

The Border and Social Movements In Mexico and the U.S.

Javier Torres Parés*



Reproduced by permission of Fondo Editorial Gustavo Casasola

The mutual influence between Mexico and the U.S. has affected the formation of the proletariat of both nations.

Down through history, social movements in the United States have maintained close relations with Mexico and the other Latin American societies. The nature and results of these contacts deserve more research.

In this field we find numerous instances of a history —shared by Latin Americans and the U.S.— of both so-

lidity and conflict. For our analysis to advance, we need a more detailed understanding of the profile of U.S. popular movements, whose role in the dynamics of the society itself is often underestimated. Conceiving U.S. history as the simple result of advances in the business world would be to ignore important, broad conflicts and the social movements that have been part of the building of the country itself. The mutual influence between Mexico and the United States, particularly intense along the border, has affected

the formation of the proletariat of both nations and the development of social rights and democratic demands in both countries.

FROM THE U.S. SOCIAL MOVEMENT
TO LATIN AMERICA

The characteristics of the historic formation of the proletariat in the United States, the nature of its main organizations and the very existence of broad, powerful social movements there were

*Professor at the UNAM School of Philosophy and Letters' College of Latin American Studies (CELA).

a spur to the establishment of relations with workers in the rest of the hemisphere. First of all I would like to touch on the multi-ethnic nature of the formation of the proletariat in the nineteenth century United States.¹ It is particularly important to note the presence of workers of Mexican, Puerto Rican and Cuban origin from the end of the nineteenth century and that of Central Americans more recently, who

lic and the expansion of capitalism toward the rest of the hemisphere were the cause of passionate debates and prompted positions and attitudes among U.S. workers ranging from racism to anti-imperialism and antimilitarism.

The different currents' political and organizational alternatives competed in Latin America to attain hegemony over relations with workers there. One example is the clash that divided the

ico and Latin America intensify notably: one that spans the first two decades of the twentieth century, the years after the 1929 crisis and the current period. The first period, which spans years of great social turmoil in the United States and several countries of Latin America, left a lasting mark, with U.S. workers' social protests and the revolution in Mexico as starting points. The international workers' experience of that time were some of history's richest, showing the way for other countries in the region.

Important experiences in the relation of U.S. workers with Mexicans on both sides of the border made it possible to create in the U.S. Southwest and Mexico's North a single region for workers' mobilization during certain periods that were, while brief, very intense.³

From that perspective, several fundamental international movements can be pointed out, although they have been studied little. The best known research on these topics has restricted its attention to official pan-American organizations and "workers' diplomacy" spearheaded by their leaders,⁴ and tends to leave to one side the numerous exchanges and contacts among workers from these countries. These links were forged regardless of the workers' membership in union confederations and political parties by middle-level leaders and rank-and-file members of these organizations.

If we take a broader view, we begin to see that more significance can be assigned to international social processes like the movement for freedom of expression, the agitation and mobilizations against interventions and imperialism and the antimilitarist resistance to the outbreak of the Great War. We

Important experiences in the relation of U.S. workers with Mexicans on both sides of the border made it possible to create a single region for workers' mobilization.

made New York, Chicago and the border states with Mexico centers of learning and political and cultural experimentation that they then transmitted to their own countries.

I am also referring to the development of many political currents and social movements spread by the different waves of immigrants. Their efforts led to the creation of very active, radical anarchist groups and the growth, particularly intense in 1911 and 1912, of a large Socialist Party with an enormous number of local chapters, the strengthening of national and local union federations and the development of popular movements with worker participation. Among the latter are the populist and progressive movements that shook U.S. society and, in different ways, had an influence in Mexico and the rest of Latin America.² For all these movements, immigration and, in general, relations with Latin America, were a focus of their attention and political definitions. Their reaction to events like the Mexican Revolution, the U.S. intervention in Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic

U.S. workers movement between the defenders of industrial organization and those who unionized by trade. This resulted in a face-off of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and led to an important split in the Socialist Party in 1912 and to the creation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1938 that tried to offer a different road to that of the AFL's trade-oriented organization. Today we can see that these old differences are resurfacing in the polemic about the creation of organizations capable of recruiting recent immigrants, the unorganized and the unskilled. They are also present in the incipient clash between a multitude of independent organizations and the United States' large union confederations.

INTERNATIONAL WORKERS' MOBILIZATION

We can identify three periods in which this kind of U.S. relations with Mex-

would also have to include on this list the movement to defend Sacco and Vanzetti, at its height during the 1920s.⁵

In all these cases there were joint mobilizations, sometimes simultaneously, that aimed to support revolutionary efforts by workers in the United States or Mexico. Different groups of workers from both countries used public demonstrations, strikes and boycotts, rebellion and armed struggle to strengthen international solidarity. Workers of Latino origin in the United States, like the Cuban workers, for example, also expressed their support for the Mexican revolution.

The antimilitarist activities of workers from Tampico, Tamaulipas, illustrates one of the social processes I have mentioned. A group of leaders from this oil port, members of different unions that belonged to the House of the World Worker (Casa del Obrero Mundial), launched a campaign to defend antimilitarist activists who had been repressed by both government and management. *Germinal* was the name of the publication that expressed the ideas of solidarity of the region's unions.

In October 1917, a Workers' Convention was held in Tampico that proposed forming a national union. Taking advantage of the tensions arising out of the European conflict and the political situation in Mexico, the press unleashed a campaign against convention participants, linking the *Germinal* group to German interests, a campaign which led to arrests and deportations, paralleling what was going on in the United States under similar pretexts.

In February 1918, *Germinal* denounced the repression it was being subjected to, its editors explaining that the persecution against them was an attempt to make it impossible for anti-

militarist positions to reach a broad audience in the United States. *Germinal's* dissemination among the U.S. proletariat replaced some U.S. publications, whose circulation had dropped because of repression. It published numerous articles and manifestos by organizers of different California anarchist groups, by the IWW and by Latin American unions who were trying to provide orientation to workers around

Different groups of workers from both countries used public demonstrations, strikes and boycotts, rebellion and armed struggle to strengthen international solidarity.

the questions arising out of U.S. participation in the war.

The links created in this way made it possible for Tampico workers to express their solidarity with striking miners in Arizona, whose production was key for the war effort, calling on Mexicans to not accept jobs in those mines. It was these kinds of efforts that formed the basis for the international experience of the workers' movement, which had a clear influence on the formation of the Mexican movement itself.

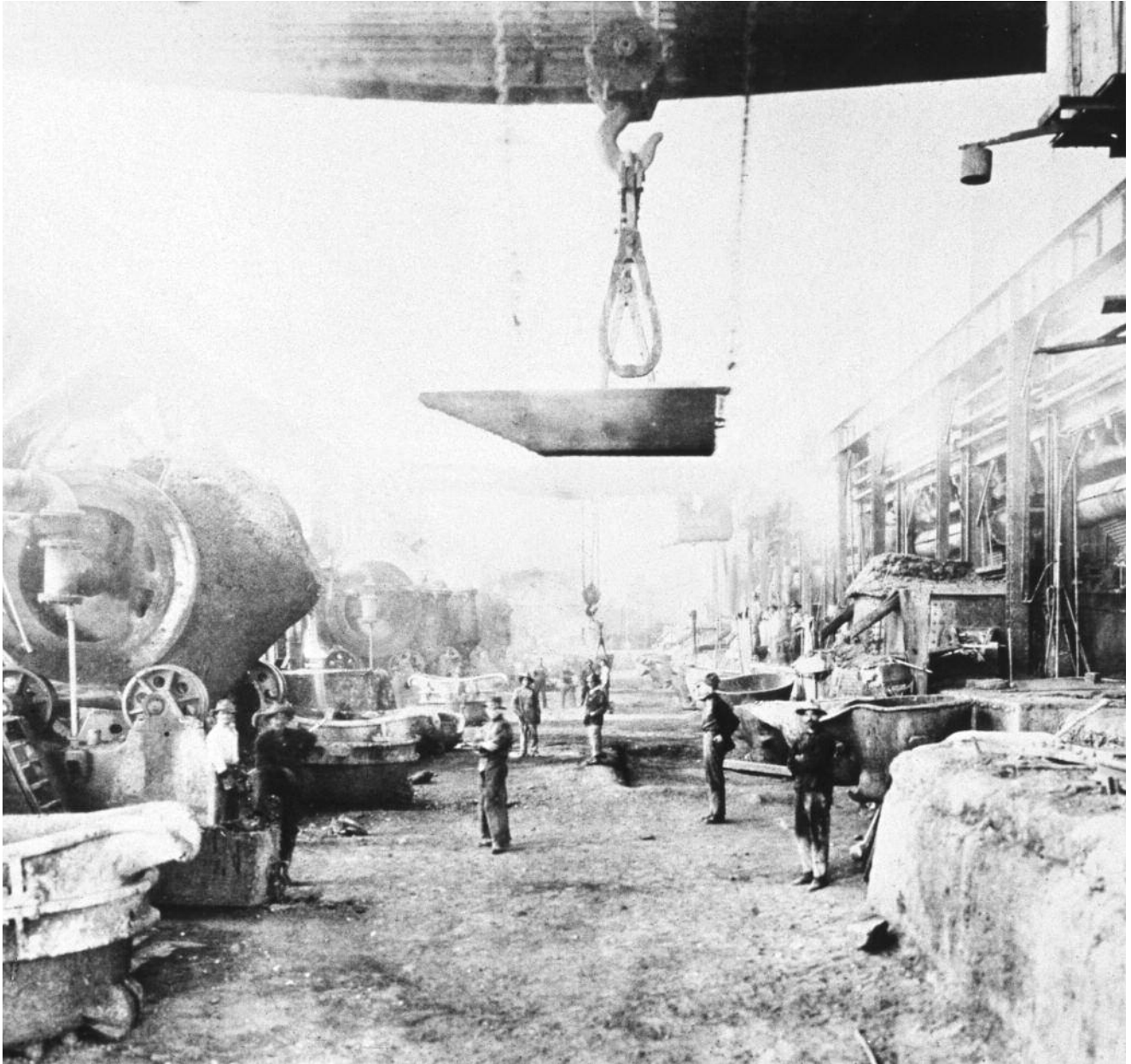
PROJECTS AND ORGANIZATIONS

We should remember the attempts to extend the organizational and political options developed in the United States to Latin America. The close relations between Puerto Rican anarchists and the IWW and the existence of IWW locals all the way from neighboring Mexico to distant Chile are examples of the attempts to organize Latin American workers on an industrial basis.⁶

The Socialist Party of the United States also attempted to penetrate the region with its ideas about building socialism. However, this did not stop socialist leader Morris Hillquit from proposing the restriction of immigration of "backward races" to the United States from as early as 1904,⁷ or the National Executive Committee from opposing in 1907 the import of "cheap labor" from China and Japan, since it

threatened—according to some leaders—to destroy workers' organizations.⁸ On the question of black workers, the party's right wing, headed by Victor Berger, thought that "Negros were inferior, depraved degenerates who went around raping women and children," and that socialism would achieve the complete segregation of blacks and whites.⁹ Obviously, this party did not particularly concern itself with organizing Mexican and Latin American workers in the United States. However, I should point out that several socialist organizations, particularly in border states with Mexico, ignored their leaders and linked up with workers of Mexican origin and the revolutionary process south of the border.¹⁰ Daniel de Leon, the founder of the Socialist Labor Party, tried to approach Puerto Rican workers and get them to adopt a radical, industrial version of socialism.

Lastly, in a very brief summary, I can mention the existence of hemisphere-wide organizations that put forward different union projects which expressed the relations of workers of Latin Amer-



Reproduced by permission of the National Library of Mexico

In the early twentieth century, joint mobilizations aimed to support revolutionary efforts by workers in the U.S. and Mexico.

ica and the United States. The Pan-American Federation of Labor (PAFL), which linked the AFL and the CROM as its initial launching pad for expansion in Latin America, is one. Another is the Continental Workers Association (ACAT-1929), a short-lived anarchist organization, and its contemporary, the Latin American Union Confederation

(CSLA), of Communist orientation. The Confederation of Workers of Latin America (CTAL), founded in 1938 and headed up by Mexican unionist Vicente Lombardo Toledano, was opposed by the AFL, but established better relations with the CIO, the organization that, as a result of a broad radicalization among U.S. workers again put

forward the idea of industry-wide organization.¹¹ These and other organizations that emerged in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and other countries of the region were victims of the Cold War polarization and were forced to either second AFL policy or resist it.¹² This is yet another of the ways that U.S. workers have influenced Latin America.

TOWARD A NEW PERIOD OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL MOBILIZATION?

Relations between U.S. and Mexican workers are constantly changing, even today. President Reagan's immigration legislation had clear effects on workers in his own country, Mexico and Central America.

Given globalization and its constant crises, restructuring and the establishment of a new international division of labor, emerging social and workers movements face problems that by nature transcend national boundaries.

A single economic and social phenomenon confronted some workers with "plant flight" and "job flight," as well as the reduction of their previously won conquests, like in the United States. For others, the same phenomenon means a greater reduction in living standards—depressed for years—like in Mexico. For workers on both sides of the border, this makes for unemployment and, increasingly, the destructuring of their old union organizations and the need to come up with new forms of organization and resistance.

To get rid of unionized workers, some companies reduce the size of their plants and try to decentralize, sending production processes to other regions where they enjoy modern facilities and cheap labor. The Mexico-U.S. border area is attractive for this operation. In some cases, such as the auto industry, companies build plants on both sides of the border, making geographical proximity another advantage. In addition, regional concentration is increased through multinationals' locating different parts of their production processes on either side

of the border, at the same time that they attempt to defuse potential protests by Mexican workers against their extremely low wages and miserable working conditions.

These changes show some of the ways that capital is internationalized. This seems to define and concretize the common challenges that workers and social activists face in both countries. James D. Cockroft's warning sev-

Given globalization and its constant crises, emerging social and workers movements face problems that by nature transcend national boundaries.

eral years ago that "these tendencies have the potential of revitalizing the class struggle on both sides of the border" seems correct.¹³

At the heart of this complex series of conditions created by the dynamics of the development of the United States and Mexico are undocumented workers. The main impact of amendments to U.S. immigration law has been on labor questions. This has happened when "illegals"—mainly farm, textile and auto workers, among others—tried to create political and union organizations, which were soon threatened by U.S. labor and immigration policy.¹⁴

The weakened U.S. workers' and union movement and the increasingly broad social protest movements (given the impoverishment of broad sectors of U.S. society) are faced once again with the need to take a position on organizing recent immigrants, the unorganized and the unskilled. Workers, farmers, employees, religious groups and students in the United States are increasing their efforts and activities around the question of ethnic minori-

ties and on the particularly serious problem of the private appropriation of nature's genetic resources. The dubious genetic modification of basic foodstuffs is something that new popular movements are focusing on at the same time that they attempt to deal with the problems that Mexico and the rest of Latin American countries are facing.

The development of social movements has led U.S. unionists to par-

ticipate in the new social struggles. In September 2000, the conservative AFL—which despite everything, does have 13 million members—"derailed" the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization and programed nationwide protests against the international bureaucracies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, seen as the imposers of economic programs responsible for poverty in many countries and enemies of labor rights. The AFL began a campaign called Jobs with Justice.¹⁵

The response of unions and different social groups to these problems are diverse and contradictory. However, it would seem that a new period of intensification of the international dimension of popular struggle is upon us, in many cases with increasing participation of workers, students and other social groups radicalized by circumstances, who have an influence in Mexico and are sensitive to Latin American struggles. This makes it important to know first hand and deepen our understanding of popular move-

ments in the United States and their relations with other countries in the hemisphere. **NMM**

NOTES

¹ Willi Paul Adams, *Los Estados Unidos de América* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1985), Chapters 4 and 5.

² About these movements, see, among others, Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment. A Short History of the Agrarian Revolution* (Oxford-London-New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) and Gabriel Kolko and John D. Buenker, "The Progressive Movement. Liberal or Conservative?", Gerald N. Grove and George Athan Billias, eds., *Interpretations of American History. Patterns and Perspectives*, vol. 2 (New York: The Free Press, 1982), pp. 163-208.

³ Javier Torres Parés, *La revolución sin frontera. El Partido Liberal Mexicano y las relaciones entre el movimiento obrero de México y el de Estados Unidos* (Mexico City: UNAM-Ediciones

y Distribuciones Hispánicas, 1990). The examples given in this article are documented in this book, which looks in more detail at the international dimension of workers' mobilization from 1900 to 1923.

⁴ Harvey Levenstein, "Labor Organizations in the United States and Mexico. A History of Their Relations," *Contributions in American History* 13 (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1971); also Sinclair Snow, *The Pan-American Federation of Labor* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1964).

⁵ A very good study about the mobilization around this case can be found in Ronald Creagh, "Sacco et Vanzetti," *Actes et mémoires du peuple* (Paris: La Découverte, 1984).

⁶ David Viñas, "Anarquistas en América Latina," *Antología de América Latina I* (Mexico City: Ed. Katún, 1983).

⁷ Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement 1897-1912* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1968), pp. 276-277.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 131-133.

¹⁰ James Robert Green, *Grass Roots Socialism. Radical Movement in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (Bâton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) and Emilio Zamora, *El movimiento obrero mexicano en Texas, 1900-1920* (Mexico City: SEP-Frontera, 1986).

¹¹ Leo Huberman, *Historia de los Estados Unidos. Nosotros el pueblo* (Mexico City: Ed. Nuestro Tiempo, 1977), pp. 415 on.

¹² Julio Godio, "El movimiento obrero latinoamericano 1960-1980. Diagnóstico y perspectivas," *Latinoamérica. Anuario de Estudios Latinoamericanos* 18 (Mexico City: UNAM, 1985).

¹³ James D. Cockroft, "La migración mexicana y la internacionalización de la lucha obrera," *Cuadernos Políticos* 35 (January-March 1983), pp. 68-82.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

¹⁵ "Protestas en EU coincidirán con acciones en Praga contra el FMI," *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 19 September 2000.