

labour markets, as well as in economic policy more generally, which pointed in the direction of significant shifts in the relationships between organized labour, employers and the state in many countries in Latin America.

These phases in the development of the labour movements of Latin America were intimately linked with shifts in the occupational and class structures of the region, with changes in political and economic systems, and with the development of social movements more broadly defined.

#### FROM THE 1929 DEPRESSION TO THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The impact of the 1929 Depression on the working population of Latin America was profound, though its effects varied considerably from country to country, largely depending on the political repercussions of the economic crisis and on the extent to which import substituting industrialization emerged as a stimulus to employment growth. Everywhere the initial impact of the Depression was a sharp reduction in economic activity and political turmoil. While the roots of political mobilization in many Latin American countries in the twentieth century may be traced back to the twenties or beyond, the Depression of 1929 focussed political and economic conflicts in new ways. At the political level a widespread challenge to continued oligarchic domination developed or was strengthened, and organized labour frequently had to reorient itself to these new political movements. In some countries the seeds were set for new, enduring identifications with popular political movements and political parties. The shift in the Comintern line in 1935 in favour of Popular Front policies created conditions more favourable for continental labour unity than ever before. With the exception of the period of the Hitler–Stalin pact (1939–41), the bulk of Latin America's popular and leftist forces found Popular Frontism (and its wartime continuation, National Frontism) a convenient vehicle for papering over internal differences and, in some cases, for achieving a remarkable unity of purpose.

In 1938 Mexican labour leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano formed the Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina (CTAL) to bring together the bulk of organized labour in the region. Born in 1894 into an upper-middle class family in Puebla, Mexico, Lombardo had become the leading intellectual of the Mexican labour movement and was one of the leaders of the CTM. Although he always denied being a Party member, Lombardo after his visit to Moscow in 1935 adopted a position similar, if

not identical, to that of the Comintern, that is to say, he conceived the CTAL as the organizational vehicle for a mass, left-leaning support for Popular Front policies. Within a few years the CTAL became – at least on paper – the dominant labour organization in Latin America. It claimed to represent some three million workers out of a total unionized labour force of less than four million. There were, moreover, friendly relations between the CTAL and the equally recently founded Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the United States.

In Argentina, the period from 1930 to the military government of 1943 was a largely defensive one for the unions. The conservative governments of this period were hostile to the idea of working-class participation in politics, and a series of basically fraudulent elections effectively blocked the development of broad-based social movements. Union membership, not high to begin with, may have dropped somewhat in the first years of the 1930s and then grew by 40 per cent between 1936 and 1941;<sup>5</sup> strike activity fell off from an average of 104 strikes per year in the period 1920–9 to an average of 70 per year between 1930 and 1944.<sup>6</sup> However, towards the end of the 1930s steady improvements in labour organization began to appear, stimulated in part by the growth of import-substituting industries and in part by the increasing institutionalization of industrial relations through the Department of Labour.

During this period the railway unions, led by moderate socialists, continued to hold a dominant position within organized labour. But the Communist Party made a number of significant advances in the Argentine union movement during the 1930s, gaining important centres of strength in meat-packing, construction, textiles and metalworking.

The thirties also witnessed the beginning of a major social and cultural transformation of the working class in Argentina. Prior to 1930 the weight of immigrants from southern Europe, and in particular from Italy, in the composition of the Argentine proletariat had been marked. Immigrants had played a significant role in labour organization in the first decades of the century and had contributed to the strength and diffusion of anarchist and socialist ideologies. The social composition of the urban working class began to change with the cessation of mass immigration

<sup>5</sup> According to Ronaldo Munck, in 1930 the CGT organized 200,000 of Argentina's four and a half million workers. By 1936 CGT membership was 262,000 and had risen to 330,000 by 1941. Membership for the union movement as a whole rose from 369,000 in 1936 to 506,000 in 1941. R. Munck, *Argentina: from Anarchism to Perónism* (London, 1987), pp. 108–115.

<sup>6</sup> R. Munck, *Argentina*, pp. 100, 124.

from Europe and the increase of migration into Buenos Aires from the interior of the country. There is still controversy about the impact of these changes in the social origins of the working class on its culture and on the political attitudes of workers, particularly with reference to the emergence of Peronism in the period 1943–6. Although some scholars have suggested that the Argentine working class was dividing into an older, proletarian segment and a new mass of migrants from the countryside, the evidence for this is far from conclusive, and it is more likely that, at least in terms of political and industrial attitudes, there were few important differences between these segments of the Argentine working class. Perhaps of greater import in these years was the increase in the number of Argentine workers who were native or naturalized citizens and thus had the right to vote.

In Brazil the period from 1930 to 1945 was dominated by the presence of Getúlio Vargas in government and his changing strategy towards organized labour. Brazilian unions in 1930 were weak and divided between anarchist, communist and more moderate currents. Official data indicate 328 unions in existence in 1935, with some 137,000 members.<sup>7</sup> There were a mere ninety strikes in the state of São Paulo during the entire decade.<sup>8</sup> Early efforts to bring labour under the wing of the state were initiated with the creation in 1931 of a National Department of Labour headed by *tenente* Lindolfo Collor. Collor actively sought to incorporate organized labour within the body politic largely through the creation of an increasingly complex body of labour legislation. Despite some vacillation in the regime's attitude to organized labour prior to the establishment of the Estado Novo, throughout this period legal recognition of unions was a central part of the government's control strategy.

What happened in the labour movement, as always, depended very much on national politics. In 1935 the Brazilian Communist Party, together with remnants of the *tenente* movement, launched a series of attempted insurrections, mainly in northeastern cities. The uprising was rapidly put down, and the Communist Party persecuted. The repression, however, seems to have spread to the working class as a whole and made active organizational work more difficult from this date until the over-

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Carlos Bernardo, *Tutela e autonomia sindical: Brasil, 1930–1945* (São Paulo, 1982), p. 113. By 1936 the number of unions had risen to 823, and the number of unionized workers to 308,000. However, changing legal requirement for union registration in the 1930s makes it difficult to get an accurate estimate of trends.

<sup>8</sup> Aziz Simão, *Sindicato e Estado* (São Paulo, 1966), p. 142.

throw of the Vargas government in 1945. The imposition of the Estado Novo in 1937 then consolidated the corporatist orientation of Brazilian industrial relations. Increasingly, unions and employers were organized in industry-wide *sindicatos*, with a monopoly of representation, and within a tripartite system of conciliation and arbitration for which the model was Italian labour legislation of the Mussolini period.

During the Estado Novo (1937–45) Brazilian labour lost whatever organizational autonomy it possessed and became largely subordinate to the corporatist state. Union funds were tightly controlled, and the sizeable sums accruing from the *imposto sindical* (a compulsory union tax of one day's wages per year per employee deducted directly from the payroll of all workers, whether or not they belonged to a union) were primarily destined to provide a range of health and welfare benefits for union members. Union leaders were vetted by the political police (the Departamento de Ordem Político e Social, DOPS) and increasingly resembled a timid bureaucratic clique. Labour legislation codified in 1943 in the Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho (CLT) benefited urban workers, particularly those in unions, and the industrial growth of this period did something to push up wages for skilled workers. The CLT was conceived as an attempt by the state to protect as well as to control labour. As such it was fiercely attacked by employers and seems to have elicited widespread, if passive, support from within the ranks of organized labour. However, with strikes an infrequent occurrence, with a ban on any kind of national confederation of labour, and with independent leftist leadership effectively removed, unions were in no position to seek improvements for the majority of the working class.

In contrast to the generally unfavourable political environment of Argentina and Brazil, the Mexican labour movement did well in the second half of the thirties. The end of the twenties had seen Mexican unionism in disarray: the once-powerful Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM) had collapsed and Mexican union organizations were fragmented and economically and politically weak. However, the early thirties was a period of sustained efforts on the part of Mexican union organizers to move towards greater unity. This was particularly apparent with the formation of national industrial unions in railways (1933), in mining and metal-working (1934), and in oil extraction and refining (1934). Together with teachers and workers in electricity generating and distribution (which remained divided into a number of competing unions), these big industrial unions were destined to play a major role in the Mexican labour

movement in subsequent years. With Lázaro Cárdenas' accession to the presidency in 1934, labour conflict accelerated: while the average annual number of strikes between 1925 and 1933 had been only 23, for the years 1934–40, the average annual strike rate was 439.<sup>9</sup>

Cárdenas, while sharing many of the corporatist tendencies of his Argentine and Brazilian peers, sought to implement them in a radically different political context. The Mexican Revolution had dramatically shifted political power to those with access to the new state. In addition to regional *caudillos*, and to the political bureaucracy, these new power contenders included both organized labour and the organized sectors of the peasantry. Whereas previous presidents had sought to distance themselves from labour, Cárdenas, in part as a strategy to prevent outgoing president Plutarco Elías Calles from exercising continuing power from behind the throne, made organized labour and the peasantry into major bulwarks of his regime. This shift was facilitated by a switch in the line of the Mexican Communist Party in 1935 from opposition to Cárdenas as a 'neo-fascist' to adoption of a Popular Front strategy and support for the new president. This, together with the formation of the national industrial unions and the control by Vicente Lombardo Toledano of a major split from the CROM, provided the conditions for the formation in 1936 of the CTM. With an initial membership of about 600,000, by 1941 the CTM had doubled its ranks to 1,300,00.<sup>10</sup> The CTM has continued to dominate Mexican unionism to this day.

There are considerable difficulties in the interpretation of the data, but it is likely that real wages for most industrial workers rose during the Cárdenas presidency, although the inflation at the end of the thirties may have eroded some of these gains. The beginnings of import substitution industrialization expanded urban employment. At the same time, however, these years also saw a considerable migratory flow to the big cities which undoubtedly did much to worsen labour market conditions.

Unionization proceeded apace, with both communists and independent leftists making substantial gains in influence. Political currents within Mexican unionism at this time may roughly be described as falling into three categories. At the conservative end of the spectrum there was a group of union leaders who came to be known as the *cinco lobitos*. The leader of this group was Fidel Velázquez, born in 1900, who had begun his political

<sup>9</sup> J. Wilkie, *The Mexican Revolution, Federal Expenditure and Social Change Since 1910* (Berkeley, Cal., 1967), p. 184.

<sup>10</sup> D. La Botz, *The Crisis of Mexican Labor* (New York, 1988), p. 61.

career as a Zapatista organizer. He had then moved on to organize the workers involved in milk distribution in Mexico City, and from there had risen to a position of influence among the unions organizing workers in the capital. The other *lobitos* were Adolfo Sánchez Madariaga, Luís Quintero, Jesús Yurén and Fernando Amilpa. This group was inclined towards a pragmatic accommodation with the government of the day, was basically reluctant to foster union mobilization and strike activity, and was suspicious of the rank-and-file. At the radical end of the spectrum were the Communists and a number of independent leftists. These groups controlled perhaps half of the votes in the CTM, and were particularly influential in the national industrial unions.<sup>11</sup> They supported Cárdenas and sought to use their relatively favoured position to further worker mobilization. Straddling the divide, and attempting to raise himself above these factional disputes, was Vicente Lombardo Toledano.

There were a number of major strikes in Mexico during this period. Among the more dramatic were the oil workers' strike of 1937, which Cárdenas then used to push through the expropriation of the industry, and the strikes in the industrial city of Monterrey in 1936, which brought already tense relations between Cárdenas and the conservative *regiomontano* bourgeoisie to fever pitch. Following the nationalization of the oil industry, there was a prolonged tussle between Cárdenas and the union concerning the oil workers' attempts to establish a form of worker control in the industry which, together with increasingly strident demands for higher wages, led eventually to government use of troops to break a strike in 1940 (and nearly to break up the union). Similarly, worker administration on the railways (nationalized in 1937) had been a failure and relations between railway workers and Cárdenas had grown increasingly embittered. Thus, unlike the successful imposition of state control over a relatively weak labour movement in Brazil, Mexico saw the independent mobilization of organized labour which entered into an uneasy, tense relationship with a left-leaning president without being willing to give up its autonomy as the process of consolidation of the revolutionary state continued.

<sup>11</sup> During a temporary split in the CTM in 1937 both sides published claims about their membership. The Communist-led left claimed to control 366,000 workers against 292,000 controlled by the *cinco lobitos*. Lombardo Toledano, at this time allied with the *cinco lobitos*, claimed that the Communist controlled 139,000 workers, and the conservatives 597,000. Despite the considerable discrepancies, which are typical of statistics on unionization (and particularly so for Mexico), these figures suggest an overall membership of about 700,000. J. F. Leal, *Agrupaciones y burocracias sindicales en México, 1906/1938* (Mexico, D.F., 1985), pp. 124–5.

In Chile the impact of the Depression of 1929 was particularly severe, with a dramatic rise in unemployment, particularly in the mining sector. The political turbulence of the 1920s spilled over into the following decade, its most dramatic expression being the short-lived Socialist Republic of 1932. While this had little immediate impact on labour, the subsequent formation of the Socialist Party in April 1933 was important in furthering the development of a ideologically militant labour movement. The conservative administration of Arturo Alessandri (1932–8) was replaced in 1938 by the Popular Front government of Pedro Aguirre Cerda (1938–41). This, and the successor Radical governments of the 1940s, relied heavily on labour support in electoral terms, though this did not prevent the passage of anti-labour legislation towards the end of the decade.

On the whole the 1930s were a period of union growth, with the number of unions increasing from 421 in 1930 to 1,880 in 1940. During the same years, membership increased from 55,000 to 162,000.<sup>12</sup> Prior to the founding of the Confederación de Trabajadores de Chile (CTCh) in 1936, the Chilean labour movement had been divided into three main sections. The anarcho-syndicalist Confederación General de Trabajo (CGT) was, by 1936, a spent force, and the Communist-dominated Federación de Obreros de Chile (FOCh) had been decimated, and was now confined largely to miners in coal and nitrates. The Socialists, however, continued to grow, and came to dominate the union movement in the thirties.

In Peru the Depression of 1929 led to massive lay-offs and an employer offensive against organized labour. During this decade both the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA) and the Communist Party emerged as rivals for the political representation of Peruvian labour. However, the situation was initially complicated with the seizure of power in August 1930 by the populist Luís Sánchez Cerro in a military coup and his subsequent victory in the presidential elections of 1931 with the support of unemployed artisans and unskilled labour. In so far as it is possible to distinguish Sánchez Cerro's social base from that of APRA, it was formed by the unorganized sections of the working poor, rather than on the somewhat better-off and more organized proletariat and white collar salariat which formed an important part of APRA's constituency.<sup>13</sup> In early 1932 Sánchez Cerro declared an emergency law and embarked on a

<sup>12</sup> Paul Drake, *Socialism and Populism in Chile, 1932–52* (Urbana, Ill. 1978), p. 178.

<sup>13</sup> S. Stein, *Populism in Peru* (Madison, Wis., 1980), p. 114.

wholesale repression of both labour and APRA. The failure of the July 1932 APRA insurrection in Trujillo opened the way for further repressive measures. The recently formed Confederación General de Trabajadores del Perú (CGTP) was dissolved, and the labour movement driven underground. With the assassination of Sánchez Cerro in April 1933 and his replacement by General Benevides, there was some easing up on labour repression and minimum wage and social security legislation was enacted in 1933 and 1936. The government of Manuel Prado (1939–45) tolerated a greater degree of political liberty, but continued the basically anti-labour orientation of the previous administrations. During these years APRA made itself into the principal political current within the labour movement, though this was increasingly challenged by the Communists (who were particularly influential in the strategic mining sector).

In Bolivia the decade opened with the Chaco War (1932–5), and a search for alternatives to oligarchic domination. After the Chaco War the labour movement gradually re-emerged under the military socialist governments of David Toro and Germán Busch. A Ministry of Labour was established in 1936 with a labour leader, Waldo Alvarez, as its head. In the same year the Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores Bolivianos (CSTB) was established, and was to be the most powerful labour organization in Bolivia until the formation of the Confederación Obrera Boliviana (COB) in the course of the 1952 revolution. Politically, union activists were divided between supporters of the nationalist and corporatist Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario (MNR) and adherents of Guillermo Lora's Trotskyist Partido Obrero Revolucionario (POR). Throughout this period there was resistance from the mine owners to unionization, and the army was regularly employed to break strikes. In 1942 a sizeable clash occurred at the Catavi mine, leaving between 40 and 400 miners and family members dead.

The early thirties in Cuba witnessed high levels of unemployment and the beginning of organization against the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado. In March 1930 a general strike of some 200,000 paralyzed the island and was put down with extreme force and the proclamation in November of a state of siege. Discontent was widespread and in August 1933 the Machado government was brought down by a broadly-based movement of opposition, in which a notable role was played by sugar workers, who organized massive strikes, seized sugar mills, and in a number of places formed 'soviets'. The ensuing political turmoil ushered in a brief period of rapid organizational growth, culminating in a massive



general strike in February and March 1935. President Carlos Mendieta order the army to suppress the strike, imposed martial law and a subsequent period of repression placed unions on the defensive. It was only towards the end of the decade that organized labour began to recover from the repression of the mid-thirties. The Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba (CTC) was founded in January 1939 with the support of the CTAL; it claimed some 645,000 members.<sup>14</sup> Cuba, like the countries of the Southern Cone, had a highly urbanized work force, resulting in a relatively high level of unionization. In addition, the seasonal nature of employment in the highly proletarianized sugar sector, together with the dramatic oscillations in the international demand for sugar, produced a working class where rural-urban divisions were less salient than elsewhere in the region, and where a store of accumulated grievances about unemployment, economic dependency and foreign domination, and authoritarian labour relations combined with Cuba's revolutionary experiences to produce a labour movement that readily accepted the leadership of radical parties, first the Communists and later the July 26 Movement.

The immediate impact of the Depression of 1929 in Colombia was to further weaken a labour movement that was as yet still in an early stage of development. Once the immediate effects of the crisis were past, labour organization began to grow and strikes to break out. Between 1933 and 1935 there was a marked increase in strike activity, beginning with workers in the publicly owned transport sector and spreading to the private sector. By 1935 the first truly national organizations began to be formed, and something like 42,000 workers were affiliated with unions.<sup>15</sup> These years were marked by the support given by the unions to the Liberal governments of Alfonso López (1934–8 and 1942–5) and Eduardo Santos (1938–42), though the Communists were also influential in the union movement. In 1936 the change in the political line of the Comintern adopted the previous year paved the way for the creation first of the Confederación Sindical de Colombia and then of the Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia, affiliated with the CTAL.

Elsewhere in the continent, weak labour movements struggled for survival in the face of difficult economic conditions and general government hostility and repression. Despite widespread popular mobilization and

<sup>14</sup> Aleida Plasencia Moro, 'Historia del movimiento obrero en Cuba', in Pablo González Casanova (ed.), *Historia del movimiento obrero en América Latina*, Vol. 1, (Mexico, D.F., 1984), p. 137.

<sup>15</sup> M. Urrutia, *The Development of the Colombian Labor Movement* (New Haven, Conn., 1969), p. 183. By 1942 union membership had climbed to 95,000.

considerable political turmoil, the record for organized labour in the thirties was generally dismal.

The Second World War might have been expected to produce widespread labour unrest, as unions sought to use the generally tighter labour markets to counter the effects of inflation on real wages. In fact the general trend was in the opposite direction. Labour generally supported the majority of Latin American governments when, in the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, they declared war on the Axis powers. The war was seen largely as a war for democracy against dictatorship, and under the influence of the Communist parties of the region and the CTAL, most labour movements followed up the policies of the Popular Front with no-strike pledges for its duration. While this policy was by no means universally popular among unionists, the CTAL had sufficient authority in most countries for this to result in a fall in strike activity. Argentina and Bolivia had governments which refused until the very end of the war to declare war on the Axis, but in these countries government hostility to the labour movement meant (with the exception of Argentina after 1943) little strike activity in any case. In Brazil, where labour legislation prohibited unions from affiliation with international bodies such as the CTAL, the Vargas government maintained control over the unions for the duration of the war. Strike activity throughout the continent was thus quite limited at a time of employment expansion and significant inflationary pressures on real wages.<sup>16</sup>

#### FROM THE SECOND WORLD WAR TO THE COLD WAR<sup>17</sup>

Falling real wages combined with no-strike pledges during the Second World War resulted in a build-up of pressure for major change as the end

<sup>16</sup> In the absence of any definitive study, there remains some controversy concerning the trend of real wages during the Second World War. The tight labour market almost certainly led to some wage drift, as workers worked more overtime and as employers competed against one another for categories of labour which were in short supply. The increase in the number of threshold members holding paid employment as a result of the expansion of industrial employment and the entry of women into the labour market also probably had the effect of raising real family incomes. Operating against these factors was an increase in rural to urban migration (counter-acting the tightening of the labour market), and the no-strike pledges of the unions in the face of rising inflation. The net result was probably a substantial decline in working-class incomes. Certainly, available statistics for the wages of industrial workers in this period indicate a widespread and substantial decline in real wages during the war.

<sup>17</sup> This section draws heavily on Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough (eds), *Latin America between the Second World War and the Cold War, 1944–8* (Cambridge, 1992).