

“Contesting Identities: Regionalism, Revolution, and Counter-Revolution in Monterrey”

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“Fourth generation scions of great fortunes, mid-level executives, assembly line workers and cab drivers share the same values. [The people of Monterrey] believe in hard work, family, education, efficiency, punctuality, and religion...They distrust Mexico City and centralized government...The city is so conservative and family-oriented, it could be Newt Gingrich’s dream.”¹

“Our labor relations...without doubt the best in the Republic..owe principally to the culture of our workers and the progressive spirit of Nuevo León’s employers.”²

“The Monterrey worker, *Señores Comunistas*, is not of malleable substance...his level of culture is far superior to that of the agitators who visit us.”³

Since the 1920s, local boosters and foreign visitors have celebrated a series of cultural values that presumably differentiate the citizens of Monterrey and their northern industrial city from other regions of Mexico. Regiomontanos of all social classes are family-oriented, thrifty, and industrious. They hold renown for their deep-seated Catholicism and their political conservatism. As *norteños*, or northern Mexicans, they embrace the regional values of hard work, individual effort, and staunch independence. These cultural norms reflected the regiomontanos’ earlier experience on the Mexican frontier and sustain their begrudging acceptance of central government authority.⁴ Of greatest importance to the city’s boosters, Monterrey’s captains of industry share this regional identity with their workers. Regionalism ostensibly serves as a cultural bond that ameliorates the antagonisms of class.

The regiomontanos’ exalted sense of regional identity was itself a product of the 1920s and 1930s. During those conflictive years in the city’s history of labor relations, union activists and their government allies challenged the social hegemony of Monterrey’s industrial elite. The captains of industry therefore instituted systems of company paternalism to court their workers’ loyalty and employed their privileged access to the media to mobilize local citizens in their resistance to unionism. They did so by articulating a series of cultural values (regionalism, patriotism, Christianity, masculinity) that resonated powerfully among regiomontanos of all social classes. Their conservative resistance climaxed with a February 1936 anti-government demonstration that drew 60,000 regiomontanos into the streets of Monterrey and prompted the local elite’s historic showdown with President Lázaro Cárdenas. The open-shop drive polarized the city, pitting the industrialists against the state and workers against one another. Union organizers contested the conservative resistance through their own counter-hegemonic practices.

¹ John Davidson, “City Apart,” *Mexico Business*, April 1995, 52.

² Nuevo León Governor Aarón Sáenz in Archivo General del Estado de Nuevo León (AGENL): *Informe del Gobernador Aarón Sáenz, 1927/1928*, 13.

³ Spokesman for Centro Patronal in *El Porvenir*, Monterrey, February 1, 1936.

⁴ Alex Saragoza, *The Monterrey Elite and the Mexican State, 1880-1940* (Austin, 1988), 5-7; Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1986), 10-11.

They drew upon languages of class, revolution, and industrial democracy, a discourse that articulated the shared grievances and aspirations of those local workers who finally embraced militant unionism. The outcome permanently divided Monterrey's working class into opposed camps of 'red' and 'white' unions, a division that persisted for generations. The process revealed the inherent ambivalences, contradictions, and fractures in the regiomontano workers' social and political world views.

This exploratory essay examines how the workers and industrialists of Monterrey perceived and responded to the Mexican Revolution by focusing on the process of identity formation during the 1920s and 1930s. It employs the analytical tools forged by scholars who study the relation between experience, identity, and political action. Since the early 1980s, historian of working-class formation in Europe, the United States, and South Asia have moved the field away from the teleological and materialist paradigms that once inspired studies of labor history by exploring a broad array of social and cultural interactions that shaped workers' intellectual and moral worlds. These 'postmaterialist' scholars challenge the concept of class as a fulcrum of identity that underpinned workers' social outlooks and behavior.⁵ They also critically redress the work of E.P. Thompson and his disciples for their (presumably) reductionist view of class consciousness as a product of material life. As Steinberg notes in his assessment of this literature, the postmaterialists reacted to a perceived failure to consider "the mediating (if not determining) effects of discourse...[of how] experience is a linguistic event and subjects are constituted through discourse, though they have agency within it." As a result of this 'linguistic turn,' a labor historiography that once reified productive relations and social life increasingly focuses on the means by which discourse constructs difference and power and sustains counter-hegemonic practices.⁶

The postmaterialists effectively demonstrate that identities "can be understood as categories that are constructed rather than reflective of a predefined essence."⁷ Few scholars deny the role of structural positioning in the production of cultural identities, as one critic of this 'descent into discourse' suggests.⁸ Rather, as Stuart Hall asserts, "events, relations, and structures do have real effects, outside the sphere of the discursive." But cultural expressions and

⁵ Patrick Joyce, Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840-1914 (Cambridge, 1994); Gareth Stedman Jones, Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832-1982 (Cambridge, 1983); William Sewell, Work and Revolution in France (Cambridge, 1980).

⁶ Mark W. Steinberg, "'The Labour of the Country Is the Wealth of the Country': Class Identity, Consciousness, and the Role of Discourse in the Making of the English Working Class," International Labor and Working-Class History 49 (Spring 1996), 2-8. Steinberg defines discourse as "the symbolic practices by which people create and reproduce the cultural codes they use to make sense of the world."

⁷ Leela Fernandes, Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class, and Community in the Calcutta Jute Mills (Philadelphia, 1997), 92.

⁸ Bryan Palmer, Descent Into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History (Philadelphia, 1990).

practices are not a “second-hand mirror held up to reflect what already exists, [they are] a form of representation...able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects.” For Hall, “this gives questions of culture and ideology...a formative, not merely an expressive place in the constitution of social and political life.”⁹ Theoretically indebted to the writings of Antonio Gramsci, the postmaterialists rightfully acknowledge identity formation as a process of negotiation, an essential if not the determining component of hegemony. “Hegemony,” Leela Fernandes writes, “is in fact centrally about the ways in which we produce boundaries between social identities within various arenas of civil society.”¹⁰ Gramsci’s own writings challenged the orthodox Marxist supposition that class identities retain a level of uniform, objective purity that may be divided, intersected, and subdued by extra-economic or ideological identities (gender, ethnicity, religion). Gramsci invoked the notion of ‘contradictory consciousness’ in recognition of the ambivalent character of working-class identities. He asserted that such identities are products of both structural, ideological-cultural, and historical forces, *and* human agency and interventions.¹¹

Blue-collar regiomontanos seeking to make sense of their world in the 1920s and 1930s were exposed to a series of competing hegemonies. This essay focuses on how distinct social actors attempted to speak on behalf of and mobilize Monterrey’s working people by constructing, reproducing, and challenging identities. Particular emphasis will be placed those social actors who were active and influential among workers. Key among these ‘intellectuals’ were working-class activists of distinct political hues, their middle-class allies from the public and private sectors, and Monterrey’s paternalistic employers. We examine the discursive and cultural practices of paternalism instituted by the pillars of industrial Monterrey, the Cuauhtémoc Brewery and the Fundidora Iron and Steel Works. These employers invested considerable human and financial resources into their projects of cultural engineering. We examine how they fostered the concept of the idealized ‘regiomontano worker,’ promoting popular conservatism by purging the category of class of its presumably political connotations. We also investigate how radical labor activists contested elite’s counter-revolutionary efforts to shape popular thought and action. The ‘reds,’ as both ruling party and communists activists were known, attempted to keep the promises of the revolution alive through languages of class, revolution, and industrial democracy. These competing hegemonies - conservative and revolutionary - provided working people with the cultural and ideological discourses through which they made sense of their world. Working-class subjects were neither constituted by discourse nor did they share a common class identity reflective of their structural position on the shop floor. By exploring the intersection of discourse and material life, this essay examines how workers appropriated the elements of the divergent discourses available to them to make sense of their lived experiences and sanction their collective political action.

⁹ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, 222-237.

¹⁰ Fernandes, Producing Workers, 6, 58.

¹¹ Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, edited by Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York, 1971).

“Those who wear the regiomontano seal”

The 1910 revolution interrupted two decades of industrial peace and prosperity in Mexico's preeminent manufacturing center. The revolution itself had a paradoxical impact on the Monterrey's workers. The hardships caused by industrial paralysis during the mid-1910s generated a collective desire for the stability and security of pre-revolutionary times. But the revolution also recast popular consciousness, prompting workers to militantly challenge customary labor practices. In Monterrey, as elsewhere in Mexico, the most direct impact of the working class on the revolutionary process began with the passage of the 1917 Constitution. The city's steel and smelter workers embraced their new labor rights enshrined in constitutional Article 123 to assert long-held aspirations and grievances. Between 1918 and 1922, the metal workers staged three general strikes that marked the first sustained industrial strife in local history. Early on, union steel workers requested the “moral solidarity of Monterrey's working class...in our struggle to save the constitutional rights bequeathed by the revolution.”¹² The language of class solidarity and constitutionalism resonated among thousands of local workers, who expressed their solidarity through sympathy strikes and at the mass labor rallies that punctuated these early years of working-class defiance. Local union activists would subsequently evoke the constitution and its promises of industrial democracy in their attempts to mobilize rank-and-file workers during the 1920s and 1930s. Meanwhile, the strikers achieved mixed results. They won the eight-hour day but failed to achieve recognition of their militant unions. Of greater long-term significance, the industrial strife prompted the city's leading industrialists to extend a series of non-wage benefits once reserved for a minority of skilled operatives to all full-time workers. The Mexican Revolution thus gave birth to industrial paternalism in Monterrey. Monterrey's steel and brewery workers learned to forsake their constitutional rights to union representation for the social security proffered to their families by the fringe benefits of paternalism.¹³ Thereafter, a committed core of loyal workers collaborated in managerial efforts to organize workers into cooperative societies and company unions that would insulate the operatives from the city's organized labor movement. The process coincided with efforts to construct and reproduce a regional identity among a rapidly expanding population of industrial workers.

The 1920s witnessed a dramatic decline in labor militancy and the gradual return of political stability and economic prosperity to Nuevo León. Locals would attribute the resurrection of harmonious labor relations to the presumably unique character of the city's industrialists and their workers. They took special pride in both. In a nation where foreign capital dominated the industrial economy, the Monterrey elite earned local acclaim for having built their

¹² Nuevo País, July 6, 1918 in AGN: Depto. del Trabajo, Labor Inspector's Report, 125/34.

¹³ All of the city's largest employers adopted paternalistic labor relations during the 1920s, building upon and expanding earlier practices meant to secure skilled workers during the Porfiriato. For a comparative analysis of the systems of paternalisms instituted at the Cuauhtémoc Brewery and the Fundidora steel mill, see Michael Snodgrass, “The Birth and Consequences of Industrial Paternalism in Monterrey, Mexico, 1890-1940,” International Labor and Working-Class History 53 (Spring 1998), 115-36.

companies with Mexican capital. Moreover, employers like the brewery and the steel mill provided their employees with welfare benefits unique by contemporary Mexican standards.¹⁴ Industrial paternalism established the cornerstone of class conciliation and industrial prosperity. So, also, did the exceptional qualities of the city's work force.

Since the late Porfiriato, Monterrey's workers and employers alike had lauded and promoted the unique character of the region's working class. The regiomontano workers earned a renown for being hard working, industrious, disciplined, and orderly.¹⁵ Moreover, as *norteños*, they embraced the regional value of staunch independence, manifested most famously in their celebrated autonomy from the national labor federations that emerged in the revolution's wake. Retired workers themselves distinguish the local proletariat for being "more cultured" than workers elsewhere. For former union militants, who also betray an inculcation of a regional identity, the assertion reflects pride and dignity in their levels of skill and education.¹⁶ For local industrial boosters, however, the workers 'cultured' status carried political implications as well. Like the industrialists, 'typical' regiomontano workers focused their energies on work and family, finding little time or sympathy for the destructive ideas promoted by 'outside agitators.' One Fundidora ideologue boasted in the company press that the steel workers' "love for labor [was] a common virtue among those who wear the regiomontano seal." Their "desire to improve their aptitude and perfect themselves constantly in their work" made them unique by Mexican standards. Most importantly, "among our workers there does not exist the unjust radical ambitions that have created so many difficulties in other regions of the country."¹⁷ Like all social identities, then, that of the regiomontano working class was constructed through difference, the 'other' being workers elsewhere in the republic. The leading daily's censoring of hometown labor conflicts and sensational, front-page reporting of labor violence elsewhere highlighted the difference for local readers. However, it was very much an 'imagined community,' for Monterrey hosted a large and active contingent of homegrown working-class militants.

This discursively constructed image of the regiomontano worker betrayed the

¹⁴ El Porvenir, April 16-18, 1920, April 12, 1926. Local boosters frequently lauded the benefits as 'superior to those established by labor law,' a notion that contained a kernel of truth given Article 123's widespread lack of enforcement in many regions of Mexico, Monterrey included.

¹⁵ Public officials first appealed to the workers' regional identity during the labor conflicts of the late 1910s, calling upon striking workers "to maintain order and tranquility, as befits the regiomontano worker." Then, as violence between unionists and strikebreakers escalated during the 1922 steel strike, the leading daily castigated the strikers "whose actions are not in line with the culture, tradition, and discipline of the regiomontano worker." AGN: DT, Labor Inspector's Report, 125/34; El Porvenir, October 4, 1922.

¹⁶ Interview with Salvador Castañeda, December 5, 1995. Monterrey's literacy rates were among the highest in the nation.

¹⁷ Colectividad, July 27, 1930. This organ, the Fundidora's company magazine, was produced by veteran workers and white-collar employees and enjoyed a wide readership among the steel mill's operatives.

industrialists' own desires as much as it captured the reality of labor relations in Monterrey. Ideally, industrial paternalism shaped rural migrants, former miners, and youngsters from Monterrey to conform to the stereotype by inculcating the regional values shared by veteran workers and their social superiors. Even the workers who migrated from San Luis Potosí state, the origin of some 25 percent of Monterrey's residents, adjusted themselves to these expectations. As one such migrant later admitted, "Almost all of us from Matehuala coupled ourselves to the system, to the way of life here in Monterrey." This process of acculturation blurred cultural distinctions between the 'outsiders,' as locals referred to the out-of-state settlers, and regiomontano workers.¹⁸ Of course, the workers' drive to master their trades through hard work, constancy, and self-improvement also reflected their shared aspirations of occupational and social mobility. Finally, labor relations in Monterrey indeed betrayed a stable and harmonious quality relative to other regions of Mexico. During the 1920s, the city never experienced the battles for union supremacy that generated fatal labor violence between Catholic, anarchist, and pro-government workers in Mexico City, Puebla, and Guadalajara. While those tragic conflicts had less to do with 'radical ambitions' than political power and religious passion, their absence from Monterrey is reflective of a genuinely 'popular conservatism.' This was betrayed most poignantly by the loyal workers who played an integral role in the development and administration of company paternalism at the brewery and steel mill (below).

Monterrey's labor militants, whose language and actions expressed 'radical ambitions' presumably alien to the region, also betrayed their own strong sense of regional identity. They prided themselves for their northern heritage, their level of culture, and the order with which they conducted their affairs. But they did so in a manner that contested elite suppositions of working-class respectability. As the industrial disputes of the early 1920s waned, Monterrey's homegrown radicals petitioned President Obregón for government action to alleviate the "unbearable conditions in this region of the country." They pointed to countless "violations of the democratic principles of our revolution," namely the mounting violations of the labor law and the systematic repression of union activism. Dismissing elite assertions as to the reign of class harmony, they characterized local "managers, foremen, and servants of Capital," as "the hateful enemies of the working class." "All of our efforts to realize the emancipation of our tyrannized class via legal channels," they concluded, "have been exhausted." The failure to address these grievances, labor leaders warned, "will carry grave consequences, even though," their petition emphasized, "we must honestly proclaim that the organized worker of the North is conscious of his actions, just, law abiding, and orderly."¹⁹

Monterrey's militant worker-activists thus embraced the very regional values promoted by the industrial elite, mobilizing them in defense of revolutionary labor activism. Throughout the 1920s, these self-described "anarcho-communists" contested elite efforts to reconstruct their social

¹⁸ Interviews with Manuel Carranza (quoted), January 4-6, 1996, Alejandro Monsiváis, December 11, 1995, and Dionisio López, December 12, 1995.

¹⁹ Federación Regional de las Sociedades Obreras (FRSO) to President Obregón, January 7, 1923, AGN: Presidentes: Obregon-Calles 407-M-13.

hegemony through their ‘anti-revolutionary’ discourse and practices.²⁰ They appealed to local workers through languages of class, revolution, and constitutionalism. They transmitted their ideas, words, and culture through labor rallies, popular theater, corridos, and their semi-clandestine press. They castigated the city’s conservative unionists “for attempting to diminish the true meaning of the revolution through their illicit alliance with Capital.”²¹ Yet their counter-hegemonic practices remained more conspicuous in the streets than the factories of Monterrey’s paternalistic, open-shop employers. Meanwhile, public officials persistently claimed that “the revolutionary program had been implemented in all its breadth in Nuevo León.” “Radical critiques” to the contrary came only from the very “professional agitators driven [from Monterrey] by the workers themselves.”²² Come the mid-1930s, when militant unionism made solid inroads in Monterrey’s factories, the city’s radical labor activists would ascend to positions of union leadership and thence contest elite-orchestrated efforts to shape their workers’ cultural identities. In the meantime, loyal workers at the Cuauhtémoc Brewery and Fundidora Iron and Steel Works used their influence among workers to promote class harmony.

“To be a regiomontano”

Like their North American counterparts, Monterrey’s industrialists instituted systems of company paternalism in response to the threat of government regulation and militant unionism. Both the Cuauhtémoc Brewery and the Fundidora Steel Iron and Steel Works developed their systems during the 1920s, building upon the non-wage incentives (e.g., company housing) first offered skilled workers during the Porfiriato. After the revolution, all full-time workers and their families enjoyed access to fringe benefits like subsidized commissaries, medical services, and savings and loan plans. The benefits were channeled through cooperative societies founded and administered jointly by veteran workers and white-collar employees. Organizations like the brewery’s Cuauhtémoc Society also designed an array of cultural programs (night schools, fiestas, athletic leagues) meant to promote a healthy lifestyle among workers and, most importantly, foster company loyalty among the operatives and their families.²³ The early 1930s witnessed the final

²⁰ See Michael Snodgrass, “Deference and Defiance in Monterrey: Workers, Revolution, and Paternalism in Mexico, 1890-1942,” (Ph.D. diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 1998), Ch. 4.

²¹ FRSO handbill in Archivo Municipal de Monterrey: Asociaciones y Sindicatos, 1927.

²² Governor Francisco Cárdenas quoted in *Excélsior*, Mexico City, August 20, 1933.

²³ During the 1920s, the Monterrey industrialists’ well-publicized commitment to economic development and the ‘moral and cultural elevation’ of Mexican workers earned the official post-revolutionary stamp of approval. Mexico’s political and intellectual elite, from President Calles to the writer and educator José Vasconcelos, regarded the regiomontanos’ endeavors as modern, patriotic, and thus worthy of official support. Visiting Monterrey in his official capacity as Mexico’s Secretary of Public Education, Vasconcelos praised local endeavors towards vocational training and the inculcation of a culture of savings among the city’s working people. (*El Porvenir*,

development in a paternalistic labor regime that persists to the present in Monterrey: the founding of company unions. We turn now to the means and extent by which the discursive and cultural practices of paternalism conditioned the workers' world views. We focus not only on content of the discourses but the human relationships and lived experiences that facilitated or hindered their transmission to rank-and-file operatives.

No firm proved more successful in shaping a loyal and deferential work force than the Cuauhtémoc Brewery. Nor did any local company more actively attempt to shape its employees' identity by inculcating the conservative political outlook of its owners', Monterrey's Garza Sada family. As one former operative, fired in the 1930s for union activism, recalled, "The brewery had its great ideologues and spent a considerable amount of money promoting its anti-revolutionary ideology."²⁴ Work and Savings, the popular magazine published by the Cuauhtémoc Society, editorialized against communism, the labor law, and Mexico's post-revolutionary government. Editors lauded such "Mexican Heroes" as Porfirio Díaz and counseled workers to dedicate their energies not towards the destructive ends of unionism but the positive fruits of civic activism. The column "To be a regiomontano" promoted participation in neighborhood improvement projects, the workers' consumption of locally-manufactured products, and their cooperation "in the abolition of all revolutionary movements." In the meantime, Work and Savings promoted its namesake virtues of hard work and thrift as the respectable means by which the Cuauhtémoc operatives would become "self-made men...through our very own efforts."²⁵

The company did not limit its discursive appeals to male employees nor to the workplace. The Cuauhtémoc Society directed many of its cultural programs towards the plant's "feminine element," who constituted 30 percent of the brewery's 1,100 workers. Moreover, managers understood "the women's capacity to shape the old man's social outlook."²⁶ They therefore extended the promotion of company loyalty and antiunion sentiments to the home as well. During the mid-1930s, when militant unionism made significant inroads in Monterrey, the socially prominent women of the Garza Sada clan would visit the operatives' wives and mothers with literature summoning the Church's opposition to communism.²⁷ Back at home, it was hoped, the women would pressure the men in their families to safeguard their jobs by resisting the economically disruptive forces of unionism. Christianity thereafter became a prominent component of company discourse, and social Catholicism would be cited as the inspiration for company paternalism. Significantly, the conservative Catholicism with which Monterrey is currently identified emerged publicly during the state-sanctioned union drives of the 1930s. It

June 5, 1924)

²⁴ Carranza interview.

²⁵ Trabajo y Ahorro, September 15, 1923, September 22, 1928, April 13, 1929.

²⁶ Interview with Luis Alfonso Cavazos, SCYF Director of Social Affairs, February 8, 1964. On the appeal of Cuauhtémoc's style of 'gendered paternalism' to the female operatives, see Snodgrass, "The Birth and Consequences," 123-24.

²⁷ Saragoza, The Monterrey Elite, 184.

then became but one weapon in an arsenal of anti-government values employed by the industrialists to mobilize the regiomontanos against the encroachment of Mexico City Jacobins.²⁸

Company ideologues also promoted class harmony by deconstructing the concept of class and purging it of its presumably political meanings. While scholars problematize the notion that class identity may “retain a level of uniform, objective ‘purity,’” Mexican labor activists and post-revolutionary politicians betrayed a belief in the unitary character of the working class and made persistent appeals to class identities in blue-collar Monterrey.²⁹ Company ideologues - the veteran workers and white-collar employees who directed the Cuauhtémoc Society - countered these appeals to class by promoting the “reigning unity” between the firms’ supervisors, office clerks, and production workers. Whereas Mexican labor law differentiated blue and white-collar workers as ‘*obreros*’ and ‘*empleados*,’ company discourse categorized all Cuauhtémoc employee as ‘*trabajadores*,’ portraying each as a ‘stockholder’ in the privately-held firm. Work and Savings critically assessed that law and its authors for their “promotion of class struggle” and the “radical” notion that “workers” created the nation’s wealth. Indeed, one editorial lamented, “It is erroneous to speak of those who work with their hands as if they were the only genuine ‘workers’.”³⁰ The Cuauhtémoc Society’s biannual elections, its joint administration by workers and managers, and the fiestas and the athletic teams sponsored by the SCYF ideally functioned to minimize socioeconomic distances and forge personal bonds between managers, supervisors, and operatives.

The Cuauhtémoc Brewery did not remain immune from labor conflicts during the 1920s and 1930s. The benevolent face of paternalism often masked its coercive underside; and fear of punitive dismissals helped shape rank-and-file deference. But the brewery workers’ own actions suggest that most shared their bosses’ disdain for the post-revolutionary state and organized labor, not least because they both promoted temperance reforms that threatened the firm’s prosperity. Thus the early 1920s saw hundreds of operatives and their families march on the state capital to successfully demand the repeal of Sunday dry laws and denounce a short-lived union

²⁸ Trabajo y Ahorro, 75th Anniversary Edition, April 23, 1993. By evoking a Catholic doctrine with strong roots in Mexico, Monterrey’s industrialists assiduously parried charges of their ‘Yankee’ outlook and practices. Such accusations could prove troublesome for a company like Cuauhtémoc, which publicized its Mexican ownership and utilized patriotic symbols to advertise its beer to domestic consumers. However, Christianity’s impact on traditionally secular northern Mexico is dubious. Manuel Carranza, a former Cuauhtémoc worker, remembered that “the priests were always on the side of the employers. But in those days, they didn’t have the influence to carry out their [anti-union] propaganda [in Monterrey].”

²⁹ Fernandes, Producing Workers, 153. Union activists and the plant’s male workers perceived the womens’ presence as a managerial ploy to deter working-class unity. The activists thus expressed their own belief in the presumably unitary character of class identities, while betraying a gendered conception of the ‘working class’ widely shared among fellow regiomontano workers. (Carranza, Monsiváis, and López interviews.)

³⁰ Cavazos interview; Trabajo y Ahorro, September 15, 1923.

drive and strike by some sixty fellow workers.³¹ Subsequent organizing drives at the plant ran aground on the shoals of company loyalty because the discourse of class harmony reflected the lived experience of Cuauhtémoc's operatives. Indeed, the intimate labor relations promoted by the discursive and cultural practices of company paternalism percolated down to the brewery's shop floor. Surprise appearances by the firm's upper hierarchy enhanced the "family-like" atmosphere and "camaraderie" that workers discovered at the brewery. The owners visited the plant frequently, greeting the operatives, lending a hand, and inquiring about their families.³² The nature of the brewing industry, one characterized by relatively light tasks and a cool atmosphere during Monterrey's long, sweltering summers, also conspired in favor of congeniality between workers and their supervisors.

The cultural events sponsored by the SCYF further reinforced these amicable relations. When the day shift closed, managers and office clerks taught night classes for workers while others coached and played on the company's athletic teams. Department supervisors also organized Saturday morning countryside excursions or hiking expeditions in the nearby mountains for workers in their departments.³³ The daily intimacy developed between operatives and managers on the shop floor and baseball field extended to the neighborhoods surrounding the brewery. Both workers and managers inhabited the *colonias* developed there during the 1920s and 1930s. Neighborhood residents elected supervisors of the bottling department and repair shop as presidents of their community improvement boards.³⁴ Such endeavors extended paternalism beyond the factory gates, elevating the managers' prestige and respect among the operatives. Furthermore, the intimacy between workers and managers was not simply a top-down proposal. The brewery operatives often honored their supervisors with gold watches on their birthdays and staged festive receptions to celebrate their return from vacations. For the SCYF's directors, such displays of reciprocity testified to the "harmony that exists between workers and supervisors in every department."³⁵ These social interactions between operatives and their superiors facilitated the company ideologues' capacity to shape the workers' social outlook. Meanwhile, at the Fundidora steel mill, industrial paternalism would meet its limits on the shop floor, providing the rank-and-file with the collective desire for a strong union.

In 1926, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of its first casting of iron, Fundidora administrator Adolfo Prieto ambitiously declared that, "From these workshops and schools will emerge the

³¹ El Porvenir, July 17-18, 1922; AGN: DT, Labor Inspector's Report, 1924, 726/7.

³² Interviews with María de Jesús Oviedo, May 23, 1996, and Estaela Padilla, November 20, 1995.

³³ Trabajo y Ahorro, September 16, 1927. Cuauhtémoc also used the cultural events to broadcast their paternalistic practices in the public sphere. The company fire trucks that transported workers to athletic contests or their countryside excursions always departed the brewery and passed through Monterrey with sirens blaring.

³⁴ AMM: Juntas de Mejoras Materiales, 1927, 4/3; El Porvenir, August 9, 1926.

³⁵ Trabajo y Ahorro, August 21, 1926, January 14, 1927, July 17, 1932, January 11, 1936.

genuine aristocracy of the national proletariat.”³⁶ Echoing the ideals of Mexico’s revolutionary elite, the Fundidora adopted the mission of “forging the homeland” by shaping their “men of steel” into exemplary workers and model citizens. The steel workers were to embrace these patriotic and ‘aristocratic’ ideals, an ethos promoted by the company’s practices of paternalism. They came to perceive their work as more than the exchange of labor for wages. Steel production assumed the aura of a patriotic mission, for no industry played a more significant role in Mexico’s post-revolutionary reconstruction than Monterrey steel. With the products of the steel workers’ labor, the nation would build the railroads, schools, and industry symbolic of the new Mexico.³⁷ From this sense of mission - and the dangers they faced in the mill - a distinct culture of work, patriotism, and masculinity developed among the steel workers. A popular *corrido* (Mexican folk ballad) sung at the Fundidora, for example, eulogized colleagues who lost their lives in the workplace for having “died for the homeland.”³⁸ The peculiarities of steel making thus led the Fundidora workers to distinguish themselves - and be perceived locally - as a “caste apart.”³⁹ Their’s was an ‘occupational identity’ constituted as much through the discursive practices of paternalism as through the lived experience of productive relations and social life.

As at Cuauhtémoc, the Fundidora’s practices of paternalism ideally integrated workers of diverse social backgrounds, their wives, and children into the *Gran Familia Acero*, the Great Steel Family.⁴⁰ Important distinctions differentiated the firms, notably the steel mill’s reputation for a more “liberal” managerial philosophy and the firm’s dependence on the state as the nation’s primary consumer of Monterrey steel.⁴¹ The Fundidora’s directors, who resided in Mexico City, neither espoused the local industrialists’ disdain for central government nor did they force the workers to abandon their right to union representation. According to the plant’s manager, the steel workers enjoyed “the right to organize themselves in any way they pleased,” a philosophy that the operatives would appropriate to their own ends.⁴² After the 1922 strike, company officials negotiated the loyalty of the plant’s skilled trade unionists. In return for preferential production contracts and recognition of their department-based unions, these skilled, veteran workers allied with the mill’s supervisors to steer rank-and-file workers away from the more radical wings of Monterrey’s organized labor movement. The former militants became increasingly conservative in the years preceding the Cárdenas regime. They worked with management to promote class

³⁶ *Colectividad*, November 17, 1926.

³⁷ Manuel González Caballero, *La Maestranza de ayer...La Fundidora de hoy* (Monterrey, 1980) 6, 21.

³⁸ “Memorias de Acero: Fundidora, 1900-1986”, *El Diario de Monterrey*, May 9, 1996.

³⁹ Interview with Luis Monzón (Monterrey Glassworks), February 22, 1996.

⁴⁰ For fuller analysis of practices and limits to paternalism at the Fundidora, see Snodgrass, “Deference and Defiance,” Ch. 3.

⁴¹ Interviews with Castañeda, Manuel González Caballero, June 30, 1995, and Juan Manuel Elizondo (with Raul Cano), April 9, 1996.

⁴² Plant director Meliton Ulmer, May 23, 1923, to Department of Labor, in AGN: Dirección General del Gobierno 2.331.8 (16)/32-A/34.

harmony, work discipline, anti-communism, and the ideals of self-improvement among the mill's 2,500 workers. Initially, the veteran workers enjoyed widespread respect among the mill's operatives. Their prestige among the rank and file derived not only from their mastery of their trades, skills as athletes, and talents as musicians. It also reflected the prominent role they performed in local society, whether as elected officials, Masons, or hosts to such visiting dignitaries as Presidents Obregón and Calles. Consistent with the character of so many 'men of steel,' they also cultivated macho, tough-guy demeanors, and employed their considerable oratorical skills to transmit their norms and values to younger steel workers. The significant welfare benefits instituted by the Fundidora and the capacity of these former militants to rein in labor militancy among the rank and file underpinned the class harmony that reigned at the mill until the onset of the Cárdenas regime.

The early 1930s witnessed a renewal of labor militancy in Monterrey. The onset of the Great Depression provoked popular protest in the streets and invigorated union activism as Communist organizers made inroads at local plants. In 1932, a communist-led sit-down strike at Monterrey's ASARCO smelter prompted a brief military occupation of the city. The events did not pass unnoticed at the Fundidora. The mill's conservative unionists responded by organizing the Federated Steel Unions and negotiating the workers' first collective contract. Union leaders lauded the contract for providing the workers benefits "superior to those established by law." According to the company press, the unionists 'had once again proven their lofty stature...and demonstrated ideals more advanced than those found in other regions of the country.'⁴³ Here was the increasingly ubiquitous language of company unionism, one that countered the resurgence of radical labor activists through appeals to rank-and-file workers' regional identity and patriotism. Like other conservative local unionists, leaders of the Steel Unions genuinely disdained communism and promoted class collaboration as in the best interests of the workers, the company, and the Mexican government's policy of economic reconstruction.⁴⁴ In the early 1930s, the city's conservative, company unions federated as the Independent Unions of Nuevo León, adopting a moniker that celebrated the regiomontanos' staunch independence and their autonomy from Mexico's 'red' labor centrals. Local boosters contrasted these "sensible" unionists to the "professional leaders" who colonized organized labor, lauding them as "genuine workers forged within the factories and workshops of Monterrey." The communists quickly labeled the Steel Unions as a "*sindicato blanco*," a 'white union' beholden to the dictates of management.⁴⁵ Rank-and-file workers came to agree.

⁴³ CYPSA, Fundidora company magazine, November 28, 1931.

⁴⁴ The local Railroad Conductors' Union succinctly expressed this viewpoint in a letter to the Cuauhtémoc Society. They refused to sympathize with strike action by fellow railroaders "because we lack neither discipline nor love for the homeland." "Unjust petitions and violent strike," they proclaimed, posed an obstacle to "the progress of industry and commerce." They pledged to "disavow flags of any color except our beloved national banner," and concluded that "the best proof we can give of our culture is the respect we share towards our ally, Capital." Unión de Conductores to Sociedad Cuauhtémoc, Trabajo y Ahorro, October 15, 1923.

⁴⁵ El Machete, Mexico City, May 1, 1932.

Industrial paternalism met its limits within the furnaces, rolling mills, and workshops of the Fundidora. Workers chafed at the plant's "arrogant and despotic" foremen, who earned unsavory reputations for physical abuse and rampant favoritism.⁴⁶ While they steel workers gained a sense of manliness and camaraderie from the dangers inherent in their work, they suffered Monterrey's highest accident rates due to unchecked occupational health and safety hazards.⁴⁷ Those who protested perceived abuses faced punitive dismissals. These conditions bred a generalized sense of powerlessness. Looking back on the early 1930s, one worker recalled that "in order to keep one's job...we had to conform ourselves to whatever the bosses said."⁴⁸ Antagonistic labor relations bred class feelings at the steel mill. However, while these affronts to the steel workers' dignity cut across the benevolent grains of paternalism, the shop-floor conflicts never undercut their loyalty toward a company in which they took great pride.⁴⁹ Rather, they blamed the abuses on the collaborative posture of the Steel Unions' leadership. The language of industrial democracy articulated by militant union activists resonated powerfully amongst Monterrey's steel workers. The political opening of Cardenismo emboldened them to take action.

"That would be patriotic"

The Cárdenas regime (1934-40) radicalized the revolution, putting the promises of the 1917 Constitution into practice.⁵⁰ Part of his broader project of 'revolutionary nationalism', Cárdenas's labor policy focused on two principal objectives: the unification of workers into a single labor central, the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), and the negotiation of government-arbitrated collective contracts. Once realized, the project would end years of interunion conflicts and promote stable industrial relations. The program reflected broader political and economic ends. Government patronage would foster working-class allegiance to the embryonic ruling party. The 'revolutionary' unions would serve as schools to forge a hard working, sober, and patriotic work force. And labor peace would promote national industrial development, thereby weakening Mexico's historic dependence on foreign capital. Monterrey thus represented a paradoxical situation for the Cardenistas. As Mexico's preeminent industrial city, where native capital predominated, the city embodied the state's vision of a 'mexicanized' economy. But as a

⁴⁶ Interview with Dionisio Palacios, January 3, 1996.

⁴⁷ Accident reports in AGN: DT, 1923-1929; AGENL: Industria, Comercio y Trabajo, 1930, boxes 3-5.

⁴⁸ Interview with Antonio Quiroga, March 17, 1996.

⁴⁹ As Dionisio Palacios recollected, "Despite the abuses, we had a great deal of affection for the Fundidora...we saw ourselves as one big family." Palacios interview.

⁵⁰ Alan Knight, "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?" *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26 (1994): 73-107; Marcos Tonatiuh Águila M. and Alberto Enríquez Perea, eds., *Perspectivas sobre el Cardenismo: Ensayos sobre economía, trabajo, política y cultura en los años treinta* (Mexico City, 1996).

bastion of company unionism, it presented the nation's primary obstacle to working-class unification. For the regionmontanos, however, there were no contradictions inherent to Cardenismo - they either embraced the project or loathed and resisted it. The process polarized Monterrey.

“PROFESSIONAL LEADERS FROM MEXICO CITY AGITATE THE CONSCIENTIOUS WORKERS OF MONTERREY.” So proclaimed a bold-faced headline announcing the steel workers' rebellion against their old guard union leaders. In early 1936, the rank and file voted unanimously to affiliate with Mexico's militant Miner-Metalworkers' Union as Local 67. Astonished citizens asked themselves why workers who enjoyed the security of the Fundidora's renowned system of paternalism forsook that stability for the uncharted waters of militant unionism. The city's pro-business media discovered an answer in the specter of outside agitation. The mill's conservative unionists also blamed the insurgency on a clique of “separatists assisted by outside leaders.” They combated the movement with appeals to the workers' regional and masculine identities, juxtaposing the “honor and virility” with which the Steel Unions defended the workers' “social interests” to the “deceitful and disorienting” claims of the “timid scab herders” from Mexico City. The “violence” characteristic of the Miners, they claimed, “in no way meshes with the culture and sincerity of the regionmontano workers.” Instead, they warned, the “self-proclaimed leaders” of Local 67 would “poison your consciousness, [overturning] twenty years of living and working together intimately.”⁵¹ The pleas fell on deaf ears. Several months later, the steel workers won a collective contract that fulfilled the militants' promises of democratizing industrial relations at the mill (below).

The emergence of Local 67 reverberated immediately in Monterrey. At Monterrey Glassworks, the brewery's sister company, ‘militant workers struggling to oust their own company union saluted the steel workers “for abandoning their old ideology and transforming themselves into a revolutionary organization.” They then castigated their complacent union leaders, “who have essentially renounced the freedoms that belong to workers in a democratic country like our own.”⁵² As at the steel mill, the militants' discourse articulated the feelings of many of the plant's 1,600 rank-and-file workers. They, too, chafed at their union leaders' failure to redress a systematic pattern of shop-floor abuses. Thus, in early February 1936, the militant unionists won a narrow and controversial union election at Monterrey Glassworks. Unlike the Fundidora's ‘liberal’ directors, who indeed acquiesced to their workers ‘right to organize themselves in any way they pleased,’ the glass plant's local owners fought back.⁵³ They would discursively credit the ‘red’ union's victory as a product of the sinister and cunning designs of Mexico City Jacobins and local Communist agitators. That ‘red’ union victories at the steel mill and glassworks involved complex legal and jurisdictional disputes resolved by federal bureaucrats helped sanction the industrialists' claims. So did the fact that many a local unionist indeed

⁵¹ *El Porvenir*, January 10, 1936; González Caballero interview.

⁵² Manifiesto del Sindicato Único de Trabajadores Vidriera Monterrey, January 10, 1936 in AGENL: Junta Local de Conciliación y Arbitraje (JCA), 60/1815.

⁵³ On labor relations and the union conflict at Monterrey Glassworks (Vidriera Monterrey), see Snodgrass, “Deference and Defiance,” Ch. 6.

belonged to the Mexican Communist Party. Most importantly, by 1936 the sharp social conflicts that Cardenismo generated elsewhere in Mexico had arrived to Monterrey, as strike activity reached record levels. Since thousands of locals embraced the boosters' image of a city where class harmony begot economic prosperity, the emergence of class struggle bred genuine fears and heartfelt feelings of betrayal. Suddenly, it seemed to many regiomontanos, all they had worked, struggled, sacrificed, and saved for was threatened by outside forces. Astute industrialists recognized the shop-floor roots of industrial conflict.⁵⁴ Their workers did as well. Nonetheless, guided as much by custom as the need to rally middle-class support, the industrial elite mobilized the specter of outside agitation to explain the rise of labor protest in the factories and streets of Monterrey.⁵⁵

On the day following the union election at the glassworks, Monterrey's businessmen announced their intent to sponsor a grand "patriotic" demonstration on February 5, Mexico's Constitution Day. On the one hand, the well-orchestrated movement would provide regiomontanos with the chance to manifest pride in their national identity as well as their commitment to constitutional principles. Nonetheless, given its timing, few Mexicans failed to perceive the industrialists' movement for what it was: a rebuttal of Cardenismo and the post-revolutionary state's support for militant unionism. The rally's organizers mobilized local support by articulating a series of cultural values meant to resonate with the locals' patriotism and regional identity. Press releases announced the march as a protest against "the preconceived and highly dangerous intrusion of professional communist agitators from Mexico City." These outsiders, regiomontanos were reminded by one industrialist, "have subverted the local order and overturned the rhythm of cooperation and hard work that has been the base of Monterrey's prosperity."⁵⁶ To punctuate their movement - and display their economic might - the businessmen resolved to couple the protest with a two-day lockout of local industry and commerce. Only the city's presses would run as usual. Monterrey's local dailies and radio stations were deemed "articles of primary necessity," crucial communicative links between elite and citizenry.⁵⁷

Monterrey's Independent Unions cast their patriotic pride with the industrialists. They would mobilize thousands of workers to support the march and lockout. Indeed, early reports portrayed the rally as a union-led initiative. 'White' union leaders proudly notified a Mexico City reporter that, in contrast to workers elsewhere in the republic, the regiomontanos would put down their tools "to defend their place of work...[and] support their employers." The industrialists' lockout thus became a "loyalty strike," a walkout to safeguard "the legitimate

⁵⁴ El Porvenir, January 1, 1935, noted the "problems with foremen" at the steel and glass plants.

⁵⁵ North American businessmen also combated the perceived threat of outside agitators by mobilizing cultural values that resonated among the local populace. For one example, to which my analysis of anti-Cardenismo is particularly indebted, see John Gaventa, Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley (Urbana, 1980), 104-121.

⁵⁶ El Porvenir, February 3, 1936.

⁵⁷ Nathan to State, February 13, 1936, 812.00 NL/135.

interests of the working class.”⁵⁸ The Independent Unions performed a key role in the pre-march preparations. While their radio airwaves buzzed with lurid accounts of the red menace, loyal workers helped distribute 100,000 flags adorned with the slogan “México Sí, Rusia No!” The Independent Unions also adorned plant gates and city walls with flyers appealing to the regiomontanos’ regional, masculine, and Christian identities. “REGIOMONTANO!” one proclaimed, “Now is the time to stand erect - the hour when the virile and independent worker protects his home, mother, children, and workplace from Stalin’s slaves.” The Communists, locals were reminded, would spread “class hatred,” “dedicate your daughters to free love...and turn your sons into slaves.” Another handbill exhorted: “WORKERS OF MONTERREY! Fight the Communists who disbelieve in God...Down with the Communist government of Mexico.”⁵⁹ The industrialists thus converted their setback at the glassworks into an anti-communist crusade in defense of the homeland.

On the morning of February 5, an estimated 60,000 citizens marched in the largest anti-government demonstration to that point in Mexican history.⁶⁰ At the forefront marched prominent industrialists and workers from 42 Independent Unions. Behind them followed wives and daughters, merchants and Rotarians, Boy Scouts and priests. People of all ages and walks of life wove through the city’s narrow downtown streets. The enthusiastic participation of thousands of regiomontano workers proved the most conspicuous feature of the day to outside observers. Their presence certainly reassured the locals. Attracted by ideological persuasion, economic incentives, or a genuine sense of loyalty, respect, and sympathy for their employers, Monterrey’s workers confirmed their unique character relative to other Mexican proletarians. National labor leaders found a ready explanation for this popular conservatism. A CTM communiqué asserted that since “the regiomontano workers are unaccustomed to struggle, their class consciousness remains weak.”⁶¹ Local militants, whose own actions contradicted the CTM’s presumptions, cited other motives. They decried the elite’s control of the media as a weapon in their anti-union struggle. Big business in fact threatened to boycott station owners who lent the airwaves to organized labor. Economic coercion also helps explain rank-and-file participation. The Cuauhtémoc Brewery threatened to dock one day’s pay to workers failing to present themselves for the march.⁶²

On the other hand, Constitution Day represented a single, dramatic, and well-publicized moment in a history of popular conservatism in Monterrey. Leaders of the Independent Unions certainly sympathized with the employers’ anti-communist diatribes. The rank and filers shared

⁵⁸ Excélsior, February 3, 1936.

⁵⁹ AGN, Presidentes, 432.2/184.

⁶⁰ Unless indicated otherwise, details of march from El Porvenir, February 6, 1936 and Excélsior, February 6, 1936.

⁶¹ Vicente Lombardo Toledano to Lázaro Cárdenas, February 14, 1936, AGN: Presidentes, 432.2/184.

⁶² Sindicato Industrial de Trabajadores de Monterrey to Francisco Múgica, March 19, 1936 in AGENL: Trabajo - Asociaciones y Sindicatos, 12/100; López interview.

the heartfelt expressions of patriotism heard on that day. The rash of strikes that paralyzed local industries also frightened and angered many workers. Furthermore, they liked and respected such employers as the Garza Sada family, owners of the brewery and glassworks. They took pride in the local ownership of the family-run industries and expressed genuine gratitude for the cultural and material benefits of paternalism.⁶³ They sought to protect their workplaces and safeguard their homes and families. Many therefore sympathized with a banner stating, “We Demand the Right to Work!” Communists labor militants, many workers believed, threatened their accustomed way of life. They thus marched to defend it. In the coming months, as inter-union struggles resulted in a wave of labor violence, many would feel vindicated.

Several days after the February 5 demonstration, President Cárdenas visited Monterrey. His arrival elicited jubilation from the city’s red workers, who had been denied the right to stage a counter-demonstration on Constitution Day. Thousands of steel, glass, smelter, and railroad workers celebrated Cárdenas’s presence with daily parades through downtown Monterrey, shooting off fireworks and cheering *vivas* to the president.⁶⁴ On February 9, Cárdenas addressed some 25,000 supporters in the city’s principal plaza. Identifying the Independent Unions as an obstacle to labor solidarity, he proclaimed that “workers should associate with their class to realize their own social betterment and prevent their class enemies from combating [organized labor], as they presently can.” Two days later, an equally large gathering heard Cárdenas pronounce his famous ‘Fourteen Points’ speech, in which he outlined his government’s labor policy. He adjourned his visit to Monterrey with the threat for which the speech derived its renown: “The businessmen who have wearied of the social struggle can hand their industries over to the workers or the government. That would be patriotic;” he concluded, “the industrial lockout is not.”⁶⁵ Emboldened by the president’s pronouncement, militant unionists made inroads in key local industries and Communist activists ascended to positions of leadership in the Monterrey’s railroad, smelter, electrical, and steel unions, as well as the Workers Federation of Nuevo León (the state’s CTM branch). The Communists’ election to union posts reflected their popularity among rank-and-file workers who did not necessarily share their political sympathies. Instead, Monterrey workers respected them for their ‘willingness and capacity to fight (*listos y peleadores*),’ their oratorical skills, and their ‘*integridad*.’ By late 1936, the US consul would emphasize to his superiors that “the labor unions of Monterrey are fairly well infected with Communists.”⁶⁶

⁶³ For expression of gratitude by brewery operatives, see Trabajo y Ahorro, January 16, and 24, March 6, 1924; López, Monsiváis, Padilla, and Oviedo interviews. Even glass workers who supported the plant’s ‘red’ union blamed the abuses leading to the insurgency on company foremen, believing that the owners remained unaware of the shop-floor conflicts. Aguilar interview.

⁶⁴ Nathan to State, February 10, 1936, 812.00 NL/131.

⁶⁵ El Porvenir, February 10, 1936; ‘Fourteen Points’ cited in Saldaña, Crónicas históricas, 250. Significantly, Cárdenas’s “Fourteen Points” speech went unreported in the local press.

⁶⁶ Torres, Villarreal, and Castañeda interviews; Blocker to State, December 31, 1936, 812.00/162.

The ‘revolutionary unions’ became a forum in which the militant minority of radicals who kept the promises of the Revolution alive during the 1920s could more directly counter the hegemonic pretensions of Monterrey’s industrial paternalists. Just as white-collar workers served the employers as company ideologues within the cooperative societies, so, also, did middle-class regiomontanos attempt to shape labor’s social outlook by working with the revolutionary unions. Notable among the latter were local school teachers and Communist students like Humberto Ramos Lozano and Juan Manuel Elizondo, respectively. During his speech in Monterrey, Cárdenas himself had instructed the city’s teachers to become the “the directors of the laboring classes.”⁶⁷ Many took this to heart. As Ramos recalled, the teachers “were nearly all of humble origins, from working-class or peasant families in Nuevo León...[which] enhanced our capacity to maintain good relations with the underdogs.” They visited union assemblies and met as well with non-union workers, especially enthusiastic youngsters, whom “we chatted with about the history of Mexico, the labor movement, and the Marxist-Leninist thesis.”⁶⁸ Elizondo traveled a different road, returning from his studies in Mexico City to the rambunctious early life of the steel mill’s Local 67.⁶⁹ He embraced his role a union activist, for, “rather than writing articles and giving conferences, our idea was to get in touch with the people and thus have a real influence on the working class.” Elizondo worked at the mill, served as a legal adviser to the union, and edited Local 67’s first newspaper. While work at the steel mill met a radical change in lifestyle - “no more running around from cafes to meetings” - Elizondo asserted that “we were better off there than preaching in the desert.” To the radicals’ further satisfaction, “we were well received by the workers,” many of whom already knew Elizondo as the fiery young speaker at the city’s labor rallies. The industrialists thus had reason for concern, for their presumptions to the inroads made by communism in Monterrey were true.

Monterrey’s industrialists and their allies thus never grew weary of the ‘social struggle.’ They continued to combat unionism in their factories and the public sphere. The industrialists sustained their resistance through a renewed open-shop drive, anti-union diatribes in the press, and the formation of Nationalist Civic Action (ACN). The latter integrated middle- and working-class regiomontanos into an organization akin to the conservative Citizens’ Alliance then flourishing in the United States. According its statutes, the ACN appealed “to regiomontanos who cherish order and progress” by pledging to “foster respect for the flag, dignify the home, and preserve the family.” It also battled unionism on the ideological front by “promoting the recognition of individual effort as the proper means of improving one’s economic standing.” The ACN’s spirited rallies attracted upwards of 20,000 locals “of all social classes” to Monterrey’s Cuauhtémoc Park, where they reaffirmed the spirit of class harmony that made their industrial city prosper.⁷⁰ The ACN’s festive public face contrasted sharply with the more coercive aspects of the

⁶⁷ El Porvenir, February 10, 1936.

⁶⁸ Interview with Humberto Ramos Lozano, May 3, 1996.

⁶⁹ Following paragraph based on Elizondo interview and Juan Manuel Elizondo, De historia y política (Monterrey, 1994), 32-34.

⁷⁰ César Gutiérrez González, “29 de julio de 1936 en Monterrey: un caso de lucha de clases,” Cuadernos de cultura obrera, No. 6 (Monterrey, 1983), 37-38; El Porvenir, July 1, 1936.

industrialists' open-shop drive. The local businessmen recruited the quasi-fascist Gold Shirts, whose drive-by shootings of 'red' union workers struck fear in many local unionists. They would eventually be driven from Monterrey by the armed "revolutionary squadrons" organized by the steel workers. But the violent tactics introduced by the Gold Shirts became a conspicuous feature of the city's interunion struggles. Indeed, in mid-1936, government officials ordered the dissolution of the ACN itself after its members opened fire on a Communist-led labor rally, killing three local workers.⁷¹

Despite the setback, the industrialists' open-shop drive scored some major successes. Their control of the city's dominant media outlets provided a forum to propagate their antiunion discourses.⁷² Conservative unionists denounced the rash of general strikes staged by the local 'reds' as "unjustified, undemocratic, and of a political character." Independent Union leaders chastised their 'red' nemeses for the "spilling of worker blood" and for "breaking the ties that ought to bind brothers of the same race and class." Daily interviews with anonymous workers reported the sanctions levied by 'red' unions to enforce attendance at union meetings and public rallies.⁷³ Monterrey's 'white' unions adopted similar strategies and proved equally responsible for the 'workers blood' spilled during the mid-1930s. In the end, the industrialists' capacity to drive militant unions from plants like Monterrey Glassworks owed less to the anti-union discourse and more to hundreds of punitive dismissals and the connivance of local ruling party officials, who shared their disdain for the communists.⁷⁴ The discourse nonetheless struck home for many rank-and-file workers, who certainly linked the rash of strikes and labor violence to the nefarious influence of 'red' agitators. As one worker asserted after Monterrey Glassworks broke the 'red' union: "We will now earn better salaries through the incentives granted by the company and dedicate to our families the time stolen from us by the reds to attend their meetings, marches, and riots."⁷⁵ For these operatives, as well as their families, the reds' seeming propensity to strike threatened their workplace and homes. Moreover, the 'white' workers retained access to the perks of paternalism as well as the concessions offered up by the owners to reinforce the crumbling walls of deference. Local employers like the brewery and glassworks thereafter blacklisted relatives of Monterrey's union workers, a selective hiring policy which ensured that

⁷¹ Elizondo interview; El Porvenir, July 30-31, 1936.

⁷² Monterrey's radical labor activists recognized how important these media had become in the industrialists' anti-union crusade. Indeed, they exhorted the Cárdenas government to seize Monterrey's newspaper and radio stations and turn them into labor-run cooperatives. Miner-Metalworker Union Locals 66 and No. 67 to Lázaro Cárdenas, January 15, 1936 and Sindicato Industrial de Trabajadores de Monterrey to Lázaro Cárdenas, March 9, 1936 in AGN: DGG 2.331.8 (16) 32-A/73.

⁷³ El Porvenir, February 2, 1938, August 8-11, 1938.

⁷⁴ On the open-shop drive at Monterrey Glassworks and other locally-owned plants, see Snodgrass, "Deference and Defiance," Ch. 7.

⁷⁵ El Porvenir, June 11 and 22, 1937; AGENL: JCA 94/2932.

future generations of regiomontano workers remained divided into union and non-union households.

Monterrey continued to play host to dozens of ‘red’ unions, notably the local affiliates of national industrial unions of railroad, smelter, and electrical workers. Unions like the steel workers’ Local 67 responded to the anti-union ambience that pervaded their hometown by instituting means of building strong and enduring union allegiances among rank-and-file workers. Local 67 endeavored to construct a strong union identity and transform working-class consciousness through means that replicated the cultural practices of company paternalism. Of course, rank-and-file support for their ‘revolutionary’ union built first and foremost upon the significant conquests won in their collective contract, from seniority rights to improved accident compensation plans to union-controlled hiring. The union hiring hall protected the families of union workers from the discriminatory hiring practices developed by the city’s industrial elite during the Cárdenas years. As one unionist recalled, “We used the exclusionary clause to protect ourselves and to fight against the black list.”⁷⁶ Thus just as the industries of the Garza Sada clan restricted hiring to workers of impeccably non-union blood, so too did generations of steel workers bring their sons into the mill, ensuring that all new hires hailed from union households. Equally important for rank-and-file workers, the ‘democratic promises’ of the revolution became a reality on both the shop floor and in the union hall. The institution of shop committees gave the workers a strong voice on the factory floor, while union hall elections and weekly assemblies permitted rank and filers to hold Local 67 officials accountable to their interests. Veteran workers therefore recall 1936 as a year of “emancipation.” The moment signaled the end to “tyrannical foremen” and “self-appointed” leaders “who did nothing in defense of the workers.” Veteran workers like Salvador Castañeda thus speak in reverential tones of “Don Lázaro Cárdenas, who provided an impulse to the labor movement in Monterrey...and liberated the workers from year of ignorance and misery.” Local 67’s leaders thereafter endeavored to keep the spirit of Cardenismo alive at the steel mill.

The union assemblies provided a forum for the activists who would shape the workers’ social outlook. Their efforts to construct a union identity began with a narrative history of past labor relations at the mill, one in which despotic foremen were cast as leading villains and the defunct Federated Steel Unions emerge as a vehicle for the suppression of the workers’ constitutional rights. They placed this history lesson within the ‘populist’ interpretation of the Mexican Revolution that prevailed in the 1930s. As the union paper asserted, ““Our bosses, who say they are the most benevolent [employers] in the country, would never admit that the 1917 Constitution obligated them to pay overtime, provide workers’ compensation for accidents, and respect the seven-hour shift for night work...These conquests they portray as gifts, when they were in fact won through struggle.”⁷⁷ The history of Local 67 and the benefits accrued by revolutionary unionism would instruct workers “to care for and protect the union.”

Activists also endeavored to demonstrate the “social value” of Local 67, meaning its role as labor’s bargaining agent as well as a political actor dedicated to causes external to the steel

⁷⁶ Interview with Zacarías Villarreal (Electrical Workers Union), November 18, 1995.

⁷⁷ La Pasionaria, March 1938.

mill.⁷⁸ In the 1930s, those ranged from support for Spanish Republicans to practices of financial and moral solidarity with striking workers at other local plants.⁷⁹ At times, rank-and-file workers betrayed their regional values by protesting the use of unions funds. The occasional resolution to contribute one day's wages towards the Republican cause in Spain or the settlement of Spanish refugees in Monterrey generated discontent. The special union levees spurred less dissension in themselves than their use in support of Spaniards, for whom Mexico's popular classes shared an historical disdain.⁸⁰ Dissenting workers thus proposed more "patriotic" alternatives. One rank-and-file worker suggested financial support for the families of workers killed in a Coahuila mine blast while another demanded that their dues instead purchase Christmas gifts for the local poor.⁸¹ Union membership also introduced rank-and-file workers to the tumultuous world of post-revolutionary labor politics, from Communist and pro-government battles for union leadership posts to the workers' integration in the ruling party. Leadership disputes and the steel workers' own exaggerated masculinity often spilled over into union assemblies, which one worker recalls as '*muy pesadas*,' heavy, raucous affairs that often ended in melees. Rank-and-file workers therefore elected union leaders who, as one such leader recalled, "had the balls to fight against management and discipline the workers...less with reason than bravado."⁸² Machismo became an enduring quality of the steel workers' union identity. While personal and partisan rivalries shaped union politics throughout the Cárdenas regime, all union leaders shared a commitment to revolutionary unionism and worked together to maintain rank-and-file unity.

Unity proved indispensable for the maintenance of Local 67's union prerogatives. Indeed, the labor actions launched by the militant union to press demands and protest contract violations helped sharpen rank-and-file allegiance to the union. Strikes loomed at the mill every two years when contract revisions came due. Congruent with their Cardenista outlook, the steel workers refrained from walkouts when the recession of the mid-1930s led President Cárdenas to demand patriotic, belt-tightening sacrifices on the part of workers. With the onset of recovery, however, the steel workers appropriated the president's own language of revolutionary nationalism to sanction their militancy. With a strike looming in 1939, Local 67's leaders wrote to Cárdenas that "our members only aspire to reap a minimum part of the copious profits obtained at the expense of our noble, sincere, and patriotic efforts." The steel workers reminded 'Don Lázaro' of the union struggles that engulfed Monterrey in February 1936, harking back to "the memorable

⁷⁸ Carranza and Elizondo interviews. That workers who entered the mill in the 1940s can recite Local 67's revisionist history of pre-1936 labor relations testifies to the effectiveness of the unionists' discursive practices. Contreras and García interviews.

⁷⁹ *La Pasionaria*, March 1938; Elizondo interview.

⁸⁰ *El Porvenir*, December 6, 1936. Union leaders thus expounded upon the difference between the "*gachupines*," as Mexicans derisively labeled the Spaniards "who only come here to enrich themselves," and the heroic freedom fighters, political refugees, and orphans of Republican Spain, hundreds of whom were settled in Monterrey. (*El Norte*, August 8, 1939.)

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, January 6, 1937, November 29, 1936.

⁸² Palacios and Castañeda interviews.

occasion when you harshly reprimanded [the local industrialists'] for their failure to cooperate in Mexico's progress." Finally, they concluded, "our Local 67 emerged from that formidable battle...and placed itself at the vanguard of the working masses, setting a palpable example of unity, brotherhood, and the collective strength of labor."⁸³ Cárdenas never responded to this discursive appeal to his own language of revolutionary nationalism; but federal authorities intervened in the dispute and management acquiesced to the steel workers' demands. The president whom Monterrey's steel workers credited for their 'emancipation' left office shortly thereafter. While 'Don' Lázaro' departed, the spirit of Cardenismo lived on in the furnaces, workshops, union hall, and neighborhoods inhabited by the 'genuine aristocracy of the national proletariat.'

Conclusion

The inculcation of a Cardenista identity among Monterrey's union steel workers was a product of the lived experience of productive relations and union struggles as well as the discursive practices of militant unionism, notably its languages of class, patriotism, constitutional rights, and the workers' own understandings of Cardenismo. As at the brewery, the capacity of worker-intellectuals to impart their ideas, values, and culture to rank-and-file workers owed foremost to the human relationships of trust and respect forged on the shop-floors and in the union hall. The union struggles of the 1930s - and the divergent responses they produced - reflected the multiple, ambivalent, and competing identities that shaped workers' attitudes towards their bosses, unionism, and the post-revolutionary state. But the regiomontanos remained bearers of common identities. Both 'red' and 'white' workers appropriated the language of patriotism to justify their diverse forms of activism, be that allying with their employers or legitimizing a strike. Masculine identities were deployed to divergent ends as well. The 'white' unionists, for example, portrayed their actions as a reflection of their manliness and the independence characteristic of the regiomontano worker. By resisting militant unionism, these male workers not only defended regional norms, values, and a way of life, but protected their homes and families from the destructive designs of the 'communist government.' Monterrey's militants appropriated this gendered ideology, upholding it to portray revolutionary unionism as a macho endeavor. Cuauhtémoc's male operatives became early and steadfast targets of the 'red' workers' barbs. As veteran brewery workers readily admit, they earned reputations as "*tibios*," 'softies' who acquiesced to their own subordination by abstaining from union activism. The steel workers also made use of the conspicuous presence of women at the brewery to further denigrate Cuauhtémoc's male workers as "*medios hombres*," 'half-men' who shared their female workmates' presumed docility.⁸⁴ To be sure, these regiomontano workers shared a common presumption that unionism was a male prerogative. But these divergent uses of the common

⁸³ Sección No. 67, SITMMRM to President Cárdenas, December 14, 1939, AGN: DAT 290/4.

⁸⁴ López and Padilla interviews.

languages of patriotism and masculinity reflects Mark Steinberg's assertion that "the dialogic nature of discourses always contains the potential for subversion."⁸⁵

Monterrey's factory workers proved to be as militant and defiant or conservative and deferential as their country cousins. Like the rural poor struggling for land after the revolution, the urban proletariat depended upon grass-roots organizing and government mediation to overcome elite resistance to their demands. But as the steel workers showed in the mid-1930s, the consolidation of revolutionary unionism owed more to rank-and-file solidarity than the government's drive to unify Mexican workers. Labor leaders understood this well. Local 67 activists therefore transformed the steel workers' union into an enduring institution that preserved rank-and-file unity, defended labor's prerogatives, and kept the spirit of Cardenismo alive in Monterrey for generations. The Monterrey case also illuminates how the twin pressures of elite resistance *and* popular conservatism pressured the post-revolutionary government to forsake its project of labor unification. The regiomontano workers' resistance to unionism, their participation in anti-government rallies, and their enlistment in Nationalist Civic Action reflected something more than the industrialists' powers of coercion. The Cuauhtémoc Brewery operatives perceived their long-term interests as common to those of the owners. They therefore believed that labor radicalism threatened their economic security and the regional values of hard work, family, and independence that underpinned their collaboration with their social superiors. As in many rural communities, these urban proletarians mobilized after the revolution to defend a way of life threatened by an alien and intrusive state. That they did so defiantly and enthusiastically did not pass unnoticed by the Cárdenas regime. For that reason, the government yielded to popular pressures and forsook its project of working-class unification in Monterrey.

The labor struggles of the 1930s permanently divided the regiomontano working class into opposed camps of 'red' and 'white' unions. However, be they militant unionists or company loyalists, a solid core of Monterrey's industrial workers continued to embrace the notion of a uniquely regiomontano identity. While they shared a common identity as regiomontano workers, these 'organic intellectuals' forged competing means of reaching a common end: the right to speak on behalf of rank-and-file workers. Blue-collar regiomontanos would share much in common through the close of the twentieth century, notably a sense of regional identity which they preserved within families, through cooperative societies, and in their union halls. Indeed, they continue to pride themselves on the local origins of their industries and the culture of work and industriousness that made their city prosper. In their minds, their hometown remains the nation's preeminent industrial city, a blue-collar metropolis that celebrates calloused hands and a skyline punctuated by smokestacks. Visitors would comment on the unique qualities of the regiomontano workers late into the twentieth century.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Steinberg, "The Labour of the Country," 7.

⁸⁶ For foreign observers' commentary on the unique quality of the Monterrey workers, see Sandord Mosk, Industrial Revolution in Mexico (Berkeley, 1950), 272; Jorge Balan, Harley Browning, and Elizabeth Jelin, Men in a Developing Society: Geographic and Social Mobility in Monterrey, Mexico (Austin, 1973), 36-38; Philip Anderson, "The City That Works," Maclean's 110 (1997), 42-47; Michael Parfit, "Monterrey: Confronting the Future," National Geographic 190

(1996), 52-61; and John Davidson, “City Apart,” Mexico Business (April 1995), 50-57, who holds that Monterrey’s is the “most stable, educated, and skilled work force in Mexico.”