

**Mexican Miners' Moral Economy: Quick Transformations, 1927-1940**  
**(From the Great Depression to *Cardenismo*)**

Marcos T. Aguila M.

Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Azcapotzalco (México)

(Prepared for delivery at the 1998 Meeting of the Latin American Studies Association at Chicago,  
Illinois, September 24-26, 1998)

“For the ‘market’ turns out to be a junction-point between social, economic and intellectual  
histories, and a sensitive metaphor for many kinds of exchange”

E.P. Thompson (*The Moral Economy Reviewed*)

The study of miners in early post-revolutionary Mexico and the years of the Great Depression and *Cardenismo* should be examined within the context of recent Latin American labor historiography. An interesting debate, which took place in the pages of International Labor and Working Class History in 1989, can serve as a point of departure.<sup>1</sup> The content of that debate, suggests a polarizing trend in terms of either studying Latin American labor as a whole or the specifics of its national, regional, or economic sectoral evolution ("the common and the specific," in Perry Anderson's terms). Of the two options, the specific is clearly the one that better applies to the study I present here.<sup>2</sup> Thus, for instance, the comparative study of the evolution of miners' struggles in Chile, Peru, or Bolivia helps to understand

---

<sup>1</sup> Emilia Viotti da Costa, "Experience versus Structures: New tendencies in the History of Labor and the Working Class in Latin America- What Do We Gain? What Do We Lose?", ILWCH, Num.36, Fall 1989, pp. 3-24. The scholars participating in this debate were Barbara Weinstein, Perry Anderson, Hobart A. Spalding and June Nash. Ian Roxborough, "The Urban Working Class and the Labor Movement in Latin America since 1930," Vol 7, Cambridge History of Latin America, (Cambridge, Camb., 1996), pp. 307- 378, is one of the best existing accounts of modern Latin American labor history.

<sup>2</sup> One good example of the new trend would be Peter DeShazo, Urban Workers and Labor Unions in Chile, 1902-1927 (Madison, 1983), heavily based on oral interviews is Peter Winn, Weavers of Revolution: The Yarur Workers and Chile's Road to Socialism (Oxford, 1986); an in-depth study of Argentina's *Cordobazo*, which seems to generalize the importance of factory relationships in the emergence of labor consciousness: James P. Brennan, The Labor Wars in Córdoba, 1955-1976: Ideology, Work and Labor Politics in an Argentine Industrial City (Harvard, 1994). For a useful general comparative study based on the economic sectors mostly oriented to the international markets: Charles Bergquist, Labor in Latin America: Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia (Stanford, 1986). Also by Charles Bergquist "What is Being Done? Some Recent Studies on the Urban Working Class and Organized Labor in Latin America", Latin American Research Review, Vol 16, Num. 2, 1981, pp. 202-223. Another approach, based on diplomatic sources and political in character: Jon V. Kofas, The Struggle for Legitimacy: Latin American Labor and the United States, 1930-1960 (Temple, 1992), which covers Mexico, Chile, Cuba, Guatemala, Bolivia, and the role of international labor organizations in the region.

Mexican miners' own peculiarities as much as the study of Mexican railroad, oil, or textile workers. Similarly, the rural background of miners in the Peruvian and Bolivian highlands offers an interesting parallel to Mexican miners in the older colonial areas such as Hidalgo, Guanajuato, and Zacatecas.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, industrial mining in northern Mexico appeared to have more in common with the industrial mining sector of Chile.<sup>4</sup> Current studies on Latin American labor tend to pay more attention to the workers in and out of the workplace; they consider ethnic and gender issues, workers as social actors rather than as almost exclusively political or union figures. Much of the new labor history tends to rely on the methodological advances laid down by the cultural tradition of E. P. Thompson as well as the sociological background of Harry Braverman.<sup>5</sup> This switch in emphasis (bottom-up rather than top-down) was made possible by the searching of new sources: demographic data, companies' records, and states' local health and educational archives, instead of mostly political reviews, newspapers or union materials, and oral interviews.

A historiographical review of studies devoted particularly to Mexican labor history and mining is in itself a difficult task. Some of the most interesting work in the field has given preference to colonial mining economy and labor.<sup>6</sup> There is also some interesting research in progress on nineteenth-century Mexican mining. Interest in the colonial period is hardly accidental, considering the enormous significance

---

<sup>3</sup> For Bolivia see June Nash, The Miners Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us (New York, 1978), as well as her I Spent My Life in the Mines: The Story of Juan Rojas, Bolivian Tin Miner (New York, 1992), for Peru, Florencia Mallon, The Defense of Community in Peru's Central Highlands, Peasant Struggle and Capitalist Transitions, 1860-1940 (Princeton, 1983), Josh DeWind, Peasant Become Miners: The Evolution of Industrial Mining Systems in Peru, 1902-1974 (New York, 1987), Dirk Kruijt, Labor Relations and Multinational Corporations: The Cerro de Pasco Corporation in Peru, 1902-1974 (Assen, 1979); Bryan R. Roberts and Norman Long, Miners, Peasants and Entrepreneurs: Regional Development in the Central Highlands of Peru (Cambridge, Camb., 1984).

<sup>4</sup> See Arthur Lawrence Stickell, Migration and Mining: Labor in Northern Chile in the Nitrate Era, 1880-1930, Michael Monteon, Chile in the Nitrate Era (Madison, 1982); also John Elmer Gray, "Decentralization, Public Policy and Participation in an Authoritarian Chile, and Cardenismo and Mining in Mexico: A Flexible Response to Dependency" (MA Thesis, UT Austin, 1994)

<sup>5</sup> E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York, 1975 [First edition 1963]), Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century (New York, 1974). These two authors may be considered more as complementary rather than opposites. Another significant influence (from David Montgomery's Workers' Control in America) has been emphasized by Jonathan C. Brown (editor), Workers' Control in Latin America, 1930-1973 (Chapel, Hill, 1997), p. 11-12

<sup>6</sup> For example, material from the Archivo Histórico de la Compañía Real del Monte y Pachuca has been explored intensively. Some works based on this source are: Gilda Cubillo Moreno, Los dominios de la plata: El precio del aue, el peso del poder. Empresarios y trabajadores en las minas de Pachuca y Zimapan, 1552-1620 (México, 1991); Agustín Ramos, La Gran cruzada (México, 1992); Inés Herrera et. al. "Etnia y clase, los trabajadores ingleses de la Cia. Real del Monte y Pachuca, 1821-906," Cuaderno de Trabajo, INAH (México, 1981). On the early nineteenth century Robert W. Randall, Real del Monte: A British Mining Venture in Mexico (Austin, 1972).

mining had for the Spanish Empire's finances, as well as the local impact it had in New Spain, given the Crown's policy of massive extraction of precious metals.<sup>7</sup>

A byproduct of the studies on the Colonial and Porfirian periods has been a growing knowledge of economic elites, international markets, and the new technologies involved in the labor process. None of these subjects will be developed in this essay, however. I will essentially discuss the impact of the depression on the mine workers' attitudes and responses, under the concept of a changing "moral economy". While the concept has traditionally been associated to long standing customs and social behavior, it seemed attractive to point out a case of quick transformations, at least in connection with the shop-floor labor relations of mine workers and management in early post-revolutionary Mexico.

Probably the most complete text on twentieth-century Mexican mining is the collective work edited by Juan Luis Sariago, et. al.<sup>8</sup> Several of the authors participating in this book wrote shorter monographic case studies during the 1980's that deal with miners and mining in a sophisticated way. Thus, one contemporary trend in research combines and synthesizes the recent advances in the historiography of the Mexican Revolution and labor. This particular line of investigation has produced regional studies whose topics are generally specific firms or plants. This approach has promising results, often associated with the recovery of local judicial and municipal archives as well as company and family records, which are normally ignored in national studies. Among other gains, this type of economic, business, and labor "micro history" has managed to broaden our knowledge of how miners lived, why businesses failed, or succeeded, and sometimes has detailed the technological history of some firms.<sup>9</sup> Along similar lines, William French's and Adrian Bantjes' doctoral dissertations –currently available as books- are imaginative additions to the

---

<sup>7</sup> See especially David Brading, Miners and Merchants in Bourbon Mexico, 1763-1810 (Cambridge, Eng., 1971) and Peter Blackwell, Minería y sociedad en el México colonial: Zacatecas, 1546-1700 (México, 1984 [First de. 1971]). See also Enrique Florescano (ed.) De la Colonia al Imperio. La clase obrera en la historia de México (México, 1983); Doris Ladd, The Making of a Strike: Mexican Silver Workers Struggles in Real del Monte, 1776-1775 (Lincoln, 1988). For the Porfirian period, the pioneering works belongs to Guadalupe Nava Otero, "La Minería" in Daniel Cosío Villegas, Historia Moderna de México, Vol. 7 (México, 1965) pp. 179-311; Inés Herrera has also contributed to the field in works such as Minería americana colonial y del siglo XIX (Mexico, 1994), and in collaboration with Cuauhtémoc Velasco, Alma Parra, Eduardo Flores and Edgar Gutiérrez, Estado y minería en México (1767-1910) (México, 1988), the principal general study available on this period. See also Eduardo Flores Clair, Conflictos de trabajo en una empresa minera: Real del Monte y Pachuca, 1872-1877 (México, 1991), Anne Staples, Bonanzas y borrascas mineras: El Estado de México, 1821-1876 (México, 1994), and the forthcoming dissertations of Alma Parra Campos and Nicolás Cárdenas.

<sup>8</sup> J.L. Sariago, L. Reygadas, M. A. Gómez and J. Farrera, El Estado y la minería mexicana. Política trabajo y sociedad en el siglo XX, (México, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> J. L. Sariago, Enclaves y minerales en el norte de México. Historia social de los mineros de Cananea y Nueva Rosita (México, 1988); Luis Reygadas, Proceso de trabajo y acción obrera. Los mineros de Nueva Rosita (México, 1987); Jesús Gómez Serrano, Aguascalientes: Imperio de los Guggenheim (México, 1982). Similarly, Nicolás Cárdenas Una experiencia obrera radical. Los mineros de Jalisco (México, 1993); Juan Manuel Romero Gil, El Boleo, un pueblo que se negó a morir, 1885-1954 (México, 1990).

subject, based on local archives and detailed descriptions of miners' social life.<sup>10</sup> While French concentrates on the social behavior of Chihuahua miners' families, Bantjes paints a robust picture of the role played by the semi-artisan miners in Sonoran copper mining districts. These miners' attitudes resembled those of artisans and peasants more than those of urban workers, in a sort of traditional "miners' moral economy."<sup>11</sup> In the case of Sonora, Michael J. Gonzáles has also improved our understanding of power relations (labor, capital and state) in the U.S. Copper companies in the region from the 1900's to the 1920's.<sup>12</sup> The activism of workers during the revolution has not yet been fully appreciated. As Jeffrey Bortz's work has brought to light in the case of textile workers, "the Mexican revolution is not only a question of who ran the country but who ran the workplace."<sup>13</sup>

Overall, the new studies on Latin American labor have given workers' participation in the economic and political arenas a higher profile than previously acknowledged. Urban labor became a decisive national actor in Latin American politics during the 1930's<sup>14</sup>. National labor organizations and labor laws emerged then. In 1936 alone, for example, Chile Colombia and Mexico found their own national labor *centrales*: the CTCh, CTC and CTM.<sup>15</sup>

### Labor laws and revolution

One of the first consequences of General Porfirio Díaz's being forced to leave the presidency, in May 1911, was the increase in large-scale worker protests in various parts of Mexico. This included numerous strikes in mining camps and cities throughout Mexico. One particularly active place was Cananea, in Sonora. Miners of this and other northern states joined (whether voluntarily or not) revolutionary armies in large numbers. Violence erupted on many occasions, such as a 20-day strike in Cananea aimed at the recognition of the workers' union and several other economic demands in July 1914. After being forced to return to work by constitutionalist army officials, miners burned two shafts in

---

<sup>10</sup> William French, Peaceful and working people. Manners, Morals and Class Formation in Modern Mexico (Albuquerque, 1996), after his 1990 PhD dissertation; Bantjes Adrian, "Politics, Class and Culture in Post-Revolutionary Mexico: Cardenismo and Sonora, 1929-940", PhD. dissertation, (Austin, 1991), which includes an excellent chapter on the effects of the depression in the *Sonoran* mining industry.

<sup>11</sup> This after James Scott, Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (New Haven, 1985), also by Scott, Domination and the Art of Resistance; Hidden Transcripts (New Haven, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Michael J. Gonzáles, "U.S. Copper companies, the Mine Workers, and the Mexican Revolution. 1910-1920," Hispanic American Historical Review, Vol. 76, Num. 3, 1996, pp. 503-533, and "United States Copper Companies, the State and Labor Conflict in Mexico, 1900-1910," Journal of Latin American Studies, Vol. 26, October 1994, pp. 651-681.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Bortz, "Without any more law than their own caprice: Cotton textile workers and the Challenge to Factory Authority during the Mexican Revolution", forthcoming, p. 4 (photocopy), 1997

<sup>14</sup> See Charles Bergquist, Labor in Latin America, R.B. Collier and D. Collier, Shaping the Political Arena (Princeton, 1991).

retaliation.<sup>16</sup> There was nothing surprising about this sudden crisis in labor relations. Within every structure of State domination one can find a degree of control over the labor forces as a prerequisite for production. Every process of State hegemony goes through a stage of "convincing" the workers of their own subordination. This process is expressed then in an unavoidable collective bargaining, or *pacto laboral*. This pact has a legal, written form of expression, as well as an even more decisive, un-written form manifested through work discipline and traditional cultural behavior. When these last two factors are questioned by society through a greater or lesser degree of violence (such as in the case of the fall of Díaz), the written part of the work agreement will have to change and reflect the new balance of power sooner or later. It is possible that the social upheaval results in the weakening of labor, or, on the contrary, that the process of questioning authority favors labor concerns. This was the case with regard to the impact caused by the Mexican Revolution on labor discipline and labor rulings.

As early as September 22, 1911, and even before the formal recognition of Francisco I. Madero as the new constitutional president, León de la Barra's government had already sent a bill to the Chamber of Deputies providing for the establishment of a Labor Department that would depend on the Ministry of Development (Fomento). However, the bill remained only on paper until January 21, 1912, already under Madero's administration, when Antonio Ramos Pedrueza and Adalberto A. Esteva became director and subdirector of this attention-getting new department.<sup>17</sup> Despite the obvious willingness to attempt to help restructure the labor relations inherited from the Porfiriato, the means with which to do this were slight. The department began with a staff of 12 (a director, a subdirector, an official, two inspectors, two minor officials, an archivist, two clerks, and two office employees, or *meritorios*), with a budget of around 46,000 pesos annually.<sup>18</sup> To a certain extent, the need for negotiating boards, or *juntas*, arose from one of the department's main functions, which was expressed as the need for "obtaining a fair arrangement in the case of conflict between owners and workers, and to be an arbiter with respect to their differences."<sup>19</sup>

Madero's fall from power and Mexico's turbulent revolutionary years were bound to affect the Labor Department of the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor. In only a four-year period, it went from being under the auspices of the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor with Huerta, back to the Ministry of Development (September 11, 1914), with Venustiano Carranza, and thereafter to the State Department,

---

<sup>15</sup> Ian Roxborough, *The Urban Working Class*, pp. 323-325.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Gonzalez, "United States Copper Companies, the Mine Workers' Movement, and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920," *HAHR*, vol. 76, Num. 3, August 1996, p. 515.

<sup>17</sup> Felipe Remolina Roqueñí, *Evolución de las instituciones y del derecho del trabajo en México*, JFCyA (México, 1976) p. 13-14 and ss.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

again with Carranza, on January 30, 1915. During this time (December 1916-January 1917), the new constitution was being discussed in the city of Querétaro, where it was approved a few months later.

One of the main themes of this discussion was the degree of autonomy that State labor law should have compared, to federal laws. In fact, autonomy versus centralization was one of several conflicts that had to be solved, not only in the area of labor, but also in others such as education and local finances. In the case of labor, the progressive nature of Article 123 was directed toward a general norm, and did not manage to achieve consensus with respect to its specific applications. As Remolina points out, "the idea of giving local congresses the ability to regulate Article 123 triumphed over the project presented by Carranza and his followers--something that over the years resulted in an unnecessary proliferation of different codes and norms." Paradoxically, organized labor could not fully take advantage of the progressive nature of the article at this stage.<sup>20</sup> Yet between the years of 1917 and 1929 some 90 specific labor rulings, each one quite different from the other, were passed at the local level. These variations were due to the distinct composition of the political groups within the states, and ranged from radical "red" legislation in Yucatán, Veracruz, and Tabasco, to conservative codes in Nuevo León and Oaxaca.<sup>21</sup>

As with other areas of the State's institutional life, it was not until the Calles administration that there was any significant progress with respect to specific rulings on the *Juntas Federales de Conciliación y Arbitraje*. Calles, who was an astute politician, had not failed to see the crucial consequences that a labor agreement would have for economic growth, especially in those sectors that, due to their strategic importance, came under federal jurisdiction (such as communications, mining, and oil). As a result, during the years of 1926 and 1927, three official announcements were issued concerning the centralization of labor rulings relative to five basic industries: railroads, oil, mining, ocean transportation, and the textile industry. The motive or excuse for taking the step toward centralization was that in the case of conflict the matter would be complicated by more than one authority claiming jurisdiction in its resolution. In fact, with regard to all of the cases it would seem that within the context of the instability of labor discipline, it was absolutely necessary to increase the State's participation and to standardize the rules in order to solve potential labor conflicts and reestablish economic growth. As a result, in a communiqué dated April 23, 1926, Calles informed all governors that the Labor Department of the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor would be the qualified body to hear the conflicts already existing between railroad owners and workers. On March 10, 1927, a similar communiqué included the mining and oil industries, and on March

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> For example, General Salvador Alvarado, when he was in charge of the Yucatán constitutional state government declared that "It's the job of the lovely people to make laws, and, accepting that they have more common sense

15 of that same year the textile industry was included in the ruling. Finally, on September 23, 1927, a decree was issued authorizing the creation of the federal juntas with power to "prevent and resolve collective and individual conflicts between employers and their workers." Moreover, the decree established that the juntas would have the power needed to enforce their decisions. It was precisely the development of labor conflicts on a day-to-day basis, as well as their treatment in a tripartite context that opened up the possibility of the creation and eventual passage of the Federal Labor Law in August 1931.

President Emilio Portes Gil issued the first draft aimed at creating a national labor law in October 1928. However, both capital and labor representatives opposed its provisions in a heated tripartite conference held in November of that year.<sup>22</sup> A second draft was created during President Ortíz Rubio's administration, in July 1929, but the consulting process (which this time was done separately), political upheaval, and deteriorating economic conditions prevented it from being approved until two years later. Employers' representatives were already eager to have a reliable set of rules concerning labor relations. In early 1931, the Mexican Federation of Chambers of Industry had stated in a conference: "It is urgent for capital to know on what basis it can work in Mexico. It is urgent to put an end to the unrest in the workers' minds as a result of unfulfilled promises... The disputes should pass from the period of violence to the inherent equilibrium of the law, from the streets to the law courts."<sup>23</sup> This cry for social order was not heard exclusively in Mexico. Similar labor legislation were passed in those years throughout Latin America, although the Mexican code was considered, according to the Chilean law expert Moisés Poblete in his comparative study, "one of the most remarkable efforts made in the world so far for the codification of social legislation."<sup>24</sup> Codification was not necessarily reality. The Mexican law relied heavily on the work of the *juntas*, which in turn were subject to all kinds of pressures. A very significant source for this essay comes from the analysis of legal disputes in the Mexican Mining sector. New customs (such as being able to speak in equal terms to one's boss, before labor officials) built upon experience, and in the end law always builds upon customs.<sup>25</sup>

---

than those above, they won't attack their opponents in a systematic and irrational way, but will oblige them to become more humane...", quoted in Felipe Remolina R., Evolución de las instituciones..., p. 40

<sup>22</sup> Moisés Poblete Troncoso, "The Mexican Federal Labour Code," International Labour Review, vol. 27, num. 5, May 1933, p. 634-636.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 636.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 663.

<sup>25</sup> E. P. Thompson, "Custom, Law and the Common Right", in: Customs in Common. Studies in Traditional Popular Culture (New York, 1993), pp. 97-8

## Traditions

It is natural that mining, one of Mexico's oldest nonagricultural production activities, would include traditional precapitalist production practices and attitudes. This was especially true in the old mining towns of the central part of Mexico. But this was not exclusively the case. Traditional mining culture was also carried out through non-wage workers' activities at the mining enclaves developed in nineteenth-century Mexico's northern regions. A strong element of localism characterized the various miners' groups and settlements. Traditions had passed from one generation of *barreteros* or freeminers to the next; and this has given the core of more skilled miners a certain pride in their control over their own work. Pride was in turn associated with a sort of informal or "natural" hierarchy, related to the work teams (*cuadrillas*) and the self-imposed work rhythm and discipline.<sup>26</sup> Mining, in order to be carried out, presupposes a high degree of close cooperation. A miner's very survival frequently depends upon a fellow worker's solidarity. Deep in the pits, "the miner has his own sense of pride," revealed a retired miner who today has a watchman's post at the Real del Monte y Pachuca Company.<sup>27</sup> "The worthwhile miner needs to be all soul," states another nostalgic testimony. "The good miner should be all determination, he should have a bold outlook, and be himself willing to collaborate, life is risky at all times," the miner José Borda commented.<sup>28</sup>

This sense of an automatic solidarity among miners is possibly somewhat exaggerated. In fact, there is plenty of evidence of violence and confrontation among them, although these often took place after work. Courage and physical strength were highly appreciated. An account of a bar fight in the municipality of Angangeo, Michoacán, illustrates this tendency. After having a dispute over an illegal brothel belonging to a certain Doña Belén, some miners originally from Cananea were assaulted by local miners. One of the boastful ones, nicknamed "el Nemo"--and infallibly every miner has a nickname--began looking for a fight.<sup>29</sup> They went into the main street where "they kept punching each other for hours, falling down, getting back up..." There was no light, and in the end, two of them--"Nacho" and "Nelo," two almost inseparable brothers--remained leaning up against a post and finding out they had been fighting each other.

---

<sup>26</sup> Chris and Charles Tilly, for instance, point out how "in most forms of mining underground workers have enjoyed freedoms and strategic advantages their textile cousins never dreamed." ("Cotton, Coal and Clinics", in Work Under Capitalism (Boulder, 1998), pp. 43-4, 51.

<sup>27</sup> Field interview carried out by the author with Genaro Armenta Moncayo, Mineral del Monte, Hidalgo, December 28, 1994. *Alla abajo, se engríe mucho el minero* was his frase.

<sup>28</sup> Luis de Pablo, in various authors, Relato minero, Comisión de Fomento Minero (México, 1988), pp. 7-10.

<sup>29</sup> Juan Carrillo Hernández (of the Compañía Impulsora Minera), in various authors, Relato minero, op. cit., pp. 183-184; in his novels about the Hidalgo state miner (La vertiente, El doble nueve) Rodolfo Benavides describes numerous cases of both, solidarity during work and confrontation on the surface, usually for issues relating to women or leadership (*machismo*).

Along similar lines, the exceptional degree of risk, especially in excavating, exploring, and in general working underground, may have something to do with miners' strong religious feelings (obviously not an exclusive feature of miners' culture). Images of saints or virgins are to be found at all levels in the mine. Religious festivals, especially those in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe, are almost always celebrated with masses and attended by the miners and their families. That of the Virgin of Guadalupe is a special day in Sonora, where "the miners' families are allowed to go down in the mine's elevator after being provided with safety helmets, because it is there on level number 19 where mass is first performed....It is very moving to hear a mass being celebrated in the mine."<sup>30</sup> Pablo Regalado Linares, a young miner at the American Smelting plant in Angangueo, Michoacán during the 1940s, remembers how one of the principal *días de fiesta* was July 16<sup>th</sup>, day of the Patrona "EL Carmen".<sup>31</sup> During fiestas, "alcohol was abundant" and we had bull fighting, "*jaripeo, juegos pirotécnicos, feria títeres y espectáculos*".

Despite the tendency to foster tightly-knit family groups, the ever-present danger, the frequency of accidents, and the lack of formal education tend to result in heavy drinking as an escape value, perhaps even more so than in other industries, and in indulging in informal sex.<sup>32</sup> Civil marriage is not a universally obeyed rule so much as a custom that became established over time. As far as heavy drinking is concerned, all evidence points toward the same: "I think there was an amazing amount of alcoholism due to the fact that there wasn't any other form of entertainment. In those days [the 1930's] intoxicating drinks could be sold on Saturdays and Sundays...but those of us who liked to drink would find the way to do so, forbidden or not, during the week. At other times we would say Salud! because by the following week we could be dead. Others justified it because of their being in an advanced stage of silicosis."<sup>33</sup> In the Real del Monte mines in Pachuca and the surrounding area, it was common for a miner to drink a liter of *pulque* with his midday meal, despite the fact that it was supposedly forbidden to bring alcoholic drinks inside the mines. In fact one of the most typical arguments used by the security staff was to declare (as shall be detailed later) that drinking caused accidents; it was the favorite excuse in the absence of security measures.

Politics and union organization were not priorities *per se* for miners; both came about as a need for individual and collective protection. It was mostly a question of basic organization. An overwhelming proportion of miners in the first thirty years of this century did not know how to write, and only read with

---

<sup>30</sup> Luis de Pablo, in various, *Relato minero*, op. cit., p. 80.

<sup>31</sup> Interview by Concepción Regalado, Mexico City, June, 1994.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel González Cortés, "Ta' oscuro el panorama. Relatos sobre los mineros del carbón," in Victoria Novelo (coords.), *Monografías obreras*, Vol. I, (México, 1987); Primo Oliver Sánchez (M.A. Hernández and F. Lara Klarh, compilds.), *Bajo la tierra. Relatos de la mina*, INAH, México, 1989; field interviews by author with Efraín Angeles Hernández (April and May 1995) and Genaro Armenta Moncayo (December 1994 and May 1995).

<sup>33</sup> Juan Carrillo Hernández (of Angangueo, Michoacán), in various authors, *Relato minero*, op. cit., p. 117.

difficulty. In the years prior to the crisis, the large foreign-owned mining companies, protected by Porfirian legislation, laid down their own conditions in the workplace in all of the most important mining concessions. This circumstance forced thousands of families, whose earnings depended directly on the mines, to concentrate in certain areas. Many other miners maintained a relative independence by working as small-time contractors, *metaleros* or *buscones*. Yet the general tendency was to work for wages in the mines. Hence, unions started to appear here and there, especially among the better qualified workers: mechanics, *perforistas*, heads of *cuadrillas*.

Vestiges of "precapitalist" behavior among miners have been well documented by the literature.<sup>34</sup> In Mexico, as in other Latin American countries with a mining tradition such as Chile, Peru, and Bolivia, one finds social spaces in which miners' behavior resembles that of peasants. Miners behave toward the mine as a farmer would toward land--as a natural element that is difficult to conceive of as someone else's private property. Small wonder that during the worst period of the depression thousands of workers tried to work abandoned mines or only slightly explored shafts with or without the companies' authorization.

Miner Primo Oliver refers to some of these cases of disobedient miners in his tales about the Pachuca region. The *metaleros* who worked on their own were miners not wanted by the companies (i.e., the Real del Monte and Pachuca or the Dos Carlos). Teams of 10, 15, and even 20 men entered the old shafts, laden with their own tools and abundant food and drink, ready to spend several days or weeks without returning to the surface. Once out, with loads of up to 40 kilos of silver rock mineral, they clandestinely sold it to the "sharks" at the exit of some abandoned shaft. Within the context of the mining culture these *metaleros* were respected, and when lucky they were able to make a small fortune, which they quickly spent. "At times a *metalero* made more money than a salaried worker. When a team got together they might even shut down a whole canteen or brothel just for themselves... They loosened their belts, emptying out everything onto the counter... [with silver pesos of 0.720]. They used trousers with a narrowed waist, narrow cuffs, and in between there were these pockets the size of balloons. They were real showoffs, the bastards ... That was around 1931 or 1932, more or less."<sup>35</sup>

Any study of Mexican mining labor relations during the Great Depression cannot avoid evaluating the cultural traditions that this group had developed over time. Some crucial elements of miners' traditions were the team work, their refusal to lose control over their craft, their religious feelings, their social and

---

<sup>34</sup> Adrian A. Bantjes, "Industrial Workers and Cardenismo: The Sonoran Mineworkers," Chapter 9 of "Politics, Class and Culture...", op. cit., pp.477-485; F. Zapata, Los mineros de Chiquicamata, ¿Productores o proletarios? (México, 1979); N. Long and B. Roberts (eds.), Miners, Peasants and Entrepreneurs. Regional Development in the Central Highlands of Peru (Cambridge, 1984); F.E. Mallon, The Defense of Community in Peru's Central Highlands: Peasant Struggle and Capitalist Transition, 1860-1940 (Princeton, 1983). In the case of Bolivia, see the works of René Zavaleta Mercado (Bolivia, hoy; "Estado nacional o pueblo de pastores").

family habits, their solidarity... all these aspects coming together in a complex fashion that is expressed in an insurmountable irony: intense individualism and strong collective identities. There was not an easy accommodation of these traditions and the authoritarian work practices associated to the taylorist management then in vogue. Thus, for instance, one of the crucial areas of confrontation was accidents.

### A Dangerous Industry

An analysis of files concerning legal protests recorded at the *Junta Federal de Conciliación y Arbitraje* between 1927 and 1931 on the American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO) units also reveal the extreme danger inherent in this industry's work in general. In terms of worker's experience a crucial matter was to determine who was to blame for the accidents and also the manner in which the company could respond in relation to medical treatment and compensation in case of fatalities. A detailed review of 180 cases of the ASARCO "family," distributed by year and according to the various causes indicated in the files, show the following results:

#### **ASARCO conflicts recorded at the JFCyA Classification by cause, 1927-31**

Year	Number	Accident	Layoffs	Illness	Wages	Others
1927	6	5(83.3%)		1(16.6%)		
1928	37	14(35.1%)	14(37.8%)	3(8.6%)	3(8.6%)	3
1929	28	13(46.4%)	8(28.6%)	3(10.7%)	2(7.1%)	1
1930	49	22(44.85)	17(34.6%)	5(10.2%)	3(6.1%)	3
1931	60	18(30.0)	23(38.3%)	8(13.3%)	8(13.3%)	3
Total	180	72(40.0%)	62(34.4%)	20(11.11%)	16(6.1%)	10

Source: AGN, JFCyA and Octavio Loyzaga. "La minería mexicana en el contexto de la crisis de 1929," unpublished manuscript, UAM-Azcapotzalco, 1994.

The predominance of accident-related conflicts in this corporation should be of no surprise. A large amount of evidence, including company' records, state studies, and workers' testimonies, can be brought to bear. Hence, the claim of worker Gerónimo Briseño, from Sombrerete, Zacatecas:

---

<sup>35</sup> Primo Oliver Sánchez, Bajo tierra..., op. cit, pp. 25-27.

Most of the workers in this mine do not agree with the procedures Dr. Estrada uses --not acknowledging the workers' suffering from silicosis and their need for medical attention, or those suffering an accident ... Included in the first group are miners who have worked for years ... and from just observing them one can see that they are *cascados* [already deeply affected]... they have refused to give them a much needed checkup, saying that either they were suffering from tuberculosis or else they only had a common cold.<sup>36</sup>

Company attorneys, in collusion with company doctors, almost always attempted to avoid responsibility for silicosis-related diseases--thus, the reference to tuberculosis (a non-work-related illness) as the source of pain. In this particular instance, the Superintendente General G.S. MacKey wrote back in surprise to the *junta* that "this entire incident represents an unreasonable opposition... We cannot understand what the workers do not agree with [since] whenever they have suffered an accident we've treated them properly."<sup>37</sup>

The real attitude of management toward the accident proclivity of the industry was always related to cost. Hence, the revealing comments of the general manager of the Compañía Real del Monte y Pachuca (CRMYP) to his headquarters in Boston:

Demands for silicosis-related indemnities continue unabated. For several months we have had no official awards or decisions from the Federal Labor Board, but we are making compromises or settlements at the local Board at the rate of about 15,000 pesos a month. Because the Federal Board decisions have invariably soaked us to the limit of 918 days' pay, we have tried to follow the policy of introducing all possible delays in the local Board of Conciliation, and then make compromise settlements.<sup>38</sup>

Company policy could not be described more accurately. Its objective was to reduce costs in whatever way possible. Interest in the miners' illnesses was totally lacking. The idea was to reduce the monthly cost load of 15,000 pesos as much as possible, as if it were equal to looking for better suppliers of a raw material or to reducing warehouse losses. It is also interesting to note that the company's administration preferred to deal directly with the local labor authorities over the federal ones, who had consistently made the company pay the maximum amount for labor illness compensation--in this case,

---

<sup>36</sup> AGN, JFCA, Box 240, file 919 (1931) letter to Federal Labor Inspector C. Severo Zapata, May 8, 1931.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. Superintendent to *Inspector General del Trabajo*, May 18, 1931 (underlining added for emphasis).

silicosis. At the same time, applying legal delay tactics at the local level, along with the company's regional political and economic strength, enabled "under the table" solutions to be made that were below the stipulated 918 days of salary for the sick employee. Most of the large mining companies labor contracts by 1934 paid only 612 days of salary as death compensation. By 1937, the figure had rose to 918.<sup>39</sup>

Here is one case among hundreds: Felipe Benetts died as a result of silicosis-related disease. Paula Ramírez, Felipe's wife, was supposed to receive 1,872 pesos according to law. The company "offered" 500 pesos. The local union (*Alianza de Trabajadores Mineros*) complained to the JFCyA on August 20, 1931. On January 30, 1932, 163 days later, the junta ruled that Real del Monte should pay 1,300 pesos. Felipe's wife and mother accepted at once (not having received a single *peso* for nearly six months). Thus, the delay tactics of Real del Monte worked.<sup>40</sup>

In order to get a better sense of some of the results of the bargaining process on a broader base, 63 cases from the Real del Monte sample were studied in some detail. The results are as follows:

<b>CRMyA. Results of conflicts recorded at the JFCyA, 1928-1931</b>				
Year	In favor of worker	Against worker	Compromise	Total
1928	7	6	1	14
1929	1	1	-	2
1930	7	11	9	27
1931	4	10	2	16
1932	-	3	-	3
Total	19	31	12	62

Source: Eduardo Morin Maya y Citlali, Proyecto de Servicio Social, UAM-A, (México, 1996)

In other words, employers of Real del Monte could rely on "winning" about half the cases. Workers could expect to win in about one-third of the conflicts, and a partial settlement was reached in 19% of this small sample. Considering the causes of conflict of this 62-case sample, the overwhelming

<sup>38</sup> H. Kuryla to C.F. Moore, Vice-President, U.S. Smelting and Refining Company, Pachuca, July 20, 1932, Archivo Histórico de la Compañía Real del Monte y Pachuca (AHCRMyP), sección Dirección General, ramo Archivo Especial de la Dirección, serie Cuestiones Laborales, Caja 4, exp s/n.

<sup>39</sup> Jesús Silva Herzog (coord.), "Salarios y condiciones de trabajo en la minería y en los ferrocarriles", in: El petróleo de México. Recopilación de documentos oficiales del conflicto de orden económico de la industria petrolera, (México, 1940), pp. 224-5

<sup>40</sup> AGN, JFCyA, file 931/1455.

majority (49 cases) had layoffs as its principal cause, 10 cases were referred because of accidents or illness, and only 4 because of a dispute over wages.

Consulting the Anuario Estadístico de la República Mexicana, of the total number of reported victims of work-related accidents in Mexican industry during 1924, miners represented an astonishing 78% (18,201 cases). The proportion declines somewhat to 47% in 1929, only to go up again to 60.8% in 1932, the worst year of the depression (despite the enormous percentage of unemployed miners--50% according to Calderón, 25% in Bernstein's estimates). By 1940, this indicator was still 38.9%.<sup>41</sup> Focusing on work illnesses, the so-called miners' disease, silicosis, accounted for over two-thirds of the total cases reported from 1937 to 1940.<sup>42</sup> According to the memorandum of the Ministry of Labor corresponding to 1942, the percentage of workers ill with silicosis in all the industries that came under federal jurisdiction represented 69.7% in 1938, 92.3% in 1939, and 85.8% in 1940--only decreasing to 48.9% in 1941 (seemingly due to a malaria epidemic that accounted for 18.9% of illnesses that year).<sup>43</sup>

In fact, it is possible to assume that one of the effects of the crisis in the majority of the mining companies was the increasing level of danger for the various activities, due both to managers' demanding more work in less time and to the reduction in security-related expenses. For example, with reference to the state of Zacatecas, we find the following testimony of the Compañía de Inversiones El Oro dealing with growth prospects in relation to the mineral extraction in the mine:

It is probable that in the future the *cuele* of the vertical shaft down to the ninth level can be solved, ... but as long as the value of silver continues to be low, we can only afford to make the inclined shaft and the aforementioned air ducts in order to mine .... As for the exploration work in San Amador, we are now only working in three intersections... and the three of them are insufficiently braced.<sup>44</sup>

Clearly, the depression did not favor any improvements in working conditions in an already extremely dangerous industry. Consequently, worker's awareness concerning who was to blame in connection with the *siniestros* increased.

---

<sup>41</sup> Anuario Estadístico de la República Mexicana, (México, 1942), p. 501. Calculations are my own. In 1932, over 18,900 accidents were reported, of which miners accounted for 11,000.

<sup>42</sup> Anuario Estadístico, op. cit., 550.

<sup>43</sup> Memoria de labores, Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social, September 1942-August 1943, (México, 1944), p. 228.

<sup>44</sup> Reporte del Ing. Edmundo Villafaña, "La Noria," Sombrerete, Zacatecas, in Boletín Minero, T.XXXIV, no. 1, July 1932, p. 29.

## Labor Mimicry

With respect to the inherent danger of the industry, a link can be established between the physical nature of the labor environment and the transformation of the typical physical characteristics of the miner. In the same way that one can say that the skin of a "typical" office worker is "as white as paper," the hands of a miner of that era seemed to be made of stone. That is, they had lost their flexibility; they seemed an extension of the minerals they mined.

The miners were also affected, no doubt, by the fact that they rarely saw sunlight; they entered the mine before sunrise and left it at nightfall, except for their days off. Dr. Erasmo González Ancira, a pioneer in the study of miners' illnesses in Mexico, recalled his first encounter with the everyday life of miners in Zacatecas:

I was in El Oro accompanied by a caravan of swaying ghosts that appeared from the center of the earth with their hands over their eyes so as to protect them from the light... Many of them had their lungs bunged up with gold and silver that, together with the silicon, was choking them.<sup>45</sup>

Here, one can immediately appreciate the forced mimicry of the miner and the stone he came in contact with. In effect, the miner's lungs continually took in coal dust (or silicon dust), producing lung disease, which can be associated with lead poisoning. Thus began the painful course toward lung hardening, inflammation of their respiratory system, continuous pains in the chest and back, the onset of tuberculosis--a twin ailment, if you will--weight loss, the typical "miner's cough," and eventually death. By stopping all contact with this type of dust, the advance of silicosis can be suspended but not reversed.<sup>46</sup> For this reason, giving affected miners the chance to work above ground--something commonly done by those companies having enough of these jobs, even though there were always fewer of them compared to those underground--was hardly more than an opportunity for many miners to extend their agony.<sup>47</sup> In terms of the future labor contracts achieved during *Cardenismo*, miners who had worked in the interior of the mine could reach retirement after 15 years, while those who had worked on the surface could only opt for retirement benefits after 20 years.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Erasmo González Ancira, "La silicosis en México," Revista del Trabajo, DAT, vol. IV, no.17, July 1939, p. 78.

<sup>46</sup> Amadeo Betancourt, "De las enfermedades específicas de la industria minera y metalúrgica," Revista del Trabajo, T.III, no.13, February 1939, pp. 71-80.

<sup>47</sup> This in fact is the tragic outcome of La vertiente

<sup>48</sup> Jesús Silva Herzog, "Salarios y condiciones...", p.p. 226; Contrato Colectivo de Trabajo número 4, CRMYP. (México, 1936), pp. 75-6

Even a superficial glance at the available photographs whose subject is mine work during the 1920's and 1930's reveals this fatal integration between the men and the rocky surface of the mine's entrails--especially in relation to the work in the pits. In these, not only the hands, but also the faces, with their sharply cut features, seem to merge with the surroundings. Most of the Mexican mining technologies applied during the 1920's and 1930's were the same as the U.S. technologies from the late nineteenth century. About that period, in reference to the coal miners of Colorado and other regions of the country, Upton Sinclair had written: "They [the miners] walked with head and shoulders bent over and arms hanging down, so that, seeing them coming out of the shaft into the gloaming, one thought of a file of baboons."<sup>49</sup> A very similar feeling to that of Dr. Amadeo Betancourt.

Contrary to the expectations the introduction of better techniques for perforation (chiefly the compressed air drills, in contrast to the pick and shovel typical of the old colonial method of mining), increased the rate of silicosis. This was due to increase in the amount of particles suspended in the air in the drilling areas, as well as to the absence of adequate ventilation demanded by workers. Dr. Amadeo Betancourt indicated that the first cases of silicosis illnesses in Real del Monte appeared in 1898, following the introduction of automatic drills.

According to a study made of the Santa Ana mine belonging to Real del Monte and one of the best ventilated sites in the mid-1930's, more than 60 hours were needed to eliminate stale (i.e., poisoned) air from the mine's 55,000 cubic meters.<sup>50</sup> Generally, the photos obtainable for this era do not give us an idea of what that poisoned air was like, due to the fact that they were posed photos; but descriptions by and interviews with the miners do not leave any doubt as to the prevalent conditions.<sup>51</sup>

Returning to the ASARCO files, the JFCyA sample reveals that a large percentage of the reported conflicts had to do with requests for death benefits during working hours. Descriptions vary widely, but a constant feeling of anxiety was experienced by the workers.<sup>52</sup> Another constant element can be detected from the company's attorneys' systematically blaming workers for not obeying the proper safety rules. Management, for example, opposed paying death benefits to the widow of Cesáreo Ibanda because his

---

<sup>49</sup> Upton Sinclair, King Coal, cited in Priscilla Long, Where the Sun Never Shines: A History of America's Boody Coal Industry (New York, 1989), p. 28.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73-75.

<sup>51</sup> Reporting of a Colorado mine in 1884, a U.S. inspector wrote: "I have found miners at work 200 feet (some 50 meters) ahead of the ventilating current. When I looked in one close and dirty hole, I could hear the miner's pick striking the coal, but at that distance I failed to see the miner..."(Priscilla Long, Where the Sun Never Shines, p. 31). Conditions in Colorado were no different than they were in the early 1930's in the coal mining zones of Mexico, especially in Piedras Negras), Coahuila.

<sup>52</sup> AGN,JFCA, files 929/47; 929/346; 929/707; 929/347; 929/1424; 929/1423; 929/1419; 929/697; 929/1343; 929/1382; 929/352; 929/1854.

death was a result of "his own carelessness and his having disobeyed the orders he had been given."<sup>53</sup> Eventually, the widow got the maximum compensation of 918 pesos. Most of the cases related to accidents presented by the workers to the *junta federal* were so flagrant that in nearly 80% of them (according to the sample) the *junta's* decisions involved some sort of payment--albeit usually a portion of the claim.

Another common strategy used by attorneys with respect to death benefits was to reject the legal right of common-law widows (or other family members) to receive compensation. In the case of women, the strategy was usually effective enough to postpone payment for months, or even years, because the typical miner did not marry formally, leaving his companion and children without the necessary legal papers.

This situation meant that widows had to claim their right and "prove" it by requesting the presence of witnesses--a process that also involved time and expenses (precisely in periods of personal and social distress). Another aspect that can be observed in the majority of this type of registered conflicts was the inability of women (and also, though to a lesser degree, men) to write their names when accepting the decisions of the junta. Quite often widows "signed" with their thumb.

Accidents were so common in the ASARCO plants that in 1927 the consortium promoted a national safety campaign. More than two years later, the company's bulletin, La Campaña, complained about its lack of success:

In vain the security directors rack their brains to come up with all possible methods so as to avoid accidents, only to find as a reward for their sleepless nights and their studies the insults of those individuals who hide themselves behind the banner of socialist agitators who take advantage of the ignorance of our poor and long-suffering workers.<sup>54</sup>

Despite all their efforts, "every day we must lament over an accident," an editorial continued. What really seemed to hurt, however, was the economics of the matter. In a report written by the engineer Leopoldo Maldonado, the company had arrived at the conclusion that "one accidental death is equivalent to 6,000 lost shifts."<sup>55</sup> So it is no wonder that ASARCO offered the following: Half a day's rest or half a day's wages to the shop and mill workers who manage to go two months without an accident that would result in lost time... It is noteworthy that accidents were categorized according to whether they had resulted in lost time or not. Also interesting is the time limit for the reward. A bonus of a peso was offered to all the miners

---

<sup>53</sup> AGN, JFCA, Box 214, exp 931/207.

<sup>54</sup> La Campaña. Organo del Comité Central de Seguridad (notice the "revolutionary" appeal), Villa Escobedo, MaY 18, 1929, no. 14. in AGN, JFCA, exp 929/1453, where the company's attorney presented the bulletin as proof of the genuine interest of the company in the security of their workers.

every time they worked without having an accident that resulted in lost time. "A first-class dance (*baile*) [continued the pamphlet] or whatever type of celebration may be offered to those workers in the unit when no accidents causing lost time occur during a one-month period."<sup>56</sup>

Although when it was first established the campaign claimed its objective to be "entirely humanitarian," workers were suspicious. No wonder that two years later they continued with their "disrespect" and "ironies" in the eyes of the managers. Economic depression, as previously mentioned, did not improve, but in fact worsened the dangerous conditions of the workplace. Needed improvements were postponed and expense in security equipment saved. An indicator of this trend is shown even in the small sample of ASARCO conflicts. While only five cases were presented to the junta in 1927, 18 were recorded in 1931. Economic depression meant not only cuts in employment but also in general budget expenses. The lack of safety resulted in an accumulated anger in the miners' attitudes toward their employers. This is not surprising, if one considers that the majority of the supervisors and managerial staff colluded so as to put the blame on the workers. The way in which the Real del Monte management answered a question sent by the Labor Department in October 1925 is as follows:

There's no doubt that the principal cause [of accidents] is solely due to the victims' carelessness or clumsiness. The drinking of *pulque* or other intoxicating drinks during work hours tends to cause, at least partially, the clumsiness that causes the accidents.<sup>57</sup>

According to the same report by Mr. Kuryla, during the 15 months from January 1924 to April 1925, the workers at the Real del Monte had suffered some 2,910 non-fatal accidents, and some 69 fatal ones--that is, a rate of 194 accidents per month, 4.6 of them fatal owing to supposed clumsiness or drunkenness. Again, relative to the same report that estimated some 8,749 laborers working per day on average at the Real del Monte, it turns out that 2.2% of these workers suffered some sort of accident per month, while the probability of accidental death reached 0.6% by year's end. Both probabilities increased if one takes into account the worker's age and schedule.

For that reason, it is not surprising that in the interviews I conducted with older workers at the Real del Monte, despite the fact that their work for that company was done at a later date (between around 1930

---

<sup>55</sup> Leopoldo Maldonado to H.H. Sharp, General Superintendent, Cía. Minera ASARCO, Annual Report, 1927.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 5 , on "Prizes and Bonuses" (underlining added for emphasis)

<sup>57</sup> H. Kuryla, "Cuestionario dirigido al Departamento del Trabajo," October 1925, Pachuca, AHCRMyP, sección Relaciones Laborales, ramo Sindicato, serie Emplazamientos y Huelgas, Box 1., file s/n.

and 1960), some of their most vivid memories had to do with accidents--some worse than others--that had happened to them at the mine. For example, the miner Benigno Cordero Brito showed me, not without a certain pride, the helmet with which he had been able to protect himself on one occasion when a winch broke loose from a rope at a distance of approximately 12 meters while he was repairing a section of the wooden braces of the shaft. Don Benigno suffered four broken ribs and the fracture of two vertebrae, but he returned to work a few weeks later. The case history of this family is particularly tragic. His maternal grandfather, Julián Brito, died buried under an avalanche of rocks, and years later his father-in-law was crushed by a pressure hopper (*tolva de presión*) and died in Benigno's arms at the mine's clinic.<sup>58</sup>

During the years of the depression, particularly in the more remote sites, the miners did not have any other way of protecting themselves against the tragedy of some accident than through the intervention of the labor authorities. The miners attempted to begin negotiations with the companies by way of mediation by the Labor Department inspectors. One example is that of federal inspector Juan Best (who supervised a large area of Durango and Sinaloa states). During his journeys to the outlying regions, Best attempted to set up negotiations, even if only for partial solutions in favor of individual workers. On a trip during August 1930, miner Felipe Mercado of the Mexican Candelaria Company accepted the amount of \$56.66 for "the indemnization for the loss of the third section [of] his right index finger."<sup>59</sup> This worker was illiterate, so Best helped the man prove his identity by testifying that "the fingerprint corresponded to Felipe Mercado's right thumb." The miserable amount paid for the loss of a finger shows the type of conditions to which these miners were subjected. At the same time, this "indemnization" in the actual work place was perhaps the only individual alternative possible for an illiterate miner who lived several days' travel from the nearest corresponding local *junta*. State intervention, usually assuming a "paternalistic" manner, partially helped to enforce the new standards.<sup>60</sup>

Discharged miners usually continued to work on their own with or without formal permission of the mines' owners, acting as independent *gambusinos* and *buscones*. They commonly sold their minerals to the same companies they used to work for (perhaps contributing to the decline in prices).<sup>61</sup> Take, for instance, Leonardo Vega, ex-worker of the Carmen Guanajuato Gold Mine, who was killed in an accident inside the mine that had formally closed in August 1926 but that "magnanimously"--in the words of the company's attorney--had allowed unemployed miners to work as *buscones*. Vega was practically covered by an

---

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Benigno Cordero Brito, Pachuca, Hidalgo, August 30 and 31, 1995.

<sup>59</sup> AGN, DT, Box 1890, exp.60, August 1, 1930.

<sup>60</sup> The role of federal labor inspectors is reviewed in Marcos T. Aguila, *The Great Depression and the Origins of Cardenismo...*, chapter 5 "Beyond the Crisis: Labor, State and Law", pp. 224-232

<sup>61</sup> Bantjes makes the point of the rejection of these groups of independent miners to the property rights of the companies, acting radically in their own way.

avalanche of rocks and left his wife, Trinidad Herrera, and seven children<sup>62</sup> without any financial support, given the fact that Guanajuato Gold could easily prove that it had no formal contract with this miner and, therefore, no responsibility to his survivors.<sup>63</sup> Yet in many other cases, *buscones* did the work on their own without permission from the companies and got away with it. The logic behind their behavior was that, as in the case of agricultural land, it was "inconceivable," an irrational waste, to let it go unexplored.

One more example of how miners perceived their collective situation is reflected in a long and enlightening letter sent by a group of *Obreros Libres* (free workers) of San Guillermo from the powerful Potosí Mining Company to the Secretary of Industry, Trade and Labor, on July 6, 1932. In order to justify their rejection of the owners' proposed closure of the mine, they wrote:

I.-Considering that the livelihood of the inhabitants of Chihuahua is mining, and that without it, it is impossible for them to exist,

II.-Considering that if the principal economic activity of our state is not functioning then its inhabitants cannot survive,

III.-Considering that when mining operations are suspended we workers will inevitably lengthen the already existing lines of the unemployed,

IV.- Considering that if we are unemployed our children will not be able to eat (...),

VII.- Considering that a law exists that is the same one that has formed the history of the people, and that has also governed our great-grandfathers, grandfathers, fathers, us, and those to come, and that Supreme Law gives us the right to live.

VIII.- Considering that the right to live is above all other rights, we, as fathers and as husbands, cannot allow our families to die of hunger.<sup>64</sup>

The document continues in a similar tone for two more pages, insisting on the "moral" nature of their argument over the company's statistics on coal prices or lack of demand. After intense negotiations, which went from late May through mid-September of 1932, workers gave in. A 250-man cut (instead of the total closure of the mine) was accepted.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, a couple of years later the national situation changed, due to the economic recovery. A more favorable situation for labor disputes emerged. This outcome, which was by no means unique, is the type of experience that suggests a connection between defensive conflicts

---

<sup>62</sup>Maria Juana, Julia Natividad, Crescencio, María de Jesús, José de Jesús, Maria Soledad and Maria Felipa.

<sup>63</sup> AGN,JFCA, Box 240, file 928.

<sup>64</sup> AGN.JFCA, Box 310, file 30.

during the Great Depression and offensive ones during *Cardenismo*. It also provides a base for the reconstruction process of higher labor standards.

The Potosí miners' letter explicitly reveals the distinctive characteristic of what might be called the miners' moral economic thinking: their perception of the right to work in the mines, and the link between this and the community's welfare. (The State only appears marginally, and the family occupies the center of attention.) Wages were not even cited in their arguments, nor were formal unions. Instead, there appears the idea just mentioned of "...a law that has formed the history of the people, and that has governed our great-grandfathers, grandfathers, fathers, us, and those to come ..." The violation of these unwritten laws that had been dictated by custom produced some of the most radical examples of the defense of traditional ways of life.

Despite the resistance by this significant group of independent miners, little by little the accepted mechanisms of industrial wages began to prevail throughout the industry. The process was hastened on the one side by the Great Depression and on the other, the federal government's position in favor of a centralized workers' organization. In a speech delivered to a select group of American entrepreneurs on May 28, 1938, just after the oil expropriation, the general director of the American Metal Company, Mr. Heath Steele (who had been in the mining business in Mexico for over 20 years) pointed out the new attitude of workers: "Conditions imposed under the labor contracts and the spirit instilled in the workers by unsound theories preached by the labor agitators have created a wall between workers and supervisors." The new labor contracts in the industry, Steele explained, provided for a committee of workers at each of the mines' units. "These committee members take their duties very seriously," Steele revealed sorrowfully, "and are unselfish in devoting their time to this work." Workers showed "enthusiasm" and "continuously attempt[ed] to take away some of management's traditional functions..." Every workman, concluded Steele, "is a potential labor leader."<sup>66</sup> Even allowing for a certain exaggeration in Steele's point of view, it is quite obvious that workers were going through a very active period of unionization and of administration of their newly achieved labor contracts just a few years after the depression. This process was taking place in many mining camps and plants all over Mexico, as could be seen in the case of the San Luis Mining Company in Tayoltitla and San Dimas, Durango. A most interesting letter was sent from this mining camp to the governor of the state in May 1931. The author was an older labor organizer by the name of Maximiano Nevárez. He argued against the still in vogue *tiendas de raya*, and skillfully rejected the description of agitator given to him and his followers by the company. He had become a musician, but he had continued

---

<sup>65</sup> The layoffs were not the only blow, workers had to accept a reduction in the work (down to three days) week and a 10 % cut in wages.

<sup>66</sup> Speech delivered by Mr. H. Steele at New York, May 28, 1938, sent to SOS Hull, 812.63/946.

to help in the organizing process for over 21 years, along with his comrade Domingo Torres. Both were now the leaders of the Sindicato de Obreros Libres de San Dimas.<sup>67</sup> This seed of political organization of miners was spreading in several other places.

In fact, dozens of small and regional unions were formed during these years. Miners were quick to create their own unified organization to fight for better conditions. On May 1, 1934, a symbolic date, 27 unions representing slightly more than 12,000 miners and metallurgical workers met in Pachuca (Hidalgo) at a national convention from which the *Sindicato Industrial de Trabajadores Minero Metalúrgico y Similares de la República Mexicana* (SITMMSRM) was born.<sup>68</sup> Miners had followed the example of the railroad workers, who had formed their own national union in January 1933. The oil workers' national union followed in late 1935, after two major successful strikes against El Aguila and the Huasteca Oil Company. Labor militancy was now a driving force in the shaping of *Cardenismo* itself.

### From Individual to Collective Bargaining

The miners' access to collective negotiation took a long time and suffered many setbacks. During the 1920's, the growth of both production and prices of the principal minerals produced a favorable situation for the appearance of numerous guild-like unions within the mining sector. As mentioned above, these unions had diverse ideological orientations, including anarchism and communism, and seriously challenged the hegemony of the traditional subservient ("*amarillo*") unions.<sup>69</sup> As pointed out above, the miners had lived a truly "political spring" after the fall of Porfirio Díaz in May 1911. From June onward of that year, dozens of strikes occurred in the different mining centers of the country (Velardeña, Aguascalientes, Chihuahua, Monterrey, Torreón, Mapimi, Santa Eulalia, Parral, Nalca, El Oro, Cananea), which demanded wage increases and a reduction of the work day.<sup>70</sup> However, these reivindicative attempts, essentially carried out with anarchist methods, were rapidly stopped by the Madero government. The principal mining association that had formed during those years, the Unión Minera Mexicana, and which had been founded in June, 1911, with 16 affiliated unions, included in its statutes the questionable advice of "excluding strikes as a method of making demands, and substituting them with justified petitions, without

---

<sup>67</sup> AGN, DT, Box 1890, file 60, Maximiano Nevárez to Governor of Durango, May 14, 1931.

<sup>68</sup> Luis Emilio Giménez Cacho, "La Constitución del sindicato industrial," in Cuatro sindicatos nacionales de industria (Mexico, 1988).

<sup>69</sup> Outstanding experiences of this worker radicalism, stimulated to a large extent by the Revolution and its consequences, can be illustrated by the cases of the Amparo Mining Company in Jalisco (Nicolás Cárdenas Gracia, Una experiencia obrera radical. Los mineros de Jalisco, 1920-1930, UNAM, México, 1993, pp. 91-142, or the company of El Boleo in Baja California (Juan Manuel Romero Gil, El Boleo, un pueblo que se negó a morir, University of Sonora, 1991, Chapter 5).

<sup>70</sup> Sariago, et.al. El Estado y la minería, op. cit., p.130.

stopping work, and until they were not paid attention to, in which case arbitration would be sought..."<sup>71</sup> The legislative effort first made by the Madero government (particularly the "Reglamento de Policía Minera y Seguridad en el Trabajo de las Minas"), and then by Obregón, managed to control, overall, the radical outbursts among the miners.

The forced transition between the rapid growth in production of the 1920's, and the at first consistent but thereafter vertiginous fall in production and employment during the worst years of the depression, brought about a very special situation. On the one hand, the harsh treatment of the miners became worse, as also did their exploitation; but on the other hand, the emergency also motivated "an accelerated process of worker unification and organization on a scale infinitely superior to that of previous experiences," as has been confirmed by Sariego for the cases of Cananea and Nueva Rosita.<sup>72</sup> This trend deserves a comment. Depression implied active political participation of miners (and other workers), in defensive type of tactics, which gave them invaluable experience. State institutions continued to resent a severe weakness initiated from the revolution and on. Companies could no longer count on repressive forces to rely on.<sup>73</sup>

In the case of Hidalgo, the CROM operated in that mining region through a local organization known as the *Confederación Minera Hidalguense*. The Confederation had signed a contract with the Real del Monte Company, but in fact the labor disputes were arranged in the majority of cases in a personalized fashion between workers and their corresponding boss. In its annual report for 1926, for example, the CROM only includes one case of union action resulting from an accident, despite the fact that this plant employed more personnel than any other in the country.<sup>74</sup> The CROM was more concerned with exercising a certain degree of political influence at the local level, proposing and obtaining the election of municipal authorities and other electoral posts for its followers, than in fighting for substantial changes in the work

---

<sup>71</sup> Statutes of the Unión Minera Mexicana, Article VIII, November 1, 1911, quoted in op. cit., p. 131; also, see Barry Carr, *El Movimiento obrero y la política en México, 1910-1929*, T1, México, 1976, pp. 73-74.

<sup>72</sup> J.L. Sariego, *Enclaves y minerales en el norte de México. Historia social de los mineros de Cananea y Nueva Rosita, 1900-1970*. (México, 1988), p. 199. I agree with Sariego when he states that "The mining associations and unions that were formed during the depression, even when they recovered many of the old experiences of the mutual societies, the anarchist clubs, the guild unions and even the CROM organizations, were basically constituted as defensive organizations oriented toward fighting against the restructuring, selective firings, and mine closures carried out by the foreign companies."(198).

<sup>73</sup> See the interesting parallel in: Barry Carr, "Mill Occupations and Soviets: The Mobilization of Cuban Workers in Cuba, 1917-1933", *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 28, 1996. Carr affirms: "In some cases seizures of the means of production were conjunctural responses to conditions of immiseration..", p. 130

<sup>74</sup> This was a case of compensation pay for a worker who had died as a result of a dynamite charge having exploded next to his work team. The CROM obtained a compensation of 400 pesos, which was reported as an example of a great achievement on the part of the union (CROM, *Memoria* of 1927, p. 320).

process. A case in a hundred is the following complaint, which was presented by the department of *jales*<sup>75</sup> (in the *hacienda de beneficio* of "Las Julias," which came under the influence of the CROM on September 10, 1929:

... the boss said that he couldn't care less if we were unionized or not, that we could screw ourselves and the CROM seventy thousand times for all he cared, that since we had been giving our money to the Confederation [*Confederación Minera Hidalguense*] we were throwing our money away, that we were robbing the company...<sup>76</sup>

The despotic treatment of the lowest-paid workers was not a novelty. What is noteworthy here is the relative impotence of the CROM in this context to alter these daily dealings with the miners. The case of a driller, Domingo Salinas, fired after seven years of work, in November 1927, without any compensation, equally illustrates the abandonment in which the workers found themselves with respect to the despotic treatment received from many of the bosses. In his complaint, which was presented to the federal *junta*, the illiterate worker referred to how he was forced to put his finger print on a "contract," which the very next day was used to "legally" justify his losing his job. It is useful to reproduce this "contract" in more detail.

After specifying the department, name, and position of the worker, as well as "his signature in the form of a fingerprint," the "temporary work agreement" read as follows:

According to the present document, and with this date, I have begun working on a temporary basis for the Compañía Real del Monte y Pachuca in the job and department stated above, having agreed that this contract will finish three days after the company, by way of the respective department, gives me notice that my services are no longer necessary, this notice being a justified reason for my being fired; for my part I have the right to stop working when I so desire. If I commit a mistake, or due to some other unexpected reason, I can immediately be relieved of my job at any moment.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> *Jale* is the name given to a certain type of ground mineral water that, after subsequent treatments, can still be used.

<sup>76</sup> AHCRMyP, FN, Section: Movements and Control of Personnel, series: Complaints, box 1, expd.7-

<sup>77</sup> Taken from the file AGN.JFC and A, expd.210,1927 (underlining added for emphasis).

So Domingo Salinas, after having missed work for two consecutive days as a result of illness, was obliged to sign, with his thumb, on October 31, 1927, the "contract" reproduced here, only to be fired, the following day, by the mine foreman, who, "using obscene words, and saying I was a Bolshevik, and saying that I didn't have a job any longer, told me that I could go with whomever I wanted, but out of respect for those listening to me I don't wish to repeat the words with which he insulted me and with which I wasn't in agreement..."<sup>78</sup> Domingo Salinas was right not to repeat the words of the mine foreman (F.H. Pengelly), who had apparently said (according to what became known in the hearings on the case) "You no longer have a job here, because of having gone to complain to the offices of Mr. Jenkins (head of the Security Department). So fuck off because you no longer have a job here, because you're a Bolshevik Indian bastard..." Salinas, for his part, had answered that "he had never been a Bolshevik, but that from then on he would be." The case was settled against the worker due to the fact that Pengelly denied the charges, presented false witnesses, and, "proved" that Salinas had missed work, without the worker being able to present proof of his illness.<sup>79</sup> Domingo Salinas' case was far from isolated. Much evidence of the Real del Monte miners' discontent with the same "temporary contract"<sup>80</sup> can be found. Above all, this was the norm for labor relations with the majority of miners until the collective contracts, during *Cardenismo*, came into existence.

Thus, throughout the 1920's personal negotiation of the most frequent problems in the mines was the prevailing trend (with exceptional cases of collective outbursts). The Real del Monte archives contain "mountains" of memorandum in which, for example, the workers (using their first names and surnames) ask for a "loan" because of illness, or the death of a near relative, or for medical expenses due to their wives' giving birth. In a similar fashion, it is possible to document the discussion, in all its details, of wage increases "case by case."

On November 10, 1925, for example, the union delegate Primo Serrandell presented the management with a long list of workers with varying degrees of specialization, and for whom he asked differentiated increases with a brief justification for each case: "Francisco Figueroa, modeling assistant, the same as Ricardo Rivera, have completed three and a half years' service and work at the torno and on the

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> For example, the worker Raymundo Jiménez, rehired in a post considered as of a lesser category, refers to the personal contract in these terms: "an outrageous agreement, of which we don't know the text, let alone have read it.... It's an agreement that harms the most needy members of our homes--like the wife and kids." (November 10, 1927) AGNJFC and A, e.631, 1928.

bench carrying out semi-skilled tasks [sic]; the former earns 2.25, and the latter 2.00. I consider it fair that they receive a raise of 0.50 cents each."<sup>81</sup>

It should be emphasized that the argument in favor of a wage increase was because it was considered "just." Generally, "justice" meant that all workers carrying out similar jobs should earn the same pay. The same criteria frequently appeared on the part of the employer: "I consider it just, in view of the fact that his work is satisfactory, that his wage be increased" x percent.<sup>82</sup> Serradell offers certain extreme examples, such as that of Julián Gutiérrez, who, "after having worked 16 years as an *hornero*, was then made to work as an assistant at a wage of \$2.10. "I consider", insisted Serradell, " that a big injustice is being committed in this case, and that it be corrected by increasing his wage, even if only to \$2.50..."<sup>83</sup>

Other factors taken into account by both sides in decisions about wages in this case-by-case negotiation were the personal political history and work discipline record of each individual. This is how a petition for a wage increase for Rafael Hernández was formulated: "*fresista* mechanic, six years of service, \$2.75, does all the work corresponding to that machine. This operator, even though his boss has complained several times about his conduct, has shown a notable improvement..." and should receive the wage asked for." The plant, for its part, made observations of the following kind: "very badly behaved." The cards prepared for the management in order to determine the individual wage increases included replies such as "Yes, it's possible," or "He's already well paid."<sup>84</sup>

In the 1925 reply to a questionnaire of the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor, this generalized practice was explained by the company as follows:

The contract system that exists between the company and its workers is: a daily wage for daily work. There are no individual or collective contracts in addition to what has already been said. In fact, we don't use written contracts, but have a system of oral agreements between the workers and their immediate bosses and the mine foremen, in such a way that the workers can receive an increase in their daily wages according to the work done. Naturally, these conditions vary a lot, according to the special conditions of each individual case, and we can't explain them here because of their being so different,

---

<sup>81</sup> AHCRMYP

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., internal memorandum.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

and because of the differing existing conditions in the work carried out by the company."<sup>85</sup>

This statement confirms the absolute prevalence of individual arrangements for fixing wages and the control over discussion about working conditions. Another case, of a worker who in 1926 sought to be heard by the company is that of Jesús Dueñas, a security worker, to whom the mine foreman of "El Rosario," named Winfield, had promised a wage of 24.50 pesos weekly. After the first week of work, the worker discovered to his surprise that his wage would be 21 pesos per week. He stated, "I tried and tried to find out why they stopped paying me the difference."<sup>86</sup> The mine paymaster, Mr. Vizcaya, told Dueñas that he had received orders to pay him a wage of 21 pesos, as the office inspector "had said that it wasn't right that you earn more than Mr. Medina, who has been working longer for this company." Subsequently, Dueñas went to his immediate boss, then to the overseer, and then to the general manager, who advised him to go to the person who had lowered his wage. In his written statement, the complaining worker "played" advice in order to "obtain justice."<sup>87</sup>

More examples would only reiterate this arbitrariness in work relationships. However, these relationships resulted from a moral criteria; lowest-paid workers should not find out, by talking among themselves, the discrepancies between their years with the company and their wages, and should know about the implicit threat to anyone who dared to think of himself as a "Bolshevik Indian." This explains the extreme caution with which, in 1926, the administration decided the wage increases of 25, 50, and up to 75 cents a day, on a case by case basis.

Yet, collective actions were maturing. In December 1922, for instance, skilled mechanics of Real del Monte, mostly mechanics of the *Maestranza* struck in order to get recognition of their union (*Unión de Mecánicos*, linked to the railroad workers' parallel union); equalization of wages according to ability and tasks performed (similar to railroaders); and more importantly, a 117 articulated *reglamento*. The company refused to any of those points, forcing workers to strike. Around 600 skilled workers forced an almost complete standstill of the over 5,000 unskilled workers in the mine. They did so by not letting material go through their posts, where they stood armed. They would no let anyone pass, including the Head of Police of Pachuca, nor the Mining staff. Armed workers explained that they would only take orders from the

---

<sup>85</sup> AHCRMyP, FN, unions' branch, strikes and wage negotiation threats series, box 1, exp.s/n, questionnaire of the SCyT, 1925, author's own underlining.

<sup>86</sup> AHCRMyP, section of movements and control of personnel, series wage groupings, box 1, expd.3, Primo Serradell to the Sub-Manager General E.L. Young, November 10, 1925, (own underlining). (39) *ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

Strike Committee.<sup>88</sup> The company cried for protection, but sorrowfully had to accept a conciliatory proposal from the federal authority suggestion. The *reglamento* was partially accepted. These were the origins of the future collective contracts of the different mines throughout Mexico: Not passively received from above but fought for from below.

The changing balance of power in Real del Monte reflected itself years later. In March 1938, the General Manager M. H. Kuryla presented a detailed memorandum to Mr. C.F. Moore, Vice President of the Company, in the headquarters in Boston, under the title of "The Question of Putting on More Men." After a careful technical study, Kuryla conclusion was in favor of adding some 400 men to work, yet the cost of firing them in case of necessity had to be specifically estimated according to the collective contract: "based on present maximum legal awards or penalties, we estimate that at the present wage scales... 400 men would represent approximately \$200,000.00."<sup>89</sup> A marked difference with the legal responsibilities and practices of just a few years before.

The specific case of the Real del Monte is only one of many examples of the general tendency of the Cárdenas government to promote (and enforce) collective labor bargaining. This tendency was considered a growing threat by foreign mining companies and, to a certain extent, by the international media. This was particularly so after the 1938 oil expropriation. For instance, E. Lohman expressed the following in a hysterical letter to the U.S. State Department on April 8, 1938:

...the administration's favoring of the recent Russian-Mexican communist set-up will not only cost foreigners their properties but will bring financial troubles to Mexico and make payments of their debts impossible. With the falling peso will come high living costs and business stagnation and perhaps revolution.<sup>90</sup>

Commenting on the unions, Lohman argued, "As the labor unions, these are really the government, and their trend is toward shorter hours, higher wages, and no work..."<sup>91</sup> He wrote this, even though there were very few communist trade union members among the miners and hardly any ideological training. As an old miner from Cananea recalled, "It wasn't that we were separate from the rest of the workers who

---

<sup>88</sup> AHCRMyP, Labor questions, Box 4, expd. 2, Asst. Director to Genaro García., Report of January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1922, p. 9-10.

<sup>89</sup> AHCRMyP, Series General Direction, Exploration, expd. 18, M.H. Kuryla to C.F. Moore, March 15, 1938.

<sup>90</sup> E. Lohman to the State Department, April 8, 1938, SDR, Internal Affairs, 812.63/925, reel 122.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

were struggling to form a union...it was just that we, the communists, were a little bit more aware of things."<sup>92</sup>

Although less vehemently than Lohman, many other interested investors expressed similar concerns: J. A. Ducournau, of Wells Fargo Bank & Union Trust Co. of San Francisco, expressed his doubts as to the security and future of its mining properties (especially those of El Potosí Mining in Chihuahua, where the bank had invested heavily) to Secretary Hull on March 24. After the oil nationalization, William G. Moore, of the Guanajuato Reduction Mines in New Jersey, had already expressed similar preoccupations on March 22, but had gone much further, saying that "it is quit evident to all of us who are constantly studying political trends in Mexico that President Cárdenas' goal is to continue to expropriate all important operations of foreign corporations..."

The State Department's response to these communications was a laconic message: their consulates had not reported any attempt to expropriate any mining companies. However, the feelings of insecurity and uneasiness persisted for a long time, especially due to the change in the relative strength of the bargaining labor force.

Some of the new labor agreements also upset foreign observers. In Chihuahua, for example, after the workers of the ASARCO smelter had won a favorable collective contract that included the firing of one of the mine's supervisors (who happened to be a U.S. citizen), the U.S. consul Lee R. Blohm described the matter as "a complete giveaway." In Blohm's own words: "It cannot be stressed strongly enough that native laborers in this district are becoming all-powerful through their labor unions and that the time is near when either control of the business profits of the mining companies must be given to labor or the plants must be shut down..."<sup>93</sup> The first assertion was probably true; the second was a gross exaggeration. A year later, the same consul issued a warning about the open public activities of the principal mining union's leader. Blohm especially questioned the union's opposition to any wage reductions. The union replied that it would ask for a revision of the company's accounts in order to check their profits.<sup>94</sup> This sort of public behavior on the part of a union leader would have been unthinkable only a decade earlier.

In fact, the idea that the miners had become stronger and more outspoken had spread even to the most remote areas. In 1934, Consul A. F. Yepis, reporting on the attitude of the workers at the Compañía El Boleo, in Santa Rosalía, Baja California, declared that radical propaganda had been propagated to the point that the miners would never give an answer about their work without first consulting the law.

---

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in F. Besserer, J. Díaz, y R. Santana, "Formación y consolidación del sindicato minero en Cananea," *Revista mexicana de sociología*, p. 1343.

<sup>93</sup> Lee R. Blohm to SOS, Chihuahua, December 31, 1935, SDR, Internal Affairs, 812.00-Chihuahua/237, reel 9.

According to Yepis, these workers, who on the whole were "lazy," seemed to carry the law with them, keeping it in their pockets (*con la ley en su bolsillo*).<sup>95</sup> Thus, for unions and workers the law mattered a great deal, and its importance tended to grow.

Nevertheless, the real gain for the miners of this and other companies was the official recognition of the national miners' union and its various branches throughout Mexico. A new labor-relations system was established: more modern, more formal, less arbitrary. Moreover, the changes in the labor market as a whole made upward mobility of the labor force a lasting mechanism of social improvement. In sum, resistance in the form of opposition to closing mines, active participation in "wild" strikes, legal protests through official mechanisms, all in favor of achieving more respect and dignity for the miner, eventually paid off.

This particular phase was helped by the restructuring or substantial reduction of the companies' overall labor costs, due to layoffs during the Great Depression. Thus, profits rose again. At the same time, miners found themselves with the difficult challenge of seeing that the stipulations of their recently achieved and ever more complex labor contracts were respected. Eventually this would also tend to turn their attention from national politics to issues of more limited, local interest. As E.P. Thompson has shown, "custom is local." In any case, things had changed, and there was no looking back.

=====

---

<sup>94</sup> Lee R. Blohm to SOS Hull, March 1, 1936, Internal Affairs, 812.00-Chihuahua/237, reel 9.

<sup>95</sup> A. F. Yepis to SOS Hull, Guaymas, November 26, 1934, SDR, Internal Affairs, 812.014/103, reel 26.

The Great Depression severely affected every segment of the economy. It also created programs that prevent depressions from reoccurring. Unfortunately, the government cut back on New Deal spending in 1938. The depression returned and the economy shrank 6.3%. Preparations for World War II sent growth up 7% in 1939 and 10% in 1940. The next year, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, and the United States entered World War II. The New Deal and spending for World War II shifted the economy from a pure free market to a mixed economy. It depended much more on government spending for its success. The timeline of the Great Depression shows this was a gradual, though necessary, process. Cardenismo (1930-1940) — Brought the end to the Maximato (eventually exiled Calles in 1936) — Was a populist government — he spent almost 18 months on gira (political tours of the country) — According the orthodox view, his policies were the culmination of the revolutionary promises — He continued the expansion of the revolutionary state. Cardenismo (1930-1940) (cont) — Had several major policies: — Land reform: over 18 million hectares redistributed. Collective programmes (e.g. Laguna). Also supported collectivisation of peasants under Confederacion Nacional Campesina. — Issue began as labour conflict, but became a threat to Mexican sovereignty — Politics: reformed the PNR, creating the PRM. Employed the corporative structure. Analyzing the period of the Great Depression in the USA, the author notes a remarkable similarity with events taking place in the USSR during the 1930s. He even introduced a new term for the USA — “defarming” — an analogue to dispossession of wealthy farmers in the Soviet Union. — “Few people know about five million American farmers (about a million families) whom banks ousted from their lands because of debts.” — In 1940, the US population was supposed to make up at least 141.856 million people upon the preservation of previous demographic trends. As a matter of fact, the USA had the 131.409-strong population in 1940, of which only 3.054 million can be explained with changes in migration dynamics. Thus, 7.394,000 people simply do not exist as of 1940.