

Mexico in Labor's Crucible

Friday 1 November 2013, by [LA BOTZ Dan](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2013).

***Continental Crucible: Big Business, Workers and Unions in the Transformation of North America* by Richard Roman and Edur Velasco Arregui. Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2013, 148 pages, references, index, \$19.95 paperback.**

***The Collapse of Dignity: The Story of a Mining Tragedy and the Fight Against Greed and Corruption in Mexico* by Napoleón Gómez Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, Inc., 2013, 344 pages, photos, index, \$26.95 paperback / Kindle \$11.99.**

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THESE TWO QUITE different books both deal in important and interesting ways with the question of building a real labor movement throughout North America. The more important, Roman and Velasco's *Continental Crucible*, analyzes the economic forces, labor union structures, migration patterns and gender relations in the working class on the North American continent and proposes a strategy based on rank-and-file struggle for transforming the unions and imbuing them with an anti-imperialist, anti-racist and anti-patriarchal character.

The *Collapse of Dignity*, written by the head of the Mexican Miners and Metal Workers Union, Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, deals more with the ways in which the corrupt, repressive, violent and absolutely pro-employer Mexican political system and system of labor relations have led workers in practice — at least partially — to a similar conclusion: We need more militant and internationalist labor solidarity.

The history of labor solidarity in North America is long and politically complex going back to the end of the 19th century. Before turning to these two books and their recommendations for the present, we need an overview of North American labor solidarity over the last century, to put our current efforts in perspective. There have been different models of international labor solidarity, some based on the labor bureaucracies and their political interests, others on rank-and-file union activism and its goals.

Replication of Railroad Brotherhoods

Labor solidarity developed out of the patterns of economic investment, the political interests of

nations, the plans of labor union leaders and the struggles of rank-and-file workers, all entangled in complicated ways. In the 1880s, the dictator Porfirio Díaz invited foreign capital to build a national railroad system in Mexico, most of it British and U.S. capital, a system completed around 1900 and linked to the U.S. railroad system.

The foreign-owned Mexican railroad employed mostly U.S. railroad workers to run the trains, though Mexicans did all the heavy, dirty and dangerous construction work. The Americans brought their 16 railroad brotherhoods to Mexico with them — Brotherhood of Engineers, Brotherhood of Firemen, etc. — so the entire system was run by English speaking, U.S.-born workers.

Yves Limantour, Díaz's finance minister, realized that leaving the Mexican railroad system in the hands of American corporations was a national security threat to Mexico, so he began to have the Americans train Mexican workers to do their jobs. By 1910 Mexican workers alone ran the railroads, running the engines and operating the telegraph, doing everything, but in imitation of the Americans they recreated the same cumbersome system of railroad brotherhoods, with their craft conflicts.

Ironically, the railroads would prove to be a "security threat" to the state, but not as Limantour imagined; Francisco "Pancho" Villa would take them over in Chihuahua on the northern border, put his troops on them, and carry the revolution all the way back to Mexico City.

In 1905 and 1906, Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón and their anarchist Mexican Liberal Party (PLM) based in Los Angeles, California organized workers in the mines of Northern Mexico and in the textile plants of Orizaba in the state of Veracruz.

Some Mexican workers working through the PLM also organized workers in the United States border and mining regions. Their anarchist organizing created some of the first unions and led some of the large strikes of that period, though by 1910 they became eclipsed by the broader revolution.

The IWW's International Unionism

During this same period, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the revolutionary syndicalist union committed to overthrowing capitalism and creating a socialist society run by workers, was organizing miners in the U.S. West. Western miners in states like Colorado and Arizona might be not only white, American-born workers, but also foreign immigrants from Wales, Russia, or Mexico.

Unlike the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which tended to organize white workers and exclude workers of color, the mining unions — whether the United Mine Workers, the Western Federation of Miners, or the IWW — almost always organized everybody who worked in the miners, regardless of their color.

Consequently, some Mexican miners returned to their homeland as IWW members. At the same time, U.S. miners sometimes went to work in the Mexican mines in Sonora or Chihuahua and carried the IWW union card with them. The IWW, which also organized oil workers, became involved in the oil fields and on the oil shipping docks in Tampico. So by the time of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) the IWW had brought a kind of international labor strategy, based on organizing industrial workers everywhere and stretching across the international political frontiers.

By the 1920s, the IWW was involved in organizing strikes in Tampico, Mexico. At the same time the IWW also reached Chile and built a movement there. But back home in the United States things were not going well. The IWW's concentration in the war-related industries — metal mining, petroleum extraction, spruce lumber industry (airplanes were then made out of spruce), and the

wheat harvest — made them a threat not only to industry, but to U.S. government war preparations.

Consequently President Woodrow Wilson unleashed the greatest wave of political repression in American history (far worse than 1950s McCarthyism), his government jailing the leading IWW and Socialist Party leaders while American Legionnaires destroyed their offices, wrecked their presses and beat their rank-and-file members. The IWW would never recover.

Labor internationalism in Mexico was also defeated in the same period. Mexico's original anarchist labor movement organized in the House of the World Worker (Casa del Obrero Mundial) cracked up in the early years of the Mexican Revolution, one part of it joining the Constitutionalist forces under Venustiano Carranza who were in the process of building a more broadly based capitalist state.

In exchange for state protection for their unions, the Casa provided Red Battalions to fight against the peasant and worker armies of Emiliano Zapata and Francisco "Pancho" Villa. The other smaller group of anarchists went off to join Emiliano Zapata. So as a result of the Mexican Revolution, anarchism was briefly extinguished in Mexico.

Shortly thereafter, though, the anarchists of Spain and Cuba organized among workers throughout the Caribbean and in parts of Central America. These anarchist or anarcho-sindicalists spread out from Cuba and became involved in organizing unions in Veracruz and in Mexico City among workers of all sorts, but mostly importantly the streetcar workers.

When the United States began building the Panama Canal, the anarchists appeared on the scene and organized the mostly Afro-Caribbean workers in a general strike that had to be suppressed by U.S. troops. Anarchists continued to organize across the Caribbean and Central America throughout the 1920s, leading strikes, building unions, and occasionally become involved in revolutionary movement, always facing the most severe repression.

Gompers, the AFL and PAFL

At about the same time, Samuel Gompers, founder and head of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), went to Mexico to meet with the former anarchists of the Casa who were now creating a new labor federation loyal to the new Mexican government. Gompers, who had already pushed AFL unions into Canada and had worked with the Puerto Rican socialist Santiago Iglesias to create an AFL affiliate in Puerto Rico, also wanted to bring the new Mexican federation into his orbit to create the Pan-American Federation of Labor (PAFL).

Gompers' strategy was based on the idea that as American political influence grew through North and South America and as U.S. banks and corporations extended their investments, the AFL operating through the PAFL would extend its model of business unionism in partnership with the government and the employers to all of Latin America. His death in 1924 followed by the Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression of the 1930s wiped that project off the map.

So by the 1920s in Mexico one could find the new official state-controlled Mexican labor unions of the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM) and linked to the PAFL, but also the IWW and Spanish anarchists advocating a more militant and internationalist labor solidarity. They were joined by the new and small Communist Party of Mexico. All three came together to create the General Confederation of workers (CGT) with ties to the world anarchist movements of the era, strongest in Spain.

The movement would be short lived. Mexican President Álvaro Obregón, a former revolutionary

gen.5e new state and the CROM were in control of the labor movement. The Mexican political crisis of 1928 caused by the assassination of Obregón by a Catholic militant, followed by the Crash and the Depression, fragmented the labor movement.

From Upsurge to Postwar Period

The Great Depression of the 1930s led to labor upheavals throughout North America. In Canada and the United States beginning in 1934 and continuing through 1939, longshore, auto, steel, rubber, glass and electrical workers — often under the leadership mostly of Communists, but also Socialists and Trotskyists — struck, seized factories, fought scabs, company guards and gangsters, police and the National Guard.

The movement — gradually brought together and under control by John L. Lewis, head of the United Mine Workers and a fundamentally conservative business unionist — became the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). At the same time, there was also a vast expansion of the AFL.

In Mexico, several unions came together to create the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), and though Communists were significant in the movement, it too came together under the leadership of another conservative business unionist, Fidel Velazquez.

When World War II broke out, the governments of Canada, Mexico and the United States worked to promote partnerships among the leaders of the labor federations (AFL, CIO, CTM), corporate executives, and government officials. During that period, there were expressions of solidarity and some coordinated activities among CIO and CTM unions, often facilitated by the Communist Party, but that moment of international labor solidarity did not last long.

With the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 the Communist Party (CP) resumed its Popular Front strategy of working with capitalist political parties, and in all three North American countries the CP joined with other labor officials in actively promoting the tripartite cooperation to increase production and win the war.

When the war ended and the Cold War broke out in the late 1940s, the U.S. State Department Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and with the blessing, logistical support and financing of the U.S. State Department. U.S. and Mexican officials more or less agreed to offer each other mutual support, while ignoring the bureaucratic and corrupt practices that had come to characterize both federations.

By the mid-1950s, the now merged AFL-CIO established international relations with the Mexican CTM unions within the context of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and with the blessing, logistical support and financing of the U.S. State Department. U.S. and Mexican officials more or less agreed to offer each other mutual support, while ignoring the bureaucratic and corrupt practices that had come to characterize both federations.

The North American Free Trade Agreement

As Roman and Velasco explain so clearly in *Continental Crucible*, the economic crisis that began in the late 1960s and extended into the 1980s led American, Mexican and Canadian business associations to lobby their respective governments for a new deal based on the integration of the North American economy and the neoliberal agenda of free trade and open markets. This resulted in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), establishing a kind of free market for capital

while restrictions on labor migration continued.

The result of the economic developments and the treaty was the movement of many manufacturing plants to Mexico and simultaneously the movement of many Mexicans to the United States. The policies, laws, and movements of capital and labor also altered fundamentally gender relations, as women in all three countries entered the labor market in greater numbers.

Canadian, Mexican and U.S. unions proved unable to develop a common strategy for dealing with NAFTA. The U.S. unions opposed the treaty, but sometimes invoked protectionist and even racist attacks on Mexican workers. The Mexican Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) controlled the major unions that had to — and were happy to — go along with the state-party's program.

The U.S. unions' search for other interlocutors and partners in Mexico eventually led them to break with their longstanding exclusive relations with the CTM and they eventually discovered the small democratic and independent Authentic Labor Front (FAT). The authors see the relationship between the FAT and the United Electrical workers as a step toward the kind of international labor solidarity that they envisage.

More generally, they contend that the political, economic and demographic developments have created two bases for international labor solidarity: first, the existence of International Unions that organize both in the United States and Canada; and, second, the existence of a common labor market in Mexico and the United States employing hundreds of thousands of Mexicans working for the same corporations.

These political and economic developments, they argue, lay the basis for a common struggle of unions and workers in all three countries not only for reform, but for a fundamentally different society, egalitarian, democratic, and socialist. They give as one example of the kind of labor solidarity that might develop, the experience of the Mexican Mineros and the United Steel Workers of the United States and Canada.

Napoleón Gómez Urrutia is the general secretary of the Mineros whose fight to protect his union from being crushed by the Mexican government and by the mining giant Grupo Mexico is told in his autobiographical account *The Collapse of Dignity*. After Gómez Urrutia inherited control of the union from his father, the previous general secretary, he set the union a new more militant course, including expressing solidarity with unions in Latin America and the United States.

In February 2006 Gómez Urrutia made a move to take over control of the Congress of Labor, the umbrella organization to which most of Mexico's labor federations and unions then belonged. At about the same time, on February 19, 2006 there was a deadly explosion in the Pasta de Conchos mine in Coahuila State taking the lives of 65 miners, a disaster that Gómez Urrutia called "industrial homicide."

Gómez Urrutia's attempted takeover in the Congress of Labor, and his denunciation of the companies for their role in the Pasta de Conchos disaster, made him an outcast with all the powers-that-be. The government accused Gómez Urrutia of embezzling \$55 million — charges that have been refuted — and forced him to see refuge in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. For the last several years he has been leading the Mexican Mineros, which continued to reelect him to the office of general secretary, from there. Three years ago the unions proposed merging, though that has still not happened.

There is no doubt that the UE-FAT and Minero-USW strategic alliances are steps in the right direction, though too tentative and in too small a scale to change the balance of forces on the

continent, or even to start a trend. What is missing is the militant labor action — principally in the form of strikes, civil disobedience, and mass protests — in all three countries that will be necessary to rebuild the labor movement.

To be able to build the kind of labor solidarity that Roman and Velasco envisage, we will need to first see some successful new union organizing in all three countries. I doubt that the current union structures and leaders can do the job, and I believe that we need to see a whole new grassroots movement, one that can relate to both the unions and to upsurges such as Occupy. (See my New Politics review and Roman and Velasco Arragui's response to what I see as their overly optimistic analysis in Socialist Project's The Bullet, <http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/885.php>.)

We need a new left prepared to transcend the models, rhetoric and images of the past to deal with today's diverse, low-wage working class, largely employed in precarious jobs, and with union no union experience. We have to keep our eyes open for the creative acts from unexpected places that will offer us the first signs of new workers movements, which may not much resemble our existing unions.

Dan La Botz

P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) n°167, November/December 2013. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>