

# ISSUES IN LABOR HISTORIOGRAPHY

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- EL MOVIMIENTO OBRERO VENEZOLANO, 1850–1944.* By JULIO GODIO. (Caracas: Editorial Ateneo de Caracas, 1980. Pp. 193.)
- THE ORIGINS OF THE PERUVIAN LABOR MOVEMENT, 1883–1919.* By PETER BLANCHARD. (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982. Pp. 214. \$23.95.)
- URBAN WORKERS AND LABOR UNIONS IN CHILE, 1902–1927.* By PETER DESHAZO. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983. Pp. 351. \$30.00.)
- LOS PARTIDOS POLITICOS Y SU DISPUTA POR EL CONTROL DEL MOVIMIENTO SINDICAL EN VENEZUELA, 1936–1948.* By STEVE ELLNER. (Caracas: Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, 1980. Pp. 181.)

The books reviewed here lead directly to a consideration of two of the principal issues in the historiography of Latin American labor. The first issue is the extent to which the various national labor movements exhibit common characteristics, and the second issue is the identification of turning points and phases of development in the history of the working class, the question of periodization.

The works by Peter DeShazo and Peter Blanchard deal with the early years of the labor movement in Chile and Peru, respectively. DeShazo's work, which is the richer of the two in historical detail and insight into the conditions of the working class, covers the period from 1902 to 1927. Blanchard's book on Peru takes the reader from 1883 to 1919. Similar in aim and method, both books depict relatively coherent and powerful labor movements in the early years of the twentieth century, movements that would be unjustly described as "precursor movements." DeShazo and Blanchard are, implicitly at least, reacting to the widely held notion that labor movements in Latin America really only took shape and achieved their "natural" form under the populist governments of the 1930s and the subsequent period of import substitution industrialization (ISI). The early anarcho-syndicalist unions are not to be dismissed merely as romantic forerunners of more mature forms of unionism that were destined to disappear with the march of industrial-

ization. On the contrary, they represented a distinct modality of working-class action, one that needs to be rescued from the stereotyping of the historical lumber room and understood in its own terms.

Peter DeShazo's *Urban Workers and Labor Unions in Chile, 1902–1927* is an outstanding piece of painstaking research that sets out to dispel some common myths about Chilean labor. Most of the book carefully reviews working and living conditions of the mass of Chilean workers and details the major industrial conflicts of the period. De Shazo consulted an impressive variety of sources and assessed the evidence scrupulously. The case he presents is, on the whole, a reasonable one and suggests a major rethinking of Chilean labor history. DeShazo takes aim at two interlinked targets: first, the notion that the miners of the northern nitrate fields constituted the militant vanguard of the working class; and second, the belief that the political and industrial forces associated with the Federación Obrera de Chile (FOCh), Emilio Luis Recabarren, and the Partido Democrático represented the principal thrust of working-class activity before the rise of the Communist party. Both beliefs are part of the orthodox historiography of labor of this period. According to DeShazo, both ideas are wrong because they overestimate the role of workers in the export sector on the one hand, and because they wrongly read back into history the importance of the eventual victors of interunion conflicts. These two mistaken views result in underestimating the role of the anarcho-syndicalists and the mass of urban labor in this period. As DeShazo claims, "the history of Chilean labor to 1927 is not one of institutions and organizations, but of masses of people and what they did" (p. 129).

On the face of it, DeShazo's claims about the relative importance of urban workers in Santiago and Valparaíso versus nitrate miners in the north and coal miners in Concepción, and about the relative strength of anarcho-syndicalists versus the reformist FOCh, seem to be borne out by the facts. The evidence clearly shows that the anarcho-syndicalists were the majority grouping within organized labor in the cities of Santiago and Valparaíso, and a militant majority at that. But is that all there is to the story? DeShazo successfully demonstrates that strikes in the nitrate zone were usually lost and that they could usually be ignored by the government in Santiago, whereas strikes and labor demonstrations in the capital were often successful and sometimes had important political repercussions. It is possible to grant DeShazo all these conclusions and still remain somewhat uneasy about his account. Could it be that in correcting a rather one-sided view of Chilean labor history, the author has unintentionally gone too far in the opposite direction? This book will certainly be controversial in raising a number of difficult questions.

The industrial labor force of Santiago and Valparaíso in the early

decades of the twentieth century was by no means mostly employed in small establishments; some 43 percent worked in establishments employing more than a hundred workers.<sup>1</sup> The supporters of the anarcho-syndicalist unions, moreover, were predominantly native-born and tended to be workers rather than artisans. Among the anarcho-syndicalists, the printers and the shoemakers stood out as particularly militant. Industrial conflict generally followed the economic cycle closely, with a high correlation between periods of inflation and levels of strike activity. By and large, bargaining was bilateral, between workers and employers, with the state intervening only reluctantly. Interestingly, the direct tactics favored by the anarcho-syndicalists tended to pay off to a greater extent than the more conciliatory and state-oriented efforts of the reformist FOCh. Such improvements in standards of living as occurred during the early twentieth century were due either to the direct efforts of the workers themselves or to prophylactic action on the part of the state, which was alarmed by the possible menace of social revolution.

Why were the anarcho-syndicalists relatively successful in Chile, and why did they retain their influence until the Ibáñez repression in 1927, when their colleagues in Argentina had ceased to be effective by 1919 and the Brazilian anarchists, by 1921? To what extent was the Chilean industrial relations system, as implemented in the late 1920s and after, a result of the threat that labor militancy appeared to pose during the period before 1927?

By the mid-1920s, something of a paradox had developed. The working class had at last arrived politically. An important force in urban elections, it posed a potential threat of subversion and insurrection and could occasionally become a serious political force in its own right. At the same time, the rivalry between the different union groupings had grown more intense, and by 1924, the working class had split into several competing ideological camps, making unification an impossible dream. The movement as a whole began to decline in 1925. With the union movement weakened and divided, the general strike of 1927 was a dismal failure and paved the way for the Ibáñez purge later that year.

DeShazo's account ends in this era of doldrums, between the end of one chapter of Chilean working-class history and the opening of another. Within a few years, the Socialist party emerged out of the 1932 revolution, the Popular Front came to power, and a long period of Socialist-Communist rivalry began. The achievement of *Urban Workers and Labor Unions in Chile, 1902–1927* is that it unearths the radical current of Chilean labor action representing a different historical tradition from the reformist FOCh and its Communist descendants.

Peter Blanchard's *The Origins of the Peruvian Labor Movement, 1883–1919* covers a period broadly similar to that covered by DeShazo

for Chile, and Blanchard's general approach and conclusions are similar. He stresses the early importance of the Peruvian labor movement and details the ways in which political elites responded to the increased militancy demonstrated by Peruvian workers in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Like DeShazo, Blanchard emphasizes the rivalries and antagonisms between the mutual-aid societies and the anarchist-dominated resistance societies and syndicates. Whereas the mutual-aid societies were relatively conservative and tended to seek government support, the anarchist-led resistance societies were more inclined to use strikes as a way of achieving their ends and were generally more successful than the mutualists. With the economic downturn of 1910, however, the resistance societies were in danger of disappearing and Peruvian workers temporarily moved back toward mutual-aid associations.

This whole issue of the relationship in various Latin American countries between mutualism and the more militant forms of industrial association is, as Blanchard notes, still the subject of historical controversy, as is the more general question of the relationship between artisans and workers during this period. It must be said that while De Shazo presents the reader with a certain amount of systematic evidence on the latter point, Blanchard tends not to differentiate between artisans and workers in any serious way. It might well be that this nondifferentiation corresponds to historical reality, that Peru's lower orders did not make clear distinctions of this sort. Unfortunately, however, Blanchard does not present the data that would enable the reader to ascertain that this was indeed the case.

A similar comment can be made about Blanchard's intriguing chapter on rural labor. Unlike DeShazo and many other authors, Blanchard has included a chapter on union activity among rural workers. He includes in this grouping not only a variety of hacienda workers but also miners and petroleum workers. Further effort will be needed to differentiate more carefully among these diverse occupational categories.

One of the more interesting parts of the book deals with the prolabor government of Billinghurst (1912–14). Elected partly with the aid of the urban masses (like Alessandri in Chile in 1924), the Billinghurst government relied substantially on the organized working class as part of its political constituency and delivered a number of improvements to Peru's workers in return before it was overthrown by a military coup two years later. The Billinghurst regime was so successful in developing support among the working class that both the mutualists and the anarchists began to lose influence. Both groups counterattacked in an effort to win back their supporters, and this reaction led to an increase in labor agitation. Partly as a result of the increase in working-

class unrest, a crisis developed, and the Billinghurst regime was ousted by the military before the relations between regime and organized labor could be clearly defined. Blanchard describes the Billinghurst government as an early experiment in populism, and like other recent writers, he perceives the emergence of populism in Latin America as antedating the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> While this attempt to reevaluate more orthodox notions of populism by tracing its origins to earlier decades is to be welcomed, a number of problems remain. Blanchard's definition of populism as a multiclass alliance between workers and a leader drawn from the elite falls awkwardly between two stools (p. 84). On the one hand, it lacks the theoretical sophistication of what I have elsewhere referred to as the "classical" notion of populism;<sup>3</sup> on the other hand, the definition is too limited to merit the label of "populism." If we are simply talking about a dissident fraction of the elite that relies heavily on labor as part of its political constituency, why can we not simply say so and dispense entirely with the word "populism"? What does it add? The occurrence of governments with some substantial multiclass support will surely come as a surprise only to the most unreconstructed Marxists. This said, Blanchard's analysis is both perceptive and potentially subversive of received notions. For if something very similar to the populist governments of the 1930s and 1940s can be found in the early decades of the twentieth century, then many of the theories that have arisen to explain the development of populism in the later period (for example, mass migration to the cities leading to the emergence of a disposable mass) will warrant serious and critical reassessment. Whatever the eventual outcome of the debate, studies like those of Blanchard and DeShazo on the early working class will inevitably raise a number of questions about our understanding of Latin American politics in general.

Before turning to the two works on Venezuela, one other methodological point raised explicitly by Blanchard requires comment. In justifying his study, Blanchard claims that "the later developments of the labor movement merely built upon the framework laid down during the formative years" (p. 171). I suspect that this statement is something of an exaggeration. Of course, history is important, and decisive events do set the contours for years to come, but labor movements also change, both gradually and through the instrumentality of other, equally important "decisive events" during subsequent periods. It is difficult to argue that a single decisive period or event sets, once and for all, the future of a labor movement (or of anything else, for that matter). In a spirit similar to Blanchard's, Peter DeShazo made a similar claim for the historical impact of the 1903 Valparaíso dock strike in an earlier article.<sup>4</sup> In his book, DeShazo has stepped back from his earlier position to note more cautiously that "the temple of organized labor in

Chile rose stone upon stone. No single law, political event, or charismatic leader built or destroyed this edifice" (p. 88). Between the image of decisive events or epochs laying down a path to be followed immutably by succeeding generations and the image of continuous piecemeal erosion and construction by a host of unchronicled hands, it is surely possible to effect something of a balance. Both images contain an important grain of truth in that change takes both forms. Change may be best visualized as a series of periods of relative stability in systems of labor relations, punctuated by periods of intense conflict and crisis. During these crises, the existing pattern of industrial relations is radically transformed and a new one emerges. The new system will remain more or less stable, undergoing incremental changes for a variety of reasons until it too is swallowed up and transformed in a major crisis. As Blanchard and DeShazo elegantly demonstrate, the second decade of the twentieth century in Peru and the third decade in Chile were periods of crisis for systems of labor relations. Another such crisis occurred throughout Latin America in the late 1940s.

This crisis of the 1940s is the subject of the two books on Venezuela under review here. Julio Godio has written a general history of Venezuelan labor up to the end of the Second World War, while Steve Ellner has focused on a more limited period. His book, *Los partidos políticos y su disputa por el control del movimiento sindical en Venezuela, 1936–1948*, chronicles the rivalry between the Communists and Acción Democrática (AD) during the period between the death of Juan Vicente Gómez in December 1935 and the military coup that overthrew the AD government in 1948. The book discusses organizations, trade unions, and their relations to political parties, and it therefore differs markedly in tone and style from the works by Blanchard and DeShazo. While Ellner has by no means written a comprehensive labor history for this period, he has nevertheless provided a thorough and balanced coverage of the major dimensions of the political history of labor in Venezuela between 1936 and 1948. The period is important, argues Ellner, because it encompassed the simultaneous birth of Venezuela's first real labor organizations and its modern political parties. In contrast to De Shazo and Blanchard, both Ellner and Godio date the birth of organized labor from the emergence of an industrial proletariat in the 1930s. Unlike the experience in other countries in Latin America, anarchist influence in Venezuela was both weak and ephemeral. Is this a real difference between Venezuela on the one hand and Chile and Peru on the other, or does it reflect the different theoretical and methodological positions of the authors? More research will be needed to answer this question. Ellner discounts earlier efforts at mutualist organization as largely ineffectual because of governmental repression. Instead, he traces the origins of the organized labor movement in Venezuela to the



period when Communist parties around the world were committed to popular front tactics. His well-presented account of the intricacies of leftist theorizing provides an indispensable guide to the period.

One fascinating phenomenon to emerge from *Los partidos políticos* is the way in which the ideological and programmatic differences between AD and the Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV) replicated some of the fundamental issues that have vexed Marxists since revolutionary politics in the Third World became a major issue. Acción Democrática was essentially wedded to the classic notion of a revolution by stages: first, a national or bourgeois-democratic revolution, and then at some subsequent point in time, a proletarian revolution. The corollary for those holding this position was the need to form a multiclass party in which no attempt would be made to subordinate the demands of other social classes to those of the proletariat. The analysis owed much to Lenin, and in many ways, it led to policies that may have seemed superficially to have a great deal in common with the Communists' advocacy of a popular front, and later a broad democratic front.

Despite apparently similar ideologies and attempts at working together, relations between AD and the PCV were essentially rivalrous. On two successive occasions, AD was able to increase its strength vis-à-vis its Communist rivals. The first occasion occurred during the Second World War, when AD took a hostile position toward the war, diagnosing it as a matter of interimperialist rivalry. This stance enabled AD members to accuse the PCV of being a puppet of Moscow and of harming workers' interests in order to help the Allied war effort. Particularly when the war ended, AD was able to pick up much support from working-class militants who had been disillusioned by the PCV's policy of restraint and its close relationship with the government of Medina Angarita.

The second occasion was the coup of 1945, which brought AD to power. Once in office, Acción Democrática could use its control over the state apparatus to ensure that its own unions were speedily legitimated, while lengthy delays occurred in recognizing Communist unions. But once in power, the AD leadership moved rapidly to the right. The principle governing its relations with organized labor was that of "social peace." Unions were urged to win the battle for increased production, and the frequency of strikes dropped substantially. This posture partly resulted from an effort to ward off an impending coup from the right. Nonetheless, in 1948 the AD was finally toppled by a military coup, an outcome that proved the policy of "social peace" to have been ineffective. According to Ellner, this policy prevented the workers from mobilizing effectively to resist the coup. Whether in fact Venezuelan workers could have organized more effectively and whether such action might have prevented a coup is a matter of consid-

erable controversy and one that undoubtedly evokes for many readers memories of the debates about the overthrow of the Allende government in 1973.

Many of the trends that Ellner describes regarding Venezuela in this period were paralleled elsewhere in the continent.<sup>5</sup> He is aware of these similarities and indeed notes how events elsewhere (in Columbia, Chile, and Peru) directly affected the course of affairs in Venezuela. The similarities are striking: after a wave of grass-roots militancy inspired both by the economic stimulation engendered by the war and by the general "liberalization" of many political systems in Latin America at the end of the war, the labor movement emerged as a major political force. Partly owing to deep internal divisions within the labor movement and partly as a result of the nascent cold war, governments throughout the region oversaw purges of Communists within the union ranks. By 1948 this process had been completed in nearly all Latin American countries, and a new phase of development of the labor movement had begun. What forms this new system of industrial relations would take depended to a great extent on the nature of the Communists' rivals, which varied greatly from country to country: Catholics in Colombia, *Trabalhistas* in Brazil, Socialists in Chile, *Adecos* in Venezuela, and so on.

Two interrelated questions arise concerning the development of labor movements in Latin America in the period between the Second World War and the cold war. First, what role did the emergence of the cold war play in developments in Latin America and exactly how was its impact felt? Second, to what extent did the causes of the postwar labor conflicts, and their subsequent resolution, differ from one country to another? A great deal of research is needed before these questions can be satisfactorily answered. Nevertheless, some speculative remarks may be in order.<sup>6</sup>

What emerged at the end of the war was a clear perception in Latin America of U.S. hegemony in the non-Communist world. Simultaneously, the North Atlantic economy, with Latin America as an appendage, began what was to be a long period of spectacular economic growth. Governments in Latin America were anxious to continue the industrialization process and believed that continued industrial militancy might hinder this trend in a variety of ways, including becoming a disincentive to foreign investment. Thus the labor question cropped up again, albeit in a form different from the first decade of the century, when the labor question had arisen in a politically more direct form (involving the incorporation of a new actor into the political system). This time the macroeconomic dimension was more obvious, although the question of political power still loomed large. (The working class is never completely incorporated because the accommodation following



the resolution of each crisis is incomplete and provisional, destined to break down at some future point.)

In the context of U.S. hegemony, using the vocabulary of the cold war became an advantage, almost a *sine qua non*. Quite apart from the real instrumental motives for controlling unions, the ritual purging of Communists from the body politic was an obligatory, almost "natural" gesture for the time. In the context of a holy crusade, one cannot afford to be too lenient with the puppets of the powers of Darkness. If this reason were not enough, Serafino Romualdi was touring Latin America on behalf of the U.S. State Department, financing "democratic" unionism. But while one would not wish to understate the importance of direct U.S. efforts in this field, it seems reasonable to argue that the combination of prospects for continued industrialization and the onset of the cold war were enough to set many Latin American leaders on the "right" path.

The second question concerning differences between various national experiences in this period is harder to answer. As has been suggested above, the answer should be partly sought in the varying nature of the beneficiaries of the attack on the Communists. Other possible factors that could help explain the different forms of accommodation that emerged in the 1950s include differences in previously existing industrial relations systems, different levels of industrialization, and the different composition of the working classes themselves. We are still a long way from satisfactory answers to these questions. The questions are implicit in Ellner's book, and he has provided some of the material for some of the answers. As a justly famous review in this journal once suggested, there is much still to be done.<sup>7</sup>

Godio's *El movimiento obrero venezolano, 1850–1944* covers much of the same material as Ellner's book, although Godio also devotes a substantial part of his book to the earlier period of the organized labor movement in Venezuela. Agreeing with Ellner as to the relative unimportance of anarchists in the early Venezuelan movement, Godio also perceives a clear distinction between the actions of the artisans in their mutualist organizations and what he sees as the more properly proletarian strikes and unions that began in the first three decades of the twentieth century. By the 1920s, the key organizing center of the Venezuelan working class was to be found in the oil fields in Zulia. In describing the early attempts at organizing the oil fields, Godio provides illuminating material on workers' standards of living and on the tensions between the Venezuelans and foreign workers.

For Godio (as for Ellner), the story of organized labor in Venezuela really begins in the period after the fall of the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez. Efforts at organization prior to that date were ineffectual and had little, if any, lasting effect. Both accounts of the rivalry

between Acción Democrática and the Partido Comunista de Venezuela during the late 1930s and the 1940s are substantially similar, although Ellner's is easier to follow than the approach adopted by Godio. Although a sociologist by training, Godio has chosen here (as in his other works) to let the documents speak for themselves. Because so little material on the history of Venezuelan labor is accessible, readers will undoubtedly be grateful to the author for devoting about half of the book to extensive quotations. The drawback of such a procedure is that the quoted passages, interspersed throughout the text, make for awkward reading. Some of the quotations are from secondary sources, usually works on economic history, and one wonders why these were not simply paraphrased and footnoted. Many of the lengthier quotations come from the programs of political parties or other organizations and could have been conveniently placed in an appendix. In short, some drastic reorganization of the book might well have resulted in a more readable version.

But the problem is more than one of style; it concerns the kind of data that one might expect in a book on labor history. A glance through the notes suggests that Godio's sources are relatively limited. Aside from secondary sources, they are mainly documents of a formal kind: acts of workers' congresses and party programs, backed up by some newspaper reading. Although Godio has undoubtedly made a useful contribution to the subject, the result seems to be an excessively formal history. The last few years have witnessed a sustained effort by labor historians to move away from the history of organizations and to explore new sources of data and new ways of looking at labor history. On the whole, the "new social history" has shown itself capable of enriching understanding of labor struggles in a number of important ways. Of the books reviewed here, DeShazo's *Urban Workers and Labor Unions in Chile* comes closest to this methodological concern of presenting a different picture by moving away from a total reliance on traditional sources of historical data. With the exception of Godio's passages describing the life of petroleum workers, his book (and to some extent, Ellner's as well) constitutes a rather traditional kind of account, one in which the organizations eclipse the men and women in them (and outside them). This outcome is unfortunate because it leads to a version of history in which true and false consciousness, as expressed in party programs, is taken as a primary determinant of workers' actions. While organizations are important, they are by no means the entire picture, and focusing on them excessively tends to distract attention from the more mundane, but vitally important, aspects of workers' lives. Data for this kind of history are hard to come by. But it is to be hoped that future historians will build on the solid foundations laid down by Godio and Ellner.

NOTES

1. See also B. Fausto, *Trabalho Urbano e Conflito Social* (Rio de Janeiro: Difusão Editorial [DIFEL], 1977), for a similar analysis of the Brazilian labor force.
2. See, for example, M. Coniff, *Urban Politics in Brazil: The Rise of Populism, 1925–1945* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981).
3. I. Roxborough, "Unity and Diversity in Latin American History," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 16, no. 1 (1984):1–16.
4. P. DeShazo, "The Valparaiso Maritime Strike of 1903," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 11, no. 1 (1979):145–68.
5. That Argentina should be an exception to this general pattern is more apparent than real. The fact that the U.S. Embassy had identified Perón with the Axis bloc in the 1940s and had unsuccessfully attempted to intervene against him in the 1946 elections gave a radically different cast to union-state relations in Argentina. Amongst other factors, diplomatic tensions between the United States and Argentina placed an obstacle in the path of U.S. influence over labor union developments in this period.
6. I am indebted to my colleagues of the history seminar entitled "Labor between the Second World War and the Cold War," at the Institute for Latin American Studies in London, and in particular to Leslie Bethell, for a series of stimulating discussions on these questions.
7. K. P. Erickson, P. V. Peppe, and H. A. Spalding, Jr., "Research on the Urban Working Class in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile: What Is Left to Be Done?," *LARR* 9, no. 2 (1974):115–42.