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Excerpt

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1

Organized labour in Mexico

This book is about car workers in Mexico. Before beginning a detailed analysis of the material, however, it would be as well to situate this study in terms of the larger theoretical debate about Latin American workers and their insertion in the political systems of those countries.

After a brief discussion of these theoretical controversies, this chapter examines what may conveniently be described as the standard account of the historical development of the labour movement in Latin America and, particularly, Mexico. This analysis, which is widely accepted by social scientists, sees Mexican trade unions as more or less passive instruments of an authoritarian state. The corporatist control over labour, it is argued, results in the co-optation or repression of rank-and-file insurgency, and what might otherwise be a potential challenge to the stability of the political system is turned into a bastion of support for the regime. The argument presented in this book is that this 'standard account' is defective in a number of important areas and that, consequently, our understanding of the dynamics of the Mexican political system is in need of substantial modification.

The 'standard account' argues that the subordination of organized labour to the state has deep historical roots, and one of the aims of this chapter will be to provide a brief survey of the history of organized labour in Mexico, indicating on the contrary just how problematic state control over working-class mobilization has been. Whereas the standard account tends to suggest that the imposition of 'top-down' forms of corporatist intermediation has effectively removed any serious possibility of working class insurgency, the view advanced in this book is that rank-and-file insurgency has been a constant feature of Mexican industrial relations and that the control by the state over the organized labour movement is far more fragile and subject to contest than appears at first sight.

Studies of the industrial working class in Latin America have often

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[More information](#)

singled out two features as starting points for analysis: the recency of the formation of the industrial working class, and the heterogeneous structure of industrial employment. Given the fairly low levels of industrial development attained by most Latin American countries, the industrial proletariat is likely to be a minority of the labour force. Although some segments of the working class, such as railway and port workers, may have a long tradition of organization, by and large the bulk of the industrial proletariat, it is sometimes argued, will be composed of recent migrants from the countryside. Such migrants, on their arrival in the city, are faced with a labour market which is sharply divided into a modern, formal sector and an informal sector consisting of small workshops, artisanal enterprises and a wide variety of petty commodity trading and service enterprises. There is disagreement in the literature about the nature of the connections between the two sectors, and about the chances migrants have of passing from the informal to the formal sector.¹

Nevertheless, it is widely believed that, in these conditions, labour movements in Latin America will differ significantly from their counterparts in the countries of the already industrialized West. Some of these arguments stress the more political orientation of unions in Latin America as compared with the primarily economic orientation of unions in Western Europe and North America. Since organized labour is only a small fraction of the total labour force, and since unemployment is high, the economic bargaining power of labour *vis-à-vis* employers is low. At the same time, because governments in many Latin American countries are relatively fragile, street demonstrations and urban rioting can often topple them or force major concessions. Therefore, the argument goes, instead of striking, unions put pressure on the government (by threatening violence) to intervene in industrial disputes and force employers to raise wages. So long as the real cost of providing foodstuffs to the towns can be kept down (by keeping the incomes of peasants and rural proletarians low), it is possible for the modern, urban sector to form an alliance against the rural poor.² This model has been described as one of 'political bargaining', as contrasted with the economic bargaining of trade unions in industrialized countries. Such an analysis is consonant with a description of the organized working class as an 'aristocracy of labour' whose interests are opposed to the unorganized poor. The utility of this description is taken up again in chapter 3. In the meanwhile, it is necessary to consider a second analysis of labour in Latin America which also emphasizes its links with the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Organized labour in Mexico*

3

state. These theories, however, which focus on corporatist control of labour organizations, suggest that labour movements are likely to be weak, to lack autonomy and to be passive instruments of the state.

Theories of corporatism assert that unions are organized by the state and that the conduct of industrial relations is structured through a system of compulsory arbitration. The state oversees elections for union leaders (indeed, it often appoints such leaders), closely controls union finances, fosters a fragmented union structure which prevents the emergence of class-wide action, and effectively regulates industrial conflict and determines the outcomes of bargaining situations. In such corporatist systems, strikes are often restricted and, in any case, are of doubtful value to the workers since decisions concerning wages are made in the labour courts or by political fiat and not in company boardrooms.³

Labour in Latin America

Such theories, stressing the corporatist institutions of labour control, frequently locate the origins of these systems in the emergence of populist regimes in the 1930s and 1940s.⁴ In this historical version, these theories are frequently referred to under the heading of 'bureaucratic authoritarianism'. Popularized by Guillermo O'Donnell, the notion of bureaucratic authoritarianism postulates a correspondence, or 'elective affinity', between stages of economic growth and the nature of the state, particularly in its relationship to the labour movement.⁵ Although many Latin American countries had some industrial base at the end of the nineteenth century, the really dramatic expansion of industrial production began in the period between 1930 and 1950, during the phase of import-substitution industrialization. With the rapid penetration of Latin America by multinational corporations in the late 1950s and the 1960s, there was a further surge in industrial output. The figures for Mexican industrial growth are presented in table 1.1

This dramatic expansion of manufacturing industry involved the incorporation of massive new contingents of workers into the urban proletariat. In some cases, it appeared as if the established cadres of the urban working class were being swamped by these waves of new workers, lacking industrial experience, in many cases fresh from the countryside. According to the standard account, the result was twofold: at the level of the individual worker, it was hypothesized that the new industrial workers would be difficult to win over to specifically pro-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

*Unions and politics in Mexico*Table 1.1. *The Mexican economy and labour force*

	GNP (millions of 1980 dollars)	Value added by manufacturing (% total GNP)	EAP ^a (000)	% EAP in manufac- turing	Unionized workers as % of EAP	
					Total EAP	EAP in manufac- turing
1960	31,520	22.6	11,274	13.8	11.5	35.4
1970	62,114	27.1	13,345	16.9	15.0	36.3
1975	81,737	27.7	16,334	17.7	14.2	35.4

^a Economically Active Population.Sources: L. Solís, *La realidad económica mexicana* (México, Siglo XXI, 1970).Nafinsa, *La economía mexicana en cifras* (México, Nafinsa, 1978).Inter-American Development Bank, *Economic and Social Progress in Latin America 1980–81* (Washington, D.C., Inter-American Development Bank, 1981).

letarian ideologies. They would, instead, be inclined to support charismatic and authoritarian leaders who appealed to certain paternalist sentiments. At the level of the class, it is argued, the incorporation of these new contingents would reduce the urban working class to an amorphous, disarticulated mass. Given this, and the relative weakness of the nascent industrial bourgeoisie as a structured class, the state would be able to exercise considerable autonomy *vis-à-vis* civil society. Taken together, these phenomena set the stage for the emergence of populism in Latin America in the 1930s and 1940s. Charismatic caudillos like Perón in Argentina, Vargas in Brazil and Cárdenas in Mexico provided paternalistic substitutes for autonomous working class organization.⁶

With the arrival of populism in power, the working masses were organized from the top down into state-controlled labour unions. Systems of corporatist industrial relations were set up (the Mexican labour law of 1931 clearly belongs to this genre), and the state assumed the role of arbiter and director in industrial life. The working class remained fragmented by this corporatist structure, and subject to the dictates of the state. The wave of authoritarian military regimes in the sixties and seventies was then able to utilize these corporatist control systems to repress the working class and exclude it from political participation.⁷

This line of analysis then argues that in Mexico there was no abrupt transition from radical, civilian populism to military authoritarianism. There, the shift took place under the aegis of the dominant party, the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Organized labour in Mexico*

5

PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional – Institutional Revolutionary Party.) The trade unions were gradually transformed into passive instruments of the state, to be used to keep wages down in the service of capital accumulation and accelerated economic growth. This phenomenon is commonly known in Mexico as *'charrismo'*, and will be discussed below.

This emphasis on the newness of the urban working class, then, led to the development of an analysis which stressed its lack of autonomy, and its passivity and weakness *vis-à-vis* the state. So long as the corporatist control mechanisms operated efficiently, the industrial working class would not engage in sustained militant activity at the industrial level and would be quiescent or pro-regime at the political level.

The second feature of the industrial working class in Latin America, the heterogeneity of employment, also led to the development of arguments which reinforced this image. The structure of industrial production, in terms of its effects on the distribution of the workforce by size of workplace, was highly dualistic in Latin American countries.⁸ As table 1.2 indicates, this seems to be the case in Mexico. As a result, it has been argued, the labour force is divided into a small elite of privileged workers, employed in large, modern, multinational corporations, earning good wages and having secure employment, and a large mass of 'marginal' workers with low and irregular earnings, employed in small, technologically backward establishments. In this situation, the elite of the working class, or labour aristocracy, would have a vested interest in the *status quo* and would tend, therefore, to be politically conservative.

Objections to the standard account

Both of these approaches to the study of labour in Latin America call for a number of comments. In the first place, the contrast with the countries of advanced capitalism is overdrawn. The state has always intervened in industrial relations in Western Europe and North America, and union movements in these countries have never been apolitical.⁹ Nor is it immediately obvious that the high levels of unemployment in contemporary Latin America serve significantly to differentiate these labour movements from their precursors at early stages of industrial development in the West. This is so for two reasons. First, unions in North America and Western Europe had to deal with the problems of mass unemployment and potential strikebreaking. Secondly, it is not

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Excerpt

[More information](#)Table 1.2. *The Mexican industrial labour force, 1970*

Fixed capital (pesos)	No. establishments	%	Total gross production (%)	No. employees	%	Average No. employees/ establishment	Average annual wage (pesos)
0-3m	115,295	96.9	21.5	713,368	45.9	6	11,113
3m-20m	2,712	2.3	25.8	371,837	23.9	137	22,942
20m+	968	0.8	52.7	469,969	30.2	485	32,438
Total	118,975	100	100	1,555,174	100	13	20,383

Sources: Jaime Osorio, 'Superexplotación y clase obrera', *Cuadernos Políticos*, no. 6 (1975).

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Ian Roxborough

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Organized labour in Mexico*

7

clear how easily workers in the modern industrial sectors in Latin American countries could be replaced by strikebreakers drawn from the ranks of the unemployed. Quite apart from shortages of experienced and skilled workers, there are often important institutional constraints on employers' ability to dismiss labour, and this makes direct industrial action a more meaningful response by trade unions.

Moreover, to draw the contrast between Latin American countries and the countries of advanced capitalism in terms of the notion of corporatism is rather difficult. The industrial relations systems of advanced capitalist countries are marked by many corporatist features,¹⁰ and it is not clear that there is a significant difference in this respect between the two groups of countries. The criteria for differentiating between different types of industrial relations are seldom explicitly stated in a way that would enable researchers to measure such supposed significant differences in a clear and unambiguous manner. Moreover, corporatism is very much a matter of degree. Industrial relations systems may have a corporatist appearance: the real question is the extent to which the conduct of industrial relations actually fits this model. Here it is important to examine the minutiae of day-to-day shop-floor conflicts as well as the well-publicized national agreements. An excessive attention to the latter may well exaggerate the extent to which corporatist structures accurately reflect the nature of industrial conflict.¹¹

These qualifications suggest the need to integrate a concern with the political orientations of organized labour with a detailed account of industrial conflict at the shop-floor level.

This general picture of workers in Latin America commands widespread assent. Nevertheless, it has recently been subject to a number of criticisms, some of which are germane to the argument which will be developed in this book. Here I will briefly indicate some of the difficulties involved in this account of Latin American labour history before examining the Mexican case in some detail.

The regimes of Juan Domingo Perón (1945–55) in Argentina and Getulio Vargas in Brazil (1930–45), together with the Cárdenas government in Mexico (1934–40), have frequently been seen as key examples of populist regimes which fit the historical pattern described above. The massive organization of recent migrants from the countryside by these personalist dictators, it is argued, swamped the socialist and Communist unions, and created the basis for a labour movement controlled from above. With the advent of authoritarian regimes, the populist labour

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

movements were either utilized (in the case of Brazil) to implement anti-working-class policies, or (in the case of Argentina) constituted a serious menace to the regime and were, therefore, the object of implacable hostility.

There is, however, evidence to suggest that this picture of populist labour mobilization is not entirely accurate. M. Murmis and J. C. Portantiero,¹² Walter Little¹³ and J. C. Torre¹⁴ have all criticized aspects of this model as applied to Argentina. They assert that the mass demonstrations which released Perón from prison and eventually carried him to power were not spontaneous, 'popular' demonstrations, but were the result of a calculated decision to give critical support to Perón by the major trade unions. The established sector of the working class was as supportive of Perón as were the newer contingents. Moreover, the process of turning the unions into passive instruments of state policy was slow, problematic and actively resisted by many groups of workers. Working class support for Perón, moreover, can be explained largely with reference to increasing standards of living in the 1940s and the contrast with the actively anti-labour regimes preceding Perón. There is no need, therefore, to invoke low levels of class consciousness or direct and unstructured ties between a disorganized mass and a charismatic leader to account for working class support for Perón. It can be explained in largely instrumental terms. In all of these ways, the standard account presents a distorted picture, one which downplays the coherence and rationality of trade union responses.

The 1930–45 Vargas government fits the analysis even less. Unlike the Argentine case, there was little working class mobilization during Vargas' dictatorship. The government was hostile to unions and sought to diminish their power.¹⁵ It was only with the return to free elections in the postwar period that unions were able to develop. This period did, indeed, see substantial working class mobilization and the widespread use of populist appeals by a variety of politicians, including Getulio Vargas. But it is crucial that the period of 'populist' politics in Brazil (1945–64) was one of free elections and competitive political mobilization. The unions in this period, quite contrary to the standard account, developed a considerable measure of autonomy and coherence.¹⁶ It was for precisely this reason that the unions had to be radically reorganized after the military coup of 1964.

These and similar arguments suggest that the standard account of labour history in some of the major countries of Latin America is open to question on a number of matters of empirical detail, objections which

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Organized labour in Mexico*

9

call into question the utility and validity of the account as such. In this book, it will be argued that this is also the case with Mexico.

As far as Mexico is concerned, the prevailing notions about the development of a corporatist labour movement offer a strikingly one-sided account. As will be argued below, the standard emphasis on the corporatist control of the labour movement by the state needs to be balanced by an analysis of the forces making for continued rank-and-file insurgency.

The standard account of the historical development and political behaviour of the urban working class in Mexico and in the rest of Latin America is based on a broad generalization from what was believed to be an accurate description of historical reality. In fact, until recently, there have been very few detailed monograph studies of workers in Latin America. Only in the second half of the 1970s did a substantial number of research publications begin to appear. In the light of this new body of literature, it is increasingly clear that the standard account of Latin American labour history presents an over-homogenized picture. The differences in the historical experiences of labour movements vary markedly between one Latin American country and another. It is more and more difficult to discern some 'modal pattern' of which particular countries are simply variants.

It has also become increasingly clear that, for each Latin American country taken on its own, the received notion of the historical development of the labour movement is subject to historiographical debate. The historical contours and defining features are by no means as clear as some theorists believe. Although this argument could be made for the majority of Latin American countries, our present concern is with Mexico.

The history of Mexican labour

The second half of the nineteenth century saw a number of attempts at union organization in Mexico. The mutualist associations which grew up under the modernizing dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911) were frequently formed by urban artisans. Towards the end of the century, they were joined by unions of textile workers and of miners.¹⁷ The nascent industrial proletariat was regionally dispersed, and had considerable difficulty in establishing permanent and meaningful organizations. Although anarchist and utopian socialist ideologies were widespread among the workers, there was also a sizeable section of the working class which believed that its best chance lay in support for the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Díaz regime; it hoped thereby to win concessions and benefits from the government. This division of the labour movement into apolitical anarchism and a pro-government wing continued through the revolution of 1910 and until the 1930s. Porfirian economic growth had created the beginnings of a modern proletariat, and the later years of the dictatorship were marked by major strikes at the Cananea copper mine in 1906 and at the Río Blanco textile mill in the following year, strikes which threatened the political stability of Mexico and which were put down with force by the government.¹⁸

Some authors have seen these strikes as precursors of the revolution of 1910. Certainly, some part had been played by the Partido Liberal Mexicano, which had made efforts to organize workers in the mining and textile centres. Led by the Flores Magón brothers, the PLM subscribed to an eclectic ideology with strong anarchist overtones. The PLM was active in the northern part of the country when the revolution broke out in 1910, but after ephemeral successes in Baja California, it was rapidly eclipsed by other revolutionary movements. Ricardo Flores Magón was imprisoned by the United States authorities. In any case, there is some doubt as to whether the PLM had any profound or lasting influence among Mexican workers. Moreover, although the strikes of 1906 and 1907 were taken seriously by the government and were put down with considerable violence, it is by no means clear that they were a major factor in bringing about the revolution of 1910.¹⁹

Like most major events, the Mexican revolution was the result of a complex concatenation of causes.²⁰ On the one hand, the rapid modernization of the country under the Paz Porfiriana had brought in its wake a number of social tensions. The expansion and consolidation of large landed property had brought with it the expulsion from the land of a number of peasant communities, particularly in the central highlands, and had led to the rapid proletarianization of large numbers of rural labourers. Elsewhere in the country, the picture was somewhat different, with the development of medium-sized ranchos oriented toward commercial production occurring in some regions in the north and in parts of the Huasteca. In the north-west, the expansion of the latifundios had exacerbated the endemic conflicts with the Yaqui Indians, and the attempt by the Porfirian state to resolve this problem by the forcible transplanting of indians to Oaxaca and the Yucatán had merely aggravated the situation. On top of these structural changes in the agrarian sphere, a series of bad harvests and economic recession in 1907 raised tensions in the countryside to a dangerous degree.