

REVIEWS

Norman Caulfield, *Mexican Workers and the State: From the Porfiriato to NAFTA*, Texas Christian University Press: Fort Worth, 1998; ISBN 0-87565-192-5 cloth \$24.95 224 pp. Illus. Bib. Index

The relationship between the Mexican state and organized labor has long fascinated and perplexed industrial relations specialists. The Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), the main labor federation, is incorporated into the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the political party which has ruled Mexico uninterrupted for more than 60 years. While the Mexican Constitution guarantees workers the right to organize and strike, the state has wide legal powers to intervene in internal union affairs. In *Mexican Workers and the State: From the Porfiriato to NAFTA*, historian Norman Caulfield attempts in less than 140 pages to outline the evolution of state labor relations from the early twentieth century to the present. Caulfield tells a tragic story of how anarchosyndicalist unions, powerful in the early part of the twentieth century, were increasingly marginalized by manipulative elites, bureaucratic unions, and interfering Americans. He has, however, overstated the radical roots of Mexican labor and simplified what is a much more complex relationship between the Mexican state and labor unions.

Caulfield begins his analysis by highlighting what he sees as the anarchosyndicalist tradition of the Mexican working class. He suggests that during the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920, which overthrew the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz, Mexican workers exploited by foreign employers sought to take their firms under workers self-management. In 1912 anarchosyndicalists, who had substantial support among Mexican workers, founded Casa del Obrero Mundial (House of the World Worker), Mexico's first labor federation. After Casa led a failed general strike in Mexico City in August 1916, the Constitutionalists, the eventual victors in the multi-sided revolution, suppressed the fledgling labor federation. As the revolution unfolded, however, radical groups including the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) continued to gain a large following in Mexico especially among mining and oil workers. In recognition of the continued strength of organized labor, the new Mexican Constitution of 1917, ensured the right of workers to organize and to strike, and guaranteed a minimum wage and an eight hour day.

In the years after the revolution, Caulfield suggests that successive governments were able to defeat anarchosyndicalism and align organized labor with the ruling elites. With the support of the government and employers, the newly organized right wing labor federation the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM) replaced more radical unions in the workplace. Caulfield argues that by portraying themselves as the champions of Mexican nationalism and instituting some reforms, Mexican politicians were able to gain ideological hegemony over the nation. In 1931 the Mexican Congress passed the Federal Labor Law which gave the national state the power to register unions, regulate strikes, and intervene in internal union affairs. The law also established arbitration through labor

boards, recognized union closed shops and required an employer to sign a collective contract with a particular union when requested to do so by the state. Finally, during the government of social reformer Lazaro Cardenas, elected president in 1934, a new labor-state alliance was cemented. The Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), formed under the leadership of Marxist Vicente Lombardo Toledano in 1936 as a rival to CROM, joined Cardenas' newly organized ruling party, the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM). The PRM, renamed the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 1946, has ruled Mexico uninterrupted to this day.

After the election of President Manuel Avila Camacho in 1940, Mexican politics took a sharp turn to the right. Espousing Cold War anticommunism, successive Mexican governments courted foreign capital and drew closer to the USA. The government used its legal powers to impose its own "charro," or corrupt, union leadership. Union leaders who built undemocratic unions and had direct access to elective office and government administrative positions, exerted their members to increase workplace production. By the early 1950s, conservative leaders were firmly established within the CTM and the CTM had political dominance in the labor movement.

Caulfield pays particular attention to the unsavory role of American unions in Mexican affairs. Since the revolutionary period, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had acted as "liaisons for American corporations and the United States governments." (p. 120). The AFL sought to promote "business unionism" and the expansion of US corporate interests which would economically benefit American workers. During the Cold War, American union leaders gave financial support to Mexican labor leaders to help them eliminate rank-and-file opposition. Opponents of the charro leaders were dubbed procommunist and the US unions helped to finance propaganda campaigns instigated against Left union leaders.

In the final chapter, Caulfield shows how developments in the 1990s, especially the introduction of NAFTA and neoliberal economic policies, has created instability in the charro system. Under deteriorating economic conditions, there have been local efforts to form independent unions and a movement of national unions away from the servile CTM. In 1997 several powerful unions broke away from PRI dominated unionism to form a new independent labor federation, the National Workers Union (UNT). New political groups, such as the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), have emerged as an electoral challenger to the PRI and a threat to charro entrenchment. Finally, the US labor movement, now under the reforming leadership of John Sweeney, has been more open to cross border solidarity to challenge the increasingly global corporate elites.

Although the book manages to succinctly outline the development of Mexican state labor relations, Caulfield concentrates too much of his analysis on radical organizations and governing elites, and too little on ordinary workers. As a result, the author overstates the support of Mexican workers for anarchosyndicalist ideas. In fact, the IWW and other radical unions were concentrated in a few northern areas and particular industries. Even here, as Jonathan Brown shows in his detailed study of the oil industry published in 1993,

Oil and Revolution in Mexico, worker support for anarchosyndicalist unions was based less on revolutionary aspirations for workers control and much more on obtaining higher wages and better working conditions.

Eschewing any comparative analysis, Caulfield also fails to show what is unique about the Mexican industrial relations system. The Mexican Constitution was one of the first constitutions in the world to guarantee rights for workers and organized labor. Moreover, virtually alone out of the Latin American countries, post-revolutionary Mexico has been able to preserve a stable government without resorting to extensive repression in the face of economic crisis. Although Caulfield ignores the fact, partly this is because through participation in Mexico's post-revolutionary governing coalition, many labor organizations have won significant material benefits for their members including access to government-financed housing, health care and a legally mandated share of enterprise profits.

These criticisms apart, Caulfield should be applauded for attempting to recount a hundred years of such a fascinating and complex history in so few pages. This book is recommended to beginners as a short and engaging introduction to the historical background of the Mexican industrial relations system.

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Jock Barnes. Never a White Flag.

Some of the gaps in New Zealand's written labour history are big enough to drive a truck through. This I discovered while researching waterfront industrial relations. In particular, the biographies and autobiographies of important figures in the union movement, and union histories, which form an important part of the history of waterfront labour in other countries, simply have not been written. The publication of *Never a White Flag*, the memoirs of Jock Barnes, has filled one of the gaps in the vernacular literature of the New Zealand labour movement. This book takes its place alongside the autobiographies of waterfront labour leaders Jack Dash (Britain) and Tas Bull (Australia), and also Charles P. Larrowe's biography of the American International Longshoremen's and Warehouseman's Union leader Harry Bridges.

Jock Barnes will perhaps be best known as the person who led the national Waterside Workers' Union (WWU) during the 1951 waterfront dispute. Symbolically, this dispute represents the apogee of industrial conflict in New Zealand in the post-World War Two period, and materially – some would argue – it marked a turning point in the class struggle.

More immediately, the dispute resulted in the WWU being smashed and replaced by twenty-six new port unions, and approximately half of the WWU's members being ejected from waterfront work, including Barnes himself and more than 90 per cent of his brother unionists from his home port of Auckland.

Complete with a photograph on the cover that shows Barnes in oratory full flight, the autobiography provides an interesting account of his 'apprenticeship' as a unionist, and how he rose to a position of leadership within the WWU. In so doing, some fascinating details are disclosed incidentally – like the deaths of American soldiers on the streets of Wellington in 1942, during a brawl that apparently stemmed from their racist attitudes towards Maori (p.59). The book also provides interesting insights (although largely from an Auckland perspective) into the day-to-day tensions and disputes surrounding the bureau system of labour engagement during the 1940s, under the control first of the Waterfront Control Commission (throughout World War Two) and then subsequently the Waterfront Industry Commission. These insights are significant, as the retention of this system is the main reason why smashing the Union in the 1951 dispute did not alleviate the problems of labour control faced by employers in the 1940s. Moreover, in the immediate post-1951 period the latent tensions within the bureau system recurred as the waterfront employers gave up their attempts to foster direct control, and increasingly sought to manage through the payment system (Reveley, 1999).

Tom Bramble must be congratulated for his act of editorial midwifery, without which the manuscript might never have seen the light of day (his role is explained at the end of the introduction). In writing the introduction, which nicely frames the book, Bramble draws on an unpublished manuscript by Anna Green, the only academic historian to give serious academic treatment to waterfront industrial relations in the period prior to 1951. It is unfortunate that this manuscript itself has not yet been published as a book.

As autobiography, *Never a White Flag* puts an additional layer of vernacular history (in terms of books, currently limited to Dick Scott's *151 Days*) beneath more formal, dispassionate and scholarly accounts of the momentous 1951 dispute. Books such as Michael Bassett's *Confrontation '51*, and more recently a pathbreaking work of comparative economic history by Deborah Mabbett (1995) that among other things provides a unique reinterpretation of the 1951 dispute. To be sure, a personal account of this type can be read in different ways. On the one hand, the autobiography can be 'mined' for further evidence of what the dispute actually was 'about' (its causes and consequences). Indeed, Bramble's introduction is written in this 'realist' vein. But the Barnes memoirs can also be read as one example of how the dispute is represented in the 'collective memory' (Schudson, 1992) of the labour movement – which is how I myself have read the book. Considered in that way, *Never a White Flag* is important for how this 'recollection' of such a momentous event in the history of unionism might be used to construct and sustain the sort of labour 'tradition' that is essential to the future vitality, nay viability, of the union movement in New Zealand. From this point of view, it matters not

whether Barnes's memories are dimmed by the passage of time (one suspects not), or whether his views are coloured by his personal involvement in the very events he describes (Bramble rightly took a 'light-handed' approach to the editing).

This autobiography is published at a particularly felicitous moment, as unions in New Zealand and Australia face an environment that is increasingly hostile to organised labour. The book gives the reader pause to consider union strategy and tactics in such an environment. The description of the events of 1951 resonates with the experience of the Maritime Union of Australia in its recent battle with the Australian stevedoring company, Patrick, during which one of the key strategic decisions was whether to adopt a legalistic approach, and fight through the courts, or take direct action in defiance of the law (as the WWU did). The MUA's leaders took the former course, and resisted the encroachments of an alliance between state and capital thankfully with more success than did their 1950s New Zealand counterpart. Equally important to any 'lessons for the future' that can be distilled from it, however, *Never a White Flag* contributes to a pool of collective memories that can be drawn upon as cultural and symbolic resources to nourish and support present-day collective action. However it is 'read', I anticipate that the book will appeal to a very interested audience within both academia and the Australasian labour movement.

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Editors' Note: Jock Barnes died in Auckland on May 31, 2000, aged 92.