The Revolution and the Labor Regime, 1910–1923

Many years before I began this manuscript, I taught a class at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico City with Adolfo Gilly. I was very young at the time and had not yet completed my Ph.D., while Adolfo had recently left the prison where he wrote his landmark study, *La Revolución Interrumpida*. Among the very bright students in that group, one asked whether Mexico’s revolution measured up to the classic cases of France and Russia. Adolfo provided a response that I never forgot. A revolution, he said, is not what the classic textbooks say a revolution should be, it is what the people do. “*La revolución no es lo que dicen los textos, sino lo que hace la gente.*”

Years later when I started this project, scholars had begun to question whether Mexico’s revolution was even a social revolution. They followed a trend that questioned social revolution in France and Russia, the classic cases. While working in the archives for this project, such questions made little sense. During the revolution itself, many people discussed its value but no one doubted that there had been one. In 1919, F. Harvey Middleton wrote:
The overthrowing of the old regime has, it is true, resulted in much unwise legislation, in some cases jeopardizing the industries created by American and European capital and energy—industries upon which Mexico is absolutely dependent. But the old order of things in Mexico, with single families owning millions of acres and a dozen families owning entire states, has gone never to return. You can no more restore the Mexico of Porfirio Díaz than you can bring back the Russia of the Czars or the France of the days of Mme. de Pompadour. 

Indeed, even a comparison of the photographs of the well-groomed lawyers and businessmen who ran Mexico before the revolution with those of the rough-hewn and violent men who ran it afterwards, found in Anita Brenner’s classic photo history, suggest the depth of change in the country. Mexico may not have been France or Russia, but it was revolutionary.

Prevailing opinion after the revolution argued one of three positions. First, it was a revolution about land, symbolized by the iconic figures of Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa. Second, it was a revolution among competing elites, represented by the no less iconic figures of Francisco Madero, Venustiano Carranza, and Alvaro Obregón. In more recent times, some scholars have argued that rather than a national revolution, there were different regional revolutions with their own causes and processes. Without doubt, there is some truth to each of these.

Within that debate, nobody argued that the Mexican revolution was a workers’ revolution, although the industrial working class in Mexico was no less important in its society than the industrial working class in revolutionary Russia. An exception was that
near contemporary, Ernest Gruening, who wrote, “the most palpable product of the Mexican Revolution is the labor movement.” Gruening, Marjorie Ruth Clark, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, and others had pointed to labor’s outcomes: Article 123, strong unions, status within the ruling party. But everybody insisted that labor’s gains came from a benevolent state, which hardly seems plausible in the rough-and-tumble world of postrevolutionary Mexico. How could workers have won so much if they had done nothing while the country around them burned? Were the generals and politicians who took power in the late revolution really that kindly? These questions led me down a research path that uncovered a workers’ revolution within the Mexican revolution.

A social revolution at work is a fundamental change in the labor regime. The labor regime is the set of formal and informal institutions that define the social relationships of work, and as a derivative, the social division of the products of work. The formal components are the written laws, work rules, labor contracts, and organizations like trade unions, employer associations, and government offices. Equally important are informal institutions such as the embedded rules, habits, and norms of work and workplace relationships. Among these, none is more important than authority at work. Authority is the central question of every social revolution. When those at the bottom do not question those at the top, there is no revolution. When those at the bottom no longer accept the authority of those above them, when they think they have the real possibility of challenging that authority, and when they act on that belief, by definition there is a social revolution. The revolution ends when a new authority at work imposes itself. That is the reason why the labor regime, which focuses on authority at work, is a better category for
understanding the workers’ revolution than moral economy, a broader term that encompasses other social processes.

For there to have been a social revolution among workers, there would have to have been a revolutionary challenge to the traditional authority at work. I have tried to demonstrate that there was, not only in my view, but more important, in that of workers and owners. Operarios, with firm ideas about social class, challenged authority at work from the beginning of their revolution until the end. However, the nature of their challenge differed from that of their Russian counterparts, which is partly why it was overlooked. In Russia, anarchist, socialist, and Marxist political parties questioned the rights of capital. Numerous workers participated in those parties and acted on anarchist, Marxist, and socialist ideas. As Chapter 5 argues, such ideas and political parties were mostly absent from Mexico’s textile zones. Instead, Mexican workers engaged in a more empirical revolution, with one set of events leading to another. The breakdown of Porfirian political rule allowed workers to successfully challenge owners on traditional laborite issues like wages and hours of work, the subject of Chapter 4. A lack of effective repression then allowed workers to successfully challenge owners on other issues, particularly authority at work, as seen in Chapters 5 and 8. It was an empirical process, each battle leading workers to draw their own conclusions, each victory strengthening their resolve, each defeat not strong enough to stop their growing ambition to control as much of the shop floor as they could.

This challenge to authority at work became the central issue of Mexico’s workers’ revolution because it transformed a laborite struggle into a revolutionary struggle for control of the factory. Before the revolution, workers won some battles but mostly they
lost. They lacked strength and organization, their methods and goals were often timid, and the owners could usually count on local and national authorities to repress them. Typical was the conflict in 1889 at La Carolina where the mill won because it was able to fire the rebellious workers, replace them with strikebreakers, and count on the government and the armed forces to maintain order. Backed by a strong state, administrators controlled who worked in the mills. The law, the rights of private property, and the strength of owners relative to the weakness of workers determined factory control over hiring, firing, and the work process. As in most places, the old labor regime rested on respect for the authority of capital.

The 1911 general strike was the critical turning point in Mexican labor history. It was a widespread and unprecedented victory for workers that began as a laborite struggle but also as a challenge to authority. Although workers agreed on wage and work day demands, in many factories mill hands added local petitions about dignity and workplace control. In Atlixco, it was the demand to control one’s house, at La Carolina, strip searches, at La Hormiga, the size of cloth. The strike’s leadership was careful to argue that workers’ demands were “strictly just and . . . within the limits of the rational.”

Winning the strike increased self-confidence, which in turn led to more strikes and workplace demands, as when the weavers of El Carmen walked out in order to get an assistant to carry the cloth rather than carry it themselves. After 1912, such local actions multiplied, leading to the strike wave of late 1912 and early 1913. Workers walked out again and again, the new Labor Office simply noting that “the cotton textile workers have expressed their dissatisfaction and unhappiness.” This phase of revolution strengthened workers’ belief in the trade unions that had brought them success. Speaking for all textile
workers, San Antonio Abad mill hands declared that they had been “victims of our owners and bosses,”\textsuperscript{10} capturing their sense of class and their political program: take power away from their victimizers. Of course, a broader revolution that had weakened government enabled these victories, as workers were aware.

The collapse of central government following the assassination of Madero, the spreading civil war, and the anarchy of a country governed more by regional military commanders than by centralized civil authority, further emboldened workers and unions. Elites, engaged in their own fight for survival, were simply unable to mount an effective repression of an increasingly rebellious working class. Between 1913 and 1917, workers attacked supervisors and walked out or engaged in other work actions to get what they wanted. Factories found it impossible to repress the labor actions. The administration of Cocolapam characterized the protests as “the infantile and impulsive movements that have spread disorder in the factory.”\textsuperscript{11} The workers naturally had a different opinion, telling Antonio Valero, head of the Labor Office, “And let the Industrialists know once and for all that the epoch of tyrannies has ended.”\textsuperscript{12} Santa Rosa workers understood that “the desires of the Triumphant Revolution of the People” had vindicated “the pariahs and [returned] their rights to them.”\textsuperscript{13}

As central government collapsed, regional military commanders responded to the workers’ challenge to authority with military decrees that ceded many of their demands. The supreme decree, of course, was Article 123 of the 1917 Constitution. Protected unions, legalized strikes, collective contracts, and numerous benefits made the revolutionary Constitution the legal victory of the workers’ revolution. Interestingly, once workers began down the road of greater workplace power, each victory seemed only to
whet their appetite, so that the Constitution and the subsequent state labor codes increased rather than diminished the challenge to authority, as seen in Chapter 8.

After the strike at San Juan Amatlán, the mill owners, astute businessmen if not scholars, said that hegemony in the workplace rested on “the principle of authority,” which in turn underlay the hegemony of the state. If workers could challenge authority at work, as happened at Amatlán, then it would destroy the “the only possible basis on which the State can sustain itself.”14 Without the benefit of Gramsci, they understood their need for a state that demanded respect for private property, the unquestioned authority of capital inside the factory. That, however, was not the Mexican state in the 1920s.

Thus the pervasive, persistent, and often violent challenge to factory authority led industrialists in 1920 to beg el Supremo Gobierno to “establish an industrial peace in the Republic, removing or making less frequent, the strikes.”15 They were unsuccessful. The uncontrolled labor actions of the workers’ revolution forced a new state to adapt to workers as much as workers adapted to it. There were sufficient activist mill hands carrying out what the owners labeled the “the biased and perverse goals of the agitators” to stalemate the industrialists and a weak government, forcing the construction of a labor relations systems that favored unions and a labor regime that favored workers.16 Uncontrollable shop floor conflict changed the labor regime in Mexico because, as one owner noted, “It is very difficult to govern the factories and technically organize production when these anarchic conditions prevail and the orders of the administrators and the supervisors are ignored.”17 The revolutionaries who took power in Mexico changed labor institutions because they had to. Mexican factory workers refused to obey
and work as before. That is why the labor outcomes of the 1920s came from the workers’ revolution rather than from a benevolent state.

The new labor regime and its real and fundamental improvements in the lives of workers created a new hegemony of the social relations of work in postrevolutionary Mexico. The new hegemony, whose story is better left to another volume, is what ended the workers’ revolution. There was no decisive defeat by capital, at least not by 1923.

This is not to argue that cotton textile workers were a homogeneous group who always fought authority at all times and all places, because that was certainly not the case. However, that was not necessary in order for workers to win. Given the context of the surrounding social revolution and the weakness of central government, a sufficient number of workers fought authority in enough instances to completely transform the social relations of work in Mexico.

If many revolutionaries and scholars later argued that even in Bolshevik Russia a workers’ state never emerged, in Mexico it certainly did not. A proworker labor regime meant that workers won, but there were limits to their victory in three critical areas. Before looking at these limits, however, let us review some of the major victories of the new labor regime, at least to the mid 1920s.

Workers started their revolution over wages and hours of work. In Mexico, it is difficult for real wages to rise for long periods because of the pressures of an underdeveloped labor market. From the late Porfiriato to the early twenty-first century, rather than a steady increase in real wages based on the rising productivity of labor, there are cyclical periods of rising wages followed by sharply declining wages, with little net overall increase. During the late Porfiriato and the early years of revolution, real wages in
textiles fell. From the late revolution to the 1930s, real wages and benefits increased, clearly as a consequence of the new labor regime.\textsuperscript{18} Aurora Gomez suggests that real wages in cotton textiles rose sevenfold between 1916 and 1928.\textsuperscript{19} Stephen Haber calculated a 43 percent increase between 1925 and 1929.\textsuperscript{20} In fact, the only periods of sustained increase in real wages in Mexican industry were from the late teens to the late 1930s, a period during which the institutional factors of the workers’ revolution influenced real wage growth, and from 1952 to 1975, which coincided with the general ascent of growth rates in the world market, which pulled Mexican industry upwards. The workers’ revolution increased incomes to textile workers for an important period.

Mill hands also won significant reductions in the workday. In December 1906, the recently established Centro Industrial Mexicano unilaterally instituted a fourteen-hour workday. Workers could leave at six on Saturdays, when they enjoyed a reduced workday, 12 hours.\textsuperscript{21} Mill hands protested, struck—leading to the famous events at Río Blanco—and lost. The power of owners prevailed, so that the prevailing workday at the outbreak of revolution in 1910 was fourteen hours.\textsuperscript{22} The 1911 general strike reduced the workday to ten hours for the day shift and nine for the night shift. Between the January 1912 provisional settlement and the July contract, there were strikes in a number of factories to make them comply with the ten-hour workday.\textsuperscript{23} Following the July contract, the strike wave grew as mill hands insisted on the enforcement of the contract’s provisions. Ultimately, mills fell into line with regard to the new workday. Federal labor inspectors fanned out over the country, confirming the change in working conditions.\textsuperscript{24}

Conflict over the workday was not limited to the textile industry. During a 1913 railroad strike, workers not only expressed pride in shutting down the trains, but claimed
that if successful, they would demand a workday of six hours within two or three years. Many of the military decrees from 1914 to 1916 reduced the workday. In September 1914, Pablo Gonzalez, issued a decree for Puebla establishing the eight-hour day. In October 1914, Gertrudis G. Sánchez issued a decree setting the maximum workday at nine hours. At a union meeting in Orizaba, one mill worker reminded his comrades of the importance of “resting, cleaning up, and amusing oneself.” By 1915, the Labor Office noted that “the nine and eight hour days . . . are well accepted by the workers.” Article 123 ratified the eight-hour day. Thus the workers’ revolution increased wages and benefits while cutting the work day almost in half.

Health care is an example of improved benefits. Even if life in the factory was not necessarily a worse alternative than life in the fields, textile work caused health problems. A 1919 inspection of La Union reported:

All of the machinery of the factory is installed in one large room that measures about sixty meters in length by twenty-five meters in width . . .

With respect to the machines that are working they are in equally deficient condition because the transmission bands are very old and patched which causes the machines to not work as they should, being also in my opinion a constant danger to the workers. The machines called “pulidoras” constantly create a strong current of air when they are working that goes directly to the worker; the manager himself told me that almost all the workers that operate these machines are constantly getting sick from “pulmonia” and some have even died from the disease.
In the much larger Río Blanco factory in Orizaba, management listed bronchitis as the major medical problem. A complaint in La Purisima noted that the carders were too close together, making it easy to cut off a finger or a hand.

During the Porfiriato, there were no legal requirements for factories to pay medical expenses, though some did. The 1906 CIM rules ignored health issues. Article 18 of the 1912 contract, however, made the owners responsible for free medical care in case of work accidents. Following the strikes of 1911–13, workers protested insufficient medical attention, leading to military decrees that often mandated medical coverage. Candido Aguilar’s Decreto Número 11, Article 7, required that owners provide medical care for workers and to pay their salaries while out sick. When the Villistas and Zapatistas controlled Mexico City, they agreed that workers’ health was a major concern, signing an agreement that included medical provisions “that makes less cruel the exploitation of the proletariat.” Article 123, Chapter XIV, made owners responsible for medical care for job-related illnesses and accidents. In the textile states, subsequent state labor codes strengthened medical provisions. In Puebla, there were thirty articles covering medical care. The workers’ revolution dramatically strengthened medical care for workers and their families.

Of course, the workers’ revolution went far beyond traditional labor issues like hours and wages of work and medical care. The workers’ revolution evolved into a struggle for the shop floor, which for unions meant hiring, firing, and disciplining. During the nineteenth century, factory blacklists kept undesirables from the mills. The 1911 strike targeted them, so that at the 1912 convention, Rafael Hernández, Madero’s minister of development, noted:
There is, nonetheless, among the petitions of the workers one that I would especially like to call to your attention.

Some delegates from various factories have approached the Minister of Government and me, declaring that there exist a large number of workers who are systematically excluded from work, without there being any reason that justifies this conduct.

They attribute this exclusion to their name figuring on a list, a kind of “Index” that the industrialists have and communicate among themselves, of all those workers that form part of the nascent workers societies and who take a more active and direct participation in them than the rest of their compañeros.36

Workers’ activism convinced government officials to end their support of the blacklists, and by early 1913 the Labor Department noted the spontaneous and successful organization of unions in the mills. Factory owners, however, tried to maintain “the old system in the factories to fire Mexican workers without motive or any reason.” In 1915, Labor Department inspectors found blacklists against workers who “demand their rights, ask for justice, and form part of the union leadership.” The factories, they said, “make lists with their names, circulate them among factory administrators so that they will not find work in any factory.”37 Unions fought the blacklists and at-will firings. A regular demand of every strike and walkout was that nobody lose his or her job for walking out. During the May 1916 general strike which paralyzed Mexico City, the four-point agreement to end it included “none of the workers who participated in this strike will be fired.”38
During the early revolution, labor activists concentrated on curtailing the owners’ right to fire. During the later revolution, they tried to influence hiring. While the 1917 Constitution protected workers against firings, it left hiring to the owners. Under union pressure, state legislatures moved further with the state codes. Although the Veracruz labor code allowed owners to hire, following regional strikes between 1918 and 1920, the 1921 Puebla state code gave that power to unions. It also made firing workers very difficult because the new state law recognized bilateral and tripartite labor councils in factories and in the state government, with numerous rights to appeal. An owner could not simply fire a worker but rather had to work through the unions and numerous legal requirements. Going further, the 1927 textile contract, which replaced the 1912 agreements, stated:

Any worker who wishes to be admitted to a factory must make the request by himself or through the representative of the factory’s Union. The admission request will be resolved by mutual agreement between the owner or his representative and the respective Union delegate……the worker will present to the factory administration a supporting document that he has affiliated with the corresponding Union, not being able to be definitively admitted to the job, although he has fulfilled the first two prerequisites, if he doesn’t present this supporting document.

From 1917 to 1923, unions increasingly fought to control hiring, and sometimes they won. With the second national textile contract in 1927, unions achieved the exclusive right to hire. The contract also strengthened workers’ protections against firings. It contained an entire chapter, IV, on sanctions. Article 78 established that the first time a
worker committed a contract violation, the factory had to ask the union to discipline him. The second time a violation was committed, Article 79 allowed the factory to suspend the worker for a week, while Article 80 allowed the factory to fire workers for a third violation within 120 days or for other grievous acts. In other words, a worker could commit violations like stealing cloth or punching a supervisor twice every four months. However, Article 81 did not allow the sanctions of Article 80 to take effect without the participation of the Comisión Mixta de Distrito, comprising three representatives of the owners and three of the unions. If the Comisión Mixta de Distrito could not resolve the problem to the satisfaction of both sides, there remained the Comisión Mixta Nacional, which also had three labor and three owner representatives. If the Comisión Mixta Nacional could not agree on a solution, then each side could go to court. If a union chose to defend a worker accused of violating the contract or disobeying an order, the procedure to fire the worker was long, complex, and costly for the company, without any guarantee of success. In short, the revolution made it legally very, very difficult to discipline a worker without consent of the union. In fact, it was virtually impossible.

There was an interesting case in July 1927, which takes us a bit beyond the boundaries of this volume but shows the extent to which unions gained control over hiring, firing, and disciplining. That month the administration of Metepec tried to fire seven employees, all of whom were deficient in their work. One of them, Francisco Gómez Moncalian, was secretary general of the Employees Union. The company had little nice to say about him. At age 52, he was described by the administration as “of middling knowledge, one might say inept . . . incapable of carrying out work that requires
great care or dedication.” Administration complained that he was always reading “magazines and . . . other printed material” instead of carrying out his tasks.⁴³

When the company became aware of widespread stealing in the factory, it found that Gómez Moncalian and the other unionized employees who were supposed to control the workers, collaborated with them instead. This would not have happened before the revolution, with its great divide between white-collar workers like Gómez Moncalian and blue-collar operatives. By the early 1920s, however, unionization of both and a new era of proletarians against capitalists turned former antagonists into allies. Because of this, the company believed that it had lost control of the mill, arguing that, “we now believe that we need to replace all our personnel, including some supervisors.”⁴⁴

The company tried to fire Gómez Moncalian and Juan Bilbao Bengoechea, but they simply refused to leave their jobs. Metepec discovered that it could not remove them from work, even for theft. The explanation, according to the company, was that it was impossible to remove an employee if the workers’ union supported him.⁴⁵ The company further argued that the workers’ union backed the rebel employees in order to have them “subordinate to the workers unions . . . making good administration of this company impossible.”⁴⁶ A year later, Gómez’s case was still the subject of litigation in the Junta Federal de Conciliación y Arbitraje. Meanwhile, Gómez retained his job, did not go to jail for defying authority, and participated actively in union activities. Incidents such as this convinced the administrators that they no longer controlled the mills.

Before the revolution, owners ran the factory. They hired who they wanted and they fired any worker who did not suit their needs. Through their revolution, workers challenged the owners’ right to run the factory. With work actions ranging from strikes to
murder, they took that right away from the owners. By the 1920s, management had lost control of the mills, which management itself recognized. Unions hired and, in practice, unions determined who was fired. This was a fundamental revolution in Mexico’s labor regime.

Despite workers’ great victory, there were three critical areas that established limits to what they could win. The first was the change in the relationship between union officials and rank-and-file workers. Gregory Crider has argued that the change from owners to unions in hiring and firing was not necessarily revolutionary. In the Atlixco mills, “Individualized relations of dominance and obligation were reproduced at every level of hiring category and shop floor hierarchy; this series of personalistic relations defined the sindicato patronage system that emerged in Atlixco’s textile mills and communities during the 1920s and 1930s.” It was a new politics of “domination and submission.” The paternalism of union leaders replaced the paternalism of owners.

While Crider’s observations have merit, it is less clear that this negates the value of what workers won. For rank and file, it made a difference that workers serving as union officials controlled a patronage system instead of owners. After all, such men shared the layered communities through which workers defined their lives. The new system provided mill hands with higher wages, greater benefits, increased job security, freedom from harassment by supervisors, and a more beneficial rhythm of work. To get and keep a job, one needed to appeal to another worker instead of the old bosses. The benefits of this system in the 1920s and 1930s demonstrated that union-controlled patronage was better for workers than owner-controlled patronage. Furthermore, unions by themselves could not change popular culture, particularly a very, very old idea of the patrón
(powerful person)-client (weaker person) relationship. Unions reproduced inside what they saw outside, hierarchy and control, but that does not diminish the change in the labor regime in Mexico’s textile mills. Owners lost power; unions gained power.

In the mid-1920s, Gruening wrote about the Orizaba mills:

In these last mills labor is ruinously undisciplined. The Convencion Textil has not served because labor does not do its part. The abuse is worst in the four mills of the French-owned Compania Industrial de Orizaba, employing 5000 workers, one of which at Rio Blanco was the shambles of 1907. From the ill treatment of the workers twenty years ago the pendulum has swung far the other way. The men often refuse to do as they are told, and it is not possible to discharge a man without the union’s consent. Not infrequently weavers, when the spirit moves them, quit their machines for the street, to sip a locally brewed cervecita, leaving their looms unattended. If while they are away a thread breaks and no one is there to tie it, the resulting effect spoils the cloth. The fines which formerly would have resulted are now forbidden under the Vera Cruz labor law. The management has no redress. In 1926 the company’s steadily dwindling dividend was cut from six to four per cent. It faces further reduction unless its labor begins sensing its responsibilities.  

Thus, there is no question whether capital lost control of the mills. It did. The question is whether, in the process, workers lost control of their unions.

At this point we run into a problem in the historiography. Most modern Mexican labor historians agree that the twentieth-century Mexican political system was corporatist
or at least state controlled. The government dominated the powerful labor centrals, which dominated the factory unions, which in turn dominated workers, because if owners couldn’t fire workers, unions could. While this paradigm seems a fairly accurate description for the 1950s or 1960s, does it apply to the 1920s? Does Crider’s argument apply to an earlier period?

The evidence to 1923 suggests that workers remained mostly in control of their factory unions in cotton textiles, despite the changing relationships between union officers and common workers. Without doubt, union democracy was never perfect in the conditions of revolutionary Mexico. During this period, one can begin to see some separation of leaders from rank and file, particularly in the regional and national federations. How this evolved after 1923 will require further research. Nonetheless, it is equally clear that workers could satisfy their demands through their factory unions, that these unions easily mobilized workers on short notice to defend comrades, and that union leaders all came from the factory and the community. These facts explain the overall absence of challenges to the legitimacy of union officials during the early institutional period, even as leaders acquired greater power and income. Nonetheless, the difference between leaders and followers in 1923 was much greater than in 1910.

The second area was law. The main purpose of trade unions is to sign and enforce collective contracts. Collective contracts are a subset of contract law, which in turn is a subset of the state. Workers could not win a revolution through trade unions without winning the right to have those organizations be party to collective contracts. The 1912 accords began a process of collective labor agreements that evolved through the 1917 Constitution, and then the state labor codes, and solidified with a new contract in 1927.
These laws and contracts immeasurably fortified unions, which in turn provided workers with better working and living conditions. On the other hand, they equally fortified the state from which they emerged.

In order to repress workers before the revolution, it was sufficient for recalcitrant owners to count on a strong state. For workers, that meant long hours, low pay, minimal benefits, at-will firings, and mistreatment by foremen and supervisors. What changed this was the collapse of the state during Mexico’s revolution, which in turn permitted workers’ activism to create and sustain successful and powerful unions. Ultimately, however, these unions needed a strong state to ensure their own strength and survival. What this meant in practice was that unions needed state and federal law to determine their legality and existence. They won this between 1917 and 1923 as an emerging state favored workers and unions. The state and the unions grew together, each supporting the other. There could be no guarantee, however, that a newly strengthened state would not once again ally with capital to crush workers, as had been the case during the Porfiriato. That, however, is a story that would take us well beyond 1923.

The third area is the inherent power of capital. Throughout the revolution, workers fought against owners and supervisors until they won. Even alleged incompetents and thieves could not be removed from the factory. With owners unable to choose their labor force, unable to fire bad workers, unable to even select foremen, it is clear that capital lost control of the shop floor, indeed, of the factory and to a certain degree of the production process. On the other hand, there is no evidence whatsoever that the vast majority of workers intended to supplant capital. There were no demands to turn the factories over to the workers or to have a revolutionary state take ownership. When
Carranza backed off the factory seizures, workers fought for shop-floor control but not ownership. The workers’ revolution within the revolution was curiously anticapitalist without being socialist or truly anarchist. Thus, while many mill hands spoke and acted with force, even violence, against owners and supervisors, equally common were the voices of those who referred to themselves as “the humble but sincere workers of the factory.”

As long as capital owned the mills, workers needed owners as much as owners needed workers. Even one of the extraordinary labor leaders in Orizaba asked the Labor Office in 1913 “to protect the rich patrimony that is the job that I have in this factory.” Similarly, “the Humble Servants of the La Guia Factory” wrote that “we are not acting in bad faith and we don’t desire bad to anybody.” The humble servants of the country’s mills turned their world upside down but as a class could never conceive of a society in which servant ruled master. There was no Lenin or Trotsky or Bolshevik Party here, only angry and radical workers with their trade unions trying to control the shop floor but leaving capital to capital. That was the limit of their challenge to authority and therefore the limit to their revolution. It may seem strange to those who study the Russian, Chinese, or Cuban revolutions, but that is how Mexican textile workers conceived of their world.

Given these limits, what difference did a revolution make? A radical difference. Cotton textile workers thoroughly transformed the Mexican labor regime. In 1923, the social expectations of the labor process of both of owners and workers were radically different than in 1910. Owners claimed that they had lost control of their factories, a claim confirmed by independent witnesses. Workers demanded and saw the state enforce rights that made their working lives less onerous than before. They won strong unions,
the right to strike, control over hiring and firing, influence over the rhythm of work, the ability to get jobs for friends and family, better medical care and educational opportunities, and new social respect. For a long period, wages and benefits grew, hours of work shrank, and workers and their families enjoyed the improved standard of living and better working conditions. Unions and labor leaders wielded great power. It was not a perfect system, but it did create labor peace.

If hegemony includes, as Antonio Gramsci argued, the “spontaneous consent given by the great masses . . . to the general direction imposed on social life,” it is almost certainly the case that the new labor regime became a fundamental building bloc in postrevolutionary hegemony in Mexico. It is one of the reasons that Mexico did not experience the cycles of left-wing governments, military coups, and guerrilla warfare that dominated Latin America in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Life had improved for the country’s industrial workers, and they knew that. It was a labor regime whose complexities and contradictions forced owners, labor leaders, government officials, and workers to rely on industrial protectionism to pay for the system and often corruption to make it work. It worked well until globalization killed it at the end of the century, but while alive, its strengths were its limits and its limits were its strengths.

Notes:


5. Similarly, it was the breakdown of tsarist authority during World War I that allowed the Bolshevik Revolution to succeed.


8. Miguel López Fuente to Director de la Oficina del Trabajo, March 9, 1912, AGN, DT, Caja 7, Exp. 11.

9. “Durante muchos años . . . ,” May 1914, AGN, DT, Caja 89, Exp. 5; Antonio de Zamacona to Director, September 20, 1912, AGN, DT, Caja 7, Exp. 6; and José López Portillo y Rojas to Manuel Bonilla, December 8, 1912, AGN, DT, Caja 4, Exp. 11.

10. Barios Obreros to Director del Departamento de Trabajo, May 27, 1913, AGN, DT, Caja 52, Exp. 1.


12. Martín Pérez, Julian Suárez, Luis Viveros to Antonio Valero, October 8, 1914, AGN, DT, Caja 87, Exp. 2.


16. Ibid.

17. Jesus Rivero Quijano, La Revolucion Industrial y La Industria Textil en Mexico (Mexico, 1990), 414.


22. Enrique Hinojosa, a leader of the Orizaba workers in 1915, remembered that “Anteriormente se acostumbraba trabajar por tiempo indefinido; se fijaba la hora de cinco a seis de la mañana, para salir a las nueve y media de la noche . . .” entrevista, March 21, 1915, AGN, DT, Caja 106, Exp. 20.


24. See, for example, Departamento de Trabajo, inspección de trabajo, Emilia G. Vda de Sta Maria and Maria H. Vda. de Goxxeza, AGN, DT, Caja 90, Exp. 6; Antonio de Zamacona to Subdirector, May 31, 1912, AGN, DT, Caja 7, Exp. 14.

25. To Antonio Ramos Perueza, January 8, 1913, AGN, DT, Caja 52, Exp. 1.


30. Ibid.

31. SICT, cuestionario sobre trabajo, Río Blanco, June 6, 1921, AGN, DT, Caja 299, Exp. 1.


33. Cándido Aguilar, Número 11, Artículo Séptimo, October 19, 1914, AGN, DT, Caja 50, Exp. 29.

34. La Convención (Mexico City), March 24, 1915, 2.

35. Puebla, Código de Trabajo (Puebla, 1921), 63–75.

36. “Como se estableció la tarifa mínima de salarios para los obreros de hilados y tejidos de algodón,” Boletín del Departamento del Trabajo, Año 1, no. 1, July 1913, 22.


38. El Pueblo (Mexico City), May 24, 1916, 1.

39. Código de Trabajo (Puebla, 1921), Articles 104, 110, 112.

40. “Convención Colectiva de Trabajo, Celebrada entre Industriales y Obreros de l Industria Textil,” Mexico, Secretaría de Industria, Comercio y Trabajo, La Industria, el Comercio y el Trabajo en Mexico, Tomo III, del trabajo y la previsión social (Mexico, 1928), 213.

41. Ibid., 223–25.

42. Ibid., 227–30.

43. Memorandum Núm. 1., n.d., AGN, DT, Caja 1159, Exp. 2.
44. Ibid.

45. Lagar to Srio. Industria, Comercio y Trabajo, August 27, 1927, AGN, DT, Caja 1159, Exp. 2.

46. Ibid.


49. Ibid., 66.


51. A fine discussion is in Kevin J. Middlebrook, The Paradox of Revolution Labor, the State, and Authoritarianism in Mexico (Baltimore, 1995), 463pp.

52. Los humildes servidores to Lic. Pedruza, January 13, 1913, AGN, DT, Caja 52, Exp. 1.

53. José Natividad Díaz to Adalberto Esteva, April 25, 1913, AGN, DT, Caja 37, Exp. 40.

54. Ibid.


56. There were guerrilla activities in Mexico but not on the scale of pre-1959 or Central America in the 1970s, and repression did not reach the level of the Southern Cone with their military governments.