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Crisis in Labor Union Models in Mexico: Some Options

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INTRODUCTION

Since the eighties, Mexican workers and their organizations have endured the consequences of deep socioeconomic changes.

Starting with the arrival of neoliberal economics and its adjustment policies obsessed with lower inflation and the reduction of fiscal deficits along with its insistence on structural change policies translated into widespread privatizations, economic deregulation and the shrinking of the government's role in production, neoliberalism has affected labor unions in Mexico by using the wage policy to curb inflation. In this sense, wage increases have usually been lower than both inflation growth – except for the years 2000 and 2001 – and the attraction of foreign direct investment. Other sources for this crisis of labor organizations are to be found in the withdrawal of social security policies for waged workers which are being replaced by targeted measures focused on the extremely poor. Meanwhile, labor unions have less influence on the economic policy in general. Unions now keep a lower profile in the Revolutionary Institutional Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional / PRI), which likewise now has less influence on the government. A sizeable part of large collective bargaining agreements have been flexibilized. Finally, the core of unionism's social basis throughout most of the century, the old working class harbored in heavy industrial activities during the period of stabilizing development¹ has substantially downsized and has almost been totally replaced by a new working class without a labor union tradition with extreme mobility between companies and no union identity (De la Garza, 2001).

Secondly, labor unions have been affected by the productive restructuring processes,² which in spite of being carried on within a limited group of large firms, it has impacted the unions due to the fact that it is precisely those large companies which hired 50% of the manufacturing workers and produce 75% of the sector's total value. The dominant productive models,³ however, fluctuate between Taylorism-Fordism and a Toyotism⁴ of precariousness characterized by partial applications of total quality and just-in-time criteria and a labor division that keeps on segmenting and allocating technicians and engineers to creative ideas while leaving the workers in charge of execution roles facing both a higher level of

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¹ *Stabilizing development* refers to the period of the sixties in Mexico characterized by economic growth with low inflation.

² *Productive restructuring* refers to changes in technology, work organization, labor relations, labor force qualifications and labor culture.

³ *Productive model* refers to the configuration of technology, organization, labor relation, labor force profile and labor culture that characterizes a productive process.

⁴ We prefer to use the notion of *Toyotism*, rather than *postFordism*, *postmodern organization*, or *flexible specialization* in order to thus restrict the concept to the characteristics of the production model originally inspired in the Toyota experience in Japan, which implies a combination of total quality control and just-in-time as well as a labor culture based on the workers' participation and engagement in production issues.

responsibility and dead-end job posts, low wages, low investment in training and high external staff rotation (De la Garza, 1993). That is, a version of Toyotism based on low wages and high labor intensity with new forms of organization. Productive restructuring has above all affected the core of the working class in Mexico located in the export-oriented industry, services and modern trade activities.

Thirdly, the Mexican labor market has been characterized by the rising importance of unstructured employment, self-employment and micro establishments, a sector that is difficult to unionize, not only because the law establishes a minimum of 20 workers in order to be able to create a union, but also because in these small businesses, waged relations are intertwined with family cooperation, thus constituting survival strategies rather than the creation of companies and employers as such (De la Garza and Neffa, 2001).

Fourthly, neoliberalism, economic liberalization and productive restructuring spawned a new working class with a high unionization rate in formal industry yes, but without a tradition of struggle or historical memory, organized around short-lived labor unions with little internal life or democracy, many of which are merely so-called protection unions⁵. When compared to the old working class the ascending working class is young with a high female presence, lacking identify with either their job, the company or the union, subject to frequent rotation, and more concerned with establishing familiar survival strategies unrelated to the collective. As opposed to other countries, this new class is mainly located in the manufacturing sector, in particular in the export-oriented sector, and partly in unstructured micro services. Employment in manufacturing has not increased in spite of the great increase in production in the second half of the nineties, but it has not decreased either. This marks a difference between Mexico and developed countries in which industrial occupation has decreased in favor of services (Thomas, 1996). Although in Mexico the share of workers in services is also higher than in industry, industrial occupation is not decaying, but rather is the most dynamic core sector in the economy, a key piece in exports. But then so, it is a sector with a high unionization rate only by account of mere formality, a unionization that is not usually the result of the workers' free will, but of the way in which labor unions make sure that all workers that join a company automatically belong to the union through the exclusion clauses and political agreements signed between labor unions, government and employers that allow the new companies to be unionized (De la O and Quintero, 1992). In fact, despite all the socioeconomical transformations since the eighties, most workers are still controlled by corporatist unions, particularly in manufacturing. Up to now, the workers' resistance has hardly been efficient, the strikes in June 1984, the expansion of conflicts in large companies in the early nineties and conflicts of the past decade have not translated into anything that remotely resembles the labor union insurgency against corporatism⁶ in the seventies (De la Garza, 1994). There have been exemplary but nevertheless rare cases, like that of maquiladoras, which have demonstrated the importance of creating struggling fronts further from labor unions including above all non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international campaigns to which the Mexican government has been more sensitive than to the purely national campaigns; as well as the incipient re-emergence of the union organizer, a figure that was important in the seventies and was then in many cases based on student and political groups.

On three different occasions, there were attempts to reform union corporatism from the top: with president Salinas, through social liberalism and new unionism⁷ in 1992; with the Agreement for a New Labor Culture in 1995 (De la Garza and Melgoza, 1994), and with a restoration attempt in the year 2001 by Carlos Abascal, Secretary of Labor under the current Fox administration to create Christian

⁵ In Mexico, unions that are only unions by name are called *protection unions*. In general, the workers affiliated to these unions ignore they exist. They do not know their leaders or the collective bargaining agreements. They are called *protection unions* because the employers accept their constitution as a way of preventing the workers' from creating an independent, possibly more conflictive, union. It is possible to register them legally because the Mexican law does not demand pre-certification of the validity of the members' votes.

⁶ In Mexico, the seventies is considered a "period of labor union insurgency" when workers struggled in their own workplaces to democratize their organizations and against corporatist leaderships.

⁷ President Salinas, in a famous speech in 1992, defined what the new Mexican unionism should be like: an ally of the government, but also of the companies in their struggle for productivity and competitiveness.

corporativism.⁸ These attempts have had few practical consequences; the most important readjustments have taken place in the companies, possibly pointing to firm-corporativism rather than business unionism.

Fifthly, the PRI's defeat in the 2000 presidential elections weakened the links between the corporatist labor union elite and the presidency. Corporativism's restorative temptations, beyond partisan politics are nevertheless still present. They can be seen first in the invitation for the production factors to sign an agreement and in the creation of a Central Decision-Making Board for the labor reform by the Mexican Labor Department, filtering the principles of the Catholic Church's conservative social doctrine down to the unions. The Labor Department, it is true, did follow a more flexible wage policy throughout the year 2001 that allowed for wage increases above the inflation rate, there were also some cases in which the workers' demands for union democracy were heard, such as metallurgy plant Siderúrgica Lázaro Cárdenas Las Truchas. The Labor Department, however, has not since then given support to any movements for union democracy, such as the airline company Aviaca, the State oil company Petróleos Mexicanos, the Federal Commission of Electricity, etc. It is fair to say that, in general, the *meso* and *micro* networks of commitments and interests among labor union leaders, public officials and employers, corporativism's other pillar, have remained untouched. It is likely that the employers prefer sweetheart unions⁹ rather than democratic, autonomous and participatory unions, but replacing corporatist unions for another type of unionism could well open up a conflict that would go against the highly prized labor peace.

Finally, in sixth place, we could say Mexico is going through a labor crisis although not one derived from a reduction of occupation due to high technology. The Mexican workers are selling their labor force under a survival crisis. Most workers in Mexico cannot survive with the mere income of a single family member. Most workers are poor and as such it has no direct relation with their productivity, or with the sole existence of an unstructured economy. This crisis has been buffered by the diversification of sources of family income, particularly with the participation of other members of the household in the so-called "informal sector". The crisis, however, has also had consequences in the productive sphere, reflecting in the extremely high voluntary external rotation that happens not only in export-oriented maquiladoras. In other words, external rotation can be seen as a form of resistance to the accelerated burn-out of the labor force in the work process. This resistance is sometimes continued through the vast number of individual labor lawsuits filed by workers without going through a labor union. High rotation implies a lack of identification with the job, the company and, in the case of the new working class, the union. We cannot claim that the new working class has created collective subjects: there is still a lack of collective worker actions, a lack of identification with the union, a lack of a discourse that transcends the repetitiveness of work, every-day life, the neighborhood and the family. The workers have not created new strategies. Collective worker strategies have been replaced by mere family survival strategies (De la Garza, 2000).

Under these conditions, engendered by neoliberalism and faced by labor unions, we are obliged to reflect about the crisis of the labor organization models prevailing in Mexico, their limitations and possible alternatives.

THE NOTION OF A LABOR UNION MODEL

Typologies of unionism are widely diversified (Baglioni, 1990, Basstone, 1977 and Bluen, 1994). Internationally, one of the most widespread typologies classified labor unions into:

a) Classicist unions that oppose the State and believe in class struggle. As such, they focus on taking political power holding an anticapitalist, anarchist or Marxist ideology; allied to, as a chain link, or behaving like a political party. In countries with institutionalized labor relation systems, classicist labor

⁸ Carlos Abascal, Labor Secretary, made both labor union leaders and Mexican employers sign that the new labor relations should be organized around the idea that both workers and employers have the same human essence and should show solidarity for each other over and above their different interests.

⁹ That is, those controlled by management, rather than the PRI or the government. They were originated in Monterrey in the thirties as a result of an important conflict between president Cárdenas and the CTM and a business group in Monterrey that decided to create their own labor unions against those of the CTM.

unions split their revolutionary discourse from their collective bargaining practices within the institution framework. Countries with a low institutionalization of labor relations privilege public political action over collective bargaining.

b) Social Democratic, Laborist and Social Christian unions are unions that emerge from a reform and are electoral allies of political parties in search of pro-workers legal reforms. They recognize that capital and labor have different interests, but unlike the first type of union, they do not consider they should exclude each other.

c) Business Unionism privilege collective bargaining company by company as a space for action over alliances with parties or campaigns to change or promote general laws that favor the workers. It is a type of unionism that also acknowledges that capital and labor have different interests, but seeks to limit labor union action to the place of work and the company.

In Mexico, the most common typology referred to the following types of unions:

a) The corporatist unions representing private interests, but subordinated to the State and, as such, co-responsible for its right performance. They are vertical and authoritarian in the way leaders are elected and the way decisions are made. They are partisan participants in the political system, defending employment and conditions of work in the best of cases, without actually being an agent of innovation in the company.

b) Independent unions come from the left-wing opposition to the government, and are supposedly independent from management and so they have no interest whatsoever in productivity. Their inner functioning is supposedly democratic, although many independent unions have tended to form oligarchies and to manipulate the election and decision-making processes.

c) Sweetheart unions are, in contrast, subordinated to management which severely oversees all election and decision-making processes. Their functions are sometimes restricted to negotiating and managing human resources. They are subject to employer paternalism without participating in the political system (Street, 1996).

Typologies like these point to defining different labor union models, however we are still missing a more explicit conceptualization of it that should consider the unions' inner structure and functioning, but also their links with the workers and the company, with the State, and society (including other labor unions, NGOs and social movements). Let us consider all of these in detail.

The unions' inner structure and functioning.

This level comprises representativeness, legitimacy and democracy in electing leaders and in decision-making, as well as the creation of bureaucracies and the relation within the union between consensus and coercion, power and domination.

Within a union, legitimacy is not only gained through following democratic norms. There are different ways of gaining legitimacy: caudillism, clientelism, patrimonialism, and even terrorism and gangsterism may be legitimized. Democracy as well may be delegated or direct. There may be bureaucratization, concentration of power in a layer of union officials, and the formation of an oligarchy that seeks to remain in power by concentrating knowledge and skills, as well as relationships and influences that make it appear as irreplaceable for the union's best performance.

Labor union organizational structures then can also be more or less complex, with few or many levels of authority and subject to simple or detailed regulations. The structures, and the ways of functioning, concentration and exercise of power and domination are not alien to a union's culture. This culture implies ways of giving meaning to the union, the leaders, the decision-making processes. In this sense, the union's culture can be democratic, caudillo-based, clientelistic and patrimonial, terroristic and gangster-like. Democratic unions are such when they are convinced of the value of respecting the by-laws, the leaders are removed if they do not meet the rank and file's expectations: it is the vote that

decides (Lipset, 1986). This is the case of the Mexican Union of Electricity Workers (SME)¹⁰ (Reyes, 1993). Otherwise, caudillo-based unions believe the leader is invested with special powers to negotiate and influence in order to defend their jobs and gain economic or political benefits (Sánchez, 1997), as was the case with Ricardo Barco, leader of the disappeared public transport line Ruta 100.¹¹ While clientelists and patrimonialists consider it is normal to exchange favors and loyalties between workers and leaders, or conceive the leader as the union's boss to whom no complaints can be addressed, but to whom favors can be requested, as happened with the oil workers' union when La Quina ruled¹² (Novelo, 1991). At the other extreme, terrorist and gangster-like unions promote a culture of fear of being laid off or harmed physically (Quintero, 1995).

Relations between the union, labor and the company.

The union may be independent from the establishment and consider it an enemy (as happens with the Independent Union of Workers of the Autonomous Metropolitan University), or may see companies as another party with which to negotiate (the FAT in Seal Power)¹³ (De la Garza, 1995) or, alternatively, the union may passively subordinate to the company in the work process (FOMASA¹⁴ member of the CTM of Aguascalientes), or actively subordinate to the company like the sweetheart unions of Monterrey. What differences each of these is not always that clear. More generally, as a privileged space of action, the union may also be a space of *circulation*, i.e., concentrated in negotiating the sale and purchase of labor force as a commodity (employment, wages and benefits) or a space of *production* focused on intervening in the productive process. The latter has four possibilities: laborist unions (for whom the work process is a space of power struggles in production-related decisions with capital); unions that conciliate clashing interests (they negotiate the labor relation in the work process with unionist positions but with no intention of confrontation); unions that simply defend the workers against labor force burnout; and unions that are subordinated to the company complying or not with the management of human resources. Herein is useful to include to distinguish *microcorporativism* or *firm corporativism* from State corporativism although they may interwine. In international theory, this notion is reserved to the labor union that represents the workers and negotiates production issues with the company (Standing, 1999). However, in the case of Mexico there is a broad spectrum of corporativist union forms, as well as State unions that also include various forms, from sweetheart unions that not only negotiate, but also carry out labor force management tasks, to passive unions that are used to control the workers, and even protection unions that only appear in public when there is the danger of an alternative union rise (De la Garza and Bouzas, 1988). Company corporativism may be associated to specific union and labor cultures, such as employer paternalism and patronage between workers, who would see employment as a concession made by the employer with a component of feeling morally committed to the employer or to productivist instrumentalism that implies more productivity in exchange for bonuses and incentives without a moral commitment with the company.

Relations between the union and the State.

The union may be a corporativist statist union, corresponsable for formulating and enforcing state policies (like the CTM until the year 2000); it may be in political opposition to the State (like CNTE);¹⁵ a critical co-

¹⁰ The Mexican Union of Electricity Workers (SME) was created in 1914. It brings together workers from Compañía de Luz y Fuerza del Centro and holds the reputation of being one of the most democratic unions in Mexico.

¹¹ Until the early nineties, Ruta 100 was the government company that administrated bus transport in Mexico City. Its union was characterized for its leftist radicalism.

¹² The historical leader of the oil workers union nicknamed *La Quina* headed the union until president Salinas had him imprisoned in the late eighties.

¹³ The Authentic Labor Front (Frente Auténtico del Trabajo / FAT) is a small democratic labor union organization with a Christian background that later broke away from this stream of thought. Seal Power is an auto part company with whose management FAT has had a good relationship.

¹⁴ A metal mechanic company with a CTM union.

¹⁵ The National Coordination of Education Workers (Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación / CNTE) is a

participant (UNT);¹⁶ or altogether absent from the State arena (sweetheart unions). On the other hand, the union may be protected by the State through legal and extralegal mechanisms like the ones under PRI rulership; the union may be harassed by the State, such as the many independent unions or establish a *modus vivendi* with the State without invading each other's spheres of action such as the innocuous sweetheart unions. Other union cultures may have also been coined around these relations with the State: statism holds the belief that labor issues correspond to the State and are thus resolved through its influence and policies; oppositionism out of principle opposes whatever comes from the State; another union culture sees the company as a big family led by a patriarchal employer where there is no reason for intervening. Additionally, the relationship between the union and political parties in Mexico can be of affiliation, as allies, or with no labor union participation.

Relations between the union and society.

Some labor unions may be craft-oriented, only interested in their labor problems with the company, while others may participate in federations and confederations or even form broader fronts with NGOs and social movements to approach problems that go beyond the labor realm, including their intervention in the reproduction of the labor force in territories such as urban or rural public services.

Thus, a labor union model should at least include the articulations between the labor unions' structure and internal operations, labor and the company, the State and society. These articulations need not be totally coherent since they are constructed historically, which implies the possibility of having contradictions and being imbued in culture as forms of interpretation and social action that give contents and articulate levels and processes.

SPACES FOR LABOR UNION ACTION AND THE POSSIBILITY OF CONSTRUCTING A UNION MODEL

Not only can unionism in a certain country and period recognize one or more labor union models, but these labor unions may as well have defined and constructed privileged spaces of labor union action and intervention (Di Tella, 1970). These spaces are constructed in a labor union fashion, but according to conditions that the labor unions do not choose. Besides, the definition of spaces of action implies a friend – enemy relationship where usually it is the strongest which is able to fix the conflict or negotiation ground (Buroway, 1985). Before neoliberalism, corporatist unions privileged the State arena and the circulation of the labor force understood, as we mentioned, as the purchase and sale of labor force, and in the best of cases held a defensive position vis-à-vis the work place and jobs (Bizberg, 1990). In other words, the corporatist Mexican union was a union of the State and of circulation: it carried out the purchases and sales negotiations at a company level (wage increases and benefits system), but it was the State elites, the employers and the unions that set the general parameters for the labor relations system as a whole. The independent and sweetheart unions were then indirectly favored by those national negotiations without really intervening. The independent labor unions also participated in wage and benefit negotiations at a company or employment establishment level, but their action pivoted around challenging state policies. In other words, for both corporatist and independent labor unions the public space played a privileged role, the former supported public spaces, whereas the latter opposed them. Sweetheart unions were the first to combine bargaining wages and benefits taking advantage of the employers' paternalistic policies that attempted to replace the welfare State in their companies and intervene in the productive process.

stream of radical left wing opposition within the National Union of Education Workers (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación / SNTE), the largest union in Latin America that groups elementary and junior high school teachers, as well as administrative and cleaning staff in schools.

¹⁶ The National Workers Union (Unión Nacional de Trabajadores / UNT) was created in 1997 as a result of a split-off of labor unions from the Labor Congress (Congreso del Trabajo / CT), an elite body of union corporatism joined by independent unions.

In contrast, in Mexico there is not a tradition of councilism as a power struggle strategy within the work process; there are neither experiences of industrial democracy like unionism in Germany. For instance, worker administration of the railways or in PEMEX during the Cardenas administration had different characteristics (De la Garza, 1994). However, since the eighties, there are new union bargaining experiences of productive innovation that cannot be assimilated to sweetheart unionism, like in TELMEX (De la Garza, 1993).

Although some spaces of social relations may be privileged, union action can be articulated with other actions in different spaces: from the State arena to labor relations in the company or to the sphere of social reproduction, or even to following the opposite path (Sariego, 1988).

When considering the creation of labor union action spaces, it is important to regard the historical genesis in which earlier stages leave an imprint on later stages and once a union embarks on a historical trajectory, sometimes other options are annulled. In twentieth century Mexico, early on craft protounions arose but were repressed by the dictatorship to such an extent that the new labor unions in the early twenty first century do not follow the nineteenth century tradition and did not emerge as craft or specific activities' unions, like in England, but as company unions in the most modern industries of those days: mining, railways, textiles and electricity. That is, in Mexico the unions' vindication of crafts or activities is historically more limited than in other countries. Thus, the most significant historical turn in Mexican labor relations during the twentieth century was not, as in other countries, the central position of the craft in the manufacturing process (in the Marxian sense of non-mechanical productive processes), but it rather signified that firm unions emerging outside an institutional framework derived into corporatist union institutionalism. All in all, this great transformation did not lead to the creation of an industrial relations system with norms, values and actors convinced that such was the appropriate channel for collective bargaining, it rather ended in the subjection of labor relations to the State. Then so, a part of the "labor relations system" turned out to be, at the same time, part of the "political system". With such firmly articulated State corporatism in Mexico instead of, say, business unionism or societal corporatism, corporatism did not disappear even as the PRI lost the presidency and still marks the current scenario. The same can be said of the presence international union currents in Mexico: Marxism has had a place through a *sui generis* opposition under the influence of the ideology of the Mexican Revolution, paired with nationalist and populist elements. This interpenetration between Marxism and the ideology of the Mexican Revolution was the basis for the various policies of alliance and subordination to the CTM's corporatism during the thirties and forties and, later on, for alliances with nationalist tendencies such as the Democratic Tendency of the electricity workers in the seventies. Corporatism has also been permeated by nationalism, anti-imperialism, populism and socialism. Social Christianity in Mexico was aborted after negotiations between the government and the *Cristeros*¹⁷ in the twenties, a decade in which the Catholic Church made attempts to promote a confederation of Christian workers; the left carried out similar efforts with the FAT during the sixties. Business unionism has not had any presence in the face of the overwhelming weight of the State and its labor unions, and the social democratic positions have not been able to truly resemble the Mexican authoritarian corporatism.

Presently, the spectrum of possibilities for a reconstitution is framed by processes and structures that surpass the labor unions' structures and internal life, which, on the one hand, act as parameters that place limits on viable action, and, on the other, are also subject to changes due to their action. In what follows we regard the most important of these "broader parameters".

The Mexican neoliberal model

The neoliberal model is to be mainly understood as the opening up the economy and the exposure of national firms to raw competition both in the international market as exporters and in the domestic market itself; it must be, at the same time, regarded as a grand economic policy that abandoned public productive investment and industrial promotion in order to fight inflation, put an end to development policies, and adopt macroeconomic balance priorities. This liberalization and its partial complementary process of productive restructuring have implied a polarization of the productive apparatus, particularly that of industry. And so a minority group of companies that have essentially restructured their organization and labor flexibility, that are competitive, export-oriented, on the one hand, and small and

¹⁷ A Christian guerrilla movement of the twenties against the government emerging from the Mexican Revolution.

micro companies under the opposite conditions, but nevertheless an extremely important source of occupation have been polarized (De la Garza, 1993). Polarization does not imply a vision based on segmentation which was transcended since the dependence theory debates upon marginality in the seventies. Rather than segments, they are constellations around a restructured core, satellites in successive orbits, on the one hand, and a coreless swamp, on the further extreme. There are very few articulations such as chains of production between these extremes, in fact chains of services are more abundant and reproductive chains more dense between the swamp of micro and small companies and the workers of the restructured pole.

In the restructured core, large-scale industrial and service companies prevail marked by intermediate technologies, new forms of work organization, Toyotist flexibility, with presence of a new working class (semi-qualified youth and women with wage levels under five minimum wages whom hold scarce identity with their occupations, firms or unions),¹⁸ high external rotation, located in rough labor-burnout processes (not to be mistaken with the economic concept of labor-intensive work vs. capital-intensive work) where unions have very little influence on decisions regarding production while management avoids to delegate tasks to workers thus continuing to reproduce the division between assignments carried by engineers and that carried out by easy-to-replace workers with low investment in training. Such precarious Toyotist production model has allowed an increase in productivity based on labor force burnout. One of the physical constraints this model faces is the workers' and society's resistance so far expressed individually through high labor rotation and a lack of identification with the company; these hinder participation and involvement, thus limiting Toyotism's capacity to increase productivity. Within this core, composed mostly of the new working class, we cannot yet speak of the constitution of one or more collective subjects; in the mean time, it is a stratum without a specific identity and without broad collective actions in spite of the high level of unionization on its formal side. The workers' potential is great since they share the same conditions of work and living standards.

The other, swamp, extreme is composed by micro and small companies based on either self-employment and family work, non-capitalist agricultural work, door-to-door selling or street vending. They employ low-level technologies and their organization forms are not based on any management basics. Unionization rates are extremely low, patriarchal authoritarian styles of command prevail and when there is identification it is because of patronage, acquaintance, or buddy (compadre) relationships. In this sector, wages are low and instability is not only due to voluntary rotation, but also to imminent bankruptcy or the short-lived nature of affairs. It is a sector that gathers few activities: in manufacturing, the garment industry and repair workshops; services and trade, personal services, cooking and selling food on the streets, urban transport and small-scale construction. The new working class also participates in this sector and has not become constituted as a subject. It is a stratum that is difficult to unionize starting from the fact that a significant part of its members are not waged workers.

The former nationalist revolutionary working class of the stabilizing development period withers between these two poles, its size considerably reduced, it can be found in what remains of the parastate companies, public universities and some large and private restructured companies. The productive processes may be sophisticated, with production models fluctuating between Taylorism-Fordism and the partial application of Toyotism with flexibilized labor relations, with some niches of rigidity remaining in the electric power company, Compañía de Luz y Fuerza del Centro, in universities with legal bargaining agreements still valid (contratos ley = pattern or "official" contracts).¹⁹ Most of such labor force is masculine, mature, with relatively high qualifications, higher wages and benefits. Although many of the contracts changed between the eighties and nineties, the unionization rate is very high and the union, although its protective capacity has been reduced, still defends employment and struggles against burnout in the productive process. Until the seventies, this working class was the core of the workers' movement and in the eighties and nineties it offered the greatest resistance to work flexibilization. Different actors might be at stake in this old working class: the decadent residues of the nationalist revolutionary workers who historically came from Cardenas's movement, the corporatist workers of stabilizing development who were younger in the sixties, an embryo of the new reconverted workers with

¹⁸ In Mexico, minimum wages are not enough for a worker and his/her family to make ends meet. Many researchers place the poverty line at incomes below 5 minimum wages.

¹⁹ In Mexico, these legal bargaining agreements (contratos ley) are contracts that rule all the companies of the same branch, regardless of the existence of several labor unions. These contracts carefully break down the productive tasks.

the capacity to dialogue with the company, such as the telephone workers, pilots and Volkswagen workers. The labor culture among them, however, cannot have changed much: it probably moves between consensus by complicity²⁰ (unions that promote more relaxed work) (Leyva, 1995) like in some universities, and productive instrumentalism such as the telephone workers union (intense work through productivity bonuses, not through identification with the company).

To summarize, the prospective options for labor organization will have to take into account first of all the workers' heterogeneity which do not entirely comply to international theorizations (Hyman, 1996). The Mexican industrial sector is not in decadence, on the contrary, it is the most dynamic axis of the export-oriented economic model. Although services account for most of occupation, the manufacturing industry is not decaying because amid the arising world labor division Mexico performs the role of an exporter of manufacturing goods. In the other extreme, i.e. the swamped unstructured economy, differences between manufacturing and services are less important since both brands of activities are reduced to face to face contact with the client and because of the relevance of non-waged work is such that production and reproduction (regarding time, space and activities) overlap in the household. The fragmentation of the unstructured economy is not due to their being worlds apart, but to the fact that they are all small establishments with similar production and reproduction conditions where the differences in the productive processes, qualifications and conditions of work may be secondary. In this sense, the meaning of work and its intertwining with the world of reproduction may be similar among establishments in spite of their separation or the unclear identity of the precarious segments, where the potential enemy might be not the small employer, but the global society of winners (De la Garza, 1997).

Among the structured sectors these difference between the sphere of social reproduction and the labor sphere is much clearer, whether we talk about the restructured pole or the pole where the old working class participates. The old working class has a clearer labor identity and even remnants of pride for their craft, whereas the potential identity of the new working class is based on the fact that they share more or less the same conditions of work, labor trajectories and living standards.

The labor relations system and its changes.

The previous labor relations system in Mexico was originated in a series of assumptions that framed its actual state. It was believed that society was divided into contradictory classes, the weakest of which had to be protected by the State. The State was thus the main space in which to resolve conflicts and work bargaining, i.e., the labor relations remained subsumed in the sphere of State politics and so the bargaining and exchange agents were the organizations, unions and employers co-responsible for the functioning of the State and its economic policy. These state corporatist relations were intertwined with the political system based on political parties and elections within which a system of stratified exchanges with unionized workers was established on the basis of negotiations between labor unions and the State. The State, then, had to hold the monopoly of representation by being in charge of corporatist labor unions. This harbored an internal authoritarian corporatism and, thus, oligarchic unions, in which the elite rarely changed, repression of the opposition and clientele was usual, and patrimonial cultures prevailed among the rank and file. These kind of labor unions were to exercise a stratified protection of employment, wages (the notion of wages according to reproduction costs without a link with productivity) and conditions of work (defensive and clientele intervention in the labor process).

Within this grand model of labor relations there were several sub models. The Mexican Revolution model grasped the core in order to attend the needs of the large-scale parastate and private companies with high wages and abundant benefits, employment security, rigidity in job functions and internal mobility, a blind promotion scale. Another kind of submodel comprised the workers in State offices with no right to collective bargaining, practically no right to strike, with job stability by law, obligatory membership to a union and confederation, this kind of union were rather defensive about the labor process. A third submodel gathered around the medium-sized industry with higher labor flexibility, and lower wages and benefits than the large establishments, less union affiliation, and less union intervention in the work process. A fourthly kind was made up of sweetheart unions subordinated to

²⁰ In a study on the railway workers union, Marco Antonio Leyva used the notion of consensus by complicity to refer to the relation of complicity between the union and the workers in order to relax the work pace and discipline.

management under the tutelage of business paternalism, enjoying relatively high wages and benefits, wherein the union participated in managing the labor force and democracy was strictly supervised.

Although the labor law itself has not been modified, the model of labor relations was. Since the eighties, the flexibilization of the collective bargaining agreements in large companies and the loss of the power of union corporativism have implied a decrease in economic benefits; a flattening of the wage scale paired with an increase in each job's functions; a diminishing importance of seniority and its benefits; reduction of wages near minimum wages' levels; the emergence of systems of productivity bonuses and incentives; and great staff downsizing in privatized companies. Above all, these changes are due to the fact that labor unions lost their power to lead economic and labor policies. Still, most labor unions remain corporatist, in spite of the State's several attempts to reform them: in 1992, through social liberalism and its derivation into a joint theory of Business and State unionism; in 1995 with the signature of the Agreement for a New Labor Culture, and since 2001 with Fox's attempt to negotiate the labor reform with production factors through the Central Decision-Making Board. As a novel element, we should add the resolutions of the Supreme Court of Justice favoring the creation of more than one union per company and the possibility that the labor unions that are regulated by special laws for government employees may be subject to regulations ruling private companies.

Workers' organizations.

Since 1982, union corporativism has demonstrated little ability and initiative to face these changes. The large union corporations have not recovered from the neoliberal shock. Internal attempts to reform and formulate new strategies have been wrecked by politics' privileged position over unions, as exemplified by the post-Jongitud SNTE in 1990,²¹ among oil workers after La Quina was arrested, with the Juan S. Millán CTM stream,²² or the CTM, CROC and CROM initiatives at a firm level.²³ Since the late eighties, with the emergence of neoliberalism and in spite of attempts to revive the Revolution ideology, corporativism lost its discourse and convictions. Since then it indifferently adopted Salinas's social liberalism, the New Labor Culture in 1995, or Abascal's Christian principles in the year 2001.

Although corporativism is in crisis, at least national state corporativism, one can identify restoration attempts at the firm, industrial branch or regional state levels. Even the possibility of re-editions at a national level, should not be discarded. Although union corporativists and the presidency are presently distanced, restoration could occur: a) through a national Christian corporatist agreement that, as opposed to the Mexican Revolution, is not based on class differences but on the fact that both employers and workers share the same human essence; or b) the employers' interest in labor peace and the control of workers' demands (beyond a proper nationalistic ideology). This employers' restoration alternative acknowledges the historical contribution of corporatist unions to labor peace even if this means to honour Fidel Velásquez²⁴ with a statue in Monterrey (the collective labor conflictiveness in the nineties has remained at a minimal historical level and the labor unions have so far conveyed wage ceilings). Following this logic, employers recognize the risks of replacing corporatist unions by unions that may actually lead an active role in negotiating and formulating proposals for production that could be expensive and risky, and although it is the employers' historical favorite type of union that is being targeted, an overt replacement of corporativism would not come without conflicts. As such, all those employer cultures based upon the notion of *property* that end up concentrating management and labor decisions considering it as favor done to workers; that is, the existence of all those business strategies

²¹ Carlos Jongitud, leader of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), was defeated during the Salinas administration.

²² A reformist belonging to the CTM who was removed from union tasks upon being elected governor of one of the northern states.

²³ Although the CTM is the largest union confederation in Mexico, there are other corporatist confederations such as the CROC (the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants) and the CROM (Revolutionary Confederation of Mexican Workers) all of which are affiliated to the Congress of Labor.

²⁴ The historical leader of corporativism in Mexico. Once he passed away, the Monterrey businessmen, supposedly critical of corporatism, thus acknowledged the services he had provided.

that, in general, assume that unions will not participate intensely in resolving issues regarding production, low wages and labor intensity, may explain why it looks like most employers would prefer to maintain the *status quo* supporting the old representation monopoly in exchange for labor peace and control over the workers.

The National Workers' Union (UNT), itself split from corporativism in 1997, appeared as an alternative to both traditional corporativism and decadent independent unionism. It brought together the "unionist capital" of the telephone workers, experts in negotiating productivity; the Authentic Labor Front (FAT) with their innovative international relations; the Social Security union and its experience on social security matters; and the union of the National University workers with a long democratic tradition. This confederation, however, remained merely as an organization of services labor unions, relevant because they are equally modern, but without a major presence in manufacture, particularly in the maquiladoras. Tactically speaking, it prefers public denunciation —like independent unionism— and elite level negotiations —like corporativism— rather than penetration and organization at a factory level. Aside from some insignificant conflicts with its employers in which it has participated, it has not decided to confront the dominant corporativist organizations.

After the failure and dissolution of the May 1st Coordination (Coordinadora Primero de Mayo) independent unionism was reduced to the Mexican Labor Union Front (Frente Sindical Mexicano) headed by the Mexican Union of Electricity Workers (Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas / SME) that, other than denouncing, it lost its capacity and determination to carry out broad collective actions long ago, and has used this front for its interests as a craft struggling against the privatization of the electric power industry and the defense of their collective bargaining agreement. On the other hand, we have sporadic actions from certain CNTE's delegations that are poorly linked to other labor unions.

The labor union cultures span the corporatist unions and its belief in the State's omnipotence which makes them search for a restoration of the elite; the restructured mild reliance on the State, such as the telephone workers, although from a critical stance; and the nationalism that fight on this same level. Inside all unions, patrimonialism, delegating all power to leadership, authoritarianism and caudillo attitudes continue to prevail.

In other words, the space of possibilities for union renovation currently has the following main parameters:

- 1) The State has quit its welfare facade benefiting the upper layers of the organized workers. There is now a polarization among firms with one extrem subject to international market and the other pole oriented to the domestic market, mainly towards the market of the poor.

- 2) Capital accumulation models based on labor intensification and low wages.

- 3) A heterogeneous working class (not only waged workers) that ranges from the new working class located in modern industry and services without any identification with labor, the firm or the union, and the swamp of the unstructured economy in which production and reproduction are often intertwined. In both sectors, the potential identities do not come from collective experiences and memories shared subjectively, but from similar conditions of work and standards of living.

- 4) A transformed labor relations system marked by a weakened influence of unions on public policies and the flexibilization of the large collective bargaining agreements. In the face of these changes, reaffirmed by the PRI's electoral defeats, the possibility of a new agreement from the top (Christian corporativism) and from the bottom (company corporativism) opens up.

- 5) Employer cultures that carry a unilateral unshared concept of property and direction, of labor as a production factor and employment as a favor; union cultures that do not make proposals regarding production and are authoritarian in the internal life of the workers' organizations; worker cultures that go range from patronage in the unstructured economy to productivist instrumentalism in the modernized sectors.

IS A NEW UNION MODEL POSSIBLE?

We mentioned how, since the eighties, the ground for disputes and negotiation has been unilaterally settled inside the space of production by the strongest of the contending parts, i.e., the employers. The labor unions actually took their time to participate, in fact very few have come up with their own proposals, most of them are subordinated to management's initiatives, others are passive observers who just let things be and a few resist as if it were import substitution times (Pollert, 1991).

In the mean time, there are several union alternatives that have already been initiated of which we would like to comment their potentialities and limitations:

The restoration of corporatist unions and their eventual transformation into firm corporatism.

This alternative is not necessarily a *Japanese house* union, although it might be one of its modalities (Tolliday, 1992) nor a sweetheart union. Under conditions existing in Mexico, this alternative cannot abstract from the intertwining of corporatism and the political system, or from the concentration of power in the union elites and authoritarianism. Because of this, corporatist restoration can take on different modalities. The first could be that of the sweetheart, disconnected from politics, acting as if their job was to supervise the workers, and manage the benefits and the labor force in the productive process. This modality has a low probability of extending because the linkages between the union leaders and the political party system (the parliament, the executive and judiciary branches in their different levels) will not be put aside overnight particularly because these networks continue working as channels of influence and power. It is more likely that the workers' discontent be controlled by the modality of the corporatist unions dependent on management to whom it allows to make technological and organizational transformations in labor relations and eventually channel some basic demands. This already existent modality does not require another type of leaders who are better prepared in negotiating productivity and in the management of the labor force. It does not imply that the leaders will no longer participate in the political system, although they might not necessarily participate with the PRI. In other words, the forms already exist, what changes is whether the emphasis is on the State or on the company without its being contaminated by partisan politics. The strength and viability of this option no longer lies on the centralized figure of the president and in the synchronization of its different instances and levels through discipline. It is, ironically, a further societal corporatism based on networks of commitments, interests, influences interwoven during decades of corporatism at a *meso* and *micro* level. This network is nourished by the employers' interest in continuing with labor peace, wage control and the unilaterality of innovations in the productive process, as well as by the leaders' interest in having firms supporting their monopoly, and by the interest public officials have in providing appropriate conditions for productive investment. It nevertheless faces some contradictions. For instance, as the president, who used to impose discipline in the face of uncertainty, loses its central grip it opens up the possibility of divergence among those actors who used to know what role they were to play. In this sense, union support to companies may be dissonant with the leaders' participation in the political system. Regarding production matters, in spite that this modality allows companies to hold low labor costs and intensify labor, the unions are unable to contain voluntary staff rotation. They do not contribute to the creation of a new labor culture among the workers, either. In other words, this modality falls short of helping to close the Toyotist loop of new organization form, new labor culture and productivity as it does not go beyond the limits of Taylorism-Fordism. The productive agreements already signed and those to be signed in the future, reached through cupular agreements will hardly have any effect on the closure of Toyotism, in any case, they will only foster an increasing work burden along with insignificant productivity bonuses. In other words, it is not an appropriate instrument to face staff rotation, the lack of identification with the company, and the labor force's accelerated burnout whether in its Taylorist-Fordist or Toyotist form. This type of union has helped to curb workers' discontent and to stop allowing the company to unilaterally act as it pleases in the work process. It has not, nevertheless, faced a major conflict while operating in conditions of relative abundance of employment in manufacturing, a situation that changed drastically as of the overproduction crisis initiated in the year 2001. Previously, manufacturing workers could simply resign to the job, take a brief break and then quite easily find a similar job in another company. Under the current conditions of crisis in manufacturing, the decrease of slightly over 800,000 jobs a year, employment takes on another subjective value for workers, particularly when the informal sector would seem to be saturating. Extending this situation could imply complications for union control once resignation is no longer an appropriate path for the workers.

The neocorporatist productivist alternative.

This modality is already at work in companies that are financially prosperous, employing high technology, high productivity and qualified labor force where there is a union that has defined production as a ground for pro-active intervention. This alternative so far only covers a minority of restructured companies in Mexico. When a new kind of worker-employer relationship has been established, as in Telmex, it is not a gracious concession of management, but is rather the result of a process in which the union's attempts to establish a new kind of labor relation have been crucial. These attempts, however, are not always successful: in Telmex they were, whereas in Bancomer²⁵ they were not (Bouzas, 1996). In other words, the foremost condition is to have a well-prepared leadership determined to negotiate the production ground bilaterally. The second but not least condition has been management's willingness to accept the union as a participant in a ground that has so far been exclusively their own. Management has commonly resisted this, although successful processes have been favored when management has been divided. The third condition refers to union capacity to mobilize its ranks productively, which implies an altogether different sense from that implied in cupular productivity agreements. The fourth condition to be met is the a financial y healthy firm in position to offer attractive productivity bonuses. Under these conditions, the union may act not only as an actor that supports the decisions taken by the employers and as a partner in managing the labor force, but also as an active agent in the company's transformation with mutual benefits for both company and workers. This alternative, however, is limited by the same conditions that have explained its emergence in other companies: that Mexico still lacks leaderships that are convinced and prepared to lead this strategic change. Beyond rhetoric and some cosmetic measures, managements are not actually willing to agree to share power with the labor unions over production-related decisions. Besides, financial health does not always allow for attractive bonuses, particularly in companies that years ago embarked on accumulation based on labor intensification and low wages. The small number of companies representing the neocorporatist productivist alternative might also face limitations in the future. It firstly depends on whether the company's financial health allows a policy of providing staff with attractive bonuses and employment security to continue. And secondly, rather than through a perfect Toyotist loop, the new labor relationship and productivity circle in these companies seems to have been closed on account of these bonuses and a transition from a consensus of complicity under the protection of a union to an instrumental productivist culture no longer based on minimum wages, but on a rigid wage scale by classifications. If the workers work more, they receive more bonuses, which differ from the notion of a *new labor culture*.

Although these two union alternatives, company corporatist restoration and neocorporatist productivism are already at stake (the former more than the latter), if we accept various intermediate modalities, then we might be able to believe that among the creaks of the new structures there are connections with uncertainties that the actors visualize according to their own conceptions and possibilities of action which at first might not appear as regularities, and there might be many particular situations, but some of them might be developed willingly. At least we can agree that all independent unions, but the raunchest, are clear that one of the most important spaces for labor union struggles since the eighties is the productive process with its components: technologies, labor force organization and management, labor relations, qualification and training, labor cultures, relations with clients and providers. It cannot be said that labor unions must disregard the productive space. But as we noted above, the labor unions can partner up with management and support its initiatives, as simple protectors of the conditions of work that favor the workers, or as agents of change inside a company with their own proposals. This alternative does not subordinate the union to management, although its differences in comparison to the other two alternatives are small. It is based on the fact that liberalization and globalization have effectively imposed extreme conditions of competition on the companies, that having companies that are financially and productively healthy can benefit the workers and the union by allowing better conditions for future negotiations. Viewed as process, the union could pressure and demonstrate the pertinence of having production models different from the Taylorist-Fordist model and the what we termed here the precarious Toyotist model with heavy union participation and distribution of benefits. This kind of strategy can come out of the limited conditions in Mexico, and provide a sense of union

²⁵ Bancomer is the second most important bank in Mexico. In the early nineties, influenced by the experience of the telephone workers and president Salinas's rhetoric of a "new unionism", the union's leadership attempted to speak on behalf of the company in its modernization process. As a result, the leaders lost their jobs.

autonomy to the empty discourses of total quality and just-in-time, and of a new labor culture (Wood, 1993). This points to unions' urge to construct a viable discourse that emerges from the productive process (Edwards, 1979): a new concept of *productivity* that is not limited to the relation between product per unit of work input, but also considers the technical, economic, productive, social and cultural factors that have an influence on productivity; this concept should also consider improving the quality of life and work. A concept of *flexibility* that opposes simple unilateral de-regulation and includes employment guarantees, creative multi-skilled work different from multifunctionality as well as training (Katz, 1999). The creation of such a discourse, that imprints union and worker contents into the dominant management discourse, would need to be complemented by a proposal to create institutions to negotiate the changes. The union structures predominating until the nineties would not seem to be the most appropriate. It is necessary to create something like the Company Committee,²⁶ that rather than negotiating employment or wages, negotiates conditions of work and innovations as part of the union close to the floor workers. Such committee would be directly elected by the workers who are interested, not appointed by an executive elites because of its efficiency but as a way of decentralizing the union's future structure. These committees could link up with institutional traditions within companies in Mexico through Mixed Commissions and department delegates. Depending on the conditions, the Company Committee may be constituted by union members only or can be mixed. In cases where management may be less union-friendly, the union may try to imprint a labor union orientation to the quality circles and push them to act, even if partially, as new forms of representation on the factory floor. Negotiating productivity could not simply imply accepting new burdens of work fixed by management in exchange for bonuses. In the long term, it would have to target a shift in the dominant production models of accelerated burnout of the labor force; in the immediate term, it would have to focus on a bilateral diagnostic of the obstacles to increase productivity, define indicators to measure them, possible ways of distributing the benefits and an evaluation of the productivity, training, and health and safety programs. That is, in countries with such limited alternatives as Mexico, there is a possibility of the workers using new forms of work organization: circles and teams as forms of representation; creative and delimited multi-skilled qualification; just-in-time as a form in which the worker relates to the chain of production; a criticism to Taylorist and precarious Toyotist division of labor between technicians and engineers, on the one hand, and workers, on the other.

It is nevertheless not enough for a different union alternative to think of intervening in the productive process with autonomy, since the old labor regime has not been dismantled yet and may even be partially restored. In other words, it would be totally inappropriate to assume a union solely focused on production while the networks of the labor relations system and policies continue interacting. The new situation, however, is not based on state centralism. Mexico is moving from a monocentric State to a polycentric State, a war of positions in which the trenches or who is friend or foe is clearly defined, a sort of *guerrilla warfare* of flexible political and labor guerrillas that intervene in different levels depending on the specific situation, forming flexible fronts with allies with which they will not necessarily agree in all fields, not only with labor unions, but with the new agents of social movements and NGOs that may transmit a transnational perspective as well. In this sense, the politically unaffiliated and unsubordinated intervention of the unions is also a need under the current conditions in Mexico. A flexible and multiple action union emerging from the production space linking it with circulation and reproduction, while acknowledging that there are other economic, political, labor and social levels foreign to production (i.e. without being directly productive). In this changing scenario, there would be anyway relevant conceptions and notions to be highlighted and rescued as general guidelines to action:

- 1) To vindicate a possible clash of interests between capital and labor that contrasts with the paternalism of sweethearted unionism and its idea that they are partners with the same interests as productivist neocorporativism (the enemy is now in the market), and/or with the Christian corporativism of the kind promoted by the Labor Secretary (workers and employers share the same human essence).

- 2) To oppose individualism, vindicating collective organization and action. The path of individualism in Mexico has led to high staff rotation and the consolidation of precarious production models, without having improved standards of living.

²⁶ In Europe, Company Committees are constituted by all workers whether they belong to the union or not; they do not negotiate wages or benefits and may or may not be part of a union.

3) Not to reduce labor to the immediate activity of transforming a work object, but to regard different processes and actors constituting the company, the chains of clients and suppliers, the labor markets, the labor relations systems (labor systems, social security, institutions that regulate conflict, the *meso* and *macro* agreements between labor unions, employers and the State) (Bronstein, 1997). Ultimately, the production and labor relation models articulate with development and economic policies, and are not indifferent to what political party is in power either. These instances cannot be thought of solely at a national level.

4) To reformulate the union's structures and inner functioning. It is necessary to design organizations with relatively decentralized decision-making bodies, particularly the construction of new forms of representing the floor workers or to reactivate old forms such as the figure of the department delegate, and new forms of representation vis-à-vis the polycentric State and the stakeholders (Fosch, 1990).

Labor union legitimacy under the new conditions can no longer mainly emerge from negotiating work and social benefits with the State, which in the mean time is withdrawing from these aspects, but from the union's capacity to negotiate new labor issues with the firms' management and of creating flexible fronts to promote reforms and policies that favor the workers.

Democratizing might imply decentralizing decision-making in the different levels in which a union can intervene. It is not detailed regulation that ensures decentralization and greater participation, but a regulation that is flexible and open to creativity.

This is valid for the structured sector, above all for manufacturing and modern services. The unstructured economy would have to walk along a different path: the path of new labor legislation with a *notion* of work that is not reduced to wages, that also recognizes the overlap between production and reproduction and the peculiarities of the immaterial production that brings the client in at the very moment of production.

It is nevertheless difficult to spontaneously break the vicious circle between work dissatisfaction and an individual or family solution instead of the union's collective action. This leads to rethinking the old problem of the relationship between feeling and thinking. The Leninist solution of an outer consciousness, apart from belonging to the days of the enlightenment, led to Stalinism, from the concept of a leading party to the notion of a leading State that based its authoritarianism on a so-called science of history. However, between spontaneism and enlightenment that leads to party and State despotism, there are other positions that give knowledge a place in the workers' struggle. The temptation for intellectuals to define what should be done from their scientific stance, even if they are now in NGO's, may experience an essential shift. Enlightenment is based on the concept of modern science and of a reality subjected to laws that science might know and that go beyond willingness. A first shift would be to accept that in social problems laws are not simply established for the intellectuals to get to know them, but that regularities are updated with practice and that in a specific juncture practice can modify structures. In other words, the future is not predestined, although it is not a totally haphazardous event either. What needs to be identified presently is the space in which collective action is viable, being aware that the parameters of viability might have structural components as well as the stakeholders' subjective components. Besides, the viability of a concrete process does not depend solely on general factors, globalization, for example, but also on specific factors. To identify these parameters can be a joint task of intellectuals and promoters together with workers. In other words, the theoretical function of the intellectuals taking knowledge to the workers may change into a methodological function that provides inputs and forms of constructing initiatives—that are never self-sufficient—for the joint development of tactics and strategies.

Along these lines, the workers feel dissatisfied with their conditions of work, but the resistance strategies have so far been eminently individual or familial. Turning feelings into collective action carried out not necessarily exclusively by the workers, may demand the intervention of a new and at the same time old figure that promotes, educates and furthers organization, particularly for the broad masses of the new working class (without forgetting the old working class). It is that very same figure that haunted the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century under the wing of the International Workers of the World, that haunted the masses of students in Mexico who after 1968 infiltrated factories or created

study circles with workers and played an important role in union insurgency in the seventies, the very same figure that haunts those who currently support AFL-CIO labor union affiliation campaigns in the United States. It is true that the conditions are different in Mexico today; the students have not overcome their sectarianism and are far from the mystique that in the seventies pushed them to confront power throughout the world. The independent labor unions have become bureaucratized and are more interested in holding on to what they have not lost or in convincing the high levels of the government that they can be an acceptable alternative for the employers than in attacking with an anticorporatist stance and organizing the new working class. The left wing parties, on the other hand, concentrate their efforts on winning the elections and getting hold of positions in the government and parliament. It seems to be urgent to have labor union organizers so as to thus break the vicious circle of every day conflict and individual solutions. Under the current conditions, unions require professionals in promotion, strategically located in manufacturing areas, that at first work underground, retrieving the students experiences of the seventies, conducting training, jointly constructing tactics and strategies, linking with other union organizations, NGO's and social movements both nationally and internationally. A point of departure could be the defense of rights already contained in legislation, another could be the struggle for minimum labor standards. Later on unions could seek to intervene in the productive process with flexible and creative lines of action, far away from old dogmatisms and with an unfixed definition of friends and enemies.

Unless anyone would bet for a social explosion like in Argentina, which in the mean time would be difficult, rather than on individual solutions, the process to reconstruct the workers' movement must essentially go from bottom to top, which does not exclude initiatives at other levels like the legislative level. A molecular movement as the one we have imagined here might help overcome fragmentations and the lack of collective identities in the future and to move from a passive stance to activity where labor issues in its restrictive sense will be in the center of collective action. The prairie is dry enough as it is. Mexico is experiencing a "social situation" recreated by neoliberalism and the path the employers have taken with regard to the production models is stressful enough to serve as social foundations for the reconstruction of the workers' movement.

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