Cardenas and the Mexican Masses

By ELLEN WARD

(This is the second article in Ellen Ward's series on Mexico. The first appeared in the last issue of this paper.—Editor.)

* * *

WHEN Calles took power he proclaimed himself a labor man, and under him the power of Luis Morones, head of the C.R.O.M. (Confederacion Regional Obrera Mexicana), grew by leaps and bounds. He became a member of the Calles cabinet—Minister of Industry, Commerce and Labor—and soon began to discourage strikes as "wasteful to the national economy." But, if there was no perceptible gain for the workers under this regime, the labor leader proceeded to enrich himself. During the few brief years of the Calles regime, Morones became the owner of several commercial enterprises, a hotel, a textile factory, a number of realty developments and a group of villas in the suburbs of Mexico City. The story is commonly told that he paid 50,000 pesos for the construction of a sunken bath—estilo romano—for one of his capricious mistresses.

"Men Of The Revolution"

Altho the tastes of the remaining friends of Calles were somewhat less ostentatious and more sober, they nonetheless enriched themselves, just as Morones had. These Callistas were called the "Men of the Revolution." From the revolution, they came to acquire governorships, generalships, cabinet posts, power and great wealth.

As generals in the field, they confiscated "enemy" properties, made forced levies on stocks of gold and currency, "purchased" supplies with paper pesos they printed over their signatures, and acquired estates by "agrarian expropriation."

Obregon had begun life as a petty rancher; he ended it as one of Mexico's large landowners.

Calles began as a rural schoolmaster and today he still owns the haciendas of Trinidad, Soledad de la Mota, Santa Barbara and El Tambor. These men and their friends are the new capitalist-minded landowning class, and their rapid rise to power and wealth help to explain their growing conservatism. By the time Cardenas came to the presidency in 1934, they were all ready to call quits. They were eager to consolidate their gains and to put a stop to the onward march of labor and the peasantry.

Calles counted upon Cardenas as a prop in his new plans, but the temper of the world had changed in a few brief years—and, as the storm clouds of a new world war began to gather and as the importance of Latin America covered the horizon once more, Cardenas felt the time was ripe for a break with the old policies of close collaboration with foreign imperialism. At this point, it is interesting to trace the early career of Cardenas.

He began life as a printer in a small Mexican village and, before he was 20, he joined the revolution against Carranza. He was only 38 when he occupied the presidency. No sooner was he nominated than he began an endless tour of the land. He omitted no village of any importance. Wherever he went, he asked what the people wanted

"Land," "a dam," "a school," a street," the replies kept coming. "You shall have it. I will attend to it personally," was the answer. And it was not long before the legend grew up about his extraordinary popularity.

Calles And Cardenas

Calles and his group, alarmed by this Frankenstein monster, began to create difficulties for the new incumbent, but Cardenas had built his defenses with such meticulous care that, when he decided that the moment for the deportation of Calles had arrived, there was no opposition to speak of. Along with Calles, Cardenas threw out his Minister Plenipotentiary, Morones. Then he set about creating a new leadership

(*Continued on Page* 5)

Cardenas Regime and Needs of Mexican Masses

(*Continued from Page* 3)

for Mexico's labor movement, a leadership which would tie the labor movement more closely to him.

Simultaneously he began in earnest to tackle some of the problems created for him by Calles and his court of intriguers.

First claim on his concern was the hostility of the Church. Cardenas prevented the execution of the harshest laws against the Church and arranged for the courts to "revise" the legal seizures of Church lands—and the Church tension grew immediately less.

To consolidate his peasant following, Cardenas speeded up the land-distribution program. In the first two years of his administration, he awarded close to 5 million hectares of land to over 3,000 villages. Thus, he alone distributed over half as much land as all the administrations before him put together. Yet, tho his land distribution has continued steadily, it would be mistaken to believe that the Mexican agrarian problem is approaching solution. It is not. In the first place, only the larger villages have received land thus far; but over two-thirds of rural life in Mexico does not fall under the classification of village and therefore is not entitled to land grants at all. In the second place, in order to make these land grants yield an adequate livelihood to the peasant, funds and machinery are necessary for the proper irrigation and the development of the land. This, due to the essential poverty of the central government, has in the main been lacking. One or two show-places, like the Laguna region, do not alter this fact. And, in those strategic regions where funds were made available thru hastily formed agrarian banks, the burocrats put in charge of these institutions have robbed right and left, have enriched themselves, while the peasant remains in the same distressed economic condition as before. At this very moment, the whole system of corruption and abuse in the agrarian banking setup is under investigation.

In the third place, Cardenas has not really planned to expropriate the large landed estates to satisfy the land hunger of Mexico's peasant masses. All that he has done is to carve off and trim the great estates and generally he has chosen only the poorest lands.

In the fourth place, the land is not being confiscated except in such instances where original robbery can be proved with legal documents. And, of some 2,000 distributions, less than 100 cases have been "restitution" of stolen land.

Landowners Retain Power

In the fifth place, as long as the economic power of the landowners is not being seriously disturbed, they can continue to rule and control politics. As recently as last year, for example, over 40 peasants in the State of Yucatan were strung up on lamp-posts and two score or more in the State of Vera Cruz. The "crime" of both of these groups was active agitation for land or for a higher living wage, which even today often reaches the munificent level of from 25 to 30 cents (Mexican) a day. Almost overnight, a photograph of this gruesome lynching appeared simultaneously on every wall and kiosk of the capital. The names of those guilty were passed by word of mouth so that, in one day, the entire population knew who they were. But was any investigation ordered or any prosecution undertaken? No! The political power of the hacendados is still too strong to permit the criminal assassins to be punished!

And these same hacendados, when pieces of their lands have been carved off, are still powerful enough to collect payment, often in cold cash, sometimes from the recipients of the land and sometimes in agrarian bonds which the government accepts in payment of taxes. It is obvious from these facts that the Mexican agrarian problem, despite progress within narrow and carefully marked-off limits, is still a long way from a satisfactory solution. All claims to the contrary are conscious deception.

* * *

(Another article, dealing with the labor policy of the Cardenas regime, will appear in the next issue of this paper.—Editor.)