The Border and Social Movements
In Mexico and the U.S.

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Down through history, social movements in the United States have maintained close relations with Mexico and the other Latin American societies. The nature and results of these contacts deserve more research.

In this field we find numerous instances of a history—shared by Latin Americans and the U.S.—of both solidarity and conflict. For our analysis to advance, we need a more detailed understanding of the profile of U.S. popular movements, whose role in the dynamics of the society itself is often underestimated. Conceiving U.S. history as the simple result of advances in the business world would be to ignore important, broad conflicts and the social movements that have been part of the building of the country itself. The mutual influence between Mexico and the United States, particularly intense along the border, has affected the formation of the proletariat of both nations and the development of social rights and democratic demands in both countries.

From the U.S. Social Movement To Latin America

The characteristics of the historic formation of the proletariat in the United States, the nature of its main organizations and the very existence of broad, powerful social movements there were

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a spur to the establishment of relations with workers in the rest of the hemisphere. First of all I would like to touch on the multi-ethnic nature of the formation of the proletariat in the nineteenth-century United States. It is particularly important to note the presence of workers of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban origin from the end of the nineteenth century and that of Central Americans more recently, who made New York, Chicago, and the border states with Mexico centers of learning and political and cultural experimentation that they then transmitted to their own countries.

I am also referring to the development of many political currents and social movements spread by the different waves of immigrants. Their efforts led to the creation of very active, radical anarchist groups and the growth, particularly intense in 1911 and 1912, of a large Socialist Party with an enormous number of local chapters, the strengthening of national and local union federations and the development of popular movements with worker participation. Among the latter are the populist and progressive movements that shook U.S. society and, in different ways, had an influence in Mexico and the rest of Latin America. For all these movements, immigration and, in general, relations with Latin America, were a focus of their attention and political definitions. Their reaction to events like the Mexican Revolution, the U.S. intervention in Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic and the expansion of capitalism toward the rest of the hemisphere were the cause of passionate debates and prompted positions and attitudes among U.S. workers ranging from racism to antiimperialism and antimilitarism.

The different currents’ political and organizational alternatives competed in Latin America to attain hegemony over relations with workers there. One example is the clash that divided the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and led to an important split in the Socialist Party in 1912 and to the creation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1938 that tried to offer a different road to that of the AFL’s trade-oriented organization. Today we can see that these old differences are resurfacing in the polemic about the creation of organizations capable of recruiting recent immigrants, the unorganized and the unskilled. They are also present in the incipient clash between a multitude of independent organizations and the United States’ large union federations.

**IDENTIFICATION OF U.S. WORKERS’ MOBILIZATION**

We can identify three periods in which this kind of U.S. relations with Mexico and Latin America intensified notably: one that spans the first two decades of the twentieth century, the years after the 1929 crisis and the current period. The first period, which spans years of great social turmoil in the United States and several countries of Latin America, left a lasting mark, with U.S. workers’ social protests and the revolution in Mexico as starting points. The international workers’ experience of that time were some of history’s richest, showing the way for other countries in the region.

Important experiences in the relation of U.S. workers with Mexicans on both sides of the border made it possible to create a single region for workers’ mobilization.
would also have to include on this list the movement to defend Sacco and Van- 
zetti, at its height during the 1920s. 5

In all these cases there were joint mobilizations, sometimes simultaneous- 
ly, that aimed to support revolutionary 
efforts by workers in the United States 
or Mexico. Different groups of work- 
ers from both countries used public 
demonstrations, strikes and boycotts, re- 
bellion and armed struggle to strength- 
en international solidarity. Workers of 
Latino origin in the United States, like 
the Cuban workers, for example, also 
expressed their support for the Mex- 
ican revolution.

The antimilitarist activities of work- 
ers from Tampico, Tamaulipas, illustra- 
tes one of the social processes I have 
mentioned. A group of leaders from this 
oil port, members of different unions 
that belonged to the House of the World 
Worker (Casa del Obrero Mundial), 
launched a campaign to defend anti- 
militarist activists who had been re- 
pressed by both government and man- 
agement. Ger minal was the name of the 
publication that expressed the ideas 
of solidarity of the region’s unions.

In October 1917, a Workers’ Con- 
vention was held in Tampico that pro- 
posed forming a national union. Taking 
advantage of the tensions arising out 
of the European conflict and the po- 
litical situation in Mexico, the press 
unleashed a campaign against conven- 
tion participants, linking the G er-minal group to German interests, a campaign 
which led to arrests and deportations, 
paralleling what was going on in the 
United States under similar pretexts.

In February 1918, G e- 
minal denounced the repression it was being sub- 
jected to, its editors explaining that the 
persecution against them was an at- 
tempt to make it impossible for anti- 
militarist positions to reach a broad 
audience in the United States. G er- 
minal’s dissemination among the U.S. 
proletariat replaced some U.S. publi- 
cations, whose circulation had dropped 
because of repression. It published nu- 
umerous articles and manifestos by or- 
ganizers of different California anar- 
chist groups, by the IWW and by Latin 
American unions who were trying to 
provide orientation to workers around

The Socialist Party of the United 
States also attempted to penetrate the 
region with its ideas about building 
socialism. However, this did not stop 
socialist leader Morris Hillquit from 
proposing the restriction of immigra- 
tion of “backward races” to the United 
States from as early as 1904, or the 
National Executive Committee from 
opposing in 1907 the import of “cheap 
labor” from China and Japan, since it

Different groups of workers from both countries 
used public demonstrations, strikes and boycotts, rebellion 
and armed struggle to strengthen international solidarity.

PROJECTS AND ORGANIZATIONS

We should remember the attempts to 
extend the organizational and politi- 
cal options developed in the United 
States to Latin America. The close rela- 
tions between Puerto Rican anarch- 
is and the IWW and the existence of IWW 
locals all the way from neigh- 
boring Mexico to distant Chile are 
examples of the attempts to organize 
Latin American workers on an indus- 
trial basis. 6

threatened —according to some lead- 
ers— to destroy workers’ organiza- 
tions. 8 On the question of black work- 
ers, the party’s right wing, headed by 
Victor Berger, thought that “Negros 
were inferior, depraved degenerates 
who went around raping women and 
children,” and that socialism would 
achieve the complete segregation of 
blacks and whites. 9 Obviously, this 
party did not particularly concern itself 
with organizing Mexican and Latin 
American workers in the United States. 
However, I should point out that sev- 
eral socialist organizations, particularly 
in border states with Mexico, ignored 
their leaders and linked up with work- 
ers of Mexican origin and the revolu-

Lastly, in a very brief summary, I can 
mention the existence of hemisphere- 
wide organizations that put forward dif- 
ferent union projects which expressed 
the relations of workers of Latin Amer-
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ica and the United States. The Pan-American Federation of Labor (PAFL), which linked the AFL and the CROM as its initial launching pad for expansion in Latin America, is one. Another is the Continental Workers Association (ACAT-1929), a short-lived anarchist organization, and its contemporary, the Latin American Union Confederation (CSLA), of Communist orientation. The Confederation of Workers of Latin America (CTAL), founded in 1938 and headed up by Mexican unionist Vicente Lombardo Toledano, was opposed by the AFL, but established better relations with the CI0, the organization that, as a result of a broad radicalization among U.S. workers again put forward the idea of industry-wide organization.11 These and other organizations that emerged in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and other countries of the region were victims of the Cold War polarization and were forced to either second AFL policy or resist it.12 This is yet another of the ways that U.S. workers have influenced Latin America.
TOWARD A NEW PERIOD OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL MOBILIZATION?

Relations between U.S. and Mexican workers are constantly changing, even today. President Reagan’s immigration legislation had clear effects on workers in his own country, Mexico and Central America.

Given globalization and its constant crises, restructuring and the establishment of a new international division of labor, emerging social and workers movements face problems that by nature transcend national boundaries.

A single economic and social phenomenon confronted some workers with “plant flight” and “job flight,” as well as the reduction of their previously won conquests, like in the United States. For others, the same phenomenon means a greater reduction in living standards—depressed for years—like in Mexico. For workers on both sides of the border, this makes for unemployment and, increasingly, the destructuring of their old union organizations and the need to come up with new forms of organization and resistance.

To get rid of unionized workers, some companies reduce the size of their plants and try to decentralize, sending production processes to other regions where they enjoy modern facilities and cheap labor. The Mexico-U.S. border area is attractive for this operation. In some cases, such as the auto industry, companies build plants on both sides of the border, making geographical proximity another advantage. In addition, regional concentration is increased through multinationals’ locating different parts of their production processes on either side of the border, at the same time that they attempt to defuse potential protests by Mexican workers against their extremely low wages and miserable working conditions.

These changes show some of the ways that capital is internationalized. This seems to define and concretize the common challenges that workers and social activists face in both countries. James D. Cockcroft’s warning seems correct.13

At the heart of this complex series of conditions created by the dynamics of the development of the United States and Mexico are undocumented workers. The main impact of amendments to U.S. immigration law has been on labor questions. This has happened when “illegals”—mainly farm, textile and auto workers, among others—tried to create political and union organizations, which were soon threatened by U.S. labor and immigration policy.14

The weakened U.S. workers’ and union movement and the increasingly broad social protest movements (given the impoverishment of broad sectors of U.S. society) are faced once again with the need to take a position on organizing recent immigrants, the unorganized and the unskilled. Workers, farmers, employees, religious groups and students in the United States are increasing their efforts and activities around the question of ethnic minorities and on the particularly serious problem of the private appropriation of nature’s genetic resources. The dubious genetic modification of basic foodstuffs is something that new popular movements are focusing on at the same time that they attempt to deal with the problems that Mexico and the rest of Latin American countries are facing.

The development of social movements has led U.S. unionists to participate in the new social struggles. In September 2000, the conservative AFL—which despite everything, does have 13 million members—“derailed” the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization and programed nationwide protests against the international bureaucracies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, seen as the imposers of economic programs responsible for poverty in many countries and enemies of labor rights. The AFL began a campaign called Jobs with Justice.15

The response of unions and different social groups to these problems are diverse and contradictory. However, it would seem that a new period of intensification of the international dimension of popular struggle is upon us, in many cases with increasing participation of workers, students and other social groups radicalized by circumstances, who have an influence in Mexico and are sensitive to Latin American struggles. This makes it important to know first hand and deepen our understanding of popular move-
m ents in the United States and their relations with other countries in the hemisphere.

NOTES

1 Willi Paul Adams, Los Estados Unidos de América (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1985), Chapters 4 and 5.


3 Javier Torres Parés, La revolución sin frontera. El Partido Liberal Mexicano y las relaciones entre el movimiento obrero de México y el de Estados Unidos (Mexico City: UNAM-Ediciones y Distribuciones Hispánicas, 1990). The examples given in this article are documented in this book, which looks in more detail at the international dimension of workers’ mobilization from 1900 to 1923.


5 A very good study about the mobilization around this case can be found in Ronald Creagh, “Sacco et Vanzetti,” Actes et mémoires du peuple (Paris: La Découverte, 1984).


8 Ibid., p. 277.

9 Ibid., pp. 131-133.


14 Ibid., pp. 72-73.

15 “Protestas en EU coincidirán con acciones en Praga contra el FMI,” La Jornada (Mexico City), 19 September 2000.