

# A History of Anarcho-syndicalism

## Unit 7: Mexico 1870-1920: Colonialism and Revolution

### This Unit aims to

- Give an overview of the development of capitalism and industrialisation in Mexico
- Look at the emergence of the anarchist movement at this time.
- Examine the cultural and political background of the Mexican revolution.
- Look at the various factions and alliances within the revolution.
- Analyse the emergence of anarcho-syndicalism as a force within the Mexican working class.
- Look at the ideas of the Zapatistas and agrarian reform.
- Examine the split in the anarcho-syndicalist movement over support of the Zapatistas.

### Terms and abbreviations

**la Sociedad:** La Sociedad Artística Industrial. The first anarchist organisation in Mexico established 1867 in Mexico City. This led to the **el Círculo:** El Círculo Proletario, set up in 1869 which formed the nationwide **el Gran Círculo:** el Gran Círculo de Obreros de México.

**la Social:** Workers' resistance societies which were based on the Bakuninist idea of forming secret societies of dedicated anarchist activists.

**el Congreso General Obrero de la República Mexicana:** the first national labour organisation set up by anarchists.

**la Escuela:** la Escuela Moderna y Libre, a free school set up anarchists.

**municipio libre:** Autonomous villages set up on libertarian principles.

**Hacienda system:** A feudalistic system of land ownership.

**The Científicos:** The Científicos were descendents of the white settlers who had arrived in Mexico after independence. They considered the average Mexican too stupid to govern themselves and better off in a serf-like existence. Those not accepting the edicts of the Científicos were murdered, raped and often sold into slavery.

**Ejidos:** A system whereby families worked plots of land, while forest, water, livestock and tools were owned collectively

**Rurales:** The rural police.

**Sociedad de Resistencia:** Underground anarchist resistance groups.

**Organizadora del Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM):** Mexican Liberal Party that soon moved to be an anarchist organisation.

**Gran Círculo de Obreros Libres (GCOL):** Union set up by workers in the textile industry.

**Confederación Nacional de Artes Gráficas (CNAG):** National Confederation of Graphical Arts, a large anarcho-syndicalist print union

**la Luz:** a group, formed In 1912, which aimed to establish an anarcho-syndicalist union that would also organise among the peasantry.

**la Casa del Obrero:**, a loose confederation of leftist unions including la Luz, which, under the influence of anarcho-syndicalists adopted direct action methods.

**División del Norte:** Northern Division, an armed force in the north of Mexico commanded by Pancho Villa.

**Regional Confederation of Mexican Labour (CROM):** Formed in May 1918 in the city of Saltillo it was attached to Obregon's political party. It managed to co-opt enough on the left to relieve radical pressure on the Mexican leaders. Its officials worked for a national consensus and accepted lavish rewards for their efforts.

**Confederación General de Trabajo (CGT):** General Confederation of Labour, an anarcho-syndicalist union.

## Introduction

Mexico was a colony and so differed fundamentally from the European countries examined in Block 1. Ruled by Spain for centuries at one point Mexico's native Indian population was almost completely exterminated and, from the 1860's, the emerging capitalist system was controlled by colonial powers. These factors led to a strong sense of nationalism, which influenced all aspects of the revolution, making it as much a struggle for national liberation. This inevitably impacted on those forces struggling for working class liberation. By 1910, 87% of Mexicans still lived directly off the land despite rapid industrialisation since the 1880's. For instance, in 1880, only 8,000 men and women worked in mills but, by 1910, there were 82,000. Similarly, in 1876 there were only 400 miles of railway but, by 1911, there were 16,000 miles. The industrialisation of Mexico was dominated by foreign capital and so excluded some of the powerful elites within Mexican society from access to this source of increasing wealth.

In order to regain their power, they attempted to enlist working class and peasant support through appeals to national sentiment and the need to throw off foreign domination. They were to be successful in this endeavour, and the story of the Mexican revolution, as is so often the case with national liberation struggles, is one of nationalist elites gaining power on the back of workers' struggle.

It becomes apparent that the Mexican Revolution, like all revolutions, was a time of great difficulty and complexity. Revolutions, far from being simplistic, are made by human beings, not by political theory. As such, they are complex social events that never conform to any master plan.

## Mexican Anarchism

Anarchist ideas first began to make inroads in Mexico in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century. The first workers to take up anarchist ideas were artisans whose independent way of life was threatened by a factory system based on exploiting cheap labour and resources by foreign capital free from state regulation. It was a barrack room system with working class families forced to live in company compounds, traded as virtual slaves by their foreign masters. This growing degradation of workers, seen as little more than animals by their European exploiters, proved fertile ground for anarchism with its emphasis on individual human development and dignity.

As early as 1867, the first anarchist organisation was formed in Mexico City when Spanish workers established La Sociedad Artística Industrial. By 1868, la Sociedad had succeeded in organising some of the largest textile factories in the Mexico City region and held a successful strike, which attracted more workers, leading in 1869 to a new organisation, el Círculo Proletario. El Círculo formed links with the developing anarchist groups in Europe and based its organisation and ideas on the writings of Bakunin. It published newspapers calling for the reorganisation of society, based on self-managed workers' control of production. El Círculo's influence was extended across central Mexico with the creation of el Gran Círculo de Obreros de México in 1871. In addition to el Gran Círculo, a number of workers' resistance societies were formed, known as la Social, which were based on the Bakuninist idea of forming secret societies of dedicated anarchist activists.

The growth of anarchism was reflected in the fact that, by 1875, el Gran Círculo had 10,000 members, mainly factory labourers. La Social had also been able to establish groups across Mexico and, in 1876, the anarchists set up the first national labour organisation, el Congreso General Obrero de la República Mexicana. At the founding congress, la Social's five delegates included a woman, Soledad Sosa, whose presence was objected to by a vocal minority on the grounds of setting a "violated precedent". Though the move to bar her was heavily defeated, it does illustrate the status of women at that time within the Mexican labour movement and society in general.

Anarchist influence also grew among the peasantry, spread by activists from Mexico City who recognised the need for workers and peasants to work together. This idea was to be crucial, as divisions between the Europeanised urban industrial workers and the largely

## Diaz: The Selling of Mexico

non-Spanish speaking native Mexican peasantry, were particularly marked.

The tragedy of the indigenous people of what was to become Mexico is a familiar story. They had been devastated by the Spanish conquest, which saw the population drop from 25 million in 1519 to 1.3 million in 1630. From that point they slowly recovered and embarked on a long struggle against colonial exploitation. Their traditional society was highly communal. Families worked plots of land, while forest, water, livestock and tools were owned collectively. This system, called “*ejidos*”, meant that the Mexican peasantry found that libertarian communist ideas were close to their own way of life. They had been able to preserve this society but, by the early 20th Century, it was increasingly under threat as the railways opened up the countryside.

To build links with the peasantry, anarchists from *la Social* and *el Círculo* had gone into rural central and southern Mexico. As part of this campaign, a free school, *la Escuela Moderna y Libre*, was established at Chalco. In 1871, a former pupil, Julio Chavez Lopez, helped organise a peasant uprising and the peasant revolutionaries’ manifesto, based on anarchist ideas developed at *la Escuela*, blamed the church, government and expansionist landlords for their hardships. It called for the overthrow of the government; for locally controlled land redistribution; for a decentralised system of autonomous villages, the “*municipio libre*”; and for a common defence force run on libertarian principles, “without recourse to the use of men who give orders and punishment”. Despite Lopez’s forces being smashed by the federal army at Actopan, these anarchist-based ideas formed the basis of a series of peasant insurrections, which kept central Mexico on a virtual war footing into the 1880’s.

By 1879, anarchist ideas had spread throughout the emerging Mexican labour movement. *La Social* had 62 regional units and some 5,000 people attended its 1879 conference. Its paper, *la Internacional*, called for social revolution, social anarchy, the abolition of all governments and the creation of a “universal social republic”, which would bring to an end all national boundaries. Anarchist ideas also continued to dominate *el Congreso General Obrero de la República Mexicana*.

The rapid expansion of anarchism halted under the repressive regime of Porfirio Diaz, which had overthrown Lerdo’s “nationalist” liberal government in 1876. Diaz argued that liberal government was outdated, that to transform Mexico into a modern capitalist state required widespread economic reform, based on a modern transport and communication network. Diaz had wide support among the liberal intelligentsia, the provincial elites of old established Mexican families, and especially the ‘*Científicos*’ who were descended from white settlers who had arrived in Mexico after independence. They thought that the common Mexican peasant was mentally and physically only suited to manual labour. Diaz was also supported by moderate trade unionists attracted by his modernist programme. Behind this modernism, however, lay foreign capitalism, namely US merchant bankers and Texan landowners, who supplied arms and military personnel.

On gaining power, Diaz quickly repaid his foreign backers by unleashing a wave of repression aimed at pacifying the Mexican working class into accepting a poverty wage economy. Workers fought back, but with strikes outlawed, and their organisations and newspapers closed down, the working class movement was soon driven underground, including the embryonic anarcho-syndicalist movement in the shape of *la Social* and *el Congreso General Obrero de la República Mexicana*, which were both disbanded.

In the countryside, Diaz moved against the growing agrarian movement. Diaz instigated a hacienda system by twisting the 1856 law originally made to break up large landed areas owned by the Catholic Church. In 1885 at least twenty percent of the Mexican population worked the land in their local *ejido*. By 1910 the figure had dropped to near two percent. The haciendas soon became slave camps. One of the worst was located in Oaxaca called *Valle Nacional* where the owners kept the workers in debt even to the point of babies born on the hacienda inherited their family debt. Local politicians would sell convicts to the haciendas for as little as forty-five dollars. At the height the *Valle Nacional* hacienda, it would receive 15,000 new workers a year. Most would die within several months.

The anarchist-inspired central Mexican uprisings were brutally put down and many founders of *la Escuela Moderna y Libre* were executed. With the urban and rural working class pacified, talk of modernisation was soon forgotten and the economy was handed over

## Working Class Conditions

to foreign capitalism.

Over 7,000-armed US settlers arrived in the northern Mexican states, evicting peasants and enclosing land with barbed wire. The Richardson Construction Company of Los Angeles took nearly a million acres belonging to the Yaqui who were then sold as slaves to plantation owners at \$95 a head. In the Papantia valley, Vera Cruz state, the whole population were exterminated by the rurales (rural police) for resisting forcible eviction. The valley that had supported 20,000 people became the property of one owner and, by 1892, more than one million peasants had their land stolen from them through such inhuman methods.

By 1906, falling profit rates at home resulted in massive quantities of US capital pouring into Mexico to join British, French, Belgian and German holdings in search of higher returns. The ownership of industry, transport, communication, banking and natural resources was transferred into foreign hands. Only in agriculture did the Mexican bourgeoisie retain any power. Even then, they depended on foreign-owned railways. By 1910, over 120 million acres of land were foreign-owned, and 90% of the eighty largest businesses, including nine of the top ten, were foreign-controlled.

As payment for selling off Mexico, Diaz and the metropolitan elite had grown rich. Corruption and bribery was the normal way for the state to function, and government officials and their families were “directors” and “counsellors” in foreign-owned companies. However, a large proportion of Mexican society, including powerful provincial elites, now excluded from power, small-scale domestic capitalists, the middle class, the intelligentsia and the working class, were all alienated by the Diaz regime, leading to a growing, if suppressed, nationalist movement, which in turn led directly to the 1910 revolution.

As discontent grew, so did the brutality used to maintain order. In one widely publicised incident, a liberal journalist, Ordoñez, who had set up a small school for peasants, was thrown alive into a lime pit. Those who organised workers were imprisoned, shot or “disappeared”. By 1893, over 50 newspaper editors and journalists were in prison. Laws were introduced to imprison anyone who used “moral or physical force to raise wages or to impede the free exercise of industry or labour”. Even these draconian laws were too liberal for foreign capitalists, and union organisers were simply shot without trial.

With growing foreign dominance of the economy came truly inhuman working conditions. Capitalism, free of state regulation, exploited mining, oil, agriculture and textile resources. A social structure with hospitals, welfare benefits, schools, housing and so on, was not considered necessary by foreign capitalists, who regarded the Mexican population as barely human. In mining areas, families were forced to live in caves. Company towns were built where whole families lived in small single rooms. These barrack towns were little more than massive prisons. Workers were barred from having visitors to prevent interchange and expression of ideas. Industrial pollution mixed with domestic sewage to create atrocious health hazards that brought epidemic after epidemic onto the working class. From 1895 to 1911, Mexico City's mortality rate topped those of Cairo and Madras. Conditions were so bad in some company towns that even the prospect of starvation failed to drive people to work there. The state responded by forcibly rounding up men, women and children, and transporting them to work as slaves.

Families were paid in ‘scrip’ or company money for exchange at company stores for company goods at company prices. Every aspect of work and living was controlled. Fines were imposed on workers who were then forced to take out loans to pay them off. Pay was docked for religious festivals and tax was collected for tools. In the event of death, loans passed to relatives who, to repay them, had to work as slaves, while high interest rates ensured they would never be free from debt.

Despite the brutal repression and harsh conditions, workers continued to organise. A number of secret workers' councils and underground unions were formed, often creating an alternative anarchist culture based on mutual aid, as workers attempted to survive in a brutal environment. By 1900, some of these organisations were strong enough to challenge the regime. At Puebla, where a textile strike quickly became a local general strike by 3,000 workers, the challenge, although repressed, proved to be a turning point in the struggle against Diaz, inspiring a number of strikes across Mexico.

## Anarchist Opposition: the PLM

In 1900, with unrest growing, Camilo Arriaga, who came from a powerful family and whose mining interests had been taken over by US companies, called for the creation of liberal clubs across Mexico. In doing so he hoped that a new liberal opposition party could be formed. It met with immediate success, and over 50 clubs were quickly established. These formed a focal point for opposition, and attracted a broad coalition from provincial and local village elites to peasants and industrial workers. The regime quickly closed the clubs down and many of the organisers were imprisoned.

Among the prisoners were Ricardo and Enrique Magon. Though not yet anarchists, they had been influenced by the writings of Kropotkin and Bakunin. On their release from prison, they launched the paper *Regeneración*, which became increasingly radical, calling for labour and agrarian reform. It was soon repressed, but the Magons continued to publish it, resulting in imprisonment three times in three years. In 1903, faced with constant harassment, they fled to the US, to continue organising against Diaz.

In exile, the Magon brothers broke with Arriaga's movement and formed *la Junta Organizadora del Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM)*. Though still calling itself a political party, the PLM moved towards anarchism. Despite constant harassment and imprisonment, the exiled PLM formed links with the US anarchist movement. Many PLM activists joined the newly created Industrial Workers of the World (IWW - see Unit 8), establishing groups in California, while many IWW members joined the PLM in the struggle against Diaz. These links led to the PLM taking up the cause of anarchism, which in turn brought condemnation from both the US liberal intelligentsia and much of the Mexican opposition.

The PLM's anarchism was reflected in its democratic structures and programme, which called for a workers' and peasants' insurrection and the establishment of libertarian communism. By 1908, the PLM had over 350 underground clubs and guerrilla units operating throughout Mexico. It was made up of town artisans and industrial workers and, to a lesser extent, displaced peasants. The guerrilla units operated on the anarchist principle of self-management, with recallable elected officers.

There were also women's clubs which worked within the PLM. One such club was the "Daughters of Cuahatemoc", a semi-secret organisation founded by Flores de Andrade. Its plan was to establish

branches of the women's club in all parts of Mexico and in the United States that would carry on propaganda and fight for anarchist ideas. Indeed, the role of women generally in the Mexican Revolution was crucial. Mexican women were directly involved and were known as the *Soldaderas*. Women went to the battlefields, engaged in combat and some assumed leadership positions. Mexican women's groups often travelled across the border to the US, to speak out on their political beliefs about the revolution and to enlist the support of radical women's groups in the United States.

The PLM was soon organising in Mexico's industrial heartlands. Most notably, they organised insurrectionary strikes at Cananea and Vera Cruz, which later were to become symbols of the 1910 revolution. At Cananea, in a mining and textile region on the US border, anarchists from the PLM organised a strike for better working conditions. The workers' demand for "Mexican jobs for Mexican workers" reflected the growing nationalism of the Mexican working class. The strike became a gun battle and, as heavily armed workers took control of the region, the government rushed in troops to reinforce the *rurales*. These troops were further reinforced by a volunteer force from the US, organised by Rockefeller, whose Anaconda mining company operated in the region.

The strikers were massacred, but the sight of government troops acting alongside the hated foreign capitalists to brutally put down Mexican workers led to a national outcry and fuelled growing nationalism. Ironically, the internationalised PLM was now seen by many as the only organisation of people willing to stand up against foreign domination. Cananea was followed by more serious unrest in the textile industry in Vera Cruz. The industry was owned and controlled by French capitalists, and was Mexico's most advanced industrial sector. Workers had been organised in the underground anarchist *Sociedad de Resistencia* for several years. Together with the PLM, they organised 'el Gran Círculo de Obreros Libres' (GCOL), which published an underground paper, *la Revolución Social*. This paper regularly denounced the church and government, and called for social revolution and workers' self-management.

The GCOL was effectively an anarcho-syndicalist union - and it quickly spread throughout the textile industry. Alarmed, the government sent in the *rurales* to raid homes and arrest militants. In protest, workers in Río Blanco declared a strike, burned down the

company buildings and opened the prisons. Strikes spread across the industry until some 93 mills were involved. Company stores across the state were destroyed and armed workers quickly overcame the rurales. In response, troops were rushed in and, after days of unequal street battles, the workers were defeated. Some 800 strikers were murdered, hundreds imprisoned, thousands sacked, and thousands more fled to the US, where many joined the IWW.

After Vera Cruz, in June 1908, the PLM launched an uprising. However, the US and Mexican governments prevented PLM forces crossing the US border. Isolated, the PLM forces inside Mexico were defeated by the army. This uprising, though easily defeated, rocked Diaz. With growing economic problems and mounting unrest, he declared his intention to step down and his wish to see the creation of political parties.

## The 1910 Revolution

Francisco Madero announced his candidature for the presidency. Like Arriaga, Madero was from a wealthy provincial family whose fortunes and influence had declined as the power of foreign capitalism had grown. However, beyond the provincial elites and the intelligentsia, he had no real power base. To widen his support, he announced a mildly nationalist programme based on a US-style free market economy.

However, implicit in this was the idea of doing away with the outdated and corrupt power base of the Mexico City metropolitan elite that had prospered so much under Diaz. This proved too much for Diaz and his foreign backers. Alarmed at the popularity of Madero's campaign, he reversed his decision to step down, and in the run up to the election, had Madero arrested. On his release, Madero, his image greatly enhanced, fled to the US. Convinced that the metropolitan elite would never go peacefully, he made his historic call for a revolutionary uprising to begin on October 5th, 1910.

This was in effect a call for a national liberation struggle. In the San Luis Potosí programme, Madero went far beyond the moderate

nationalism of his presidential campaign. It included agrarian and labour reform to attract the peasantry and workers who, until that point, he had virtually ignored. His revolution needed an army, and with the Mexican army still loyal to Diaz, he turned to the workers and peasants. Another factor was his fear that the revolution could lead to a PLM victory which was not what he had in mind. This was recognised by Diaz, who warned that Madero was unleashing uncontrollable forces. Nevertheless, Madero's support grew among the urban working class, with mass demonstrations turning into violent confrontations with troops and police. The peasants also showed support. In the south, an obscure sometime bandit, Emiliano Zapata, announced a revolution in concert with Madero's, while in the north, Francisco Villa also declared his support for Madero and organised a powerful peasant army.

Madero became a focal point for a mass movement against Diaz. The confrontation diverted the state's repressive forces from the PLM who, taking advantage, immediately launched their own uprising with striking success, capturing towns in Sonora and Vera Cruz states. In Baja California, they quickly defeated the state forces and declared an anarchist republic. Meanwhile, Madero's small forces suffered a number of defeats. Fearful of the growing power of the PLM he attempted to co-opt them, announcing that the future revolutionary government would be headed by both himself and Ricardo Magon. In response, Ricardo Magon, still languishing in a US jail, issued a rejection of any alliance:

*"I ought to say that governments are repugnant to me. I am firmly convinced that there cannot be good government...Government is tyranny, because it curtails the individual's free initiative, and the sole purpose it serves is to uphold a social system which is unsuitable for the true development of human beings. Governments are the guardians of the interests of the rich and educated classes...I have no wish therefore to be a tyrant. I am a revolutionary and a revolutionary I shall remain until I draw my last breath."*

## Madero Sells Out

With the PLM moving south from its northern stronghold and Zapata's forces gaining ground in the south, Jose Limantour, a leading Cientifico, who was virtually running the country and well aware of Diaz's situation, sent an emissary to meet with Madero. In an attempt to stave off the revolutionary working class they signed a treaty whereby Francisco de la Barra, the Mexican ambassador to the United States, would serve as interim president until elections could be held. This agreement was known as the Treaty of Ciudad Juarez and called for the removal of Diaz by the end of May. Diaz did not wait and resigned on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May leaving for exile in France. On June 11<sup>th</sup> 1911, Madero entered Mexico City. However, the PLM refused to accept the revolution was over, stating:

*"The Mexican Liberal Party has no compromise with Madero and Diaz. The proposed peace treaty between Diaz and Madero will not stop the revolutionary activity of the PLM... We are convinced that political freedom is a lie where it concerns the working class...it is for this reason that the liberals are fighting for economic emancipation of the proletariat. Our objective is that the land and machinery of production will become the communal possession of all and every inhabitant of Mexico, with no distinction of sex."*

Madero became president on November 6<sup>th</sup> 1911 and quickly moved against the PLM with the full force of the Mexican army while attempting to stall Zapata in the south with empty promises of land reform and bribes. The PLM was defeated in Sonora and Chihuahua states. In Baja California, although reinforced by Italian anarchists and IWW members, the massively outnumbered PLM forces were driven across the US border, where they were promptly arrested. Throughout Mexico, PLM activists were rounded up and thrown into jail and, although many others continued the revolutionary struggle alongside Zapata, the PLM was never again to pose a real threat to Mexican capitalism. Madero then launched an assault on Zapata's forces who had taken his promise of land reform seriously by taking over large estates. In response, Zapata declared a revolution against the new government, condemning Madero as a "traitor to the revolution" and guilty of "bloody treason". He issued his own revolutionary programme, the Plan de Ayala, which argued for the land to be returned to the native Mexican peasantry.

## Zapata & Agrarianism

Zapata's position within the revolutionary movement of 1908-11 was complex. Though at first he looked to the state for land reform, he quickly became radicalised. As described by the PLM paper, *Regeneración*, in 1913:

*"The PLM and the Agrarians (Zapatistas) work in conjunction and good harmony...they as the PLM have burnt to ashes private property deeds...have thrown down fences that marked private properties, the jails have been destroyed, and everything has been turned into the property of all."*

At the centre of Zapata's project was land reform, for which he drew heavily on anarchist ideas. The Plan de Ayala was remarkably similar to ideas developed at la Escuela Moderna y Libre in 1906, and was partly written by the anarchist, Otilio Montano. The plan was issued in November 1911, and until 1918, represented the issues that Emiliano Zapata and his rural followers were fighting for. While a large portion of the Plan was reserved for attacks upon Madero for his failings to uphold his own plan, that of San Luis Potosi the document reveals the primary importance the Zapatistas placed on agrarian reform.

The Zapatistas sought to replace the great estates with a decentralised federation of free villages, with communally owned land. It was a radical programme and looked to improve the peasants' conditions, but without a clear opposition to the capitalist framework. Many of the concepts and phrases were the same as the PLM had used in the 1911 September manifesto. Words like, "tyrants", "usurpers", and the "bosses" are used throughout the Zapata document and it was considered so extreme that "no other revolutionary group except the anarcho-syndicalists would advocate, much less adopt as a policy." The ending motto of Zapata's plan, "Liberty, Justice, and Law," is very similar to the motto of the Liberal platform of 1906: "Reform, Justice, and Law." He drew support partly from Indian "nationalism", which wanted the land returned, and partly from a radical form of Catholicism.

Morelos state remained under Zapatista control for a further 4 years, and it was mainly here that the land reform plan was put into action. The great estates were divided into communes and co-operatives. Other land was under the direct control of the Zapatista general headquarters and helped to generate income for the war

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effort and to pay pensions to families of fallen soldiers.

Meanwhile, Madero's campaign against the Zapatistas was largely unsuccessful, while in the north he made a fatal error in underestimating Villa. Having made him an "honorary general", he ordered him to retire. An outraged Villa declared war on Madero and quickly reassembled a mainly peasant army. Though Villa argued for agrarian reform, he had no firm plans. He discouraged peasants from taking over land controlled by his army. Although he did take over the estates of some rich Mexicans, he often evicted any peasants who had seized the land before him. However he left US-owned land alone in the mistaken belief that this would carry favour with the US government. Though often brutal, there is no doubting his military effectiveness. Over the next two years, his forces increasingly operated as a traditional army, using trains to move heavy equipment, and defeating state forces in set-piece battle.

This contrasted with the Zapatistas, who operated as a "classic" 20<sup>th</sup> Century guerrilla army, mainly at night, and dependent upon the local population for support and supplies. Under attack from both south and north, Madero also alienated the same urban working class who had only recently welcomed him as a conquering hero. Buoyed by the defeat of Diaz, workers took the offensive against foreign capitalism. Between January and September 1912, the Madero government had to deal with upwards of 40 major strikes across the industrial heartlands of Mexico.

With Diaz and his brutal henchmen gone, anarcho-syndicalists in Mexico City suddenly found themselves able to organise relatively openly. A large anarcho-syndicalist print union, the Confederación Nacional de Artes Gráficas (CNAG), was established, which produced a paper and other propaganda from its own print works in Mexico City. In 1912, a new group, la Luz, was formed, which aimed to establish an anarcho-syndicalist union that would also organise among the peasantry, similar to the Spanish CNT. La Luz saw its role as "uplifting the workers through group example and education" until such time as labour could destroy the church, state and capitalism through the general strike and armed workers' self-defence, and take over the economy for the benefit of all.

The ten points of the Manifiesto Anarquista del Grupo Luz were uncompromising:

1. *To enlighten an enslaved and ignorant people.*
2. *To overthrow the tormentors of mankind: clergy, government and capital.*
3. *To not serve the ambitions of any political charlatan, because no man has the right to govern another.*
4. *To make known that all men are equal because they are all ruled by the same natural laws and not by arbitrary ones.*
5. *To demand explanations from the opulent rich regarding their wealth, from the government regarding its lying authority, and from the representatives of the bandit god for his celestial powers.*
6. *To devastate the social institutions generated by torturers and loafers.*
7. *To gain freedom for the enslaved worker.*
8. *To use truth as the ultimate weapon against inequality.*
9. *To struggle against fear, the terrible tyrant of the people.*
10. *To march forward towards redemption, toward the universal nation where all can live with mutual respect, in absolute freedom, without national political father figures, without gods in the sky or the insolent rich.*

La Luz joined with a number of socialists to form a new trade union organisation, la Casa del Obrero, a loose confederation of leftist unions, with the more anarcho-syndicalist influenced ones advocating the general strike and sabotage to destroy capitalism. La

## US Takes Control

Casa grew rapidly and, in 1913, it launched a number of strikes in Mexico City. Under the influence of anarcho-syndicalists, the *Manifiesto Anarquista del Grupo* expressed many of its most important ideas; La Casa adopted direct action methods, occupying factories and gaining support across the community. Crowds providing food and protection from the state authorities often surrounded occupied factories.

Madero responded to la Casa's growing strength by creating the *Gran Liga Obrera*, which proved a disaster. A number of anarcho-syndicalists stood for office in la Liga's first public meeting, stating they would disband it once elected. This duly happened, making it a laughing stock. It remained a paper organisation with no popular support, and the government resorted to its traditional means of control - brutal repression. Police raided la Casa's offices, shut down its papers, arrested prominent activists, and attempted to retake occupied factories. A series of street battles ensued with the *cosacos* (mounted police). These attempts to crush la Casa failed miserably. In fact the confrontations with the *cosacos* only enhanced its militant reputation among industrial workers.

Losing urban working class support added to the growing crisis facing Madero. Besides Villa's and Zapata's forces, a number of non-aligned peasants groups moved about at will, attacking and robbing wealthy landowners. There was so much conflict that the economy began to grind to a halt. This proved too much for the officer corps and, in February 1913, several army officers attempted a coup d'état. After a 10-day battle, troops loyal to Madero gained the upper hand. With victory assured, Madero made General Victoriano Huerta the new head of the army. Huerta immediately made a secret agreement with the US government and the defeated officers to overthrow Madero. On February 23rd, Huerta had Madero arrested and murdered.

With US support, Huerta immediately formed a military government, drawn from the same metropolitan elite that had sustained Diaz. In response, the alliance that had toppled Diaz declared against Huerta. Venustiano Carranza, a northern state governor and wealthy landowner, declared himself "first chief", announcing the formation of a "constitutionalist" revolutionary army. In the north, Villa, his forces now moulded into the highly effective and powerful *División del Norte*, also declared war on the new government. In the south, Huerta tried to enlist Zapata's support, only for his emissaries to be tried for "assassinating the revolution". Launching a brutal "slash and burn" counter-insurgency campaign against the *Zapatistas*, Huerta promised there would be no mercy. State forces burnt villages and crops, and shot villagers at will. This only succeeded in driving yet more support to the *Zapatistas*, who slowly drove the government forces back.

In the north, Villa's army won a sensational string of victories. Alarmed, the US quickly dropped Huerta for Carranza's constitutionalists. At their instigation, a meeting was held between Villa and Carranza and the *División del Norte* was incorporated into the constitutionalist forces under the overall command of Carranza. In reality, Villa continued to operate independently so, with his forces threatening Mexico City, the US government sabotaged him by cutting off coal supplies and rail links, effectively sterilising the army. If Huerta's military campaign was going badly, his efforts to control the urban working class fared little better. With the economy crippled, the government had resorted to printing money to pay for the war, leading to hyper-inflation. In response, in April 1913, la Casa

del Obrero launched a wave of strikes among weavers, retail clerks and restaurant workers and called for the overthrow of Huerta. Government troops burnt down la Casa centres and rounded up activists, while many anarcho-syndicalists fled Mexico City to join Zapata's forces. By July 1914, with Zapata about to enter Mexico City and Villa approaching from the north, Huerta resigned and left Mexico.

His replacement, Francisco Carbajal, urged on by the US, sought to stall Zapata through lengthy negotiations, while awaiting General Alvaro Obregon's constitutionalist forces which had by-passed the stalled División del Norte. The Carbajal government quickly surrendered to Obregon. Though overall control of the constitutionalist forces was still with Carranza, divisions soon started to appear within them. Carranza, was a conservative committed to the patrón tradition of rural Mexico whereby power lay with the wealthy landowners. Moderates within the constitutionalist forces, however, realised that reforms were needed if there was to be any hope of avoiding Zapata and la Casa seizing power. This meant a modern Mexican state with guarantees for both capital and labour, and they began to introduce labour reform in areas under constitutionalist control. In Aguascalientes, this brought a 9-hour day and Sundays off for both workers and peasants. In San Luis Potosí, a minimum wage, a 9-hour day and a department of labour were promised. Carranza, who hated trade unions, opposed Obregon, leader of these reformers. Nevertheless, he embarked on a propaganda campaign stressing reforms already introduced by the constitutionalists and promising they would be extended across Mexico. He handed over buildings to the unions, distributed food and clothing and intervened in labour disputes, openly supporting workers against foreign-owned companies. He also froze prices of staple foodstuffs.

In a short space of time, Obregon established himself as the reforming hero of the urban working class. Meanwhile, Obregon also unleashed a ferocious propaganda campaign against Zapata and Villa, alleging that they represented the forces of reaction and were dominated by the Catholic Church. He sought to exploit cultural differences between industrial workers and peasantry. Not surprisingly, relations with Villa and Zapata deteriorated rapidly, but Obregon headed off conflict by arranging a constitutionalist

convention on October 10th 1914, at Aguascalientes. The Zapatistas, who had never been a formal part of the constitutionalist forces, attended the conference without voting rights. Through force of argument, they won over many constitutionalist reformers to agrarian reform. As a result, a compromise candidate, Eulalio Gutierrez, a reforming state governor, was elected as convention president. A furious Carranza who, true to his background, opposed agrarian and labour reform, rejected the decision and stormed out, along with Obregon. Villa and Zapata entered Mexico City on December 14th. Though they both distrusted Gutierrez, they handed over the reins of government to him as per the convention's decision.

True to his constitutionalist roots, Gutierrez constantly undermined the efforts of Zapata's and Villa's forces over the next two years but it seemed only a question of time before the constitutionalist forces would be overcome. However, it was not to be. Instead, massive US intervention came to their aid. At Vera Cruz a training camp was established, protected by US forces, to train and reassemble the constitutionalist army. At the same time, they blockaded Mexico to halt the arms flow from US arms dealers to Villa and Zapata.

However, Obregon's efforts to woo the workers had convinced some in la Casa that the constitutionalist forces were the best hope of building a union movement. Support was split over the issue of supporting the constitutionalists. Many of those who were drawn into this disastrous route had been influenced by the sight of Zapata's army who, whilst occupying Mexico City, exhibited "religious devotion, acceptance of the clergy, and wore religious armbands and carried religious banners". The Anarcho-syndicalists did not agree on this in a solid bloc. When the forces of Villa and Zapata forced Carranza and the Constitutionalists to flee Mexico City, membership in the Casa split into three factions. Most of the membership left with the Constitutionalists, and to a lesser degree, many joined the Villistas and a handful joined the Zapatistas.

Zapata had attacked the timid reforms of the Carranza administration, stating that Carranza offered "freedom of the press for those that cannot read; free elections for those who do not know the candidates; proper legal proceedings for those who have never had anything to do with an attorney." Certainly this echoed the sentiments of la Casa, but the Zapatistas were very religious, largely catholic,

## Postscript

which the Anarcho-syndicalists found repulsive. On November 7 1915 Zapata finally issued a proposed labour law but it merely exposed Zapata's lack of understanding of his urban counterparts. It included an eight-hour day, the prohibition of work for children under that age of fourteen, worker cooperative to run factories abandoned by owners, and a fixed minimum wage. But it failed to respond to some of the most important demands of the Mexican labour movement, which included, more control of foreign property, equal payment and treatment for foreign and Mexican workers, and extensive and clearly defined right to strike, and a guarantee of the status of trade unions. More importantly it came too late, the majority of the Casa forged an alliance with the Carranza's Constitutionals the February before. Though none in la Casa had much time for Obregon, some reasoned that backing the constitutionalist army would allow them the time and freedom to build the union organisation and militias needed to carry out a new revolution under which true agrarian reform would be introduced, free from the influence of the hated Catholic Church. This decision to take up arms against the peasantry allowed the constitutionalists to divide the working class in order to defeat it. Some 7,000 urban workers left Mexico City and joined the constitutionalist army, forming seven so-called "red" divisions. Many workers were clearly aware of the stupidity of joining forces with the constitutionalists and this was reflected in mass meetings organised by la Casa when large minorities, and often even majorities, refused to join up.

Over the next year the constitutionalist forces, led by US military advisers, deployed tactics developed in the early part of the First World War against Villa. By 1916, the División del Norte had been defeated and Zapata's forces, though undefeated, had retreated to their southern heartlands.

With the victorious constitutionalist army now occupying Mexico City, the Carranza government quickly moved to eradicate the threat posed by its recent ally, the urban working class, through a series of raids on la Casa centres across Mexico. In response, a general strike paralysed Mexico City and the government, caught unawares, were forced to back down by releasing prisoners and opening up la Casa centres once more. The anarcho-syndicalist movement began to reorganise and meetings attracted thousands of workers and anarcho-syndicalist papers reappeared, while a number of anarcho-syndicalists were elected to prominent positions within la Casa. Anarcho-syndicalists also argued for militias to be formed for the coming revolution against the constitutionalists.

Alarmed by this threat, the government again resorted to repression but la Casa called a general strike for July 31st, 1916, which was an even greater success than the previous one, with a large part of central Mexico paralysed. The government was now better prepared and troops, brought into the city under cover of darkness, brutally put down the strike. Martial law was imposed and the death penalty was introduced for the offence of striking. With the peasantry and urban working class now all but defeated, the reformists within the constitutionalists led by Obregon, organised against the "outdated" elements led by Carranza. In May 1918 the Regional Confederation of Mexican Labour (CROM) was formed by a national labour congress and attached itself to Obregon's political party. This labour union although spouting some revolutionary rhetoric would prove to serve a useful purpose to the Mexican political leaders for years to come.

In 1919, Obregon, backed by remnants of Zapata's forces and younger army officers, marched on Mexico City, and Carranza fled. Obregon formed a so-called "revolutionary" government backed by the provincial elites, the more progressive elements of the metropolitan elite, domestic Mexican capitalism, the intelligentsia and much of the army. Strongly nationalist, they looked to the establishment of a strong state. Though at first resisted by the US government because Obregon's nationalism was counter to US interests, it finally accepted Obregon's forces and worked to maximise its interests through the Obregon administration. In doing so it ensured an attempted uprising by Adolfo de la Huerta, erstwhile supporter of Obregon, was doomed to failure.

## Key points

This proved to be the last attempt of the revolution and Obregon and U.S. business and governmental had finally reached an understanding. Revolutionary opponents, like Zapata and Villa were now dead as was Ricardo Magon, who had died in a U.S. federal prison. Though minor agrarian and labour reform was introduced, the process was kept under strict state control. Anarcho-syndicalists managed to reorganise, creating the anarcho-syndicalist union, the Confederation General de Trabajo (CGT), which at one point in the 1920's numbered 50,000. However, a mixture of state repression and marginalisation by CROM, brought its eventual demise. The Mexican revolution ended in defeat for the Mexican working class and victory for the nationalist elites who still run Mexico.

- The Mexican elite continuously used the language of national liberation to enlist the support of Mexican workers and peasants during the Revolution.
- Anarchist ideas spread because they were very close to the peasants' way of life in Mexico.
- The modernisation of Mexico was funded by foreign investment that alienated the traditional Mexican elites.
- The combination of the hacienda system and atrocious working conditions saw the working class and peasantry join together against the dictatorship of Porfiro Diaz.
- In the Revolution moderates continually attempted to enlist the support of the militant workers and, in the south, the Zapatistas.
- The United States constantly intervened in the revolution to protect its own interests.
- There were vital differences between the anarcho-syndicalists and the Zapatistas which was to prove fatal in the Revolution.
- Any or successes in creating workers' organisations or in agrarian reform were brutally crushed by successive presidents as soon as they were strong enough.

## Checklist

1. What were the main factors influencing the revolutionary movements in Mexico?
2. Why did anarchist ideas strike a chord with the Mexican peasantry and workers?
3. How did Porfiro Diaz set about the 'modernisation' of Mexico?
4. What were the main planks of the Zapatistas' policies?
5. How did the split between la Casa and the Zapatistas occur?
6. How did Alvaro Obregon manage to consolidate and institutionalise the revolution?

## Answer suggestions

1. *What were the main factors influencing the revolutionary movements in Mexico?*

Mexico was a colony and ruled by Spain for centuries and the Spanish virtually wiped out the native population. From the 1860's, the emerging capitalist system was controlled by foreign powers. American capitalism and the U.S. government continually intervened in Mexico to protect their interests. These factors led to a strong sense of nationalism, which influenced all aspects of the revolution, making it as much a struggle for national liberation.

2. *Why did anarchist ideas strike a chord with the Mexican peasantry and workers?*

The Mexican peasant society was highly communal. They had a system called "ejidos" in which families worked plots of land, while forest, water, livestock and tools were owned collectively. This meant that anarchist ideas were easily understood. In the towns Spanish workers influenced by anarchism and the ideas of the Spanish CNT established the first unions.

3. *How did Porfiro Diaz set about the 'modernisation' of Mexico?*

Diaz argued to transform Mexico into a modern capitalist state required widespread economic reform, based on a modern transport and communication network. Although Diaz had wide support among the liberal intelligentsia, the provincial elites of old established Mexican families and the 'Cientificos' behind this modernism lay foreign capitalism, mainly US merchant bankers and Texan landowners, who supplied arms and military personnel.

4. *What were the main planks of the Zapatistas' policies?*

The Zapatistas sought to replace the great estates, the hacienda system, with a decentralised federation of free villages with communally owned land.

5. *How did the split between la Casa and the Zapatistas occur?*

The Zapatistas had little understanding of the issues and problems faced by the urban working class and so alienated some of them with their primary concern of agrarian reform. Also the Zapatistas were, in the main, very religious and this clashed with the anarcho-syndicalists who saw the Catholic Church as one of the

mainstays of the Mexican ruling class.

6. *How did Alvaro Obregon manage to consolidate and institutionalise the revolution?*

The major revolutionary opponents, like Zapata, Villa and Ricardo Magon were now dead. Minor agrarian and labour reform was introduced but the process was kept under strict state control. He built up the CROM to absorb any working class dissent and co-opted labour and capital into the state structure. Most importantly he reached an understanding with the American Government and American capitalism which ensured their interests were served.

## Some discussion points

- What are the problems in combining national liberation struggles with the struggle for a social revolution?
- Was Zapata an anarchist?
- What lessons can be learned from the split between the urban workers and the peasants during the revolution?

## Further Reading

**Ramon Eduardo Ruiz. Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries, Mexico, 1911-1923. John Hopkins University Press, 1976. ISBN: 0-8018-1728-5. -LI-**

Detailed text that portrays accurately the total confusion of the whole revolutionary period. Worth seeking out.

**John Mason Hart. Revolutionary Mexico. University of California Press, 1987. ISBN: 0-520-05995-6. -LI-**

Like Ruiz, a rather academic text that does very 'academic' things like break out in Spanish without translating it. Nevertheless, useful and detailed.

**Colin M. MacLachlan. Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution: The Political Trials of Ricardo Flores Magón in the United States. University of California Press. ISBN 0520071174. £9.95 -AK-**

The tragic story of Flores Magon, told from analysis of court records. Concentrates on his repression by the US, which led to his eventual death in a US jail in 1922.

**Brian Morris. Flores Magon and the Mexican Liberal Party. In: Brian Morris - Ecology & Anarchism, Images Publishing. ISBN 1897817800. £7.50 -SE-**

Good primer chapter in an excellent and far-reaching book that contains reviews and essays on many key figures and issues within the anarchist tradition.

**Ricardo Flores Magon - Land and Liberty! Cienfuegos Press, 1977. -LI-**

Edited by David Poole, this is Magon's classic gut-wrencher of the Mexican revolution. Now sadly out of print but worth searching out.

**Fighting the Revolution. Volume 1. Freedom Press (pamphlet). £1 -AK-**

Contains (among other things) 'Emiliano Zapata' which is the text of a talk by Jack Stevenson, and also a reprint of the original 'Manifeto to Mexicans' issued by Zapata in August 1914. Also contains stuff from Makhno and Durruti.

In Britain and in English at least, decent histories covering this critical period in Mexico are few and far between. It is worth checking libraries on the off chance, and looking in wider (e.g. central American) histories for material. As a starter, here are a few we haven't had chance to check out –

**J.D.Cockroft - Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution 1910-1913. University of Texas Press, 1968.**

**A. Gilly - The Mexican Revolution. NLB Press, 1983.**

**R.E.Ruiz - The Great Rebellion, Mexico 1905-1924. Norton, 1980.**

Notes: The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: -LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS- try good bookshops, -SE- ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).