

# One hundred years since Zapata and Villa took Mexico City—Part 1

## The historical significance of the Mexican Revolution

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One hundred years ago, on December 4, 1914, Francisco “Pancho” Villa and Emiliano Zapata met in the Mexico City suburb of Xochimilco at the heads of peasant armies that had conquered the capital and seemed poised to take control of the whole country.

Two days later, the commanders each sat in the presidential chair at the National Palace after having presided from the palace balcony over a victorious procession of the tens of thousands of soldiers that made up the two peasant armies of the Mexican Revolution.

The Mexican Revolution had reached its peak. Within months, these peasant armies were in full retreat, having surrendered the capital to the armies of the liberal bourgeoisie. Six years later, Zapata was riddled with bullets while Villa retired from politics, only to be assassinated on the orders of the Mexican state in 1923.

The mass revolutionary upheavals that engulfed Mexico a century ago remain deeply embedded in the social fabric of the country. The workers, youth, and oppressed masses of Mexico remember the revolution as a mass upheaval against a brutal regime that presided over a vastly unequal society, one in which the social and democratic rights of the population were repeatedly trampled underfoot.

But the same grievances that were raised 100 years ago against the despotic regime of Porfirio Díaz are being raised once again today. In 2014, just as in 1914, all aspects of Mexican cultural and political life are dominated by the existence of widespread poverty, growing social inequality, and continuous state violence.

The disappearance of the 43 student-teachers (*normalistas*) in the southern state of Guerrero at the hands of police acting in concert with a drug gang and on the orders of the local government has exposed the character of the whole Mexican political establishment and the gross social inequality over which it presides.

All of the bourgeois parties in Mexico stand indicted before the population for the massacre of the *normalistas*—including President Enrique Peña Nieto’s Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the right-wing opposition National Action Party (PAN), and the Party for a Democratic Revolution (PRD), which despite being a nominally “left” party is directly implicated in ordering the kidnappings. Nor is the new National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) of former PRD presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador untainted by the massacre. In fact, there is photographic evidence suggesting that López Obrador has personal connections with the PRD mayor of Iguala who ordered the disappearances.

The massive outpouring of indignation amongst Mexican workers and youth over the massacre of the *normalistas* is proof that the

objective conditions have ripened for a renewed social explosion. There is every indication that another Mexican Revolution is fast approaching.

The question of the legacy of the Mexican Revolution pervades all aspects of Mexican political life. For this reason, no struggle waged by the Mexican toilers for social equality and democratic rights can be won without an understanding of the social forces whose political and military clashes gave rise to the revolution’s successes and failures.

The importance of clarifying the political lessons of the Mexican Revolution was underscored by President Peña Nieto’s recent cancellation of the government’s official commemorations of November 20—the day that marked the officially recognized beginning of the Revolution in 1910.

Instead, hundreds of thousands of workers and youth poured into the Zocalo to celebrate the Revolution by denouncing the political establishment for the massacre of the 43 *normalistas*. The parent of a disappeared student told the crowd: “Today, the 20th of November, we celebrate the 104th anniversary of the beginning of the Mexican Revolution. If we are halted here, it is because the governing class has mutilated our constitution for their benefit and to justify their acts.”

For the Mexican bourgeoisie, which today presides over one of the most unequal and impoverished societies in the world, the legacy of the revolution is a nuisance and its memory a scar. The concessions made by the bourgeoisie in the aftermath of over a decade of revolutionary struggle have since been subjected to decades of erosion, beginning with particular intensity under the presidency of Miguel de la Madrid in the 1980s. The gains made during the revolution are now being further eviscerated: public education has been subjected to right-wing reforms, and the state oil company, PEMEX, is slated for privatization.

Despite the concessions won by the Mexican masses during more than a decade of civil war, the aspirations of the workers and peasants for equality and land were never satisfied by the bourgeois Constitutionalists who succeeded in maintaining state power through the course of the revolution. Despite its mass character, the Mexican Revolution was a bourgeois revolution, and capitalist property relations remained intact after the civil war.

The defeats suffered by the armies of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata after the meeting at Xochimilco in December 1914 and the inability of the working class to establish itself as an independent political force during the course of the revolution must be considered soberly, without idolizing individuals—however courageous they may have been.

## Imperialism and the Fall of the Porfiriato

The year 1914 marked a turning point in world history. By mid-year, the tensions that had built up over decades of rapid capitalist development could no longer be contained by the political form of the nation state.

The assassination of Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28 set into motion a chain of events that resulted in four years of imperialist war. By the time Zapata and Villa met in Xochimilco, the world war's casualties were in the millions and climbing higher.

As war waged across the Atlantic, the same contradictions in the world economy that drove the imperialist powers into conflict pushed social tensions in Mexico to the point of explosion.

The development of widespread opposition within Mexico to the pre-revolutionary regime of autocrat Porfirio Diaz was inseparably bound up with popular hostility to the role played by American, British, and French imperialism in exploiting the Mexican economy and in dictating the affairs of its government.

The reign of the Diaz government—known as the “Porfiriato”—was chiefly characterized by the carve-up of the country's resources by foreign capitalists and by the anti-democratic political climate accompanying this carve-up. The limited economic development that took place during this period, alongside changes in the structure of the agricultural economy, greatly expanded the size of the working class.

The United States—which seized half of Mexico's territory in the war of 1848—dominated the country's mining and railroad industries, with trade between the two countries increasing from \$7 million in 1860 to \$246 million in 1910.

With the aid of heavy subsidies from the Porfirian government, American railroad magnates, industrialists, and financiers built a web of railroads across the country, expanding track total from 1,500 kilometers in 1880 to 23,000 kilometers by 1908. The American-built rail lines connected the mines and tropical export crop zones with major trade centers, but were inadequate to transport food from agricultural zones to the domestic markets.

American capitalists also dominated the Mexican mining industry, controlling 81 percent of mining capital in 1904. The Porfirian government worked in conjunction with the foreign capitalists to secure favorable legislation granting property owners “unquestioned title to whatever subsoil deposits there might be beneath the surface.”

In finance, 80 percent of Mexican capital was controlled by foreign interests by 1908. France, which had invaded and occupied Mexico from 1861 to 1867 after Liberal president Benito Juarez cancelled foreign interest payments, dominated Mexican finance. Shortly after the turn of the century, French capitalists exercised control over the three largest banks and claimed possession of 45.7 percent of the capital in the 52 largest financial institutions.

The burgeoning oil industry was a field of fierce competition between American and British interests. By the turn of the twentieth century, 290 companies were active in extracting Mexican crude oil for foreign refinement. British oil exportation carried out primarily by Weetman Pearson's Mexican Eagle Petroleum Company began to eclipse the American interests, dominated by Rockefeller's Standard Oil, Edward Doheney's Mexican Petroleum Company, and the Texas Oil Company.

The development of industry at the hands of foreign investment meant that few of the advances made through the modernization of the Mexican economy translated into social progress for the broad majority of the population. The bulk of infrastructure and industrial production was carried out for foreign export. The transition to export-

crops led to rates of food staple production that were actually lower in 1910 than in 1877. In 1910, life expectancy was a paltry 30 years of age. As finance capital dug its talons deep into Mexico, the population bled.

But the late development of capitalism in Mexico was a contradictory process. While foreign investment leached the country of its resources, the economic modernization sparked a process of proletarianization that elevated the working class to a primary position in Mexican political and economic life. Though only 82,000 new jobs were created directly by foreign industrial investment between 1895 and 1910, the flow of capital greatly increased the number of jobs in larger factories and warehouses, thereby giving rise to the Mexican working class.

The hundreds of thousands of peasants who were forced to abandon the land due to enclosure and a spike in land prices subsequently took up work in the mines, textile factories, and oil fields—industries which themselves were being developed primarily for export. By 1910, the working class comprised 16 percent of Mexico's 15 million inhabitants. It included over 100,000 miners, 34,000 textile workers, 44,000 shoemakers, 23,000 potters, 23,000 mat-weavers, 18,000 hat makers, and tens of thousands of railroad workers.

Miners and railroad workers in particular began to play an important role in Mexican politics. The 1906 strike of copper miners in Cananea involved more than 5,000 workers, while three large railroad strikes broke out in 1903, 1906, and 1908, centered in the city of San Luis Potosí. Overall, 250 strikes were reported between 1876 and 1911.

Furthermore, many of the peasants who had remained in the countryside—where 87 percent of the population lived at the turn of the century—were turned into agricultural laborers. In a drastic shift from previous decades, 62 percent of peasants were categorized as agricultural laborers, not landowners. These shifts created the social conditions for the revolutionary upheavals that broke out on a national scale in 1910.

*To be continued*



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