One hundred years since Zapata and Villa took Mexico City—Part 3

The historical significance of the Mexican Revolution

Eric London
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The iconic meeting of Zapata and Villa in Xochimilco in December 1914 epitomized the Mexican Revolution at its peak. But the two military commanders and the peasant armies that they led were incapable of providing the peasantry or the working class with a viable political program for social revolution.

The peak of the Mexican Revolution preceded the outbreak of the Russian Revolution of 1917 by less than three years. Although divergent historical conditions in the two countries precludes drawing an equals sign between the two revolutions, important parallels exist.

In both countries, the late economic development spurred largely by foreign capital had produced a working class that was far outnumbered in size by the rural peasantry. In both Mexico and Russia, in the aftermath of the fall of the old regime, the liberal bourgeoisie took state power but was plunged into crisis when it came into conflict with the egalitarian aspirations of the masses. Strengthened by the crisis, a section of the ruling class with close connections to the old regime attempted to establish a counterrevolutionary dictatorship, which further enflamed the social antagonisms between the workers and peasants on the one hand, and the bourgeoisie on the other.

Although the objective conditions were ripe worldwide for social revolution in the decade of the Mexican and Russian Revolutions, there is one definitive difference between them that accounts for the fact that the former resulted in the continuity of bourgeois rule, while the latter gave rise to the world's first workers' state.

The existence of a revolutionary Marxist party in Russia, armed with scientific socialism, provided the Russian working class with the political compass required in order to assert its independence from the bourgeoisie, win the leadership of the peasant masses and fight for the seizure of state power. The Bolsheviks (and Lenin and Trotsky in particular) went into the great events of 1917 with an understanding of the revolutionary implications of the outbreak of the First World War. Their irreconcilable struggle for the political independence of the working class and their constant warnings of the disastrous implications of lending trust to the liberal bourgeoisie or their petty-bourgeois supporters created the conditions for October.

In Mexico, no such party existed. While the reasons for this—both in terms of the objective development of the working class and the subjective character of its leadership—are complex and deserving of detailed examination, the consequences for the Mexican masses are lasting.

The Mexican Revolution, in spite of the bravery and revolutionary resolve displayed by the workers and peasants, is a tragic vindication in the negative of Leon Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.

Opportunist Leadership of the Working Class

The more radical wing of the Constitutionalist forces have been improperly labeled "Jacobin" by historians of the Mexican Revolution, including the ex-Pabloite Adolfo Gilly.

According to this theory, the nationalist petty-bourgeoisie that provided the Constitutionalists with the bulk of its officers represented a progressive force during the years of the revolution. As the theory goes, this layer "fused revolutionary-nationalist ideology with the general influence of the insurgent peasantry, hoping to push through its ideas in the very development of the struggle." According to Gilly, the "Jacobin" faction fought for "a change in the basis of the Mexican state" which would "expand working-class conquests" and pave the way for a "socialist course" which Gilly criticizes as merely being "rather ill-defined."

Such a conception parallels the perspective of the anarchist leaders of the Mexican Liberal Party and the Casa del Obrero Mundial (COM), both of which sought to tie the urban working class to the "Jacobin" forces within the Constitutionalist movement during the years of the revolution.

This conception dangerously obfuscates the primary lesson to be drawn from the Mexican Revolution: in the absence of a revolutionary Marxist party, the working class is incapable of spontaneously developing socialist consciousness and declaring its independence from the forces of the bourgeoisie.

The months preceding the convergence of the Northern Division and Southern Liberation Army in Mexico City were marked by renewed conflicts between the working class and the ruling Constitutionalists. Strikes broke out in Mexico City as workers shut down rail transit, telephone and telegraph communication, textile plants, and the electrical power industry.

In an effort to contain social opposition, these strikes were betrayed by the Constitutionalists in alliance with the leadership of the COM. One major strike was betrayed when COM leader Luis Morones was granted a management stake in an electricity company against which workers had struck in late 1914. Morones was a close friend of Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor and had been given training by the AFL and the US government in the United States.

The opportunist leadership of COM helped foster illusions amongst the working class in the "Jacobin" wing of the Mexican bourgeoisie. The COM targeted only foreign-owned companies with strikes, and insisted that workers place their faith in the Constitutionalists.

Most perniciously, COM leaders put forward a program of alliance with the bourgeoisie on the basis of direct opposition to the peasant armies. When Villa and Zapata's forces entered Mexico City in December 1914, COM leaders denounced Villa as a "personalist" and preyed on the strong anti-clerical traditions of the Mexican working class to portray the southern peasantry as "Catholic" and reactionary.

In this way, the political cover was laid for a massive betrayal. In

February 1915, with Carranza and the Constitutionalists on the defensive, a delegation of COM leaders traveled east to meet the Constitutionalists at Veracruz, where they pledged the COM membership as cannon fodder in the war against the peasantry.

The decision to align COM membership with the bourgeoisie—and against the peasant revolt—was opposed in raucous mass meetings of workers that took place in January and February, 1915. At a secret meeting in the early hours of February 11, the COM leadership voted to support the Constitutionalists and suspend organizational work until the peasant armies were defeated.

As a result, thousands of workers were channeled by the COM leadership into Constitutionalist training camps, where they were trained by American advisors and armed with American weaponry. These so-called "Red Battalions" were sent to drive back the peasant armies of Zapata and Villa.

Within months, the working class was once again entering into conflict with the Constitutionalists, but on a much wider scale. The strike wave of late 1915 and the massive general strikes of 1916 made clear that the Constitutionalists and the COM leadership were incapable of containing class tensions by peaceful means.

But the working class was left prone to the betrayals because it lacked a party of its own to warn of the traps being laid by COM and the Constitutionalists.

As the events in 1915-16 show, socialist revolution was not impossible after the revolutionary ebb that followed the meeting of Zapata and Villa in Xochimilco. But at the peak of the power of the peasant armies, the betrayals of late 1914 and early 1915 were catastrophic. With no plan or perspective and with no working class leadership, the peasants handed power to the bourgeoisie, and began a long retreat out of Mexico City and back into the countryside.

The Peasantry Yields Power

When Villa met Zapata at Xochimilco amidst the peasantry's seizure of the capital, the former denounced the so-called Jacobin wing of the Constitutionalists as "men who have always slept on soft pillows."

Zapata added: "They have always been the scourge of the people. Those bastards as soon as they see a little chance, well, they want to take advantage of it and line their pockets," an assessment that was to be richly confirmed by the whole subsequent political history of Mexico.

Despite these statements, Villa and Zapata were to hand over control of Mexico City to those very forces: "We ignorant men make the war. The cultured people have to make use of it," Villa said.

In the days following the Northern Division and Southern Liberation Army's entrance in Mexico City, the two peasant leaders promptly turned power over to a coterie of bourgeois figures who comprised the new government and whose ties were to the Constitutionalists. On January 7, four of the chief ministers of the new government wrote to a leading Constitutionalist and pledged their support in any move the Constitutionalists might make to depose Villa and Zapata. A week later, the ministers issued a formal decree against the peasant leaders and fled for Veracruz.

The Constitutionalist armies under the control of Alvaro Obregon won a resounding victory at Puebla on January 5. The oncoming forces sought to divide the peasant forces and singled out their attacks on Villa and the Northern Division, fearful of the political implications of a direct attack on Zapatista forces, who were prepared to wage a defensive, guerrilla war in Morelos and who could rely on the popular support of the peasantry. Soon after the loss at Puebla, much of Zapata's force abandoned Mexico City to defend the south. It was taken by Obregon in early 1915.

The limitations of Villa and Zapata's peasant-based struggle grew more apparent over the course of the military campaigns of 1915. Neither leader was capable of putting forward either a political leadership or a military strategy to defeat the Constitutionalist forces on the national arena.

Despite the fact that the prospects for defeating the Constitutionalists would have improved with a concentrated military attack on Veracruz, the Northern Division instead spread out over central Mexico and carried out maneuvers on an ad hoc and isolated basis. With Zapata's retreat to Morelos, the center of national production—Mexico City—was surrendered without a fight, largely because the Zapatistas did not see its relevance to a program limited to local land reform.

The chain of defeats suffered by the peasant armies allowed the bourgeoisie to consolidate control and concentrate on the suppression of the working class in Mexico City and elsewhere. The peasant forces spent the remainder of the revolution fighting defensive warfare in the extremities of the country. Though the armies fought bravely for years after the meeting in December 1914, they would never again threaten bourgeois rule in Mexico City.

Conclusion

Mexico today exists in an intensifying state of political and social crisis.

When officials finally began searching for the bodies of the 43 disappeared *normalistas*, they claimed to not know the location of the disappeared student-teachers. However, they stumbled upon multiple mass graves containing the charred remains of an unknown number of additional victims of the crisis of Mexican society.

This crisis is rooted in conditions created by world capitalism, above all pervasive poverty and growing social inequality. By official counts, 45 percent of the Mexican population lives below the poverty line of $180 per month, with a further 40 percent at an immediate risk of falling into poverty. In the states hardest-hit by the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), poverty rates for children are above 75 percent. In all, over half of children in Mexico live in poverty.

Roughly 10 percent of the total population has been forced by economic catastrophe to flee to the United States to seek their livelihoods. Thousands have died attempting to make this treacherous journey, while those that manage to cross live for the most part in poverty in the United States under constant fear of deportation.

President Barack Obama has deported over 2 million undocumented immigrants, the great majority of them Mexicans. Under Obama's proposed immigration reform, the border is to be further militarized with a "surge of resources" to "crack down on illegal immigration," and those few immigrants who will be allowed to stay temporarily will be denied access to health care and other social programs.

Meanwhile, Mexico's 145,000 millionaires possess a combined fortune of $736 billion USD, or 43 percent of Mexico's total wealth. Mexico's 16 billionaires possess a total of $142.9 billion USD.

The privatization of PEMEX, the state oil company, is expected to produce a boon for the Mexican and international financial markets. Ouliana Vlasova, a financial analyst with wealthinsight.com, noted that in part because of the oil privatization, "Mexico provides opportunities for both domestic and foreign investors and is anticipated to witness strong growth in the number of high-net-worth individuals and their wealth" in the coming years.

In the face of growing inequality and poverty, social opposition is met with massive police repression. Veiled threats of a military crackdown on demonstrators were made in November by the National Security Secretary, General Salvador Cienfuegos.

Such threats are not empty when coming from the Mexican military. As evidenced by the recent Ayotzinapa massacre, the state works in close collusion with vicious drug cartels, even though it has carried out military operations against the population under the mantle of the so-called "drug war." This campaign, which began in 2006, has claimed over 100,000 lives while displacing another 1.5 million.

Nothing short of social revolution can repair the damage done by the Mexican bourgeoisie over the last century. No section of the political establishment—including Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's MORENA

movement, for whom there exists evidence of intimate ties to those responsible for ordering the Ayotzinapa massacre—can be trusted by workers and youth to carry out the revolutionary fight for social equality.

The Mexican working class must learn from the struggles and betrayals of 1910-20. It must establish its political independence from the bourgeoisie and, in close coordination with its class allies in North, Central, and South America, carry out the seizure of power and the expropriation of the country's wealth through the fight to establish the United Socialist States of the Americas. To accomplish this task, a Mexican section of the International Committee of the Fourth International must be built.