Railroad during the Mexican Revolution and the Struggle for Workers’ Control, 1910-1921

By Jeffrey Bortz and Marcos Aguila
Social revolutions are inevitably violent affairs because there is an aspect of civil war to them. Mexico’s lengthy revolution, 1910-1921, was no exception, and because political instability persisted for such a lengthy period, was perhaps more violent than most.¹ According to census accounts, the country’s population fell from 15,160,368 in 1910 to 14,334,780 in 1921.² One recent estimate, which disputes the 1921 census, calculates the cost of the revolution at more than 2 million lives, about 2/3 of them through violence.³
Section 1 – Introduction

Mexico is a large, heterogeneous country, so that violence was not uniform by either time or region. Though Porfirio Diaz (1830-1915) and Francisco Madero (1873-1913) were national presidents, revolutionary leaders were largely regional figures, led by the iconic Francisco “Pancho” Villa (1878-1923) from Durango in the north and Emiliano Zapata (1879-1919) from Morelos in the south, so that revolutionary violence varied dramatically by region.\(^4\) Violence also varied through the years, particularly since the revolution unfolded in three principal phases: rebel bands fighting the central government from November 1910 to July 1914, an absence of central government from July 1914 through most of 1915, and the slow and contested establishment of government between 1916 and 1921. At each moment, though, the revolution consisted of bands of armed men killing their enemies, by gun, dynamite, knife, rope, any means necessary.

There is now a consensus that the revolution in large part was a reaction to the changes in Mexico brought about by the impact of railroads on the economy and society.\(^5\) When General Porfirio Diaz took office in 1876, the country counted 691 kilometers (428 miles) of track, and when he left in 1911, there were 24,717 kilometers (15,324 miles).\(^6\) By cutting the cost of transportation, the railroads made it feasible to profitably increase agricultural and mining exports, changing the social relations of the countryside as well as introducing new elites, thus laying the groundwork for the subsequent revolution.\(^7\)

The Mexican Revolution

In 1910, Francisco Madero challenged the old dictator, Gen. Porfirio Diaz, in the Mexican presidential elections. Diaz, who had been in power since 1876, imprisoned Madero. When released, Madero escaped to Texas, where he called for revolution, which began on November 20, 1910. Pascual Orozco and Pancho Villa led revolutionary bands in the north, while Emiliano Zapata led them in the south. Following a defeat of the federal army in May 1911, Diaz abandoned the country, and, following an election, Madero took office in November 1911. Soon afterward, Zapata broke with Madero over matters related to land reform, which were central to the revolution for which they had formerly been comrades in arms. Zapata accused Madero of abandoning the idea of redistributing land away from the elites in favor of the peasants. In February 1913, General Victoriano Huerta carried out a coup d’etat with the possible approval of the U.S. ambassador, assassinating Madero and making himself president.

Both Villa and Zapata opposed Huerta, as did the governor of Coahuila, Venustiano Carranza, who headed the Constitutionalist forces, with his military leader, Alvaro Obregón. In April 1914, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson ordered the U.S. Navy to occupy Veracruz, which deprived Huerta’s army access to the country’s main port, leading Huerta to abandon the country in July 1914. The revolutionaries then turned to fighting among themselves, with Villa and Zapata on one side, and Carranza, who claimed to be the Constitutionalist president, and Obregón on the other.

Obregón defeated Villa in a series of battles, so that by the end of 1915, the Constitutionals were becoming the dominant force, and the United States recognized them as the legitimate government of Mexico. In retaliation, Villa attacked Columbus, N.M., mainly as a symbol of resistance, leading President Wilson to order Gen. John J. Pershing to lead the U.S. Army into Mexico to hunt down Villa in March 1916. The troops were pulled out almost a year later because of World War I and without capturing their target.

With the Constitutionals winning the military effort, in late 1916, Carranza organized a Constitutional Convention, which approved Mexico’s new and revolutionary Constitution in February 1917, after which Carranza, a moderate liberal, was elected president. Zapata, the radical peasant leader from the state of Morelos, continued in resistance until he was assassinated in April 1919. Villa eventually retired to private life until he was assassinated in July 1923. In the 1920 presidential elections, Carranza attempted to name his successor, leading Obregón to rise up in rebellion. Carranza fled Mexico City, but was assassinated in May 1920.

Following the interim presidency of Adolfo de la Huerta, Obregón became president 1920-1924, but was assassinated in July 1928, shortly after being re-elected to the presidency but before taking office. New President Plutarco Elias Calles then took office and founded the party of the revolution, the Partido Nacional Revolucionario, which later became the PRI, and with that, the most violent phase of Mexico’s revolution, and the long string of assassinations, came to a close.
The advent of railroads in Mexico generated a new, albeit small, working class, mostly in mining, textiles, and railroad work. Somewhat ignored by early histories of the revolution, militant workers participated actively in the revolutionary process, resulting in the revolutionary Article 123 of the 1917 Constitution and dramatic changes in labor relations in the decades that followed. Our most comprehensive studies of this process come from the textile industry. However, despite the many studies on the revolution, railroads, and workers, there is relatively little on the impact of revolutionary violence on railroad workers and the social relations of work during the revolution. This study proposes to analyze that impact by how, and in what ways, revolutionary violence affected railroad work and workers. The question is important in order to shed light on how the revolutionary experience shaped Mexico’s labor regime during the revolution, but also during the immediate post-revolutionary aftermath.

To answer this question, we use materials from Mexican railroad archives organized in the following fashion: Section 2, a brief description of the companies and their workers; Section 3, the kinds of violence and their impact on work and workers; and Section 4, the impact of railroad violence on a central component of the social relations of work, labor discipline.

While Section 2 uses a combination of primary and secondary materials, Section 3 mostly employs telegrams that reported attacks on Ferrocarriles Nacionales in 1911 and the Ferrocarril Mexicano, 1912-1917 and 1916-1917. Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico was the country’s largest railroad company, and the Ferrocarril Mexicano (1912-1917) (1916-1917) had been the first. Built by English capital, the Mexicano operated 680 kilometers (421 miles) that connected Mexico City with the Port of Veracruz, running through Apizaco, Orizaba, and Puebla. Other than regional differences in violence, the secondary sources suggest that the experiences of the Ferrocarriles Nacionales and the Mexicano were typical of the railroad experience throughout the country. Section 4 uses a variety of primary materials to show that while violence disrupted work, if anything, it strengthened workers’ resolve for control over the workplace, which led to a decline in the companies’ ability to impose labor discipline.

Section 2 – Railroad companies and workers of the revolution

Mexico largely constructed its railroad system during the Porfiriato (the name given to the years of Porfirio Diaz’s domination of national politics, 1876-1911), and it remained relatively unchanged during the revolution. In 1876, when Diaz took office, there were 618 kilometers of track (383 miles), 19,748 in 1910 (12,244 miles), and 20,800 in 1920 (12,896 miles). Railroads in Mexico, as elsewhere in the world, were big business. Seven of the country’s 20 largest corporations in 1910 were railroad companies: Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México (first); Cia. Ferrocarrilera Mexicana, Ltd (fourth); Ferrocarril Interoceánico de México, Ltd (sixth); Kansas City, Mexico & Orient Railway Co (11th); Ferrocarriles Unidos de Yucatán (13th); The Mexico Tramways Co. (15th); and the Ferrocarril Sud Pacífico (16th).

Table 1
Principal Railroad Lines of Mexico in 1910

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kilometers (miles) of track</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferrocarril Internacional Mexicano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferrocarril Sud Pacífico de México</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferrocarril Interoceánico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferrocarril del Noroeste de México</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferrocarriles Unidos de Yucatán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferrocarril Mexicano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferrocarril de Sonora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferrocarril Mexicano del Sur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tehuacan-Esperanza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas City, México y Oriente</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mérida-Peto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coahuila y Zacatecas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexicano del Norte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tlacotepec-Huajuapan de León</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De Nacozari</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michoacán y Pacífico</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a now quite famous article, historian John H. Coatsworth argued that “railroads accounted for as much as half of the economic growth of the Porfirian economy.” They reduced transport costs by half, which dropped the market price of the commodity exports that drove the Mexican economy. Thus, the companies principally moved cargo (though not just for export), and only secondarily people, although the transport of passengers changed Mexican society, making it more national and less regional, and more “modern.” The Ferrocarril Central, incorporated in Massachusetts in 1880 and becoming part of Ferrocarriles Nacionales in 1907, earned 73 percent of its income from moving goods in its years of operation, 1884-1907.

Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico, the country’s largest railroad company, resulted from government action to consolidate a number of lines between...
1902 and 1908, with the purpose of avoiding foreign consolidation, which had been the way out of ruinous competition within the United States. The previously mentioned Ferrocarril Central Mexicano contained more than half the rail lines of the consolidated Nacionales de Mexico.16

As Mexico’s largest companies, the rails were also among its largest employers. In 1902, the Central employed 17,500 Mexican workers, making it the largest single employer in the country.17 In 1909, the consolidated Ferrocarriles Nacionales, which had absorbed the Central, employed 21,402, of whom 1,350 were foreigners, mostly Americans in either management or skilled positions.18

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment in Ferrocarriles Nacionales, 1909-1921</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Daniel Lewis, *Iron Horse Imperialism: The Southern Pacific of Mexico, 1880-1951*, Arizona University Press, 2007, p. 47. In the case of the Southern Pacific, the offered State subsidy was 20,000 pesos per kilometer in 1904, more than twice the average of 9,000 pesos that had been given before in other lines.


When Mexico began its railroad construction, the technology was already old in Great Britain and the United States, but new to Mexico and Latin America. After a false start with attempts to build the rails with Mexican capital, new foreign companies received heavy state subsidies.19 These British and American railroad companies initially needed workers to lay track and build bridges, but they especially needed skilled workers to create a telegraph system, to run and repair the trains, and to manage a new and sophisticated technological and administrative enterprise.

In the beginning, there was an absence of skilled Mexican railroad labor, so the companies brought skilled American railroaders to manage the companies and run the trains.20 Over time, the companies found it cheaper to employ lower-paid Mexicans rather than the Americans in the unskilled positions.21 Skilled American railroaders dominated their professions – engineers, brakemen, stokers (firemen), conductors – right up
through early 1912, when the strike and ongoing
revolution led most of them to abandon the country.

The American railroaders came from an industry
with a long history of both unions and labor conflict.
From the 1870s forward, railroad workers organized
themselves through craft brotherhoods, of which
four stood out, engineers, conductors, and firemen,
all founded before 1880, and the Brotherhood of
Railroad Trainmen, established in 1883. The Great
Railroad Strike of 1877 and the Pullman Strike of 1894
highlighted the highs and lows of labor activism on the
rails, but by the turn of the century, the brotherhoods
had achieved great power, increasingly and successfully
negotiating collective contracts for their members.

The Americans in Mexico brought their brotherhoods,
and although they often excluded Mexicans, they spurred
the local workers to organize their own unions. The
result was that by 1910, Mexican railroad workers were
the most organized, combative, and successful workers
in Mexico, having achieved quasi-collective contracts,
elements of workers’ control, and significant wage and
other gains.

Section 3 – Violence on rails

Long before the revolution, railroad work was
notoriously dangerous. As Harvard historian Walter
Licht commented in his classic Working for the Railroad,
“Railroad employment was erratic and without
guarantees, the hours of service long, and most crucially,
railroad workers toiled under the ever-present threat
of accidents and the high probability of injury and
death.” Railroading in Mexico, with its difficult and
mountainous terrain and insecure countryside, was not
less dangerous than in the U.S. In late February 1870,
a group of armed horsemen led by Tobero Lozano
descended upon the railroad station at Tepeyan, on the
Ferrocarril Mexicano line from Mexico City to Veracruz.

During the revolution, however, disrupting traffic
on the rails was a goal of virtually every revolutionary
public service, companies reported attacks via telegrams
to the Secretaria de Comunicaciones y Obras Publicas
(Secretary of Communications and Public Works), and
these telegrams provide a small but accurate sample of
railroad violence.

There were different sorts of attacks and violence on
the rails, with different impact on work and workers.
Such attacks were ubiquitous, because railroads were the
principal means of long-distance transport, and warfare
requires mobility. Each revolutionary band needed the
rails to haul troops, supplies, and munitions, while at
the same time denying that capacity to its enemies, so
that fighting over the rails was daily fare.
By 1916, one author noted that “Nearly every railroad in Mexico – whether National Railways or otherwise – is a physical wreck from every point of view. Stations and freight yards everywhere have been burnt, blown up and wrecked, bridges and track ruthlessly dynamited, thousands of cars and locomotives utterly destroyed and untold damage caused in every conceivable way.”

In one typical attack, if any can be considered typical, at the First Battle of Rellano in March 1912, fighters of the Orozquista faction loaded a locomotive with dynamite and sent it full-throttle toward the Federales. The enginemen jumped off before it exploded, but 80 Federales were killed.

Just as the Orozquistas turned the train into a weapon of war, the revolution turned the entire railroad system into a weapon of war, effectively transforming railroad workers into partisans, regardless of their own personal politics. Everything about the rails – locomotives, railroad cars, tracks, bridges, railway stations, telegraph lines, and trainmen – became a legitimate target/instrument of war, a position that all sides recognized. On March 13, 1911, “the Permanent Commission of the National Congress ordered the suspension of constitutional guarantees and summary execution or punishment for ‘highway robbers, comprising among them those who without right detain or derail trains ... who remove, destroy or damage the rails, crossties, spikes, plates, switches, bridges, tunnels, embankments ... who place on them obstacles ... who separate, render useless or damage the locomotives, cars, or service vehicles, ... who change the signals, who discharge firearms, throw rocks or objects at trains, or who place explosives tending to destroy them.”

This de facto militarization of the rails became de jure militarization when, in December 1914, provisional national leader Venustiano Carranza issued a decree that militarized Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico.

Bridges and telegraph lines were perhaps the most widespread targets, because they were mostly unguarded. Mexico is largely a country of mountains and high plateaus with a correspondingly difficult terrain that requires a large quantity of railroad bridges. Telegraphs and rail lines were essentially the same business, since the coordination of railroad activity took place over telegraph lines. In fact, one can almost define modernity through the railroad, the telegraph, and watches, and all railroad stations depended on both. The railroad business had to coordinate trains, passengers, and cargo, which depended on telegraph, so that telegraph lines paralleled the tracks. It was quite common for attacks on bridges on other railroad facilities to be accompanied by attacks on telegraph lines.

For example, on March 27, 1911, a first report came in to Ferrocarriles Nacionales at 7:20 a.m. that telegraph lines 1 and 3 near Chihuahua were down, as was line 2, and that the “revoltosos” wouldn’t allow them to make repairs. Twenty minutes later, another report came in from Torreon in the state of Coahuila that the telegraph...
to Durango was down, also noting that “rebeldes” had burned seven bridges between Kilometers 693 and 713.\textsuperscript{35} Twenty minutes later, a third cable came in from Torreon reporting that telegraph communication was cut both south and north of Pedriceña. It also reported the burning of bridges 704-A, 708-A, 709-A, 709-B, 711-C, and 713-B.\textsuperscript{34} Finally, at 9:40 a.m., another cable reported that a wood bridge at Kilometer 178 in the Cuernavaca District had been burned.\textsuperscript{35} Thus, in a single day, Ferrocarriles Nacionales saw combatants destroy 13 bridges and numerous telegraph lines from Chihuahua in the north to Morelos in the south. Multiply this by a decade of violence and add the other railroad companies, and one can envision the disruption of railroad service because of downed bridges and telegraphs.

Attacks on bridges and telegraph lines did not end with their destruction. As a general rule, the companies sent repair trains, which then also became subject to

\textbf{FACING PAGE} A large group of mounted “insurrectos” at the railroad station in Tierra Blanca, Mexico, in February 1911. Library of Congress

\textbf{RIGHT} Pancho Villa on the steps of a KCM&O coach. Credit TBA

\textbf{BELOW} General Salagar’s troops, March 1912. Library of Congress
attacks. On March 24, 1911, after fierce combat with the Federales, Zapatista rebels captured Jujutla and Tlalquitltenango, Morelos. They forced businesses and inhabitants to turn over money, arms and horses, and freed prisoners from the local jail. They then cut telegraph lines, and “some of the revolutionaries stuck around to make sure that telegraph lines were not repaired. When a work crew arrived from Tlaltizapan, they killed the supervisor.”

On November 12, 1914, the Ferrocarril Mexicano sent a repair train from Puebla to check rail and telegraph lines when it was attacked by a suddenly rebellious group of federales who had risen up against their commanders, killing two railroad employees, engineer Dawson and railroad agent Herrera. The available reports suggest it is likely that at least as many railroad employees were killed or wounded trying to repair bridges and telegraph lines as in the original attacks.

Crews were well aware of the extreme danger of repair work. For that reason, they often refused orders to go out. A May 2, 1911, report noted “only a few peons are willing to out to work,” because Zapatistas “would not permit repairs to the telegraph lines.”

If bridges and telegraph lines were easy targets, so were station buildings and the railroad agents who worked there. In April 1911, 20 armed men attacked the station at Achotal, Veracruz, and took $59.90 of the company’s money. A March 1912 attack on the station at San Marcos, Guerrero, yielded the value of the day’s receipts. An attack at Boca del Rio, Veracruz, in October netted $8.15, a typewriter, and a watch. The “partida de bandidos” warned the station masters that if they said anything, they would return and shoot them.

The group then went on to nearby Alta Luz where they stole dynamite and forced the company’s workers to disconnect the rails at a nearby bridge. In September 1913, a “partida de rebeldes” attacked the Penzacola railroad station 12 kilometers outside of Puebla with the train sitting there. They burned the station, killed the train’s engineer, and wounded the fireman, also shooting two soldiers on board. Sometimes station attacks also became attacks on trains.

And of course, bands sometimes attacked a station, the train parked there, and the telegraph line, which they would cut. On April 25, 1911, the station agent in Parras, near Torreon, reported that “rebeldes: informed him they would not allow repairs to the cut telegraph lines. They also threatened to kill the station agents if they repaired telegraph equipment in the station, while cutting the telegraph lines inside the office.” During the revolution, being a station agent was a dangerous job.

With the 1914 ouster of President Victoriano Huerta, the Federal army disbanded and there was no longer an effective central government in Mexico.
City. While the Constitutionalists were now the dominant military and political force, it would take quite some time for them to impose and consolidate their rule. In the meanwhile, there were no limits to railroad violence. In late 1914, there were a number of dramatic attacks on stations, always involving theft but also murder. In August, rebels assaulted the Acotla station and kidnapped two railroad brakemen who were guarding the trains. In September, “los ex-generales” José Trinidad Ruíz, Benjamín Argumedo, and Cándido Aguilar assaulted the Esperanza station in Puebla, where they took $103.05. The men also took the money from the neighboring restaurant, tore up the station, and destroyed the train parked there, while assassinating eight of the 10 soldiers guarding the train. They took off with the beer the train was carrying. The frightened station employees fled the scene. In November, an attack on the Paso del Macho (Veracruz) station netted $135.

While robbing stations, blowing up bridges, and cutting telegraph wires were disruptive activities, the main thrust of railroad violence was direct attacks on trains. Railroad workers were acutely aware of what train attacks meant for them. As one railroad official noted, “I believe the trains can run with great precautions and without troops because the revolutionaries have prohibited it and have threatened ... to shoot the employees of our trains.” Train crews responded to this violence the way repair workers did, often refusing orders to take their trains out. Following an April 1911 bridge attack, railroad engineers W.E. Boyles, F. Ramos, C. Razor, and H. Razor, refused to take out a train with soldiers from Durango, fearing what might happen to them. The next day, Ramos relented and took the train out, but following an accident, simply disappeared, another common employee tactic. H. Razor also relented and the next day, with Conductor Anchondo, took out a repair train. Then engineer F. Laro and conductor E.H. Martínez took out a train, which went off the rails after “revoltosos” broke or reset a track switch. The leader of the revolutionaries told Martínez that they meant to get control of the locomotive in order to use it to burn bridges. They then robbed the conductor of some small personal items and stole clothes from the caboose, after which they set out in the stolen train in their mission to burn bridges. Laro and brakeman Hernández escaped by jumping off the train, both suffering severe injuries.

At the time that Boyles and the others refused to go out, so did other trainmen crossing territory that was held by Zapatista rebels. When ordered to take a troop train there, Engineer Brown reported to his supervisors that he “preferred not go out this evening.” Conductors Rodriguez and Martínez also refused to go out on a train heading south. Both Brown and Martínez had come in to Cuernavaca through Zapatista territory and reported that the revolutionaries told them that if they returned with troops, “they would kill them without fail.”

Refusing to take trains out for one reason led to refusing to take trains out for other reasons. In early 1911, Ferrocarriles Nacionales fired three American engineers who refused an order to take their train, motivated by their protesting the jailing of a fourth American engineer. “My action in refusing to take out No. 2 was done as a protest against the unjust incarceration of engineer Sutton, a brother American in Jalapa [i.e., Xalapa, Veracruz].”

When the trains did go out, it always was dangerous. Rebels attacked a train near Cuernavaca in April 1911, spraying it with bullets. Luis Bustamente dropped to the wagon floor to save himself, but was hit anyway and died on the spot. Trains carrying troops were especially vulnerable. In April 1911, south of Cuernavaca in Puente de Ixtla, 400 rebels attacked a train carrying 30 soldiers, all of whom were either captured or killed, along with one first-class passenger killed. An attack on a train near Tres Marias killed “un Americano” and a Pullman porter, who was shot several times.

Robbery, major and minor, was also a common part of the attacks. Near Monterrey on May 2, 1911, a group of rebels stopped a train and took two boxes of Winchester rifles and four boxes of bullets, then let the train continue. Another attack that month yielded $3,069.25, plus a pistol taken from one of the employees. On March 28, 1912, 150 “armed men” detained a pair of trains of Ferrocarril Mexicano, opened the cars, and stole everything they could carry away, including dynamite. They then derailed one of the engines, burned a nearby bridge, and cut all the telegraph lines, after which they threatened to kill anybody who tried to repair the train, tracks, or lines. Later in the day, the same men attacked the railway station in San Marcos, stealing what they could and cutting telephone and telegraph lines. They also stole four boxes of whisky because, well, a revolutionary cannot live by dynamite alone.

Killing enemies, however was always the most basic task, so next to guns, bombs were indispensable. Two 1916 Veracruz bombings illustrate both their hit-and-miss nature as well as their cruel efficiency. On September 15, 1916, a bomb blew off the tracks a tow train pulling another train, near Cordova, Veracruz. Then on September 30, Zapatistas set off a second bomb “por batería,” which blew up underneath a moving train.
passenger train. An extensive report listed the wounded and dead, which we include in Table 3.  

**Table 3**  
**Bombing of Train, September 30, 1916**  
**Dead and Wounded**  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First-class passengers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Doroteo Garcia</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Light wound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Victor Parra</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Light wounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Mario Casagualdo</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Light wounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Manuel Guzman</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Laura Bonilla</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Virginia Porte Arroyo</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Broken leg, arm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td>Light wound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other passengers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Rebecca Guerrero</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Light wound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Maria Gasca</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Light wound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Ocotlan Garcia</td>
<td></td>
<td>Light wounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Arnulfo Avila</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Antonio Alduncin</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Wounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Isaura n. de Guzman</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Light wounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Adela z de Estrella</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Light wounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Guillermo Hernandez</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Light wounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Bernardo c Echaverria</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Light wounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td>Killed in the accident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Railroad employees</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Luis Quezadas</td>
<td></td>
<td>Serious wounds; company accountant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Manuel Rojas</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Died in the hospital; railroad publications agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Military personnel</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Rafael Gallardo</td>
<td></td>
<td>Shot in the arm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Victor Cortes</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Shot in the arm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 José López</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Two bullets in the chest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 F. Martínez</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Aron Manzano</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td>Died at the accident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Manuel Ceda</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Wounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Francisco Eduardo Estrella</td>
<td></td>
<td>Light wounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td>Body completely destroyed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The train had its operators, none of whom were killed, probably because the bomb blew underneath a passenger car, and carried first- and second-class passengers along with a military armed guard and two railroad employees who were not operating the train.
The seven first-class passengers escaped with mostly light injuries. A few of the 10 second-class passengers suffered more serious injuries, and one was killed. The wounds among the eight soldiers were more serious, and one died. One of the railroad employees was seriously wounded and died shortly afterward, and the other was killed during the blast. One was listed as “nombre ignorado, Individuo todo destrozado [name unknown, body completely destroyed],” so no identification was possible. The toll from one bomb: five dead, 23 wounded, with two railroad employees being among the dead and wounded.

We have no information about the crew of the train, but we do have reports about crews after other such attacks. It was relatively common for the surviving crew to disappear, sometimes not to be heard from again. As one report said, “I haven’t been able to find any of the employees from Train Number 12, nor the passengers either.” Generally, the crews tried to escape the attackers. When rebels attacked a night train from Veracruz near Teotihuacan, the engineer put the train on full throttle and managed to escape while under fire, running over one of the attackers in the process.62 Sometimes, though, they couldn’t escape. In late 1914, a group of soldiers guarding the Apizaco, Tiaxcala, railroad station rebelled, killing railroad engineer Dawson and station Agent Herrera.63

As we have seen, railroad violence was not random but purposeful, with a principal goal of preventing the
enemy from using the rails, along with secondary goals of killing enemies and stealing assets. During the attack on Torreon in April 1911, both sides made vigorous attempts to keep the enemy from using the rails. The Federals “only permit trains with a special permit from the federal authorities.” Meanwhile, Ambrosio Figueroa, “cabecilla [ringleader] de los rebeldes,” notified railroad authorities that he would attack any passenger train carrying enemy soldiers.65

One strategy employed by different groups was to capture trains to use them for partisan and sometimes military purposes. On May 3, 1911, “a large group of rebels” attacked a train station near San Luis Potosí and when the train showed up, they took control, got rid of the engineer, and filled the 10 cars with their men and horses, whom they took up north.66

Partisan violence on the trains took a variety of forms. In 1914, the Ferrocarril Interocéánico complained that Daniel Peral and Vicente Ceballos were well known “Porfiristas y Huertistas who have shown antipathy towards the revolution ...”67 Peral was in command of a train near Puebla when Constitutionalist forces closed in. He abandoned the train, leaving it to the brakeman, but in the subsequent attacks, both the brakeman and the fireman were killed, and the train was left sitting at the Huexocoapan railroad station.68

As we can see, railroad violence began with the revolution and continued throughout. Revolutionary bands selectively tore up the rails, blew up bridges, cut telegraph lines, assaulted stations, and attacked trains, sometimes blowing them up, sometimes shooting crew and passengers, sometimes taking them over for military purposes. From the outbreak of revolution to the end, railroad work became exceedingly dangerous.

Not long after President Victoriano Huerta fled the country, the situation deteriorated, and in August 1914, Venustiano Carranza ordered the president of Ferrocarriles Nacionales to turn the system over to him for military use, an order ratified by a military decree of December 4, 1914.69 By late 1914, the Ferrocarril Mexicanos, also seized by the Constitutionals,70 reported that “we’re no longer carrying either cargo or passengers, our traffic is reduced to military trains...”71 “From 1915 to 1917, revolutions occurred with such regularity that all railroad operations except those of a destructive nature ceased.”72 A.W. Donly noted that the Ferrocarril Mexicanos “suffered comparatively little” through 1914, but after that “has been the scene of constant battles and assaults upon trains.”73

Between 1915 and 1917, railroad workers ran the trains for military purposes. While a few lines, like the Southern Pacific de Mexico, remained in private hands, most railroad employees of private companies were in effect engaged in a military enterprise. In June 1917, some 20 to 30 rebels attacked the trains leaving Orizaba, Veracruz. At their head was Silviano Fernández, an ex-brakeman and employee of Ferrocarril Mexicano, now a revolutionary, assaulting the same trains he once managed for the company.75 They took control of two trains and set them off “loca” (without engineers) in opposite directions, with the intention of causing damage down the line in order to shut down traffic.75

As revolutionary violence slowly and irregularly ebbed, so did railroad violence, though both continued. As late as 1920, the railroad workers’ newspaper, El Trenista reported that Jose Lagunes and 300 men assaulted a train between Veracruz and nearby Alvarado. In the ensuing shootout between “bandits and train guards,” among the dead were engineer Gerardo Mora, brakeman Paulino Ochoa, and fireman Luis Sandoval, along with one passenger and 12 soldiers.76 During the decade of revolution, other than soldier, there was no occupation more fraught with danger than railroad.

Section 4 – Railroad violence, railroad work, and labor discipline

What impact did the violence have on labor activism? During the 19th century, Mexican railroad workers were the vanguard labor organization in the country. As labor historian Marjorie Ruth Clark noted, “The most important of the early attempts at organization in mutualist societies occurred among the railwaymen.”77 Railway unions were the first in Mexico to alter labor relations in favor of workers.78 The result, according to history professor Teresa Van Hoy, was that “[railroad] workers fared well in exercising control over their workplaces and private lives ...”79

Then the revolution erupted in 1910, and along with it, unprecedented violence on the rails. A review of railroad strikes, workers’ efforts to change the workplace, and the capacity of company command suggest that railroad violence did not decrease labor activism, but rather enhanced workers’ attempts to gain control over the workplace.

Between November 20, 1910, when the revolution broke out, and July 15, 1914, when Huerta resigned, four railroad strikes occurred: Yucatán, 1911, 1913, 1914; and Aguascalientes, 1912. Upon Huerta’s flight, the central government collapsed and there could be no more “official” strikes, since the Labor Department ceased to function and could no longer register them. Then when the Constitutionals militarized much of the railroad system late in the year, strikes became treason and therefore impossible. Even so, once
the revolution diminished in furor and the Labor Department resumed functioning, four different strikes took place in 1918, then a widespread strike in 1921, for a total of at least nine railroad strikes of one sort or another between 1910 and 1921, so that strike movements did not diminish with the revolution.80

The strikes were generally about wages, hours of work, and something approaching control over the workplace. Workers’ control had been a goal before the revolution and continued throughout, taking a variety of forms, some of which consisted of challenging the authority of bosses.81 In April 1912, the Unión de Forjadores (iron workers) Mexicanos challenged a supervisor on the Ferrocarril Interoceánico, declaring that they were tired of his despotic treatment, as if they weren’t Mexicans.82

While the company supported the supervisor, the union refused to back down.83 In November 1913, the Sociedad Mutualista de Despachadores y Telegrafistas Ferrocarrileros (railroad dispatchers and telegraphers) sent a note to the Labor Department complaining about Antonio Jiménez, Superintendent de Telégrafos del Sistema, that “He exercises all kinds of hostilities against the many employees under his command ... in most cases as personal retribution ... ”84 In February 1914, the Unión de Caldereros (boilermakers) Mexicanos del Puerto de Veracruz challenged the company on work hours. Hours of work were always an important issue, in which workers tried, often successfully, to influence the workplace.85

In March 1914, the Sociedad Mutualista de Despachadores y Telegrafistas Ferrocarrileros was back at it, challenging Ferrocarriles Nacionales on how supervisors treated workers, saying that workers had “suffered silently from harassment and abuses” at their hands.86

For 40 years before the revolution, there was an increasing struggle of railroad workers toward some aspects of worker control.87 This continued after the outbreak of revolution right through to the end of the Huerta government in 1914. The demise of Huerta meant that the Labor Department, a Madero invention, ceased to operate, so that historians no longer have the records of worker actions that they have for the earlier period. Additionally, the militarization of the rails made strikes impossible. To trace worker opposition to company authority, we need to look at other sources.

When the Constitutionalist militarized Ferrocarriles Nacionales after the collapse of the Huerta regime in August 1914, and then Ferrocarriles Mexicanos, they came to control the rails. That experience led them to believe that that militarization of the rails was a contributing factor to the disintegration of labor discipline. The 1916 Annual Report of Ferrocarriles Nacionales claimed that corrupt officers in charge of the trains misused resources, weakening control over labor.88 With labor discipline one of the first casualties of revolution, “Many of the first efforts of the Dirección General de los Ferrocarriles Constitucionalistas de México were ... establishing certain rules of discipline among personnel.”89

The same report, echoing earlier complaints, argued that not only an absence of discipline existed, but also, actual incompetence. The personnel in charge of the trains, along with being completely subordinate to military chiefs, were incompetent. They were military appointees, not railroaders, and lacked the technical knowledge to do their jobs. Many were ordinary brakemen or firemen who had assumed management positions by something other than aptitude as a railroader.90 At the same time, railroad operators complained about supervisors “who have committed various abuses against subordinates ... .”91 Both management and labor agreed that a decline of work procedures had taken place, though for different reasons.

Neither was mistaken, as political affiliation came to replace professional merit for supervisory positions. The report noted that Juan Venegas was a former railway engineer made head of Department of Military Trains, so that his son, also a railway engineer, was then elevated to a senior position, and Juan's brother, José Venegas, ascended for similar reasons. It pointed to Carlos Muñoz, made Jefe de Trenes in the FFCC Interoceánico “for his loyalty to the Huertista cause.”92 There were numerous complaints like this.

Favoritism and nepotism were rampant. One complaint noted that Martín Ramírez, maestro mecánico, employed in his department a brother, three cousins, and two compadres “at high salaries that don’t correspond to knowledge or ability... .”93 They also claimed that favoritism led to the outright selling of favors and positions. When engineer Santiago Luna was let go after an accident, in order to get his job back, he was required to make payment with “the man who arranges this kind of matter.” When engineer Maximiliano Lopez tried to get a position with the FFCC Mexicano, he was told, “it will cost you 50 pesos for me and 50 pesos for Mister Vidal.”94

If promotions and hiring were arbitrary and corrupt, so were firings, such as the case of Francisco Hernández, ex-conductor of the FFCC Interoceánico, “fired for having lent his services to the Government of Huerta.”95 And if one managed to avoid getting fired, he could be assigned to private work for his boss on company time.96 Certainly, some of these were old complaints.
among railroad workers, but the militarization of the rails clearly degraded railroad work.97

Lt. Col. Paulino Fontes, general manager of the Ferrocarril Mexicano, believed there was little difference between railroad workers and bandits or rebels, claiming “the indisputable mingling of some railroad employees with bandits.”98 He said his employees were in cahoots with them, sharing information that made possible assaults on trains. He gave the example of “bandolero” Silvano Fernandez, ex-brakeman and ex-employee of Ferrocarril Mexicano, who led an attack on the same trains he once managed for the company.99

This was not an isolated nor an unusual case, and Fontes suggested that family ties among railroad workers undermined any attempt to maintain discipline. He complained about the “infinity of railroad employees” who aided and abetted the rebels, whether through sympathy with their cause or through force.100

He extended his comments to labor discipline in general, commenting that railroaders refused to go out on the military trains when called to do so, as recounted in Section 3 above, and wanted to work only when they wanted and on the runs they chose. For Fontes, supervisors had ceded control to common workers, who were running things as they wished. But, he concluded, he was afraid to fire them because they would just “swell the ranks of the enemy.” Having lost his last disciplinary tool, firing, he found the labor situation to be desperate. In effect, by the late revolution, railroad management believed that railroad labor had achieved a measure of worker control over the workplace, though they viewed it from a managerial perspective.

To restore labor discipline, Fontes proposed that the government attach to his command a new and specialized “cuerpo de soldados [body of soldiers].”101 These were not military soldiers to protect against bandits, but armed men to protect the company against its own workers.

Conclusion

Railroad workers entered 1910 as an organized and determined lot. The revolution broke out and brought with it unprecedented railroad violence. Rather than breaking workers’ resolve, the violence of revolution led them to take more control over their work lives. Formally, they engaged in strikes when they could, and challenged their bosses when possible. Informally, they often refused to carry out orders, engaged in theft, and disrupted work when they thought it might help them. Unions, though battered, remained, as witnessed by union-led railroad strikes in 1918.102 In February of that year, Monterrey streetcar workers went out on strike.103 In August, Orizaba streetcar works also walked out.104 Then in late November, railroad machinists in the Monterrey workshops went out on strike.105

By 1920, Fontes was Director General de Ferrocarriles Nacionales, and he was convinced that the labor problem was not only not improving, but it was also getting worse. He wrote President Carranza in January to request “vigilancia” to prevent “the uncountable thefts daily being committed.”106 He requested the formation of a Cuerpo de Policía Secreta de los Ferrocarriles [railroad secret police force], with a monthly budget of 50,000 pesos. It took President Carranza only two days to approve the proposal and budget.

The revolution began with government military force to combat rebels. The revolution ended with government military force to combat railroad workers.◆

Notes

1. Although historians agree that the revolution began on November 20, 1910, the date that Francisco Madero called for uprisings against the Porfirio Díaz government, there is vigorous debate about the date of its end. Many scholars choose 1917 with the revolutionary Constitution. For our purposes, 1921 with the assassination of Venustiano Carranza (1859-1920), and Álvaro Obregón (1880-1928) in power, represents a more realistic date for the “normalization” of labor affairs. Other authors legitimately include the 1920s and the Lázaro Cárdenas government of the 1930s as part of the revolutionary process.

2. Inegi, Estadísticas Históricas de México, vol. 1, México, 1999, p.3; There is a debate about the 1921 census and the number of deaths during the revolution, Robert McCaa, “The Demographic Costs of the Mexican Revolution”, Mexican Studies, Vol 19, No 2, Summer 2003. See also the discussion of Enrique Cárdenas in El Largo curso de la economía Mexicana, FCE, México, 2015, chapter 5, and also Víctor Mata y José Antonio Casanueva, La economía Mexicana y los ferrocarriles (1910-1920), Gobierno del Estado de Puebla-Secretaría de Cultura, Puebla, 1999.


10. On railroads and the revolution, Francisco Javier Gorostiza, Los ferrocarriles en la Revolución Mexicana, Siglo XXI Editores, México, 1914, is massive, with lots of photos, but mostly based on secondary sources; Guillermo Guajardo, Tecnología y trabajo en los Ferrocarriles Mexicanos, Conaculta, 2013; Víctor Mata y José Antonio Casanueva, La economía Mexicana y los ferrocarriles (1910-1920), Gobierno del Estado de Puebla-Secretaría de Cultura, Puebla, 1999; Teresa Van Hoy, A Social History of Mexico’s Railroads (Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).


15. Sandra Kuntz, Empresa extranjera... (Lincoln, 2013).


17. Ibid., p. 99.


19. Daniel Lewis, Iron Horse Imperialism: The Southern Pacific of Mexico, 1880-1951, Arizona University Press, Tucson, 2007, p. 47. In the case of the Southern Pacific, the offered State subsidy was 20,000 pesos per kilometer in 1904, more than twice the average of 9,000 pesos that had been given before in other lines.

Indeed, the actual number of strikes is apparently much greater, but we lack a complete study of them. An article by Paco Ignacio Taibo II lists 16 mostly small, regional railroad strikes just in 1920. Paco Ignacio Taibo II, “Las huelgas en el interinato de Adolfo de la Huerta,” *Historia Obrera* 20, vo. 5, September 1980.

Worker control was also the goal of textile workers during the revolution. Jeffrey Bortz, (*Stanford, 2008*). For ongoing attempts at workers’ control on the railroads, see Bortz and Aguila, *Command and Control at Work*, August 2016.


Octavo Informe Anual de los Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico, junio 1916, pp. 16-17.

Ibid.

Octavo Informe Anual de los Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico, junio 1916, p. 16.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Octavo Informe Anual de los Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico, junio 1916, p. 16.

AGN, DT, Box 73, file 12, José F. Domínguez and David Del Valle to Ing Antonio Balero, October 13, 1914.

AGN, DT, Box 73, file 12, People of recognized affiliation,  September 19, 1914.

AGN, DT, Box 73, file 12, El Subdirector, people of recognized affiliation, September 19, 1914.

AGN, DT, Box 73, file 12, Arturo López et. al., September 19, 1914.

AGN, DT, Box 73, file 12, People of Huertista affiliation, September 19, 1914.

AGN, DT, Box 73, file 12, Arturo López et. al., November 1913.

AGN, DT, Box 73, file 12, E. Hernández et. al. to Alzati, September 20, 1914; Letter without signatures, September 22, 1913; AGN, DT, Box 73, file 12; Annex to the Complaints Section (Ramo), AGN, DT, Box 89, file 2.

AGN, SCOP, 1-524, Teniente Coronel Paulino Fontes, 15 junio 1917.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


AGN, DT, Box 118, file 18, Questionaire on Strikes in the Republic.


AGN, DT, Box 118, file 5, Strike, November 1918.

AGN, SCOP, file 10/2541-1, Fontes, January 5, 1920.