Mexican Labor and Labor Leaders

By BERTRAM D. WOLFE

(This is one of a series of articles on Mexico Today based on the closing chapters of Comrade Wolfe's forthcoming book, "Portrait of Mexico." The book which contains 248 full-page halftone reproductions of paintings by Diego Rivera and 211 pages of text by Bertram D. Wolfe will be on sale at all book stores after March 2 at $4.75. The Workers Age offers it to its readers at $4.00. We have only 500 copies at that price and orders will be filled as received. Make checks or money orders payable to New Workers School, 131 W. 33rd St., N. Y.C.—Editor.)

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OBREGON and Calles received support from the Government of the United States by direct negotiation with the House of Morgan, first through Lamont, then through Morrow. The popular support the Mexican government needed at home it secured by direct control of the organizations of the masses. For this purpose government-instituted and subsidized labor and peasant movements were set up, captained by carefully selected agents of the administration. These agents disposed of funds, patronage, and occasional support in struggles with rivals, or with opponents of the government, or with economic interests which the government did not wish to protect.

Carranza's labor agent was Gerardo Murillo, the artist whose *nom de plume* or rather *de pinceau* is Dr. Atl. The little bearded second-rate painter suddenly appeared in the labor movement in 1915 armed with vast quantities of Carranza's own printing-press pesos, given him by Obregon to relieve the distress of the workers during the stormy war-torn days of a year of political chaos and economic prostration. Thereby Dr. Atl acquired sufficient influence to organize the famous "Red Battalions" for Carranza. Obregon further gave the nascent labor movement palatial headquarters: the *Casa de Azulejos*, formerly the Jockey Club and today the continentally famous restaurant, Sanborn's. But when Carranza had consolidated his power he outlawed the labor movement, prohibited and smashed its strikes, jailed its leaders and dispossessed it from its elegant home. Thereby Dr. Atl was discredited and went back to painting volcanoes. He was lost from the surface of political life until he bobbed up again last year as an agent of the German embassy in Mexico and a paid propagandist for fascism and anti-semitism. But Obregon, even while working through Dr. Atl in 1915, was already grooming a much more important labor lieutenant for his purposes.

The Rise of Morones

Luis N. Morones is the *caudillo* in the labor movement. The type is as old as Mexico, but the field of operations is a new one requiring new formulæ and new methods. Gross, fleshy, thick-lipped, heavy-jowled, soft and pudgy-handed, redolent of perfume, fond of silk underwear and diamonds, he looks more like the newspaper cartoon conception of a capitalist than he does like a labor leader. His sybaritic softness of exterior gives no inkling of the ruthless hardness and lust for power that enabled him to bestride the confused, chaotic, mistrustful and immature labor movement of the '20's and bend it to his will.

Obregon first met his future labor lieutenant during an electrical strike in 1915. The meeting took place in the course of one of General Obregon's intermittent occupations of Mexico City before Carranza's power was definitely consolidated. The General settled the strike by "seizing" the properties of the British-owned telegraph and telephone company and "giving" them to the strikers to run under the management of a company foreman. The foreman was Morones. Like so many of the Mexican Government's melodramatic "seizures" of plants and properties, the arrangement was only temporary. But the association between Morones and Obregon there initiated was a prolonged one. With the disappearance of the diminutive Dr. Atl from the labor scene, Morones, the ex-electrical worker, became the main transmission gear from the government to the organized workers.

In 1918 the *Obregonista* Governor of Coahuila, Gustavo Espinosa Mireles, issued a call to the various local labor movements, unions and workers' propaganda groups, to unite in a single nation-wide labor movement. The call is typical and revealing:

"The Government of the State of Coahuila, watchful not to remain behind in the evolutionary march of time . . . desires that the worker himself meeting fraternally and freely should study and determine the points on which his well-being can be based . . . thinks that the opportune moment has come to invite all workers of the Republic to realize their unification and provide a solution of their needs. . . ."

This was accompanied by an offer to pay all expenses of the transportation, lodging, lost wages and other needs of the delegates, and provide free meeting halls and other expenses attendant on the holding of a national convention. Out of this government-fostered and government-financed meeting was born the *Confederacion Regional Obrera Mexicana* (*Crom*), with Luis N. Morones as its inevitable leader. The next year a similar conception and gestation process gave birth to the Partido Laborista Mexicana (Mexican Labor Party) again with Morones as its leader. True, not all labor elements accepted the new government gift horse; but state subsidies, government favors, and their obverse—government repression—soon made the *Crom* and the *Partido Laborista* dominant, and they continued so till 1935.

The following year, 1920, both movements supported Obregon against Carranza's handpicked candidate for the presidency, and backed the Sonora group (Obregon, De la Huerta, Calles) in their subsequent uprising. Morones was rewarded by appointment as the director of the government munitions factory (a strange revolutionary labor leader that can be put in charge of munitions!); his fellow laborite, General Celestino Gasca was made Governor of the Federal District with all the patronage involved, and a number of other labor leaders were given fat government jobs.

Rule by the "Crowbar"

Armed with government funds and political patronage, Morones gathered around him a little group of labor leaders of his own selection. He even included capable opponents and critics when they proved amenable to softening by the persuasive methods the administration had put into his hands. This little band of chieftains, never elected by any labor body, was known as the *Grupo Accion*. Limited at its height to twenty-five men of whom less than half were important, it nevertheless controlled an ever-widening circle of active agents in the labor movement, including the *Casa del Obrero Mundial* (House of the World Worker), also a non-representative body, the *Crom*, the *Partido Laborista*, the principal unions and state federations of labor.

A much less publicized organism than the *Grupo Accion* was the mysterious *Palanca*—the "lever" or "crowbar"—Morones's specially selected strong-arm squad. A Mexican *caudillo* cannot maintain pow-

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THE MOSC HISTO

(Concluded from last issue)

Historical analogies generally limp. It is tempting but dangerous to try to make any correlation between the groups and group struggles of the French bourgeois revolution of the eighteenth century and the Russian proletarian revolution of the twentieth.[5] Besides that is not my point at all. From the material here presented, necessarily in sketchy form, I think the following two conclusions may be fairly drawn:

Political Conflicts Converted Into Criminal Cases

1. The conversion of political cases into criminal trials by charging political opponents with impossible and fantastic "crimes" is no diabolical invention of Stalin's, as some would have us believe, but seems to arise out of the very conditions of factional-political struggle in revolutionary times. Certainly it is to be found in full bloom in the French Revolution, as I have shown above.

It is curious to note how close is the parallel. Tory England was the bitter enemy of revolutionary France then, Nazi Germany of revolutionary Russia today; both appear as the mainspring in the foreign plots against the revolution. In place of efforts to bring about a monarchist restoration in France, we have charges alleging attempts at a fascist counter-revolution in Russia. Today we are told of the Trotskyites, working hand in hand with the Gestapo, organizing wrecking and sabotage in Soviet industrial plants; in 1794, the cry was that the Hebertists (and the Dantonists, too), under Pitt's instructions, were interfering with the food supply and trying to bring about a famine. About "amalgams" it is hardly necessary to say anything.[6] If we wonder

5 *One fundamental difference should be borne in mind. The conflicting tendencies in the French Revolution represented distinct and hostile classes or groups of classes. This cannot be said in the same way of the inner struggles of the Russian Revolution.*

6 *When taxed with the juridical "laxness" of the trials, Robespierre impatiently replied: "They wish to govern revolutions by lawyers subtleties; to treat conspiracies against the Republic as if they were actions between private individuals. . . . It is not so much a question of punishing as of destroying them."*

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er merely by bribery of his enemies: he inevitably makes more of them than he can buy, and among them will always arise unpurchasable competitors who can be satisfied by nothing short of his displacement. Nor could Morones always count upon the government to put his enemies out of the way: sometimes they were even fostered by opponents in the cabinet or by the administration as a whole to prevent its agent from becoming too powerful. Hence the *Palanca.*

If one is active in Mexican political life he must expect to shoot and be shot at. Morones was shot at more than once, even wounded on occasion; but he was too good an organizer to do his own shooting. It got done just the same, as men like Senator Field Jurado could testify were it not for the proverbial reticence of the dead.

These opponents of Morones who were opponents on principal of the entire system of government-controlled unionism, the government itself took care of. Those who were not amenable to purchase, were taken care of by two other characteristic methods of "persuasion." "For foreigners," a high government official once told the writer, "we have the thirty-three, for natives the thirty-thirty."

"Thirty-Three"

The "thirty-three' in question refers to Article Thirty-Three of the Constitution of 1917 which permits the president "to expel from the republic forthwith, and without judicial process, any foreigner whose presence he may deem inexpedient." Under it Obregon and Calles deported dozens of Argentinians, Cubans, Spaniards, Americans and workers from various European countries: Communists, Anarchists, Syndicalists, and even the bombastic poet Santos Chocano, of no particular ideology whatsoever.*

As to the instrument reserved for the native-born, the "thirty-thirty," it refers to the calibre of the rifle used in all Mexican revolutionary campaigns; the best, the most incorruptible and clear-eyed of the native leaders of the Mexican workers and peasants have been eliminated and their mouths have been stilled by its action. As victims of the Obregon and Calles regimes I cite at random: Mauro Tobon, tireless and selfless Communist textile worker and leader in the industrial center of Orizaba; Gutierrez de Lara, follower of Flores Magon and organizer of a copper mine strike against American interests at Cananea; Jose Guadalupe Rodriguez and Primo Tapia, two of the bravest and best beloved of Communist peasant leaders. These are the greatest of the victims of these "laborista" regimes, but the list could be extended to cover many pages and include local leaders in every village and industrial center of the country.

Next Week: A MEXICAN "LABOR GOVERNMENT".

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* It is hard to believe that the well-informed Ernest Guening did not know this when he wrote:

Whereas in the United States a foreign labor agitator is deported for activities deemed against "our form of government," in Mexico it is the foreign capital agitator, the superintendent who violates constitutional provisions and refuses to comply with the labor laws, who may have Article Thirty-three applied to him—a policy both nationalistic and popular. (Mexico and Its Heritage. p. 358.)

Vastly more use has been made of Article Thirty-three against foreign-born labor leaders, including the Spanish-speaking Latin-Americans and natives of Spain, than against foreign-born capitalists or their superintendents.