

H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Vincent C. Peloso, ed. *Work, Protest, and Identity in Twentieth-Century Latin America*. Jaguar Books on Latin America Series. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2003. xx + 348 pp. Notes, suggested readings, suggested films. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-8420-2926-5; \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 0-8420-2927-3.

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Revisiting the Labour Movement

In the two years since this book was published, a few of the predictions that appear in its pages have been contradicted by recent developments, yet it remains a useful and stimulating volume that provides an understanding of the directions that the labour movement and labour historians have taken in recent decades, as well as valuable insights into what is called the "new labour history." The book is obviously designed for those teaching courses on twentieth-century labour movements, providing both suggested readings and suggested films in the field, but it could also be used profitably by those dealing more broadly with the region's social history, for as the title indicates, it aims to take the reader beyond the confines of labour history. Nevertheless, the unifying elements are labour and the issues confronted by the work force through the twentieth century.

The book comprises fifteen chapters, introduced by Vincent Peloso in a brief overview and then more precisely in a few paragraphs before each selection. Four of them have not appeared elsewhere, providing case studies from Ecuador, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela, and an examination of the issue of militancy that uses Argentina as its focus. The others, taken from journal articles and book sections, will probably be familiar to most labor historians, but they are useful to have in a single text. Moreover, their lively style and their juxtaposition of specific examples and theoretical material should spark a response from even the most jaded undergraduate.

The selections cover a multitude of issues that could be the subject of any review. Let me deal with two of the more central ones that the editor identifies in his introduction and certainly underline some of the strengths of this book. The first is the rather obvious historical weaknesses of the labour movement. One vital factor in this was the divisions within the movement that undermined the workers' effectiveness and facilitated repression by the employer, the state, or both. The strategy of divide and rule that had been used effectively by elites to control the masses since the conquest came into play again in response to late-nineteenth-century economic modernization and industrialization, the accompanying proletarianization, and the need to control workers to ensure profits. Desirous of avoiding the politicization, radicalization, and unionization that was occurring elsewhere, Latin American employers sought ways to maintain labour peace without the negative aspects of

repression, although they were not averse to using this as many examples show. Keeping the workers divided along various lines served them very nicely. Early in the century when the influences of positivism and social Darwinism were prominent, they used the "race card" with this in mind. Alejandro de la Fuente examines its impact on Cuba at a time of significant immigration from Europe that was deliberately used against both Afro-Cuban and native non-blacks workers. Race was also a factor in the suppression of the 1904 rebellion against vaccination in Rio de Janeiro, a rebellion that was really an anti-government movement that included a definite working-class component, according to Jeffrey Needell. And Miguel Tinker-Salas found the same issue relevant in the case of the Venezuelan oil fields, where workers were imported in the 1920s from the British Caribbean and China, and administrators from Mexico, creating conflict with Venezuelan workers. Oil workers were further set apart from their fellows through higher wages and other benefits provided by the companies. Creating this kind of labour aristocracy was also a device of the United Fruit Company in Colombia with its banana workers, as Catherine LeGrand shows, and of Chilean copper companies, that, according to Thomas Klubock, provided not only relatively high wages but also company housing and social welfare benefits before 1973. In the case of Colombia, divisions were promoted with the nearby large group of peasants whose own economy grew as an adjunct to the banana industry, but who also served as a pool of cheap, competitive labour, which employers could use to keep their workers in line, especially during periods of high unemployment. With increasing numbers of women in the work force, companies had a further means of division. Maria del Carmen Baerga looks at the case of needleworkers in Puerto Rico in the 1930s to show how women operating in their homes on a piece work basis came in conflict with both men and women employed in factories, largely because the male-dominated union did not reflect their interests. And just as race, gender, and wage rates could divide, so too could legal definition. David Parker's extract from his book on the Peruvian middle class shows how law was used in the 1920s to separate the intellectual worker from the manual worker, raising the status of the latter and in the process lowering that of the artisan.

The expansion of the labour force, its activism, and its revolutionary potential, which became evident with the Mexican and Russian revolutions, produced new attempts at control that were equally divisive. Incorporating them into the political system by creating government-sponsored unions and corporate structures became common from the 1930s and was particularly evident in Mexico and Brazil. Norman Caulfield describes how alienated workers in Mexico attempted to establish unions free from the direction of government-linked union leaders, who, by the early years of the cold war, also had U.S. support because of their anti-communist reputation. His example points to the conflict between independent unions and government unions that further divided local movements, as did ties to opposing political parties that occurred with the gradual spread of democracy during the twentieth century. Workers, thus, were drawn in numerous directions according to their gender, race, religion, work, family needs, political affiliations, and so on. Which of these was of greatest importance to them varied enormously and made any type of unity even more problematic.

When these divisions are considered alongside the other obstacles that workers had to confront, it seems amazing that they managed to achieve as much as they did. This leads to

a second important theme of the book: the accomplishments of the labour movement. Workers, as the book's title suggests, engaged in various forms of protest, and in the process left their mark on their nations' developments. Their willingness to unite, protest, and agitate points to, among other things, the horrendous conditions that they experienced and their desire for change. Workers recognized their common goals and on occasion came together, if only temporarily. Normally, organizations assisted in the process, even though, as Baerga points out, an organized labour movement was not essential to the development of class-consciousness. In Colombia a mutual support system existed between peasants and wage-earning banana workers without union intervention. Elsewhere unions were prominent, such as in Cuba where immigrants united with the locals in the 1920s often in black-led unions. In Mexico, in 1959, unionized railway workers staged a wildcat strike despite the opposition of their own leaders. Nationalism often served as a uniting force and it also played a role in establishing ties with other sectors of the population. Anton Rosenthal describes the difficulties that the workers in the new electric trams in Montevideo had in organizing a general strike in 1911, yet they managed to do so with support from elements of the middle class who saw their own interests being infringed upon. Female textile workers in Medellin, Colombia, in 1920 won a strike when males from all classes provided them backing, in a show of stereotypical male concern for women's supposed fragility. Ann Farnsworth-Alvear points out that the women quite deliberately elicited this response to achieve their ends, although in this particular case they created a frequently repeated myth, as the historiography of the strike usually ignores that men also were involved as strikers. A popular revolt in Ecuador in 1944, that drew together women, Indians, workers and students, had amongst its prominent leaders two elite and two Indian women, who, according to Marc Becker, struggled to incorporate women and Indians into the nation's political life.

That unity was frequently promoted by political parties, especially communist and socialist parties, showing that party affiliation has both helped and harmed workers over the years. Party involvement marked changes in workers' strategies as they moved from economic action to political action, an almost inevitable development as they realized that any improvements required not simply convincing their employers but changing the political system. They were also drawn in this direction by their association with populist leaders like Vargas and Perón who sought to steer them away from more radical alternatives. Such political activism intensified in the face of the repressive regimes that ruled much of Latin America from the 1960s. Indeed, political action became the only means of protest, for economic action was throttled by the dictatorships as they introduced neoliberal policies that created new hardships. In these repressive situations alliances beyond a factory or union were necessary. The process of establishing ties with other less privileged groups was assisted by a number of organizations, including the Catholic Church, as Michael Jimenez shows. A heightened militancy was evident, as Rachel May found in the case of Argentina where there was widespread support for urban guerrilla groups. The desire to end the dictatorships and re-establish democracy produced common cause across classes in Chile and elsewhere, and unions played a vital role in the process. In Brazil, they actively opposed the regime and challenged neoliberal economic reforms, according to Anthony Pereira. Moreover, in this struggle with repressive regimes, unions went through a process

of internal democratization that had a democratizing effect on the community as a whole.

Kenneth Roberts concludes the discussion with a review of seven books on labour that he uses to address many of these same issues, thereby providing a useful summation. He concludes rather positively that workers have managed to emerge from the tatters of the past and to use their experiences to build something new. That experience is probably going to be tested frequently in the not-too-distant future. Recent works show that globalization has been a decided failure in terms of reapportioning wealth to the have-not nations. It has also widened the gap between rich and poor within those nations and virtually eliminated the middle class in many of them. What does this mean for Latin America in the future? If we take the historical evidence, mobilization is certain to occur. Workers have shown their willingness to protest, to strike, and to support revolts, revolutions, and guerrilla movements, taking them out of the strictly limited realm of economic action. Whether they will be successful, of course, is another issue, as history has not been kind to this sector of the population. Yet movements have survived and shown an ability to adapt. Perhaps the recent election of more progressive governments in many Latin American countries is a positive sign, an indication of the growing strength of democracy in which workers can compete more equitably and achieve the improvements that they deserve.

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