



Vol. 7, No. 2, Winter 2010, 327-335  
[www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente](http://www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente)

### **Review/Reseña**

Jeffrey Bortz, *Revolution within the Revolution: Cotton Textile Workers and the Mexican Labor Regime, 1910-1923*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

## **Labor Regime Change in the Mexican Revolution**

**John Lear**

University of Puget Sound

Histories of the Mexican Revolution long stressed rural movements and featured armed peasants and military caudillos. By the time serious labor histories emerged in the decade after 1968, they often fell within a reigning revisionism that questioned the social character of the revolution and saw labor's participation as insignificant, defeated, or opportunist, and ultimately subordinate to the cynical middle-class leadership that emerged triumphant from the decade of military "rebellion." In the last fifteen years, the story of labor has changed. Soon after post-revisionist

interpretations in the 1980s again embraced the social character of the revolution, new studies of urban areas began to re-vision working people as key actors of the revolution—different from peasants in their goals, actions and trajectory, yet very much a part of the ongoing process of challenge and consent that constituted the revolution and the post-revolutionary order.

Jeffrey Bortz's study of textile workers in the revolution is a welcome and important contribution to this new historiography. His overarching claim, writ large in the title and repeated throughout, is that between 1910 and 1923 textile workers were the vanguard of a workers' revolution that transformed the factory labor regime (defined generally as the social relations of work). In turn, he asserts, "the revolution within the revolution is the missing link in Mexico's modern history" (9), the source of the gains of organized labor after 1917 and of its fundamental role in the stability of post-revolutionary Mexico.

Other monographs in English have addressed the mobilization of textile workers, but usually as part of a broader study of a regional or national working class; the literature in Spanish is more abundant, but usually focused on a particular region, factory or moment, such as the 1911 textile strike and the resulting industry-wide agreement. No study of textile workers to date is as sweeping and systematic in its coverage, analysis and broader claims. And while this book draws from an ambitious variety of national, state and municipal archives, it is a very assignable length, well-organized and written in vigorous and often elegant prose.

A national focus on textile workers makes sense and is long overdue. As the author shows in chapter two, cotton textiles constituted Mexico's largest and most advanced factory industry, expanding rapidly in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century along a corridor from Mexico City to Puebla/Atlixco to Orizaba, largely on the initiative of French- and Spanish-born entrepreneurs. By 1907, the sector employed 33,000 workers—a drop in the bucket of Mexico's mostly rural population, but by far the largest single sector of the industrial and urban working class. Some 140 mills employed from 22 to 2700 workers, completely dominating mill towns like Orizaba and forming a substantial minority around Puebla and the Federal

District. Chapter three unravels the “layered communities” formed by workers around class, skill level, gender, family and nationality. Bortz argues that textile workers developed a notion of social class and community that above all revolved around the shop floor. Thus their primary goal during the revolution was “to change the conditions and social relations of work, leaving most of the larger society to itself” (82). This assertion explains the book’s limited attention to the broader working class community, gendered relations, or the specific political activities of textile workers, beyond involving the state in mediating factory relations. It also highlights an aspect of the textile workers’ experience of the revolution that the author does not address directly: that workers in general and textile workers in particular did not participate significantly, as individuals or collectives, in the armed uprisings and military mobilizations of the revolution.

The narrative of this book is closely tied to the December 1911 textile strike, which the title of chapter three identifies as “the beginning of the workers’ revolution.” In the best account to date, Bortz makes a strong case for the importance of a textile strike that quickly became national, led to state-mediated meetings of textile owners and workers, and issued in an agreement that would ultimately change relations between textile workers, owners and the state. Other scholars have emphasized the limited material gains (shorter hours and slightly higher, more uniform wages), the continuance of authoritarian shop floor rules, the refusal of factory owners to recognize or meet directly with workers’ organizations, and the voluntary and uneven nature of the implementation of the accord. Bortz acknowledges the reformist demands and even more modest outcomes, but emphasizes the important precedent of state mediation, and convincingly argues that the textile workers’ strike and the settlement cracked open the edifice of owners’ and managers’ traditional authority.

Chapter five provides a more general narrative of the widening of that crack, the continual assertions and gains by workers during the years of greatest fighting (1912-1916). The textile convention and the virtual collapse of the state that followed the overthrow of Madero allowed textile workers to move from the “laborite” victory of the textile convention to a

more radical rebellion in the workplace, strengthening their organizations, challenging management over daily tasks, hiring and firings, and striking for higher wages or to remove abusive foremen and supervisors. At the same time, Constitutionalist military commanders, engaged in a civil war with the Convention forces of Villa and Zapata, promulgated a series of regional and national labor decrees in 1914 and 1915 that acceded to labor demands while trying to contain them.

Chapter six backs up and moves forward to trace the emergence of a body of labor laws and institutions that emerged between 1910 and 1923, including the formation of the Labor Department in 1911, the textile agreement in 1912, military labor decrees, the labor guarantees of Article 123 of the 1917 Constitution, tripartite Juntas de Conciliación y Arbitraje, and a variety of state labor codes, culminating in that of Puebla, which took control over the hiring of workers from owners and gave it to unions. The following, parallel chapter traces the development of unions over the same period. While earlier chapters refer uniformly to textile workers' organizations as unions, chapter seven clarifies the transition from a variety of precarious organizations (mutual aid societies, factory-based *mesas directivas* and a national Comité Central set up by the Labor Department, and *agrupaciones de resistencia*) to de facto and, after 1917, de jure unions (*sindicatos*), recognized and regulated by the state and forced upon owners. The growing interventions of military elites and the post-revolutionary state, which "put the state in the middle of the labor-capital conflict" (127), are shown to be responses to the continuous and growing challenges of workers and their organizations.

The final two chapters summarize the accomplishments and limits of textile workers' transformation of the labor regime in the period of early institutionalization from 1917-1923. One pattern is the growing use by workers of violence as a method of contesting the authority of management. Multiple examples show workers using knives, guns and even dynamite to assert themselves within the factory, a reflection of the broader violence of the revolution up to 1917, as well as the rapid shift of power within the factory toward workers after 1917. Another pattern is the creation of hierarchical union structures with direct ties to the state. With

the emergence of the semi-official CROM labor federation, union directed-violence often settled differences between those affiliated with the dominant CROM and those tied to anarchist or company unions. From 1920, power within unions began to shift from the rank and file to increasingly powerful leaders with ties to regional and national federations and close alliances to local, state and federal government, epitomized by the role of Luis Morones as head of the CROM, the Labor Party, and eventually the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Labor. The result was a union hierarchy that echoed traditional patron-client relations and emphasized discipline and loyalty among workers. At the same time, Bortz shows that the use of violence and the consolidation of hierarchical unions were compatible with “the principal goal of the worker’s revolution: gaining control over the shop floor” (181). Perhaps the most telling sign of the owners’ loss of control of the shop floor was pervasive union control over firings—removing an abusive foreman or preventing the firing of a worker—and eventually control over hiring (in Puebla from 1921, and throughout the textile industry after 1927). Bortz notes Gregory Crider’s argument that control over the shop floor and its attendant tasks of discipline and loyalty may have simply passed from abusive, paternalistic owners to analogous union leaders; but he counters that most workers probably preferred to cede such decisions to leaders who shared their origins and values than to the owners. And unions, in alliance with the state, ultimately helped deliver significant improvements in wages, hours, health care throughout the 1930s and 1940s, as the author has shown in much of his earlier scholarship.

How far did this workers’ revolution go? Bortz makes clear that without the national revolution and its attendant decline in owners’ monopoly of force, there would not have been a workers’ revolution. Similarly, from the beginning textile unions relied on the state or revolutionary leaders for mediation with capital, just as the new state came to rely on workers for political support. As workers asserted themselves on the shop floor, their unions recreated traditional hierarchies based on skill and patronage. Finally, while textile workers never lost sight of their goal of control over the shop floor, at no point did they contest the issue of

ownership of the means of production. Unions controlled the inside while owners controlled the outside. In spite of these limits, Bortz argues convincingly that the situation of textile workers in 1923 was dramatically better than it had been in 1910, particularly in terms of material benefits and union control over the shop floor, and that this outcome was largely a product of the workers' own making.

While the transformation of the labor regime in textile factories is dramatic evidence of the agency of workers in a genuine social revolution, his provocative use of the term "workers' revolution" and his claim that "the one actor ignored by historians [of the revolution] has been the winner, the industrial working class" (2) raise some caveats. For example, Bortz makes the startling if plausible claim that "in no other twentieth-century revolution—with the possible exceptions of Bolivia and Spain—did unions play such a central role." Accepting his exclusion of the Russian revolution, where workers organizations were led by the Bolshevik Party from the start, a case could be made for an equally dramatic, union-led transformation of the labor regime in Peronist Argentina (see Daniel James), or the far more radical one in Allende's Chile (see Peter Winn).<sup>1</sup> Both occurred much later, in the absence of armed revolution, and were shorter-lived, particularly in Chile, but they do help fit Mexico's labor regime in comparative perspective.

Bortz calls textile workers the "vanguard of the workers' revolution" (5). Textile workers were focused on shop floor issues and their own communities during the revolution and so the focus of this book on them makes sense. But briefly considering textile workers in relation to peasants and workers in other sectors would help enforce his ambitious claims. At no point does the author suggest that the workers' revolution fueled the larger one, or could have happened without the context of the national revolution, but a more direct contrast with "revolutionary peasants," with their assumption of arms, their direct attack on the system

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Peter Winn, *Weavers of Revolution: The Yarur Workers and Chile's Road to Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

of private property, and their frequent attacks on the state and the triumphant middle-class leadership of the revolution makes for a suggestive comparison.

Perhaps a more reasonable concern is that the claims to the primacy of textile workers eclipses the concurrent mobilization of workers in other economic sectors, such as mining and oil workers, electricians, transport workers and the variety of skilled and unskilled workers who serviced the urban economy (here I should confess, my own work on the working class of Mexico City during the revolution). Many groups of workers—and not just the anarchist Casa del Obrero Mundial and the Red Battalions who took up arms on behalf of the Constitutionals—more directly challenged owners and maintained a greater degree of autonomy from the state and generals. The issue is not simply which group of workers was more “revolutionary” or more strategic, but rather that the transformation of the national labor regime was the result of shared and differing actions of a large and diverse working class, as well as the related reactions of owners, politicians and generals. A book about textile workers need not be a book about all workers, but bold claims about a vanguard of the workers’ revolution do beg a more explicit comparison.

In his claims of novelty, Bortz is directly or indirectly dismissive of a fairly substantial body of recent working class history. In the introduction, he lumps recent labor history with Ramon Ruiz’s 1976 revisionist argument that workers failed to achieve their goals and that any benefits they received were handed down from above: “Twenty-five years later, scholars still claimed that workers benefited from the revolution only because they ‘encountered revolutionary leaders willing to regulate by decree many of the insecurities of work’” (2). Full disclosure: the words of the citation are mine, but the argument he associates with it is not. That workers encountered sympathetic revolutionary leaders is the subject of half of Bortz’s book, but no recent scholar of Mexican labor would argue that revolutionary leaders were the “only” or even the primary reason for workers’ gains after 1917. For the most part, *Revolution within the Revolution* fits well within the pattern of recent scholarship (a few examples are monographs by William French, Leticia Gamboa Ojeda,

Jocelyn Olcott, Susie Porter, Myrna Santiago, Michael Snodgrass, and Andrew Wood) that emphasizes the agency of workingmen and women during and after the revolution. The main difference is that these scholars put greater stress on the transformations of other “vanguards,” on the defeats as well as the victories of specific rank and file movements, and on the negotiated give-and-take between subordinate groups and post-revolutionary elites that characterizes much of the post-revisionist literature.

At the same time, Bortz’s book could have benefited from some of the gendered and cultural turns of recent labor history. Chapter three includes an interesting discussion of the gendered, largely male construction of the layered communities of textile workers. Table 3.3 indicates that women were a mere 16 percent of adult textile workers in 1927, and largely segregated into low skilled and low paying positions. And then this small female minority largely disappears from the narrative of the “man’s world” of the shop floor, in spite of two suggestive questions about women’s actions and working conditions during the revolution that are mostly left pending (62). Susie Porter’s research on women workers in Mexico City demonstrates how the revolution opened up discursive and political spaces within which women could formulate their demands in new terms. At the same time, she shows how new labor laws and male-dominated labor unions ultimately contributed to the declining percentage of women in the Mexico City workforce after 1917, particularly in factory settings. An example from my own research shows that women fell from 24 percent of workers in 1918 in one of Mexico City’s largest textile factories, San Antonio Abad, to 14 percent in 1924. If this decline holds nationally for textile workers, it would suggest a greater presence of women in textile factories in 1910 than in 1927. Examining the power relations mediated by changing discourses of gender might further his argument that the revolution on the shop floor ultimately reinforced aspects of traditional hierarchies, while forcing him to consider the revolution of working people beyond the shop floor. In spite of the increasing radicalization of textile workers’ actions and their dramatic transformation of the labor regime, they seem little affected in this account

by the ideas and language of the revolution itself, rarely invoking the revolution or any expanded view of citizenship in their challenge to owners' authority or appeals to political authority. Is this the result of the fixed gaze of workers on specific issues of wages, hours and shop floor control (while "leaving most of the larger society to itself"), or will such a discursive analysis simply have to await future cultural historians who can build upon Bortz's solid foundation?

These caveats may be unrealistic. Among the strengths of this fine book are its innovative blending of carefully researched social history with a new institutional history framework, its tight organization and assignable length, and the very boldness of the author's assertions. If the focus on the transformation of the textile labor regime at times seems narrow, it is that very focus that allows him to argue convincingly that textile workers staged a revolution within a revolution. And the "narrow" focus allows the author to fill a big hole in the history of Mexico's working people. His final phrase about the new labor regime that textile workers created can be extended to this important book itself: "its strengths were its limits and its limits were its strengths" (201).