

The Mexican Revolution

A look at the Mexican Revolution from the pages of Organise! the magazine of the Anarchist Federation

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Mexican Revolution. Organise! investigates this extremely important and much-misunderstood event.

Mexico in 1910 was a land where an emerging working class was adopting radical forms of organisation and struggle, where the indigenous peoples were still continuing their resistance against three hundred years of rule initiated by Spain, and where the bourgeoisie itself was attempting to develop and consolidate its power against the establishment institutions of the old regimes and the Catholic Church.

The regime directed by Porfirio Diaz represented the interests of the small group of rich owners of vast agricultural estates, and in addition served the interests of foreign capital, including that of the USA. It was opposed by various groups within the liberal bourgeoisie who wanted a national revolution to institute bourgeois democracy. This agreement was at first led by Madero and Carranza. In addition Carranza represented a group of landowners in northern Mexico who had been excluded from the regime. In addition there was the movement around the Magon brothers, which was evolving in an increasingly anarchist direction, a workers' movement to a lesser or greater extent influenced by the Magonistas, and strong rural movements, around Emiliano Zapata in the south and Pancho Villa in the north.

The aging Diaz, in power for 34 years, announced his impending retirement which started off the period of unrest. The bourgeois opposition advanced a candidate to the Presidency and pushed it through, rather than giving in to the customary compromise with the regime that was frequent in Mexico. The opposition turned to mobilisation of the masses to help this come about.

Throughout Mexico conditions were wildly divergent. There were still the free villages based on traditional Indian ways of organising, where land was farmed on a collective basis, there were the labourers on the big estates and in the timber industry in the jungles, who were virtually slaves, there were the cowboys and ranchhands and in the north and the small farmers. Discontent had been slowly building long before the bid of Madero for power. The free villages were increasingly under threat, the big estates were expanding, propelled by the development of mills and the development of the sugar cane industry.

Madero was a typical modernising member of the bourgeoisie, whose aims were solely the departure of Diaz and the introduction of democracy. He now made himself popular with a promise of land reform and had the financial backing of several Mexican and American capitalists, as well as relying on his own personal fortune.

The Magon brothers and the PLM

There was the movement led by Ricardo Flores and Jesus Flores Magon, which had a much longer record of opposition to Diaz. They had founded an opposition journal Regeneracion in 1900 and soon formed the Partido Liberal Mexicano (Mexican Liberal Party) which essentially advanced a programme of civil rights. Gradually, under the influence of Ricardo, this party orientated itself towards the indigenous free communities and the poor peasants. The Magon brothers were forced into exile in the USA., whilst maintaining contact with PLM members in Mexico.

In exile Ricardo met the American anarchist Emma Goldman and established a friendship with the Spaniard Florencio Bazora, a friend of the Italian anarchist Malatesta. Links were

formed with the Socialist Party of America and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The PLM, despite its continuing to retain the same title, started to transform itself into an anarchist communist organisation. The Magonistas began to smuggle Regeneracion into Mexico and massive agitation took place among the workers and peasants.

The PLM attempted two insurrections, in 1906 and 1908, both repressed. For their part, the USA interned some of the PLM leadership in 1907 for conspiracy and violation of the laws of neutrality between Mexico and the USA. When Madero called for an uprising against Diaz on 20th November 1911 the PLM mobilised its forces for an uprising. They were in favour of a tactical alliance on the ground with the Madero forces against Diaz, but were categorically against a political alliance with them. Indeed, the PLM hoped to win elements of the Maderistas over to more radical positions. Unfortunately the Madero uprising failed, and it was only in late December that the movement renewed itself. PLM forces under Praxedis Guerrero crossed the border and marched through the state of Chihuahua. The PLM rose up in nine other states in Mexico, orchestrating joint military activity with the Maderistas and inflicting big defeats on the old regime. In Baja California (see the separate article) the PLM seized Mexicali and this deeply disturbed the regime. The PLM hoped in the long run to expropriate the big landowners there, but in the meantime, forced them to hand over large sums of money. The PLM, in addition, hoped to use Baja California as a base from which to support other PLM units.

PLM units gained many victories, in contrast with the poor military record of the Maderistas. Support internationally began to grow for the PLM, with many socialists, syndicalists and anarchists supporting their cause.

Thanks to Silva, a PLM guerrilla commander, Madero returned to Mexico from the States, but on the following day, declared himself commander in chief of the insurgent forces, and after another PLM commander came over to his side, arrested Silva for refusing to recognise his authority. The situation was compounded by the split between the leadership in exile in the States, clearly anarchist communist, and some of the PLM membership in Mexico, not as politically developed, and leading to compromises with Madero. For his part Madero denounced PLM militants to both the US and Mexican governments, and profited from lack of communication to peddle the myth that the two movements were in alliance. This destroyed PLM unity, leading to splits towards Madero. Madero had 8 leading Magonistas arrested in Chihuahua and 147 members of their units were disarmed. At the same time a campaign of slander began against the PLM on both sides of the border. On the American side they were portrayed as mere bandits, on the Mexican side they were portrayed as tools of American interests. This situation was facilitated by the large number of American volunteers swelling PLM ranks, be they socialists, anarchists or IWW.

Victory over Diaz

Madero finally came to power on 21st May, signing a treaty with Diaz. Officially, the Revolution was over, and everyone should lay down their arms. The PLM refused this, and saw that a social revolution was continuing within Mexico. However, many insurgents now thought that the Madero regime would lead progressively towards greater social justice. The American Socialist Party withdrew its support from the PLM, and transferred it to Madero. Only a section of the IWW and the anarchists continued to support the PLM.

Despite these setbacks Regeneracion released a new manifesto to replace that of 1906, calling for struggle against authority, the Church and capitalism, and for the establishment of a free society. However, some influential members of the PLM, including Jesus Flores Magon, had rallied to Madero. And, in June 1912, Ricardo and other important PLM militants were

arrested by the US government and sentenced to 23 months in jail for breaking the neutrality laws.

Peace only lasted a few weeks after the signing of the treaty and several movements, including that of Zapata, took up the cry of Land and Liberty. Madero himself was murdered by the reactionaries and a new phase of unrest began. When Ricardo Flores Magon came out of jail in January 1914 he renewed his agitation. Criticising the successive regimes, he denounced the manipulation of the masses by the different factions of the bourgeoisie. He castigated Pancho Villa for acting as their servant, but praised the Zapatistas for maintaining their principles and behaving as anarchists whilst not using this title.

However repression was falling more and more upon the PLM. Ricardo and Librado Rivera were again arrested by the US government and sentenced respectively to 20 and 15 years in jail!! In 1922 Ricardo died in prison, with strong indications that he had been murdered by the US authorities. Released in 1923 Rivera returned to Mexico where he was a leading light in the anarchist group (Hermanos Rojos), maintaining his convictions until his death in 1932.

Zapata

In the south Emiliano Zapata organised armed bands to take back communal lands seized by the estates, spurred on by the bid by Madero to challenge the old regime. He represented a new generation willing to fight and the village elders accepted this situation, standing aside to let them take over the village councils. The movement around Zapata were distinguished by their determination to restore communal land. As a result they increased from a small band to a large movement. They forced the Madero regime to talk about widespread land reforms. The Zapatistas established the Plan of Ayala calling for the return of seized lands, and further that a third of land owned by the estates be distributed to the landless. This was drafted by Zapata and a local anarchist teacher, Otilio E. Montano. After Huerta, representing the old regime, seized power and murdered Madero, many Magonistas and syndicalists fled south and made contact with the Zapatista movement. Among these were Octavio Jahn, a French anarchist communist, and the brothers Ignacio and Antonio Diaz Soto y Gama.

The Huerta coup meant that opposition was coming from the liberal bourgeoisie, the workers' movement and the rural movements. In the north the movement of cowboys and ranch hands around Villa adopted the Plan of Ayala, effectively uniting the movements in the countryside. Huerta was defeated. In the process the peasant groups dismantled many big estates and killed or expelled many officials of the old regime. The Zapatistas fought a classic guerrilla campaign, making sudden appearances, and then disappearing away. The movement built up to include tens of thousands. When Huerta was smashed the Zapatistas controlled the south. The Convention of Aguascalientes in September 1914 where the different forces involved in the smashing of Huerta met up. Peasants and workers from the revolutionary units forced through the Plan of Ayala. Carranza and his group refused to accept this and set up their own government. He the Carranzistas now began to co-opt insurgent leaders. One of these, a Zapatista leader called Jose Rouaix, who had become governor of Durango, joined Carranza and together they set up a committee on agrarian reform. At the same time Carranza sought to buy off the workers' movement by promising labour legislation and organising rights (see the separate article A Grave Error).

The Carranzistas smashed Villa in the north and in the south isolated the Zapatistas. The intelligentsia and many workers' leaders made their peace with Carranza. The Zapatista movement continued in the south, with Zapata issuing many denunciations of the new regime, but by now he had lost most of his intellectual supporters some of the insurgent leaders who had been won over by promises of non-interference in Zapatista territory.

On April 9th, 1919 Zapata was lured into a trap and gunned down.

The final phase of the revolution took place when some of Carranza's generals, who represented a more radical approach of a section of the bourgeoisie, revolted and in the following hostilities, finally defeated him. In this conflict the new contender for power, General Obregon, received the support of many remaining Zapatistas and those who had earlier joined Carranza.

The triumph of Obregon meant the institutionalisation of the revolution reflected in the title of the new ruling party, The Institutional Revolutionary Party. The hopes and aspirations of workers and peasants had been dashed.

Why Was The Revolution Defeated?

The PLM put the military and insurrectional question before the political education of its militants. As a result there was a lack of ideological unity, as seen in the succession of splits and defections. The 1906 and 1908 insurrections had resulted in the deaths or imprisonment of many of the most active and politically advanced militants. The PLM in its progression towards anarchism, began to accentuate the importance of the working class over that of the peasantry. However, the working class in Mexico was still in development and too weak and numerically small to have a decisive influence. For its part propagation of PLM ideas among the peasants was hindered to a certain extent by widespread illiteracy. Recruitment to the PLM had been difficult, and the influx of foreign volunteers had distorted the situation. The leading lights in the PLM had in the main remained in Los Angeles when they should have been on the ground in Mexico. They had believed that the production of Regeneracion, enabled by being in the States, was of first importance. This removal from the scene clouded their judgement and their lack of clarity led to a debate on the international level as to whether or not they were truly anarchist, (they certainly were) robbing them of a certain amount of international solidarity. The PLM suffered from lack of finances, whereas Madero, for example, was able to call on millions of dollars.

Finally, to end positively on the PLM, they had influenced the struggles of both workers and peasants with their anti-authoritarian ideas, radicalising them from the Zapatistas in the south to the formation of unions heavily under the influences of anarchism. Today still in Oaxaca, the PLM has inspired the present-day Magonistas.

As to the Zapatista movement, whilst most effective in its military activity and its land occupations, it failed to actively form an alliance with urban workers, only gaining the support of a small number of anarchist workers and intellectuals. Like the PLM, its lack of political education, led to the defection of people like Rouaix and others. When the forces of Villa and Zapata arrived in Mexico City they failed to take the initiative. They failed to form an effective and lasting alliance among themselves, failed to establish links of solidarity with urban workers, and failed to confront Carranza and to attempt to dismantle State power. Nevertheless the influence of the Zapatistas echoes down to the present day.

As to the workers movement, lack of experience and numerical weakness does not excuse an inability to link up with the agrarian movements, and the support given to Carranza against those movements. Revolutionaries, both in Mexico and elsewhere, need to reflect on all these mistakes, and be prepared to fight against cooption and compromise in future social struggles.

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