influence in the Americas’.⁶

There was, indeed, a permanent ambivalence between the concern about the expansion of communist influence on the one hand—after all, the ACAT had been founded right after the Profintern set up its own Latin American organisation—and the insistence on the weakness of communist development in the labour movement on the other. The editors of *La Continental Obrera* considered that ‘Bolshevik propaganda’ in Latin America had been a failure, in spite of the material resources deployed and the ‘suggestion exerted on the masses by the Russian communist legend’. The creation of the CSLA was nothing but an attempt to put pressure on ‘bourgeois governments’ to recognise the Soviet government, in the path of the ‘capitalist reconstruction of Russia’.⁷

The PAFL, already very weak by the end of the 1920s, received much less attention, although criticism of ‘labor Monroism’ was sharp. According to the ACAT, the PAFL was an ‘agency of the U.S. administration’ and ‘nothing more than a label attached to the official trade union organization of the United States’. Its conferences were ‘private meetings between officials of the AFL, the CROM, and delegates of the governments of those countries subjected to the plutocracy of the dollar’. These ‘Wall Street conquest plans’, however, were bound to fail in ‘countries that have a social personality and a defined proletariat’.⁸

⁶ “La propaganda”: 1–2.

⁷ “La estrategia bolchevique en América,” *La Continental Obrera* 1, no. 1 (1929): 7.

⁸ “Monroísmo sindical,” *La Continental Obrera* 1, no. 2 (1929): 9–10.

With an optimistic tone, the editors of *La Continental Obrera* stressed that, unlike Europe, Latin America was particularly prone to the development of anarchism. It had ‘not yet been vitiated by the multiple factors that diminished the capacity of resistance of the European proletariat’. They even tried to trace a relationship between this fact and the traditions of American ‘native populations, accustomed to living with a minimum of authority, [...] this sentiment is the best basis for the development of a strong anti-authoritarian movement’.⁹

Later on, however, the tone became more cautious. In October 1929, one of the members of the Secretariat admitted how difficult it was to talk about ‘a proper anarchist movement of the American continent’, due to the fact that ‘anarchism exists only in a small number of countries’ and was nothing else than ‘an intention’ in the rest. The development of anarchist ideas was ‘seriously hampered by the growing authoritarian wave that gradually threatens to destroy all the achievements made in the moral and material order’. The article recognised that things had only got worse since the founding Congress: ‘authoritarianism has escalated and ACAT is unable to perform any effective task’.¹⁰

Indeed, soon after its hopeful beginnings, it became clear that the forces of Latin American anarcho-syndicalism were extremely weak, and that maintaining a regional organisation was an almost impossible task. The harsh repressive measures taken in Argentina by the military dictatorship established in September 1930 paralysed the activities of the Secretariat and the publication of its organ. After deportation, some members of the Secretariat attempted to reassemble in Montevideo, without success. It was only two years

⁹ M. Villar, “La A.C.A.T. frente al bolchevismo,” *La Continental Obrera* 1, no. 2 (1929): 2.

¹⁰ M. Villar, “Una necesidad perentoria del movimiento obrero anarquista americano,” *La Continental Obrera* 1, no. 3 (1929): 2–3. A couple of weeks after the publication of this issue, Emilio López Arango, one of the members of the Secretariat, was murdered.