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Labor and Social Movements: Trade Unions, Strikes, and Political Change

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Introduction

This book traces the entwined histories of labor and political change from the Porfirian era to the post-1980 neoliberal order. It begins amid the factories, mines, and rail yards that expanded under Porfirio Díaz, where early conflicts—emblemized by the strikes at Cananea and Río Blanco—announced a modern working class and the repression it faced. Out of these conflicts, the Mexican Revolution opened a new horizon for labor citizenship, culminating in Article 123 of the 1917 Constitution. That legal framework, celebrated for enshrining rights to organization, collective bargaining, and social protections, also laid the groundwork for a century-long debate: whether labor law would empower workers' collective action or bind it to the state.

Across the 1920s and 1930s, corporatist unionism matured through the CROM and then the CTM, embedding unions within a project of nation-building. This alliance delivered tangible gains—industrial arbitration, social insurance, and mass political inclusion—while also curtailing internal democracy and disciplining dissent. The postwar decades revealed the ambivalence at the core of corporatism. Episodes like the 1958–59 rail, miners', and teachers' strikes, and the 1968 student-worker mobilizations, exposed both the capacity of rank-and-file insurgency and the limits imposed by charro leaderships and security forces. Labor's story in these years is not one of simple cooptation or resistance; it is a history of negotiation, fracture, and periodic upsurge.

The late 1970s and the debt crisis of the early 1980s marked a watershed. Structural adjustment, trade liberalization, and privatization reconfigured workplaces and bargaining power. Austerity pacts tempered wages while new managerial strategies—outsourcing, temporary contracts, and the expansion of informality—reduced union density and fragmented bargaining units. Yet even as neoliberalism redesigned the shop floor and the law, workers innovated: organizing in maquiladora corridors, forging cross-border alliances, and experimenting with strategic research, minority-union strategies, and carefully planned strike escalation.

Law, once the anchor of corporatism, became a terrain of contestation. Reforms to representation procedures, the creation or strengthening of independent labor courts, and the introduction of transparent contract legitimation mechanisms began to chip away at protection contracts and employer-dominated unions. These legal shifts did not automatically produce democratic unionism; rather, they opened institutional openings that organizers had to occupy with painstaking committee-building, leadership development, and credible strike threats. Throughout, landmark conflicts—successful and defeated—offer a laboratory for understanding how tactics and structure interact with political opportunity.

Labor has never operated in a silo. It has shaped and been shaped by political parties, from the hegemony of party-state arrangements to the more fluid alignments of recent decades. The book situates labor within broader movements—the feminist surge that transformed union culture and bargaining agendas; indigenous and peasant mobilizations that reframed land, autonomy, and extractivism; migrant-worker networks that carry organizing knowledge across borders; and climate movements demanding a just transition. By connecting factory floors to electoral arenas and transnational campaigns, we see how workers reimagine power in an era of global supply chains and algorithmic management.

Methodologically, the chapters draw on union archives, oral histories, government records, and contemporary campaign materials. They pair narrative history with analytical tools from labor relations, political economy, and social-movement theory. Each chapter highlights concrete organizing problems—recognition, contract enforcement, strike capacity, coalition-building—and the solutions developed in different conjunctures. Rather than a linear march of progress or decline, the arc presented here is cyclical and contingent, attentive to geography, sector, and the balance of forces.

The stakes are practical as well as historical. For activists, this book offers a toolkit: mapping power beyond the workplace, designing representative committees, building durable coalitions, and leveraging law without substituting it for organization. For scholars and readers, it proposes a framework for understanding how labor both shapes and is reshaped by political realignments. From the roots in Porfirian modernization to the dilemmas of the post-1980 neoliberal era, the chapters that follow invite a clear conclusion: when workers organize democratically, align their tactics with structural leverage, and engage politics without surrendering autonomy, they can bend institutions—and the future of democracy—toward justice.

CHAPTER ONE: Birth of a Working Class under Porfirio Díaz

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Mexico witnessed a seismic transformation, a period often termed the Porfiriato, after the long-serving president Porfirio Díaz. This era was characterized by a fervent embrace of modernization, economic development, and foreign investment, all pursued with a singular focus on imposing order and stability. While the country experienced unprecedented growth in sectors like mining, railroads, and manufacturing, this progress came at a steep human cost. A new social stratum was emerging – the industrial working class – born from the displacement of rural populations and the influx of foreign capital. These men and women, uprooted from their agrarian lives, found themselves concentrated in nascent urban centers and company towns, facing harsh working conditions, meager wages, and a distinct lack of rights or protections.

The Porfirian regime viewed labor as a necessary, yet potentially disruptive, element in its grand vision of progress. Economic modernization was paramount, and this meant attracting foreign investment by ensuring a compliant and inexpensive labor force. The government actively discouraged worker organization, viewing unions and strikes as threats to stability and productivity. Labor laws, if they existed at all, were rudimentary and rarely enforced in favor of the workers. Instead, the state relied on a combination of private security forces, local militias, and sometimes even the federal army to quell any signs of unrest. This created an environment where labor exploitation was not merely tolerated but, in many ways, facilitated by the very authorities meant to uphold justice.

The burgeoning mining industry, particularly in northern Mexico, became a crucible for this new working class. Vast reserves of silver, copper, and other minerals attracted significant American and British capital. Companies like the Guggenheims, with their immense copper operations at Cananea, Sonora, and the American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO) in Chihuahua, established sprawling industrial complexes. These were often company towns, where workers lived in housing owned by the company, shopped in company stores, and were subject to the company's pervasive influence. The work was brutal: long hours in dangerous conditions, deep underground or in toxic smelters, with little regard for safety.

Similarly, the expansion of the railway network, crucial for transporting raw materials and connecting the nation, created a new class of railway workers. Engineers, conductors, track layers, and maintenance crews toiled under demanding schedules. The railroads were often foreign-owned, and labor disputes frequently took on an

international dimension, with Mexican workers facing off against companies backed by powerful foreign governments. The discipline imposed on the railways was strict, mirroring the military-like efficiency the Porfiriato sought to instill across its industrial landscape.

The textile industry also experienced significant growth, with large mills established in states like Puebla and Veracruz. Workers in these factories, often including women and children, faced long hours, repetitive tasks, and exposure to dust and chemicals. The rhythm of the machines dictated the lives of the workers, a stark contrast to the more natural cycles of agricultural labor many had left behind. The concentration of workers in these large industrial settings, however, also created the conditions for collective consciousness to emerge, even in the face of severe repression.

The Porfirian state's approach to labor was characterized by a paternalistic authoritarianism. While Díaz himself was a military man, his regime's ideology was deeply intertwined with positivist ideas, emphasizing order, progress, and science. In practice, this translated into a firm belief that the state knew best and that individual or collective dissent was a sign of ignorance or backwardness. Workers were expected to accept their lot, to work diligently, and to trust that the government's overarching goal of national progress would eventually benefit them. Any deviation from this expectation was met with swift and often brutal force.

Foreign investors were given assurances that their investments would be protected, and this often meant that the government would intervene forcefully to suppress any labor disputes. The legal framework was heavily weighted in favor of employers. Contractual obligations were strictly enforced, but workers often found themselves trapped in contracts that offered little in the way of protection, with weak or non-existent mechanisms for grievance or redress. The concept of a collective bargaining agreement was virtually unknown, and the idea of a legally recognized union was anathema to the regime.

The seeds of organized labor were sown in this highly restrictive environment, often in clandestine meetings held away from the prying eyes of company foremen and government spies. Early attempts at worker organization drew inspiration from international labor movements, particularly socialist and anarchist ideas circulating among immigrant workers and intellectuals. These early groups often focused on mutual aid, providing a safety net for workers facing injury, illness, or unemployment, but they also began to articulate demands for better wages and working conditions.

One of the most iconic early labor conflicts occurred in 1906 at the copper mines in Cananea, Sonora. Workers there, largely Mexican, were striking against low wages and exploitative conditions. They were joined by American workers who, despite earning higher wages, also felt the sting of the company's oppressive practices. The strike quickly escalated, drawing the attention of both the company and the government.

The response was swift and violent. Díaz, eager to protect foreign investment and maintain order, dispatched state and federal troops, as well as armed paramilitary groups, to crush the strike.

The Cananea strike was brutally suppressed. Accounts suggest that hundreds of workers were killed in the ensuing violence, with many more arrested or forced back to work under even worse conditions. The strike, though a devastating defeat for the workers, became a potent symbol of the injustices of the Porfiriato and a rallying cry for future labor movements. It starkly illustrated the lengths to which the government and foreign capital would go to maintain their control over the labor force.

A year later, in 1907, another major strike erupted, this time at the textile mills in Río Blanco, Veracruz. The workers, including a significant number of women and children, were protesting wage cuts and the infamous "tienda de raya," or company store system, which kept workers perpetually indebted to the company. The conditions in the textile mills were notoriously unhealthy, with long hours and constant exposure to hazardous materials. The demands were simple: fair wages, an end to the company store exploitation, and an end to the brutal fines levied for minor infractions.

The Río Blanco strike, like Cananea, met a violent end. The government's response was to send in federal troops who fired on the striking workers, resulting in a massacre. The scale of the repression was immense, and the event sent shockwaves throughout the country. It demonstrated that the Porfiriato's commitment to modernization and order came at the direct expense of worker rights and lives. The memory of Río Blanco would fuel resentment and contribute to the growing discontent that would eventually erupt into the Mexican Revolution.

These early struggles, despite their tragic outcomes, were crucial in forging a sense of collective identity among the burgeoning working class. The shared experience of exploitation, the common enemy in oppressive employers and a complicit state, and the nascent efforts at organization, however rudimentary, began to lay the foundations for a more unified labor movement. Workers started to see themselves not just as individual laborers but as a distinct social group with shared interests and grievances.

The strikes at Cananea and Río Blanco were not isolated incidents but rather emblematic of a broader pattern of labor unrest simmering across various sectors of the Mexican economy. In the mining towns, the railway hubs, and the growing factory districts, workers were grappling with similar issues: low wages, excessive hours, dangerous conditions, and a complete absence of legal recourse. The very nature of industrial work, concentrating large numbers of people in close proximity and subjecting them to uniform conditions, fostered a sense of shared experience that transcended regional differences.

Foreign ownership of many of these key industries played a significant role in shaping the labor landscape. Companies, often based in the United States or Great Britain, operated with little accountability to Mexican law or public opinion. Their primary objective was profit maximization, and the Porfiriato's permissive regulatory environment allowed them to pursue this goal ruthlessly. Workers often found themselves caught between the demands of a foreign employer and a Mexican government more concerned with maintaining international relations and attracting further investment than with protecting its own citizens.

The influx of foreign ideas also began to influence the nascent labor movements. Socialist and anarchist tracts, smuggled into the country or brought by returning Mexican expatriates, circulated among workers. These ideologies offered frameworks for understanding their exploitation and envisioning alternative social and economic systems. While the direct impact of these ideologies might have been limited to a relatively small intellectual and activist circle, they provided a vocabulary and a theoretical basis for articulating demands that went beyond immediate economic grievances.

Newspapers and pamphlets, often produced and distributed clandestinely, became vital tools for disseminating information and coordinating action. These early publications discussed labor conditions, reported on strikes (often with a sympathetic slant), and called for worker solidarity. They helped to foster a sense of a shared struggle, connecting workers in different industries and cities and creating a nascent national consciousness among the working class.

The Porfirian regime's response to this growing labor consciousness was consistently one of suppression. While the government occasionally engaged in token gestures of reform or established labor tribunals that were largely ineffective, its primary strategy was repression. Strikes were seen as acts of sedition, and participants were treated as criminals. The rurales, the federal rural police force, and local authorities were frequently employed to break strikes, often with extreme violence.

The reliance on violence and intimidation, while effective in the short term, only served to deepen the resentment among the working population. The memory of the massacres at Cananea and Río Blanco, and countless smaller incidents of repression, festered beneath the surface of the seemingly orderly Porfirian state. These events were not just isolated tragedies; they were foundational moments in the formation of a collective working-class identity forged in the fires of struggle and sacrifice.

The limited nature of existing labor organizations during this period should not be mistaken for a lack of worker agency. Even without formal unions, workers found ways to resist and assert their demands. Work slowdowns, localized acts of sabotage, and refusal to work overtime were common forms of passive resistance. More overtly,

spontaneous walkouts and protests occurred with some regularity, even if they were quickly and brutally suppressed. These actions, though often uncoordinated and localized, demonstrated the persistent will of workers to challenge their conditions.

The company store, or "tienda de raya," was a particularly galling institution that fueled much of the anger. Workers were often paid in company scrip, redeemable only at the company store, where prices were inflated. This system effectively trapped workers in a cycle of debt, ensuring their continued dependence on the employer. The demand for an end to the "tienda de raya" was a consistent feature of many early labor disputes, representing a desire for economic autonomy and a rejection of this pervasive form of control.

The concentration of workers in industrial centers also led to the development of a distinct urban working-class culture. This culture often revolved around shared experiences of hardship, solidarity, and resistance. Taverns, community gatherings, and informal networks provided spaces for workers to socialize, share information, and build trust. These informal social structures, while not formal organizations, were crucial for sustaining morale and facilitating communication during times of intense repression.

The Porfiriato's emphasis on order and progress, while leading to significant economic modernization, created a starkly divided society. On one side stood a small elite of landowners, industrialists, and foreign investors, enjoying the fruits of economic growth. On the other stood the vast majority of the population, including the newly formed working class, who bore the brunt of the harsh conditions and reaped few of the benefits. This widening chasm of inequality was a significant underlying cause of the social unrest that would soon engulf the nation.

The international context also played a role. As industrialization accelerated globally, so did the spread of labor organizing and socialist ideas. Mexican workers were not entirely isolated from these international currents. While government censorship and repression limited direct contact, news of labor struggles in other countries, and the ideas they represented, filtered into Mexico through various channels, including returning migrants and foreign workers.

The Porfirian era, therefore, was a period of paradox for Mexican labor. It was an era of unprecedented industrial growth and the formation of a new working class, but this class was born into a climate of extreme repression and exploitation. The very forces driving modernization – foreign capital, state power, and a focus on economic growth – were precisely the forces that created the harsh conditions and actively suppressed worker efforts to improve their lot.

Yet, it was precisely within this crucible of exploitation and repression that the foundations of Mexican labor organizing were laid. The brutal suppression of strikes

like those at Cananea and Río Blanco, rather than extinguishing the desire for collective action, served to solidify a shared sense of grievance and a growing awareness of common interests. These early, often tragic, struggles became indelible chapters in the unfolding narrative of Mexican labor history, shaping the consciousness and the tactics of workers for generations to come. The stage was being set for a more profound upheaval, one that would challenge the very foundations of the Porfirian order and offer a new vision for the place of labor in Mexican society.

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