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Baja California: Attempted Insurrections

Octavio Alberola

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“Let the people take possession of the factories, the mines, etc.” The insurrection had to light the fuse of the revolution, and the latter had to lead to the social emancipation of the workers. For five months hope would last ... until it was defeated by a coalition of political interests.

On July 1, 1906, the program of the Mexican Liberal Party was published. The program, of a democratic nature, was used to unite the Liberals and direct the insurrection, which became the main preoccupation of the P.L.M. The groups armed themselves on their own or with the collaboration of the Junta, which took care of smuggling the weapons. According to Enrique Flores Magon’s account, five insurrectional zones were organized in this way. In its instructions for the uprising, the Junta asked that “Liberals who are prepared to take up arms must commit themselves quickly and act...without waiting for further notice or signals from the Junta.” It also ordered the groups to start applying the program during the revolution without waiting for legislation on the matter, to proceed immediately to suppress the *tierras de raya*, to impose

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the eight-hour day and establish the payment of a minimum wage of one peso. Later, the P.L.M. was not to change its position; it systematically demanded the accomplishment of the transformations while the revolution was still in progress. The Junta hoped that by attacking a few strategic points, the insurrection could spread.

The first attack had to be directed against the customs post at Agua Prieta (Sonora) to open a breach that would facilitate actions in the South. But the plans of the Douglas group in Arizona were discovered and its members arrested on September 5, 1906. On the 26th of the same month another group attacked Ciudad Jimenez (Coahuila), but federal troops dispersed the rebels. On the 30th at Acayucan (Veracruz), an uprising assembled more than a thousand men, led by Hilario C. Salas. They were routed, but most of them managed to take refuge in the sierra. In the surrounding villages, other uprisings took place at the same time (Coxcapa, Chinameca, Ixhaultlan, etc.). Unfortunately, the most important uprising, which was to take place at Ciudad Juarez and was to be the signal expected by many revolutionary groups throughout the country, did not take place. The Governor of Chihuahua, Enrique C. Creel, laid a trap for the revolutionaries, and on October 19 he succeeded in capturing their principal leaders: Juan Sarabia, vice-president of the P.L.M., Cesar Canales and J. de la Torre. At El Paso, American police captured Antonio I. Villareal, Lauro Aguirre and journalist J. Cano. These imprisonments seriously disrupted the insurrectional movement, forcing the P.L.M. to go into a period of withdrawal before attempting new insurrections.

In the following months, the leaders of the P.L.M. who managed to escape the repression strived to restructure the party's press: Ricardo Flores Magon managed to escape to Sacramento (California), Antonio I. Villareal escaped after having been arrested, and others like Librado Rivera, Lazaro Gutierrez de Lara and Modesto Diaz took refuge in Los Angeles (California).

in Ensenadas left for Tijuana. The noose tightened further. On June 22, the Magonists were routed and abandoned Tijuana. A few crossed the border and were arrested by American army patrols. These events led to the collapse of the P.L.M.'s military activity, and this is how Magonism's military adventures came to an end.

that Magonist forces place themselves under his command. In April the conflict worsened and Madero accused Magonists in the region of Casas Grandes (Chihuahua) of insubordination, as they wore the P.L.M.'s red cockade instead of the tricolored one. Madero mobilized Francisco Villa to disarm the Magonists, which caused the P.L.M. to break definitively with Madero.

This hardening of Madero's attitude led the leaders of the Socialist Party of the United States to abandon Magonism. Even Turner ceased his activity on the P.L.M.'s behalf and tried to persuade a few Magonists to back Madero: the P.L.M. then underwent a split. In this context, it had to face up to a campaign that called its activity in Baja California "filibustering." This term was invented by the press of the United States, led by the *Los Angeles Examiner*, from February 1911.

With the occupations of Tecate and Tijuana on May 8, the Magonists proved in spite of everything that they were maintaining their positions in Baja California, where they forced the railroad companies to raise the minimum wage and respect the eight-hour day. The Magonists wanted to consolidate their positions to carry out the expropriation of rich foreigners, the point of departure for an egalitarian society. But the development of Madero's anti-reelection movement and the ambiguous attitudes of a few Magonist leaders ended up by isolating the P.L.M., facilitating the tragic end of this revolutionary adventure in Baja California and its disappearance in the rest of the country.

The decisive factor in the fall of Magonism was the American government's support for Madero, aiding him militarily and repressing the P.L.M., for he knew that the anti-reelectionist movement could pacify the country and prevent the "social revolution" from continuing. Magonists who continued the struggle were subjected to violent repression. The new government concentrated its forces in Baja California until Maderism triumphed. Troops clashed with revolutionary groups that had already been weakened. In mid-June federal troops stationed

On June 1, 1907, the newspaper *Revolución* was published in Los Angeles. The people in charge of the newspaper immediately received the cooperation of Praxedis Guerrero and Ricardo Flores Magon. The latter left his hideout in Sacramento to put himself at the head of the Junta in Los Angeles, in late June. As leaders of the Junta, Ricardo Flores Magon and Villareal appointed Praxedis G. Guerrero as a special delegate, so he could "incite the workers to make an imminent uprising in Mexico against the Dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz." The lack of money and the repression the Liberals came up against in Mexico and the United States represented a serious obstacle to the preparation of the armed movement. However, despite the arrests, the activities of Enrique Flores Magon and Praxedis G. Guerrero allowed the insurrection to continue. As it was at the time of the previous insurrection of 1906, the country in 1908 remained divided into zones in which sixty-four armed groups were distributed.

On June 7 and 8, 1908, Ricardo Flores Magon took stock of the groups' very incomplete state of preparedness. However, Ricardo did not want a postponement of the insurrection, as he thought it should serve as an example to start a rebellion of anti-government forces and with it, the revolution. The important thing was to light the fuse. In a letter addressed to Praxedis G. Guerrero and Enrique Flores Magon, Ricardo insisted on the need to orient the revolutionaries' behavior in an appropriate way, to influence the process in a decisive way. He would say with foresight: "After its triumph, no revolution has succeeded in winning acceptance for or putting into practice the ideals that created it, for it is thought that the new government will do what the people should have done during the revolution."

Worried about the bourgeois turn the revolution had taken, Ricardo recommended advising "the workers to arm themselves on their own, to defend what the revolution gave them." For him, the important thing was "to work as anarchists," although this is not what we call ourselves: "giving the land

to the people during the revolution” and also “let the people take possession of the factories and mines, etc.” To accomplish that, he insisted that the Junta approve accomplished facts, for “what is gained by the workers themselves will be more solid than what is done by decree of the Junta.” According to Ricardo, libertarian militants had an essential role to play in the revolution, as much political as it was military, and to accomplish that he was in favor of bringing many European anarchists to Mexico.

It was with this orientation that the Magonists threw themselves into insurrectional action again, but as in 1906, the small number of revolutionary uprisings and the dictatorship’s military repression forced the revolutionaries to evacuate the villages they had succeeded in liberating and go into hiding. The repression went after the P.L.M. unrelentingly after these revolts, which forced them into a phase of reorganization again. Above all, it was necessary to maintain relations between the armed groups of Arizona and Texas (in the United States) and the Mexican groups. This task was assumed by Praxedis G. Guerrero, who was one of the principal animators of the P.L.M. Guerrero also published *Punto Rojo* [Red Point] in El Paso (Texas) in August 1909, aided by Enrique Flores Magon. *Punto Rojo* circulated in the working class centers of Chihuahua, Sonora, Coahuila, Puebla and other Mexican States, as well as in the southern United States. It had a print run of 10,000.

Praxedis Guerrero’s activity and Magonist activity in general vigorously gave an impulse to Mexican workers’ participation in the revolutionary process in these years. As a result, and to prevent political factions that had arisen in the new Mexican context from capitalizing on growing agitation against the dictatorship, the propaganda of the P.L.M. strived to strengthen the movement’s proletarian nature and to distinguish working class and peasant objectives from the interests of opportunistic political factions. It was in this spirit that

the P.L.M. launched many insurrectional actions in late 1910. The rebellion in November, fomented from the United States by Francisco I. Madero, produced only poor results at first. On the other hand, the P.L.M. succeeded in impelling an insurrectional movement in Chihuahua through the activity of Praxedis Guerrero, who attacked Casas Grandes and took the village of Janos, where he died on December 30, 1910. But other guerrilla leaders took his place, and the military activity of the P.L.M. continued at a high intensity in Chihuahua.

In January of 1911, with the help of the I.W.W., an insurrection was launched in Baja California. It became Magonism’s best known insurrectional action during this period. Baja California was a strategic area. Enrique Flores Magon planned to concentrate military equipment and provisions there, to facilitate the revolutionary struggle in the rest of the country.

By starting the insurrection in January 1911, the Magonists set out to spread the anti-dictatorship movement and make the P.L.M.’s offensive coincide with the one being prepared by Madero. This is why, on January 29, 1911, a group of seventeen Magonist revolutionaries attacked and occupied Mexicali, a border town with several thousand inhabitants. The American journalist John Kenneth Turner, who supported and supervised the movement from the American side of the border, began a solidarity campaign with the Mexican Revolution known as “Hands Off Mexico!”, to denounce the movement of United States troops toward the border.

Porfirio Diaz’s army answered the challenge made by the seizure of Mexicali, but even the intervention of the 9th federal battalion (commanded by Colonel Mayol) was unable to dislodge the Magonists from Mexicali. As the Magonists had anticipated, the revolutionary struggle spread to the rest of the country. Francisco Villa in the North and Emiliano Zapata in the South kept Porfirio Diaz’s troops at bay. This is how on February 13, 1911, Madero decided to enter Mexico to head the insurrection, break off relations with the P.L.M. and demand