

“Contesting the ‘Mexican Miracle’: Railway Men and Women and the Struggle for
Democracy in Mexico, 1943-1959”

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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This dissertation argues that railway men and women led a working class insurrection in response to post-war economic modernization programs implemented by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), programs which favored business interests over the needs of the working class. In doing so, the railway movement challenged PRI hegemony by proposing a new democratic vision based on workplace democracy and community mobilization. The thesis details how the PRI intervened in the affairs of the most powerful industrial union, the Mexican Railway Workers' Union (STFRM), forming pacts with union leaders to ensure the acquiescence of the rank and file to the ruling party's post-war economic program. After enduring declining wages enabled by union corruption throughout the 1950s, dissident railway workers organized in 1958 and 1959 to elect democratic leaders to head the STFRM and to pressure the Mexican National Railways to raise wages and provide housing and medical benefits to railway families.

Drawing on oral histories and railway company documents, the thesis proceeds to argue that railway men and women created a collective identity based on workplace and neighborhood experiences, and that they drew on this identity to organize the railway movement of the 1950s. Because a railway identity existed for individuals who did not work for the railways, such as wives, daughters and sons, the railway movement brought

together families across regions. Hence, what began as a struggle over workplace concerns took on national significance in 1958 when railway families supported strikes that shut down the economy. The railway movement stood as the most significant challenge to PRI rule up to that moment, serving as an antecedent to the student movement of the 1960s.

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Abbreviations

BUO: Workers' Unity Bloc

CGT: Workers' General Confederation

CROM: Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers

CTM: Confederation of Mexican Workers

FMTBB: Fraternity of Mexican Trainmen and Brotherhood of Boilermakers

FNM: Mexican National Railways

PCM: Mexican Communist Party

PP: Popular Party

PRI: Institutional Revolutionary Party

P.O.C.M: Mexican Workers-Peasant Party

S.T.F.R.M: Mexican Railway Workers Union

Chapter One: Introduction

In the years immediately following World War II, Mexico entered an era of unprecedented economic growth and seeming prosperity. The political system, with the Institutionalized Revolutionary Party (PRI) firmly entrenched in power, was stable. After the tumultuous years of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), when land reforms redistributed nearly fifty million of acres of land to hundreds of thousands of landless Mexicans, labor unions won better wages and working conditions, and the government stood up to foreign oil companies, expropriating them in 1938, the ruling party had shifted rightward, committed to less radical policies of economic development. The presidencies of Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946-52) and Adolfo Ruíz Cortines (1952-58) sought to modernize Mexico, encouraging industrialization by protecting domestic companies.

Underneath the surface glow of prosperity and modernity, however, there lay growing discontent among workers that Mexico's progress had come at their expense. Organized labor, in particular, felt the impact of inflation on its members, which eroded the hard won gains of the 1930s, and of the widespread corruption that had undermined the responsiveness of both the unions and the dominant political party. For the most part, the PRI's system of rewards (for those groups and individuals who cooperated with the party) and punishments (for those groups and individuals who did not cooperate with the party) covered up dissent.

In 1958 and 1959, however, discontent erupted onto the surface of Mexican politics, when the dissident members of the Mexican Railroad Workers' Union (STFRM) staged a series of strikes that constituted the most threatening grassroots movement and the largest labor strikes of the post-revolutionary era (1920 on). Railroad workers went on strike three times during those two years, demanding not only higher wages, but the transformation of their union into a workers democracy, and, even more extraordinarily, fundamental changes in Mexican politics as well. After relatively conciliatory negotiations during the first two strikes that resulted in considerable concessions by President Ruíz Cortines, the government, finally pushed to the limits of its tolerance, crushed the third strike, which had spread to include petroleum, electrical, and telegraph workers as well as teachers, by calling in the military and police on March 26, 1959.

The study that follows traces the historical antecedents of the railroad workers' movement, relates the narrative of the movement, and explores the construction of the community of railroad workers and their families that produced both the successes and failures of the strikes of 1958 and 1959. The dissertation argues that the railroad workers' movement resulted from the construction of this special community and that men and women both built the community and created their doomed movement together.

The strikes reflected an effort by workers and their families to propose their own vision for the country's modernization. They expected modernization to bring about capital investment in the railway industry as well as wage hikes to the rank and file. Railway families also wanted the company to provide free healthcare and subsidized housing. With the end of World War II, the PRI, FNM and corrupt union officials could

no longer convince railway families that they needed to accept living shabbily in order to help industry to help industry produce for the Allies.

We chart the contested the process of post-war modernization, which began with railway workers demanding higher wages at the end of World War II, led to the imposition of government cronies as heads of the STFRM, and eventually culminated in the strikes of 1958 and 1959. Economic liberalization in the post-war period strained the relationship between rank-and-file railway workers and STFRM leaders because they had been placed in their positions with the help of the PRI. From 1948 to 1958, these collaborationist union leaders, popularly known as charros, suppressed workers' demands for wage hikes in order to keep rates on cargo low and thereby help strategic industries, such as mining and textiles, which were critical for industrialization. When the rank and file complained, charros explained that higher wages would only hurt the economy. Along with PRI officials, STFRM charros instructed the rank and file to accept low wages for the good of the country's economy.

By the late 1950s, railway families had had enough of scrimping and barely getting by, while union politicians, who rubbed shoulders with PRI and FNM bureaucrats, exhorted the rank and file to accept low wages as a patriotic duty. By accepting low wages, workers helped keep transportation costs down for industries. Workers were well aware that their sacrifices had aided industrialization; they now wanted to be recompensed having accepted poor pay for the good of the country. The 1958-1959 strikes mark railway families' rejection of the PRI's post-war modernization plan, which required working-class families to accept falling wages and inflation.

Roots of Discontent

The discontent among railway workers that emerged in the late 1950s had its roots in the national government's post-war economic policies. President Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-1946) and President Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946-1952) pursued industrial modernization with a zeal and enthusiasm not seen since the days of Porfirio Díaz in the nineteenth century. Ávila Camacho took advantage of the patriotic fervor stoked with World War II to create a pact between national labor syndicates and the government. Working class people and the unions that represented them supported the Allied cause by postponing demands for wage increases and avoiding strikes, thereby facilitating industrial production and helping to foment national unity. Mexicans of all classes stood united against the fascist threat. The largest unions showed their cooperation in 1942 when they signed the Labor Unity Pact, accepting wage concessions and promising not to strike in order to support the war effort.¹

When the war ended, STFRM leaders, who were still independent and beholden to the rank and file, expected the government and railway companies to reward its members with higher wages for the sacrifices they had made in support of the war effort. The STFRM urged the PRI to increase the wages of the rank-and-file. In addition, the STFRM advocated for the government to invest in national industrialization. In order to create more and better jobs for workers, the STFRM sought a larger share of the economic pie for the working class.

Labor's proposals coincided with the election of Miguel Alemán in January 1946. Alemán shared labor's desire for a modern, industrialized Mexico, but his

industrialization project conflicted with that supported by the country's powerful unions. Alemán envisioned an industrial sector owned and financed largely by private investors, with some foreign ownership. Alemán's doors opened widely for business representatives, as he concurrently urged workers to continue to sacrifice wage gains for the sake of industrialization. Not surprisingly, unions soon came to perceive Alemán as pro-business and hostile to the interests of the working class.

From 1945 to 1948, Luis Gómez Z., the Secretary General of the STFRM, took a strong stance against Alemán's position that workers had to accept decreases in their standard of living for the good of the nation. Valentín Campa, the STFRM Secretary of Organization, Propaganda, and Education and an outspoken proponent of Marxism, demanded wage increases for rank-and-file railway workers. Union leaders such as Gómez Z. and Campa used the official STFRM newspaper to publicly argue against Alemán's policies. They opposed further sacrifices on the part of the members and sought to expand the industrial working class through government investment in industrialization. Moreover, they protested against government subsidies for private companies. In private meetings with company and government officials, Gómez Z. exhorted officials to increase freight rates to finance wage increases and capital investment in the industry. In short, the STFRM expected President Alemán to return to the pro-labor, economic protectionism of the Lázaro Cárdenas era.

The Cold War and the Charrazo of 1948

¹ *Mexico, un pueblo en la historia*, Enrique Semo ed. (Mexico City: Alianza Editorial Mexicana, 1989), 76.

President Alemán's administration was part of a continent-wide shift away from populist governments that had advanced state-financed industrialization combined with voting and labor rights. The Cold War served as the context for the shift toward political conservatism and the decreased importance accorded to workers' rights. Latin American governments aimed to attract U.S. political and economic support by elaborating policies of industrialization that sought injections of foreign capital and resulted in reduced wages for the working class. To be sure, the transition to more conservative economic policies was aided by measures that decreased the political clout of the industrial working class.

In his study on the Cold War in Latin America, historian Greg Grandin observes that 1947 marked a turning point in Latin American political history, as governments throughout the continent abandoned liberal democracy for more authoritarian forms of government.² He explains that "reform parties lost their dynamism, while governments intervened against work stoppages, passed legislation restricting the right to strike, and outlawed or repressed Communist parties." Workers lost their voice in national politics, as their "unions purged militants from their ranks, while labor confederations fractured or came under government control".³

In Mexico, the PRI annexed industrial unions and had leftist unionists arrested and replaced with pro-government cronies. Marxist parties found themselves having to back President Alemán's initiatives or face repression. The Popular Party, which was founded in 1948 and led by the prominent labor leader Vincente Lombardo Toledano, pledged its support to the PRI, arguing that Mexico needed to find its own path to socialism, a path

² He points to military coups against elected officials in Peru and Venezuela. Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 8.

³ Ibid.

that ran through the PRI.⁴ The Mexican Communist Party (PCM) backed the PRI by agreeing to follow a policy of National Unity. The PCM proposed “compulsory national military service, the signing of a military and commercial treaty with the United States for Mexico’s defense, and the encouragement of the development of Mexican industries, and changes to the party’s tactics on the industrial front to avoid unnecessary strike actions that might harm production.”⁵

Marxists unwilling to accept what they viewed as President Alemán’s anti-labor industrial policy were either expelled or broke away from the PCM and formed a Mexican Worker-Peasant party (POCM) in 1950. Many of these former PCM activists used the POCM as a vehicle to organize railway workers in the 1950s. The most important of these figures were Demetrio Vallejo and Valentín Campa. Vallejo was a union activist in Veracruz, yet unknown to workers and the press in other areas of the country. Campa, banished from the Mexican Communist Party in 1940, used his position as STFRM Secretary of Education, Organization and Propaganda to criticize the Alemán modernization program; as editor of the union paper, “Unificación Ferroviaria,” he played a direct role in presenting Marxian critiques of FNM management to the railway rank and file.⁶ Luis Gómez Z., secretary general of the STFRM in the 1940s, joined Campa in leading the STFRM against Alemán’s modernization plan.

Gómez Z. and Campa paid the price for their political dissidence. In October 1948, the Alemán administration exploited an internal battle among STFRM leaders to undermine the influence of the combative leadership. In February 1948, rank and file

⁴ Barry Carr, *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 189.

⁵ Ibid, 117.

⁶ Ibid., 166.

workers elected Jesús Díaz de León, a railway electrician, as Secretary General of the STFRM. Díaz de León was known as “el charro” because of his love of rodeos and penchant for dressing in cowboy garb. He promised to act independently and curtail union corruption, which was already a source of grief among the rank and file.⁷

Díaz de León began his crusade against union corruption by studying how the union had spent its money during the previous year. The investigation revealed that Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa transferred over \$U.S. 30,000 from STFRM coffers to the Unitary Workers’ Confederation (CUT), an umbrella group which Gómez Z. founded in 1947 to forge alliances among the country’s most progressive unions. Although Campa and Gómez Z. had received authorization by the rank and file to use union funds for the formation of the CUT, Díaz de León took the two union veterans to court for embezzling funds. Gómez Z. and Campa were convicted of fraud and landed in prison. In one stroke, the court defanged the two men who had protested the PRI’s favoring industrialists and who had demanded that the FNM increase wages. Gómez Z. and Campa languished in jail until 1951, when the courts overturned their sentence. The defendants provided evidence that more than twenty locals had approved transferring money to the CUT. Nonetheless, the incident took away Gómez Z and Campa’s ability to use their union positions to criticize the government and to get their message out to the STFRM’s over 60,000 members.

During Gómez Z. and Campa’s period in jail, Díaz de León called for the federal attorney general to audit the finances of the union, presumably to discover those who had stolen union funds or property. This was a truly unprecedented action, however, because

⁷ Kevin J. Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State, and Authoritarianism in Mexico* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1995), 136-137.

STFRM members took pride in their independence from the government. Díaz de León had overstepped his authority by inviting government agents to investigate the STFRM. In response, on October 14, the union oversight committee suspended Díaz de León from his position as secretary general for overreaching his powers. Hours later, approximately six hundred men dressed as railway workers backed Díaz de León by forcibly taking over union headquarters in Mexico City. While many of the men undoubtedly were workers, others were members of the Federal Security Directorate, an elite group in law enforcement. Carlos I. Serrano, an aide to Aléman, led the force, suggesting that the action enjoyed the support of the presidential administration.⁸

The group that supported the charro Díaz de León, known as the October 14 Group, became the most powerful faction in the STFRM. The takeover of STFRM headquarters and reinstatement of Díaz de León as union head became known as the “charrazo”. The charrazo divided the rank and file. Workers from twenty-six union locals protested the takeover of the union by the charro and his supporters. Railway workers opposed to the charro found support from colleagues in other industrial unions. Workers from petrol, electrical, mining and telephone unions condemned Díaz de León for allowing the government to meddle in union business.

The worse fears of critics of the charrazo unfolded over the next ten years: Díaz de León put an end to the militant policies of his predecessors and took a conciliatory stance toward the FNM and PRI, coercing union members to sacrifice pay and benefits for the supposed good of the nation. Workers complained of fixed elections for leadership posts at all union levels. Díaz de León’s followers soon became known as for rigging elections and refusing to fight for higher wages and better working conditions for their members.

⁸ Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 140.

It is no wonder then that since the charrazo Mexicans have referred to collaborationist union leaders as “charros,” regardless of the industry to which they belong.⁹

The Strikes of 1958

Scholars have viewed the 1940s and 1950s as a period of economic stability and social peace, which enabled a “miracle” in economic growth.¹⁰ Alemán’s ambitious industrialization programs and policies aimed at capital accumulation masked working-class resentment over increased inflation, drops in real wages, government influence over industrial unions, and a general sense that the rosy portrayal of the country’s economy in the press and by politicians did not reflect hard times faced by workers and their families. For railway families the “miracle” felt more like a nightmare.

Discontent simmered throughout the 1950s, emerging in a short-lived train workers slowdown in 1954.¹¹ The slowdown reflected the organizing efforts of railway activists who wanted to overthrow corrupt union leaders, but it was not until more than a decade after the charrazo that railway workers managed to organize a national movement against the charros. In June 1958, Demetrio Vallejo, a telegraph worker from Matías Romero, Oaxaca, emerged as the leader of workers tired of charro acquiescence to President Alemán and FNM management. Vallejo headed a railway movement that circumvented charro authorities and directly demanded a wage increase from the FNM. Charros, who

⁹ V.M. Durand Ponte, *La ruptura de la nación* (Mexico: UNAM, 1986); Víctor Manuel Durand Ponte et. al, *Las derrotas obreras, 1946-1952* (Mexico: UNAM 1984); R. Loyola, ed. *Entre la Guerra y la estabilidad política: el México de los 40* (Mexico: 1978).

¹⁰ Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, Eric Zolov, eds. *Fragments of a Golden Age: the Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 8; for the 1950s, see Olga Pellicer de Brody y

found support from PRI and FNM officials, lambasted the railway movement for agitating against the interests of the nation. In response, activists rallied workers throughout the country and successfully shut down the railway industry during the last week in June.

The June strikes ended only when President Ruíz Cortines (1952 – 1958) intervened and unilaterally granted workers a 16.66% across-the-board wage hike. The collective power of the rank-and-file became evident when Demetrio Vallejo and dissident leaders met personally in the National Palace with the President. Dissidents had gone from outsiders with no union authority to meeting with the highest official in the land. Their success proved that the collaborationist leadership was inept and corrupt.

The June 1958 victory of the dissidents in the STFRM further weakened charro leaders' credibility among the rank-and-file, while it made heroes of railway activists. Workers who rallied around Demetrio Vallejo became known as “vallejistas”. Vallejistas soon sought to turn their economic victory into a political one. In July 1958, railway activists called for open union elections, nominating Vallejo as candidate for the position of STFRM Secretary General. The action was a direct challenge to the PRI and its modernization plan, which counted on the support of charro unions to keep wages low for the benefit of private industry. After a series of additional strikes in August 1958, dissidents won the right to hold a democratic election for the Secretary General. The

Esteban L. Mancilla, *Historia de la Revolution Mexican, 1952-1960* (Mexico City: El Colégio de Mexico, 1978).

¹¹ Mario Gil, *Los ferrocarrileros* (Mexico City: Editorial Extemporáneos, 1971), 104.

election posed José María Larra, a company man with no connections to the rank and file, against Demetrio Vallejo. On August 27, Vallejo bested Lara by over 59,000 votes.¹²

Grassroots desire for democratization and higher wages extended beyond the railway industry. Dissident workers in the electrical, telegraph, and petroleum also mobilized for higher wages, while contesting the power of entrenched union leaders who refused to confront the respective companies and demand salary hikes for their members. The electrical workers also called for the ouster of their charro union leaders. Teachers, who led a massive, combative movement for a wage hike, joined these rebels. At different moments between 1958 and 1959, these movements publicly supported the dissident railway workers. Unlike the railway movement, dissidents from other industries concentrated mainly in Mexico City. Their actions were fierce, but they were geographically limited. By the sheer function of the railway industry, railway workers wielded more power than other working-class insurgents. Hence, the railway movement provoked a truly national debate on the conflict between the advocates for a better standard of living for the working class and those who saw the need to keep wages low to aid industrialization.

1958: Revising the PRI

Up until the late 1990s, an overwhelming number of historical monographs in Mexican history focused on the Revolution of 1910.¹³ Post-Revolutionary history was

¹² The election results were never disputed by the FNM or PRI. see Alonso, *El movimiento ferrocarrilero* and Ortega, *Estado y política ferrocarrilero*.

left to political scientists, most of whom argued that corporatist national politics defused grassroots movements.¹⁴ According to these studies, local and national politics after the Revolution became a game played by elite politicians, business people and corrupt union leaders. Working-class mobilizations, including the post-war railway movement, were seen as rare and unimportant exceptions in large part because they were so often suppressed by paying off union leaders or by arresting protestors. In a poetic twist on the corporatist interpretation of state-labor relations, Arnaldo Córdova suggests that the “masses” remained docile until 1959 because they remained seduced by the myth of the Revolution. In “La mitología de la Revolución Mexicana,” he explains,

With the elimination of those who subverted order, especially communist union leaders, between 1948 and 1959 the country was founded on another myth: that of the stable state [which] unified society in one party under one government. The myth was based in fact. The masses approved all of the proposals made by the state. Why? Because they have always been and continue to be possessed by the myth of the Revolution¹⁵

Notable works in political science have commented on the role of the railway movement in contesting the hegemony of the PRI in the late 1950s, even if these studies focus exclusively on union politicians and fail to capture the importance of rank and file men and women. Evelyn Steven’s Protest and Response in Mexico moved beyond

¹³ For a mapping of the literature on the post-war period –with an emphasis on the developments in cultural history--see Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, Eric Zolov, eds. “Assembling the Fragments: Writing a Cultural History of Mexico Since 1940,” in *Fragments of a Golden Age*, 3 – 22.

¹⁴ Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Richard Fagen and William Tuohy, *Politics and Privilege in a Mexican City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972). Pablo González Casanova, *Democracy in Mexico* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Nora Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Roger Hansen, *The Politics of Mexican Development* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971); Carolyn Needleman and Martin Needleman, “Who Rules Mexico? A Critique of Some Current Views of the Mexican Political Process,” *Journal of Politics* 31 (Nov.): 1011 – 34. Peter Smith, *Labyrinths of Power: Political recruitment in 20th Century Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

¹⁵ Arnaldo Córdova, “La mitología de la Revolución Mexicana,” in *Mitos Mexicanos*, Enrique Florescano, ed. (Mexico City: Taurus, 2001), 31.

analyses of the “decision making process [within] authoritarian regimes” to focus on “the strength of the explosive potential and reaction” to the PRI.¹⁶ Although she does little more than present a standard narrative of the railway strikes, she paved the way for political scientists to take the railway movement seriously for challenging the post-war political order. Kevin J. Middlebrook has documented in greater detail how the railway movement challenged PRI rule in the late 1950s.¹⁷ Unfortunately, Middlebrook concludes that the repression of the movement was inevitable, failing to fully assess the gains that workers won, such as higher wages and free medical care for families. These gains stayed on the books after the repression, serving as reminders that the independent railway movement came through for “familias ferrocarrileras”.

The line of research inaugurated by Stevens and continued by Middlebrook failed to recognize the political everyday clout flexed by rank-and-file railway men and women. Middlebrook’s The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State, and Authoritarianism in Mexico, a sophisticated study that argues that political scientists should take seriously political pressure put on the state by “society”, depicts labor disputes as battles between union leaders, company officials and national politicians.¹⁸ We offer a corrective to these institutional studies by reconstructing the habits and actions of railway men and women, explaining how their everyday sociabilities enabled the social cohesion and political solidarity among railway families in 1958 and 1959.

Histories of cultural processes in post-revolutionary Mexico also failed to register how deeply postwar economic dislocations affected working class Mexicans and ignore

¹⁶ Evelyn Stevens, *Protest and Response in Mexico* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974), 12, 99-126.

¹⁷ Kevin J. Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution*; Ian Roxborough, *Unions and Politics in Mexico: The Case of the Automobile Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

¹⁸ Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*.

or gloss over the mass resistance organized against the PRI in the 1950s, which challenged the very notion that the country's economy had achieved a "golden age". Anne Rubenstein's clever use of comic books as a window into post-revolutionary politics accepts the corporatist paradigm presented by political scientists, as she charts how mass media enabled the PRI to achieve political consensus through cultural means, such as the comic book. Rubenstein's study of "historietas" is notable for its attention to the importance of visual representation for national politics, but it fails to account for how political dissidents used the mass media to challenge the PRI consensus, to let the public know that for the working class there was no "Mexican Miracle."

In his cultural history of the 1950s, Eric Zolov claims that the decade was marked by social and political stability because the masses consented to PRI modernization policies. Although the working class in the 1950s found themselves "squeezed between a rapacious capitalist sector and the lack of democratic recourse," Zolov claims that working class people either accepted their condition as unchangeable or they faced repression.¹⁹ "Indeed, the real miracle lay in the fact that the corporatist structure of the PRI had succeeded in stabilizing the cities and countryside through a combination of carrot and stick tactics, while virtually eliminating the possibility of politics outside the official party of the Revolution".²⁰ The working class therefore did not play an important role in resisting the PRI or exposing the PRI as ineffectual and undemocratic. Poor and working class folks happily accepted the carrot extended to them by the PRI, or were crushed by the PRI for stepping out of line. The thousands of railway, electrical, petrol and mine workers recede into the background as insignificant.

¹⁹ Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 7.

Zolov finds the student movement of the 1960s as the first major political force to break the PRI consensus.²¹ Led by middle-class consumers who benefited from postwar modernization, the student movement drew not from the working class uprisings of the late 1950s but from 1950s and 1960s counterculture, especially the growth of rock music. Students learned cynicism from rock and roll, which they in turn employed as a tool to critique the PRI establishment. In short, Zolov glosses over post-war working class rebellion, concluding that middle-class student rebellion created a rupture in post-revolutionary politics, as young consumers questioned the legitimacy of the PRI.

The present study provides a story of the immediate political antecedents to the student rebellion of 1968. The student movement did not represent a rupture from a supposed post-war grassroots politics based on corporatist relations with the state. Rather, it picked up where the working class rebellions of the late 1950s left off, signifying an extension of grassroots discontent with the PRI. This explains why the student movement demanded the release of political prisoners, including the leader of the 1958 and 1959 railway strikes, Demetrio Vallejo.²² Working class dissident unionism and middle class student radicalism are part of a broader history of how the PRI lost its legitimacy in the postwar period in the eyes of people from various social and economic backgrounds.

The dissertation joins recent historical studies in challenging a large body of scholarship that views the Institutional Revolutionary Party's rule as virtually

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. 8.

²² Elena Poniatowska, *Fuerte es el silencio* (Mexico City: Biblioteca Era, 1980), 41.

uncontested by Mexican workers and citizens.²³ Historians have begun revising post-Revolutionary political history by interpreting grassroots mobilizations as contingent contests between subaltern citizens and national politicians. Writing on the women's movement in the 1930s, Jocelyn Olcott warns us against chalking up the defeat of grassroots projects as the inevitable result of corporatist politics. "A narrative focusing too explicitly on the end—the defeat of the women's suffrage campaign—would ignore the small and large victories and their legacy for women's organizing."²⁴ Likewise, Arthur Schmidt has recently urged historians "to become more sensitive to issues of central state weakness than they have previously."²⁵

Subaltern movements injected themselves into post-Revolutionary life and politics, coming to head during the late 1950s. Teachers, students, as well as petrol and electrical workers, took over streets in the capital and in the provinces, demanding a voice in the national government.²⁶ The railway strikes should be understood as a national effort to democratize union and national politics, a movement that incorporated workers from the most powerful industrial unions. While it is true that the national government suppressed the railway movement by sending police and military officers to arrest striking railway workers, railway families won tangible benefits, such as wage gains, housing, and

²³ Jocelyn Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in PostRevolutionary Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Tonális Padilla, "From Agraristas to guerrilleros: the Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of Pax Priísta," (San Diego: Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, University of San Diego, 2001); O'Neil Blacker-Hanson, "La Lucha Sigue: Teacher Activism in Guerrero and the Continuum of Democratic Struggle in Mexico," (Seattle: Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, University of Washington, 2005); Steven John Bachelor, "The Edge of Miracles: Postrevolutionary Mexico City and the Remaking of the Industrial working class, 1925-1982," (New Haven: Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, Yale University, 2003).

²⁴ Olcott, *Revolutionary Women*, 25.

²⁵ Arthur Schmidt, "Making It Real Compared to What? Reconceptualizing Mexican History Since 1940," in *Fragments of a Golden Age*, 38.

²⁶ On teachers, see O'Neill Blacker-Hanson, "La Lucha Sigue,"; Aurora Loyo, *El movimineto magisterial de 1958 en México* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1979); Gerardo Peláez, *Las luchas magisteriales de 1956-60* (Mexico: Ediciones de Cultura Popular, 1984).

medical care. Political scientists who have written on the railway strikes have focused “on the end”, using the strikes as evidence of the inevitable failures that workers have endured with the PRI in power. This study peeks into that contingent period when workers still stood a chance at victory, as they stood up to the PRI and FNM, democratized their union and made concrete gains.

In addition to the importance of the railway strikes of 1958 and 1959 for political history, the events also provide a window into how workers built communities both inside and outside of the workplace, as well as how railway families drew on their everyday experiences at work and in neighborhoods to participate in protests. In 1958-1959, workers and families organized around their identities as *ferrocarrileros* and *ferrocarileras* to take to the street and contest the increasing authoritarian policies of the FNM and PRI.

The majority of STFRM members worked for the state-owned Mexican National Railways, which was administered by PRI appointed officials. The president appointed the FNM General Manager, which was occupied by Roberto Amorós in 1958 and Benjamin Mendez in 1959. The General Manager represented the FNM but maintained close contact with the president. To contest the policies of the FNM was to challenge the President. The dissident movement organized primarily on behalf of workers at the FNM, and its demand for higher wages did not extend to members who worked at private companies, such as the Ferrocarril Mexicano, Veracruz Terminal, Ferrocarril de Yucatán, and Ferrocarril del Pacific. Although dissident leaders demanded wage increases that would go only to members employed by the FNM, railway workers at private companies supported the cause of democratic unionism and backed the 1958 strikes.

The strikes constituted the most dramatic and combative mobilizations against the revolutionary regime after 1940 and the largest industrial strikes since the Cananea Miners strike of 1906. When the government refused to give in to their demands, workers took to the picket lines and families took to the streets. Women and men sang railway songs, burned effigies of charros, and took over plazas and avenues throughout the country. The railway industry's strategic importance in the country's economy gave workers and their families political and social clout, which they proudly flexed in the streets through political theatre.

The Formation of Railway Communities

Workers and families constructed railway communities through physical, concrete actions as well as by establishing psychological attachments with each other and through their identification as ferrocarrileros and ferrocarrileras. The first was based on local experiences on streets and stations, while the second was linked to a larger, national railway community, best reflected in the STFRM, which linked all workers. These two versions of communities—the local and the national—formed the base of the ferrocarrilero and ferrocarrilera identity. The individual railway man and woman identified with their neighbors and friends who also depended on the railway industry, as well as the thousands of other railway families in the country who were in the same situation.

The STFRM spread news of these other railway neighborhoods and workers through the union paper, “Unificación Ferroviaria”, as well as by keeping local union leaders up

to date on union locals throughout the country. The FNM's official publication, "Revista Ferronales", also addressed workers and their families across the nation as a common group, bound by their families' dependence on the railway industry. Finally, folk traditions, such as railway songs, well-known stories, and gossip transmitted a wide range of information that helped shape railway families' collective identity. The brief articles on railway workers' history that appeared in "Revista Ferronales", the political editorials in "Unificación Ferroviaria" that encouraged railway workers to think of themselves as sharing common needs and needing common political goals, combined with folk knowledge to create a repertoire of shared symbols, ideas, and beliefs. These common points of reference created a mental landscape in which workers and their families navigated.

Railway families constructed communities through lived experiences in neighborhoods that bordered stations, at railway yards and on trains, and in the cantinas and marketplaces where railway men and women socialized. But "community" also had a psychological component for ferrocarrileros and ferrocarrileras. Lived experiences in neighborhoods and on the job facilitated what Raymond Williams has called a "structure of feeling", "a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material".²⁷ Consciousness formed the fragile glue that brought railway families together based on a shared identity. Consciousness "map[s] the terrain of lived experience and define[s] the boundaries between the probable and improbable."²⁸ Workers and their families lived in mostly well-defined spaces, neighboring stations or tracks, and their everyday

²⁷ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 131; E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 194.

²⁸ Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg, eds., *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 17.

sociabilities formed the building blocks of a shared set of rituals, habits, and thinking about their world.

Members of railway families came to share ways of thinking about the world in part because they had similar concrete experiences. They suffered from corrupt bosses, poor sanitation in company housing, the need for healthcare for the family, and the fear of losing a limb at work. Individuals who worked together and lived in close proximity came to share common practices and internalized similar ways of perceiving the world. Their habits and opinions became commonsensical to them as a group.

Communities are not utopias, however. Strains existed among workers and family members. Railway workers constructed a sense of community identity that was rife with tension and conflicts. Scholars have come to view differentiation and hierarchy as constitutive elements of community. No community exists without some sort of differentiation, either based on age, sex, class, race, sexuality, or a combination of the bunch. In Peasant and Nation: the Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru, Florenica Mallon expresses the need to write about community in a manner that assesses both the cohesive and divisive elements of groups. “The challenge for those of us wanting to understand popular political culture and action,” writes Mallon, “is to develop approaches that make visible both the hierarchy and the heroism, the solidarity and the surveillance.”²⁹ Without conflating the realities lived by peasants in the nineteenth-century to railway communities, Mallon’s reconstruction of the complex divisions and hierarchies within peasant communities instruct us to read for squabbles, dissent, and repression within communities. Railway workers and their families policed and

²⁹ Florenica E. Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: the Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 11.

supported each other at work, in neighborhoods, and during protests. Co-workers mocked men deemed cowardly and passive on the job; during the strikes, men unwilling to strike faced threats by others ferrocarrileros and ferrocarrileras.

Wives came to regard themselves as railway women because they were closely bound to the railway industry. In many cases, they lived in or near stations, which meant that they socialized principally with other railway women. These women often came from railway families—their father and male siblings worked for the FNM. These strong family ties created an added layer of association with the industry. They came to identify as ferrocarrileras or reileras.³⁰ This identity found discursive confirmation in the famous railway song, “La Rielera,” the FNM female basketball team, “Las Rieleras,” as well as in quotidian conversation.

Workers came to internalize a commonsense acceptance of the railway hierarchy, workplace regulations, and a code of behavior that deemed their labor special because it required masculine traits, such as strength, endurance, and the willingness to risk physical danger. Their identity as tough guys found discursive confirmation in the union paper, workers songs, as well as shared stories of hardship told on and off the job. Part of the construction of community also consisted of gendered symbolic references. For instance, workers gave gendered diminutive to locomotives, such as “la negrita” and wore red kerchiefs with overalls, which distinguished them as trainmen. Their everyday sociability required that workers follow rules and regulations that were particular to the railway industry.

Gender structured power and generated hierarchies between railway men and women. Notions of proper masculine and feminine comportment formed part of railway

habitus and informed the commonsensical knowledge of community members. Men pressured each other to carry themselves with masculine bravado by performing difficult work tasks and by drinking and chasing women after work. Unfortunately for women, men sometimes took advantage of their patriarchal privilege by beating their wives, a practice all too common. Those who failed to live up to the masculine ideal were ridiculed.

Women carried out duties deemed feminine, such as preparing food, taking care of children, and selling goods at market. Women found companionship in other women, whom they met on the street or at market. Oftentimes they socialized with female family members, whose fathers and husbands also worked for the FNM. Young women delivered their father's lunches at yards and looked forward to weekly dances, where it was acceptable for them to dance with young men. Finally, older women policed younger women, making sure that they lived up to the feminine ideal of an honorable and sexually pure woman.

Gender norms informed the combative actions of railway families. Gender proved decisive in how railway workers lived at and away from work. During social and work activities, male workers exhibited traits deemed manly—such as strength, endurance, and sexual potency—to gain prestige as a “railway man”. These ideas contrasted with the idea of women as penetrable and weak and helped highlight workers' manliness. When male workers protested, they drew on their identity as tough men.

Sexuality was a central component of railway gender ideology. Proper sexual rituals for railway men and women—such as flirting, dancing, and sexual liaisons—assumed heterosexual identity and practice as the community norm. The body served as the

³⁰The terms are used as synonyms.

billboard where men and women announced their masculinity and femininity. Men flashed hard poses, wore ripped and dirty clothes that reflected their dangerous work, while women covered their bodies and met men at appropriate places, such as community dances. The proper railway man was heterosexual, strong, and combative; the proper railway woman was heterosexual, domestic, and supportive.

Masculinity among railway workers led to gendered forms of differentiation and conflicts between them.³¹ Workers exhibited combative attitudes at and outside of work. They fought with each other on the job and in cantinas. During social hours, they flaunted their masculinity by dancing with women, hiring prostitutes, and drinking tequila or pulque. During times of relative political calm, the combative, manly identities played out on the job between rank-and-file members resulted in friendships and conflicts between individual railway men. During times of political turmoil, such as the strikes of 1958 and 1959, workers drew on their masculine, combative identity to exhort each other to take to the streets and mobilize en masse against the company.

The limits to everyday masculine solidarity became manifest in daily fights and arguments. Conflict took on political overtones during the strikes of the late nineteen fifties. Workers who crossed the picket line were ostracized by fellow co-workers as well as by railway women, including wives and daughters. Strikers threatened those who

³¹ This study draws from and contributes to important past studies and new work on masculinities and femininities in Latin America. See Peter M. Beattie, *The Tribute of Blood: Army, Honor, Race, and Nation in Brazil, 1864-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Mathew Gutman, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Thomas Klubock, *Contested Communities: Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Copper Mine, 1904-1951* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Robert Mckee Irwin, *Mexican Masculinities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Richard N. Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Matthew Gutman, ed., *Changing Men and Masculinities in Latin America* (Durham: Duke, 2003); General works that have informed my thinking on masculinities include R.W. Cornell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) and David G. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

hesitated to join the movement with violence and in effect excluded them from the railway community. Strikers acted as tough guys and beat up scabs. Meanwhile, women joined in on the action. Ferrocarrileras dramatically shamed scabs into joining the picket line, urging them to behave like proper railway men and strike.

Women in fact played a key role in railway communities and in the railway strikes. These women participated in everyday forms of sociability and came to identify with the railway industry. The railroads served as the economic engine that sustained their neighborhood, and the railway station and yard served as a social hub. During times of political mobilization, women organized around their identity as ferrocarrileras or rieleras. This analysis of railway women is a major departure from the historiography of railway communities, as scholars and journalists have focused exclusively on male workers who toiled in yards, in stations, and on trains.³²

During the strikes of 1958-1959, women showed their political muscle by making use of the gendered norm that placed railway men as macho, tough guys. Ferrocarrileras urged men to strike for higher wages, which would enable women to buy food and clothing for the family. Interviews with women who participated in the movement attest to the deprivations suffered by women. Ferrocarrileras were expected to stretch workers' wages to feed the family, but by the late 1950s, workers' wages had fallen drastically and adversely impacted women's ability to carry out their duties. Women expected men to fight the company for better wages. When men hesitated, women publicly shamed them into joining the strikes. In August 1958, ferrocarrileras in Cárdenas, San Luis Potosí blocked train tracks, preventing the efforts of scabs to break the strike. When the military

repressed the strikes in 1959, women in Matías Romero, Oaxaca prepared and carried food to male strikers hiding on the outskirts of the city. In short, gender structured the everyday sociabilities of railway women and men, which shaped the way women and men mobilized during the strikes.

Railway Workers in Mexican History

The railway movement of the 1950s is part of a broader history of how railway workers inserted themselves into national politics through grassroots mobilizations. Railway workers proudly point to a history of union militancy that dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz. Díaz created the Mexican National Railways in 1908 with loans from foreign creditors.³² The railways were key to Díaz's ambition to modernize the country. The social Revolution of 1910 abruptly ended his modernization project, but the railways and other Díaz-era industries had given birth to a nascent urban working class. The urban working class grew and formed around key industries, such as mining, textiles, streetcars, and the railways. Meanwhile, railway workers organized around craft specialties, creating The Mexican Union of Machinists (1900), the Great Mexican League of Railroad Employees (1905), Confederation of Mexican Railroad Workers (1910), and the Union of Conductors, Engineers, Brakemen,

³² Gil, *Los ferrocarrileros*; Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*; Alonzo, *El movimiento ferrocarrilero*; Ortega, *Estado y movimiento ferrocarrilero*; Marcelo N. Rodea, *Historia de movimiento obrero ferrocarrilero* (Mexico: n. p., 1944).

³³ Vicente Fuentes Díaz, *El problema ferrocarrilero de México* (Mexico City: n.p., 1951); Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 124.

and Firemen (1911).³⁴ These constituted the first labor guilds in Mexico, a point of pride for ferrocarrileros.

During Francisco Madero's and Venustiano Carranza's revolutionary governments, railway workers used their strategic role in the national economy to gain wage increases and shorter work shifts. Amidst revolutionary turmoil, railway workers walked out on strike in 1914 and, along with electrical, port, textile and petroleum workers, forced revolutionary generals to take seriously the grievances of the newly formed urban working class. Constitutionalist chief Venustiano Carranza (1914-1915) made a brief alliance with mobilized workers. He recognized workers' syndicates and in exchange workers fought on the Constitutionalist side, grouped as the "Red Battalions".³⁵ The history of these combative actions have been passed down over the generations among railway families, serving as inspirational folklore that affirms their collective place in the heroic narrative of the Revolution.

Widely-circulated photographs of armed railway workers transporting revolutionary generals and militias served as mnemonic devices for generations of railway families thereafter. These images remind them that their predecessors fought for the revolutionary promises codified in the Constitution of 1917, which included the right to work. Railway workers' participation in the Revolution paled in comparison to the throngs of mobilized indigenous people who made up the great mass of subaltern revolutionaries, but railway families nevertheless continue to place themselves at the center of the revolutionary

³⁴ Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 17-18.

³⁵ John Lear, *Workers, Neighbors, and Citizens: the Revolution in Mexico City* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 238.

narrative.³⁶ Moreover, an important study published by the Mexican National Railways supports workers' interpretation of themselves as critical to the Revolution.³⁷

It took time for workers to develop a sense of solidarity because occupation distinctions created a workplace hierarchy that conferred greater esteem and higher wages to skilled workers, such as those who worked on the locomotives or as mechanics at rail yards. Workers first organized along craft lines at the beginning of the twentieth century, creating eighteen autonomous guilds.³⁸ These associations were an important step in creating vehicles for workers to organize politically. However, their ability to organize effectively against company policies was limited because it was difficult to coordinate across guilds, as each association organized and acted autonomously.

The ineffectiveness of the guild system for organizing nationwide protests against the railway companies became clear during the railway strikes of 1926 and 1927. In 1926, rumors spread among the rank and file that railway companies intended to layoff workers and lower wages in order to reduce operating costs.³⁹ Leaders of the Mexican Union of Machinists (UMM), the association of railway mechanics, organized workers to strike in protest against the anticipated layoffs and wage cuts. The UMM had been formed in Puebla in 1905, becoming the first rank and file association and enjoyed great prestige among railway workers. In order to publicize the movement and agitate workers

³⁶ For a romantic portrayal of railway workers' participation in the Revolution written by a *ferrocarrilero*, see Elías Barrios, *El escuadrón de hierro* (México: Ediciones de Cultura Popular, 1978).

³⁷ Sergio Ortiz Hernán, *Los ferrocarriles de México: una visión social y económica, vol. II* (Mexico City: FNM, 1970), 65-76; Official government publications publicized the indispensable role of ferrocarrileros during the Revolution. See the chapter "de cómo los ferrocarriles ganaron la revolución," in Gilberto D' Estrabau, *El ferrocarril: historia de las comunicaciones y los transportes en México* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes, 1988).

³⁸ Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 76

³⁹ Barrios, *El escuadrón de hierro*, 116.

to strike, the UMM created “Unificación”, a newspaper that would eventually become “Unificación Ferroviaria”, the STFRM’s widely read newspaper.

The UMM’s goal of organizing masses of railway workers proved overly ambitious. On December 5, 1926, the UMM led a disorganized series of strikes that had little chance of succeeding.⁴⁰ Leaders of the strikes came to realize, however, that the autonomy that craft associations enjoyed also made it difficult for them to coordinate workers across specialties. The lack of a centralized body with the authority to represent the entire rank and file doomed the actions to prevent mass layoffs. The divisions among railway workers were exploited by the Mexican Regional Labor Confederation (CROM), which provided scabs to replace striking railway workers.⁴¹ The head of the CROM, Luis N. Morones, instructed its members to avoid strikes and support the revolutionary government of President Plutarco Elías Calles. As railway workers were free to choose to follow the UMM or the CROM, many crossed picket lines. The failure of the strikes and inability to prevent mass layoffs signaled the need to create one union that would represent all railway workers.

After two decades of competition and conflicts between craft associations, railway workers formed the STFRM in January 1933. The STFRM became the most powerful and influential union in the country with the help of the federal labor law of 1931, because the law required workers to be union members in order to attain and keep their jobs. If a worker lost his or her union status during their course of employment, the employer was compelled to dismiss them. The STFRM’s power expanded greatly in 1934 when President Abelardo L. Rodríguez granted the STFRM a monopoly on representing

⁴⁰ Ibid., 35, 136.

⁴¹ Ibid., 37.

the rank and file.⁴² These two exclusion clauses enabled the STFRM to squash dissent among its members. If a member challenged the representational authority of the union, their union membership could be revoked, which would lead to their dismissal from work because only union members were permitted to work for the railway company. STFRM leaders made use of the union's representational authority by dismissing trainmen and boilermakers in 1943 when they tried to break away from the STFRM and create their own union. Clearly, craft loyalties continued to exist beyond the establishment of the STFRM in 1933, though rarely did they lead workers to want to break away from the union and revert to craft associations.

The creation of the STFRM constituted a political triumph for railway families because the union defended workers against unwarranted firings and other abuses while defending the family wage by negotiating a collective contract on behalf of its members. Railway families regard 1933 as a date of national importance, as it bound railway families across the country into a politically powerful organization. The STFRM did more than just fight for wages. The union fought for workers' children to receive special hiring preference by FNM, which led to a pervasive sense among railway families that fathers bequeathed a job with the railway to the children as a sort of inheritance. By linking generations within families to the industry, the policy went far to create a sense that one was born into the railway industry. Railway identity became a right, an inheritance, and a source of family identity.

The STFRM also proved crucial in the formation of the modern Mexican state. Scholars agree that by supporting populist President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) the

⁴² Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 97.

STFRM helped the PRI solidify its dominance over national politics.⁴³ When he came to power in 1934, Cárdenas formed a mutually beneficial alliance with the STFRM and other national unions. Cárdenas and STFRM leaders shared the conviction that the government was responsible for generating economic growth and modernization through public investment in industry. Cárdenas's commitment to the Mexicanization of the economy became legendary when he expropriated the National Railways of Mexico (FNM) in June 1937.⁴⁴

Cárdenas increased his prestige among railway workers and their families when he made the remarkable move of granting STFRM officials authority over the railways by creating the Workers' Administration in 1938.⁴⁵ By transferring administration of the railway industry to workers' representatives, Cárdenas won the unwavering support of the rank-and-file and continues to be regarded with awe by former workers. Scholars have since noted that Cárdenas created the Workers' Administration (WA) in order to defuse railway discontent. Disgruntled workers who blamed the company for poor working conditions now had to operate—through their union--an industry burdened by debt and poor equipment.

STFRM leaders were assigned the daunting responsibility of rebuilding a system in shambles. The Workers' Administration ran into trouble because its operating budget

⁴³ Arturo Anguino, *El estado y la política obrera del cardenismo* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1975); Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*; Ian Roxborough, "Urban Labour movements in Latin America since 1930," in *Latin America: Politics and Society since 1930*, Leslie Bethell, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); J. Basurto, *Cárdenas y el poder sindical* (Mexico: 1983); Joe Ashby, *Organized Labor under Lázaro Cárdenas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963).

⁴⁴ Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 124; Richard Roman, "Railroad Nationalization and the Formation of Administración Obrera in Mexico, 1937 – 1938" (York University: Center for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean, 1981); Sergio Ortiz Hernán, "La locomotora Cardenista," (Mexico City: Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico, 1995).

⁴⁵ Ruth Adler, "La administración obrera en los Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico." *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 50 (3) (1988): 97 – 124.

proved insufficient to repair poorly maintained rails while making payments to foreign bondholders, debt owed since the establishment of the railways during the Porfiriato, as well as the national government.⁴⁶ The Cárdenas Administration reasoned that only the STFRM would be able lay off workers in order to repair the industry's financial woes. In short, the government gave the STFRM the task of disciplining militant workers who refused to accept cutbacks and dismissals for the improvement of the industry.

The Workers Administration lasted just two short years. It failed to make the operative changes necessary to reduce its debt to foreign bondholders and to pay for new machinery and equipment.⁴⁷ Although the WA made an effort to reduce payroll by firing non-union employees, such as managers, it actually increased labor costs by hiring over 5,000 rank and file workers, which expanded the STFRM membership.⁴⁸ Miguel Ávila Camacho (1940 – 1946) disbanded the Workers Administration in December 1940, charging that the WA had mismanaged the industry by employing lax oversight of the rank and file and by failing to reduce operating costs.⁴⁹

Ávila Camacho transferred management of the FNM to government officials and initiated a railway modernization plan, which provided government funding for repairing old, and laying new, rails; fixing bridges and equipment; and importing freight cars from the U.S. Miguel Alemán made the modernization of the railway industry a major program during his term in office, creating “Alemán Railroad Rehabilitation Plan,” which provided millions of pesos to modernize railway infrastructure. When he toured worksites or inaugurated railway company sports fields paid for by his railway rehabilitation

⁴⁶ Rodea, *Historia del movimiento obrero ferrocarrilero*, 134.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 139.

⁴⁸ Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 125.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

program, Alemán emphasized that Mexican economic development required a modern railway system. Presidents Ruíz Cortines and Adolfo López Mateos, continued the post-war policy of modernizing the railway industry, purchasing diesel engines from the U.S. Diesel engines were hailed as pillars of railway modernity, promising a major advance over slow and creaky steam engines.⁵⁰

Between 1945 and 1959, PRI and FNM officials expected the rank and file to accept stagnant wages in order for the company to pay for the expensive infrastructural improvements. Critical STFRM leaders, such as Luiz Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa, denounced the PRI and the company for demanding that workers bear the burden of railway modernization. The independent STFRM wanted the company to raise freight rates on cargo, especially since much of the mineral goods headed north to American companies. Union leaders reasoned that American and Mexican companies, not railway workers, should be made to finance the modernization program by paying more to ship goods over the rails. Presidents Alemán, Ruíz Cortines, and López Mateos appreciated working with charro leaders, who abandoned their predecessors' demands for higher wages for the rank and file. Charros and PRI officials agreed that the industry keep cargo rates low in order to subsidize national industries and to express solidarity with the World War II effort. The government, which owned the railways, was thus subsidizing industry. After the war, the government continued to keep rates low for industries, while workers' purchasing power declined precipitously.

Workers willingness to sacrifice for the war effort ended with the Allies' victory. Throughout the war, company and government officials rallied railway families to accept

⁵⁰ Andrea Spears, "Rehabilitating the Workers: the U.S. Railway Mission to Mexico," in *Workers' Control in Latin America, 1930-1979*, Jonathon C. Brown, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,

a decreased standard of living as an act of patriotism. Inflation decreased railway workers salaries by 22.9 percent between 1941 and 1946.⁵¹ When the war ended, railway families expected to be compensated for their unique role as linchpins of what they considered to be the most important war industry, the railways.

Instead, in January 1947 the Alemán administration unveiled the “Alemán Railroad Rehabilitation Plan”. The STFRM lobbied for an ambitious program, which included higher wages, housing, medical care for families, and better working conditions. Workers resented stress on greater worker productivity in the “Alemán Railroad Rehabilitation Plan”. STFRM leaders argued that workers could not be expected to improve their productivity when problems such as makeshift tracks and overloaded locomotives remained prevalent obstacles.⁵²

Leftist STFRM leaders’ refusal to accept Alemán’s industrialization plan serves as the context in which the charrazo took place in 1948. The union argued that the company could afford higher wages, medical care, and housing for workers if it raised freight rates. The proposal to increase cargo rates proved to be a radical proposal for industrialists because they had grown to take for granted government-subsidized rates. When dissidents took over the union in 1958, they took up the issue of rate increases that Luis Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa fought for during the years preceding the charrazo. The attempt to raise rates on industrial goods proved no easier in 1958-1959 than it did a decade earlier.

Sources and Chapter Breakdown

1997).

⁵¹ Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 128.

I use oral histories with ordinary railway activists to give a rich portrait of how grassroots railway men and women participated in the railway movement. Scholars of working-class communities have found oral history to be an indispensable methodology because the voices of workers and their families are often muffled or altogether absent in institutional sources. Oral histories provide a view into the intimate, everyday lives of railway men and women, enabling us to tease out the intricate habits and routines of people at work and in neighborhoods.

Oral histories allow me to give railway women a narrative place within the history of the railway industry as well as the broader political history of grassroots' challenges to the PRI. Feminist scholars have found oral history particularly fruitful for subverting traditional narratives that elide the role of women.⁵³ With tape recorder and notebook in hand, they have inscribed the stories of a wide-range of Latin American working-class women, from Argentine meatpacking workers, Chilean activists to Colombian Catholic textile workers, into the broader narrative of twentieth-century Latin American history. Although oral histories are mediated by the passing of time, they nevertheless reveal details about how people lived "offstage", places obscured by official documents, as well as the meanings that people attributed to everyday past events, such as strikes.⁵⁴

⁵² Gil, *Los ferrocarrileros*, 89.

⁵³ *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed., Sherna Berga Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991); Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Ann Farnsworth-Alvear, *Dulcinea in the Factory: Myths, Morals, Men and Women in Colombia's Industrial Experiment, 1905 – 1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

⁵⁴ Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity*; Heidi Tinsman, *Partners in Conflict: the Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Labor in the Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1950 – 1973* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

Interviews with ferrocarrileros and ferrocarrileras help complicate the heroic narrative of the railway strikes. Contrary to published accounts, which stress the cohesion of strikers, interviews with former strikers reveal that some rank-and-file workers hesitated to join the strikes, or felt that they had no choice but to join. My interviews with former workers, such as Geraldo Niño Mendez, José Jorge Ramírez, Narciso Nava, Carlos Salazar Ramírez, Francisco Mortera show that workers pressured each other to join the picket line; those who did not strike faced physical reprisals. Jorge Ramírez and Niño Mendez, both of whom I interviewed several times over a period of nine months, take pride in recounting how they threatened coworkers to strike, while Nava and Salazar Ramírez provide more ambiguous testimonies, explaining that they supported the movement but felt compelled to strike because they feared physical reprisals if they challenged dissidents. Nava and Salazar had reason to worry. Workers who fell out of line risked getting beaten up and thrown out of the STFRM, which amounted to expulsion from the railway community. In short, conflicts and divisions, based on a wide range of personal motivations, existed among workers during the railway strikes.

I supplement oral histories with never-before-studied workers' dossiers. The FNM kept dossiers on every rank-and-file employee from the day he or she submitted an application to, in many cases, the day he or she died. The FNM paid for the funerals of retired workers. Death notices and burial receipts are often the last documents in workers' dossiers. The basic application form listed the employee's place of residence, household size, age, and level of education as well as his or her height and weight. After filling an application, potential employees took a medical exam, which tested eyesight

and hearing. Those who failed were dismissed. More important, the dossiers also hold records of accidents, transfers, punishments, complaints, and medical services; most illuminating are the letters written by workers to company officials and vice versa. These documents give us access to the physical hardships of working for the company, as they document accidents in which workers' lost limbs and cases in which employees died on the job.

The dossiers shed important new light on the strikes of 1958 and 1959. They show that sympathizers and organizers of the strikes faced repercussions for their political activism. Company officials wrote memos to inform each other on how to deal with union activists on the job. Documents that detail the repression that occurred in 1959 after police officers arrested strikers provide new evidence on how Cold War fears of communism affected the relationship between activists, the government and the company. Dossiers show that dissidents arrested during the movement faced charges of treason, as prosecutors argued that dissidents had followed "foreign ideologies", such as Marxism, and intended to overthrow the state. Demetrio Vallejo in particular was charged with the crime of "social dissolution", which accused the leader of purposefully wreaking havoc on the economy in order to serve the interests of world communist revolution.

Interviews and dossiers also allow me to reconstruct the lives of railway men and women in Chapter 2. The chapter introduces us to the world made by railway men and women. It captures the excitement of living amid the hustle and bustle of railway stations; the smoke, the whistles, the throngs of people clamoring to make the train. It also documents the hardships associated with working on trains—the accidents, the

injuries, and the anxiety of keeping to the schedule. Wives endured poverty, poor or non-existent medical care, inadequate housing, and husbands who spent paychecks in cantinas and brothels.

Finally, it underscores the importance of folk knowledge shaped railway identities by analyzing two railway corridos. “Heroé de Narcozari” and “Maquina 501” tell the tale of how Jesús García, a ferrocarrilero from the northern town of Narcozari, saved a town from a derailed train, which carried explosives. The story of Jesús García is legendary among railway families. In each former railway town, you are likely to find a street or avenue named after the railway martyr. The songs explained to workers and their families that railway men had to be tough and brave. They also helped disseminate an important episode in railway workers’ history to families, reasserting the strongly held belief that railway workers distinguished themselves through the sacrifices they made for the benefit of the nation.

The third chapter uses the records of meetings between high-ranking officials of the FNM, STFRM and PRI to plot two important developments that occurred during WWII. The first consisted of an intra-union dispute that threatened to weaken the STFRM. In 1943, the Fraternity of Trainmen and Boilermakers attempted to break away from the STFRM and negotiate a new contract directly with the FNM. The Fraternity claimed that Luis Gómez Z. overcharged members for union dues and could therefore not be trusted to represent the interests of workers.

I use this case as a window into the tenuous construction of the idea that there existed a homogenous “railway community,” whose members shared common needs and politics. The notion of a “railway community” gave workers a sense of unity but it also gave the

union the power to decide who belonged in the railway community. Those who challenged the institutional power of the STFRM threatened to undermine the belief that workers shared an essential identity (ferrocarrilero) around which they could make collective demands for rights, wages, and services.

In order to solidify the notion of “railway community”, the STFRM quickly dismissed the Fraternity’s claims and labeled them scabs, or outsiders. By designating them as scabs, Luis Gómez Z. and the STFRM used the notion of a railway community to discipline union members. The case illustrates that divisions and disputes permeated railway communities. Workers required the institutional power of the STFRM to foment a sense of professional unity.

The second part of the chapter traces the struggle between the STFRM and the FNM over the modernization of the railways. PRI, FNM, and union officials met regularly in Mexico City to discuss railway finances, workers’ grievances, and the future of the industry. Minutes from these meetings allow us to document the major clashes between the STFRM and the PRI and FNM over how the railways should modernize and how the country should industrialize. STFRM leaders voiced their deep contempt for President Miguel Ávila Camacho and President Miguel Alemán’s emphasis on importing railway technology from the U.S., keeping cargo rates low to help industries, and refusing to raise workers’ wages.

Chapter three also documents how STFRM leaders, especially Secretary General Luis Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa, Secretary of Education, Organization, and Propaganda, rallied STFRM members against Ávila Camacho and Alemán’s railway modernization plan by urging workers to unite as a “railway community” and demand

higher wages and increased rates on cargo. The chapter concludes with the infamous 1948 charrazo, showing that the infamous event resulted from intense debate between STFRM leaders and FNM and PRI officials over who would sacrifice economically in order for the country to modernize.

Chapters 4 and 5 tell the story of the dissident railway movement—how it began, what it sought to win, what it gained for railway families, and how it was eventually repressed. Chapter 4 explains how workers managed to win a 16.66% wage increase in July 1958 and take over their union in August 1958. It argues that what began as struggle for higher wages turned in to a battle to democratize the STFRM. It departs from the standard narrative that depicts the PRI as incontestable by documenting how working-class citizens took over parts of cities in protest and demanded the attention of national and international observers. By the autumn of 1958, railway workers led the crest of a working-class insurrection, winning a wage hike and control of the STFRM. Vallejo and vallejismo replaced charros and politics as usual.

Chapter 5 traces the brief history of the independent railway union, assessing gains and explaining why and how it ultimately became the victim of government repression. After a heated strike in February 1959, the new STFRM made significant gains for workers. Workers received an additional wage hike. More important, railway families received health care and a commitment from the FNM to construct houses for the rank-and-file. These constituted major victories for families living in shacks, tents, and railway cars. STFRM leaders gained prestige as honest brokers, demonstrating that they fought for more than just pay hikes.

STFRM officials overplayed their hand when they attempted to attain these benefits for workers who did not work for the FNM. Railway workers employed by private companies—Mexican Railways, Ferrocarriles del Pacífico, Ferrocarriles de Yucatán and Veracruz Terminal—had supported FNM workers and expected the STFRM to present demands for higher wages to their bosses. The STFRM could not lean on PRI officials when contesting private companies the way it could when making demands on the FNM. Since the PRI managed the FNM, union leaders could use the press to exhort the PRI to stay true to its populist promise of representing peasants and workers. Officials at the Mexican Railways, Ferrocarriles de Yucatán and the Veracruz Terminal had no political commitments and no social responsibilities to citizens. Hence, when the STFRM led a strike against the private companies in February, the PRI acted on behalf of private railway capital and sent the military to repress strikes. Strikers faced imprisonment, and countless were fired. Those who wished to return to work were made to sign confessions, stating that they regretted participating in the movement.

Finally, the last chapter offers the life story of Lilia Benetíz Vallejo, the niece of the railway leader, as a window into the gendered milieu of railway community. It traces how one exceptional woman dealt with railway patriarchy and ultimately found her voice as a political activist. Interviews conducted by Elena Poniatowska with Lilia Benetíz Vallejo, as well as interviews I conducted with women in Oaxaca and Mexico City, are the primary sources used for reconstructing the gendered politicization of Benetíz and other women who participated in the railway movement. Benetíz's story poignantly dramatizes the complicated joys and subjection experienced by ferrocarrileras before and during the strikes, and directs us to write ferrocarrileras into the history of railway

communities as well as the story of the dissident movement of 1958 and 1959. Along with railway men, ferrocarrileras contested the post-war political order and its claim of inaugurating a period of prosperity. The “miracle” was no more than a mirage.

Chapter Two:

Fissures and Bonds: The Gendered Construction of Railway Communities,

1943 – 1959

“The locomotive has its own language.”— Geraldo Niño Mendes, January 2004.¹

“The train’s whistle had a deep sound, it structured [regía] the lives of the ferrocarrileros, and the señoras.”²

Sometime in the early 1930s, a Zapotec woman from Mogoñe, Oaxaca took her twelve-year old son Demetrio Vallejo to work with her with the intention of finding him a job at the railway. Although she barely spoke Spanish, she managed to persuade the station manager to take on Demetrio as an assistant. As she sold the produce that she and her husband harvested on a nearby farm to passengers and railway workers, she kept her eye on Demetrio, who quickly grew fond of his work and dreamed of becoming a telegraph worker for the railway.

A few years earlier, Demetrio’s older sister Isaura Vallejo had married a railway worker in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, a major railway hub. She soon gave birth to Lilia Benetiz Vallejo. Like Demetrio, Benetiz lived near the train station, where she played with friends and waited for her father and grandfather—both ferrocarrileros—to punch out. By the time they were in their teens, Demetrio was living in Salina Cruz with his sister and niece, working at the railways with his brother-in-law. For the Vallejo-Benetiz family, the railway penetrated most aspects of their lives; they lived near the tracks,

¹ Interview with Geraldo Niño Mendes, by author, Jan. 2004, Puebla.

² “*Yo soy reilero...*”: *Imágenes de identidad de los ferrocarrileros poblanos*” (Puebla: Secretaría de Educacion Publica, 1988).

depended on the railways for work, and even socialized at the station or on the streets bordering the station.³

Demetrio Vallejo took such pride in his work and developed such affection for his colleagues that he decided to become a union representative for Section 13 of Matías Romero, Oaxaca while he was still in his twenties.⁴ When the railway movement came to a head in 1958, he had already had well over a decade of union leadership experience. As Vallejo rose meteorically to become the principal leader of the movement, he realized he needed trustworthy allies, as he fought the charro union establishment. It was during those heady days of 1958 that Demetrio Vallejo called on his niece Lilia Benetiz to join him in Mexico City and help him in the rebel railway movement.

Like Vallejo and Benetiz, railway workers and their families had formed a sense of belonging to a broad railway community through everyday practices that they performed at the workplace and in neighborhoods bordering stations, as well as through discursive communications, such as railway corridos and union magazines. Thousands of men and women managed to form a contingent yet pervasive sense of community based on their relationship to the railway industry either as workers, or as spouses or children of workers. Workers drew on their experiences at work in the railway yards, on trains, and in the union hall to create a repertoire of habits and practices that they associated with an authentic railway community member's experience.

Isaura Benetiz Vallejo and Lilia Benetiz were characteristic of the thousands of wives and children who found that their lives were strongly linked to the railway industry because their livelihood depended on the company and their neighbors had someone in

³These biographical details can be found in Interview with Demetio Vallejo, by Elena Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972; *Private papers of Elena Poniatowska*, Mexico City.

their family employed in the industry. Individual families found common ground with their neighbors as well as with local shop owners because they all depended on the railway economy. Moreover, the sheer presence of the railway stations—with all the hustle and bustle, noise and smoke, whistles and shrieks—made the industry more than an employer but rather an integral part of the neighborhood, especially since railway families tended to live just blocks, or even feet, from the tracks.

Divisions and disagreements also pervaded railway neighborhoods and worksites. Workers and neighbors did not always get along. The contingency of the railway community turned on how individuals interpreted their experiences in the workplace and in the neighborhood. Despite their shared practices, workers and neighbors did not always agree on a wide range of issues, from sexual mores to who was most fit to lead the union. The occupational hierarchy separated workers on a daily basis. For instance, trainmen, the best paid and most esteemed group, spent most of their time away from rail yards, where mechanics, handymen and others labored. Station managers worked (and lived) at stations, but they held a higher place in the occupational hierarchy than mechanics and handymen because station agents attained specialized training. Although distinctions in training set workers apart from one another, they nevertheless shared a common identity as *ferrocarrileros*; their common plight was emphasized by the STFRM and used as a rallying message during protests.

This chapter argues that workers and their families formed bonds through their everyday experiences at work and that STFRM leaders cited these experiences in the union newspaper, speeches, contracts, and other discursive materials to articulate a sense

⁴ FNM Personnel Dossier, Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*, *MNFM*.

of national social and political community.⁵ The ability of the union to use ferrocarrilero and ferrocarrilera experiences as evidence that workers and their families shared essential class and community interests solidified the strength of the union and made the notion that a national railway community existed commonsensical. In this way, the STFRM linked the local experiences of workers and families to form a national social and political identity.

STFRM leaders disseminated the idea of a common railway community through printed materials such as the union newspaper, “Unificación Ferroviaria,” as well as speeches delivered at union halls and rallies. Benedict Anderson has famously argued that print-capitalism historically facilitated a sense of national belonging in Europe during the nineteenth century. Print media allows people to communicate and form common interests and attitudes with others across distances, enabling the emergence of national consciousness, “conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”⁶ The national consciousness described by Anderson, like the railway workers’ community identity, was deeply subjective and, as Anderson’s critics have pointed out, fragile.⁷

It is no wonder that Demetrio Vallejo associates his political coming of age with learning to read, especially labor news.⁸ When he read the news of labor-leader Vincente Lombardo Toledano’s trip to the U.S.S.R., he ordered books on Marxism sent to him from Mexico City. The labor press radicalized Vallejo and others like him. Vallejo and other union activists would read union news and explain the collective contract to illiterate colleagues.

⁵ Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, no. 4, Summer, 1991.

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983), 7, 44-45.

⁷ See, Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 9-11.

The chapter also argues that the railway community was formed in part through exclusion. When disagreements became most heated, workers, neighbors and union officials took sides, deciding who was fit to belong to the “comunidad ferrocarrilera”. Co-workers and friends became enemies, making clear that the railway community constituted a lived process. Workers, family members and union leaders needed to constantly reassert the value of belonging to the “familia ferrocarrilera.” Individuals who threatened to undermine the community’s cohesion by calling on outsiders to intervene on union politics could be ostracized and even forced out of the STFRM.

The seminal work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe is useful for understanding how material practices (such as work tasks) and linguistic constructions, (such as stories, songs, and even gossip) enable people to form a sense of commonality and belonging. In Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, they argue that “discourse is a real force which contributes to the moulding and constitution of social relations.”⁹ In the context of railway families, railway songs, workplace banter and neighborhood conversations served as the linguistic material that helped create the notion of a railway community.

These narratives pervaded tangible practices on the job and in the neighborhood, an empirical example of Laclau and Mouffe’s position that discourse “cannot consist of purely linguistic phenomena; but must instead pierce the entire material density of the multifarious institutions, rituals and practices through which a discursive formation is structured.”¹⁰ Work practices and railway narratives provided workers and their families with a particular sense of who they were and how they belonged to a broader railway

⁸ Interview with Vallejo, by Poniatowska, 1972; Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, by author, Puebla, 2004.

⁹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (New York: Verso, 1985), 110.

¹⁰ Ibid., 109.

community, “piercing” official railway institutions such as the FNM and STFRM as well as informal institutions, such as the cantina, the street, and the family. The railway corrido could be sung on the job, in the union hall, as well as at home and on the street. Railway narratives were open to rebuttals from rank-and-file members, among others associated with the industry. The narratives—perhaps songs or gossip--could not necessarily ring true to all rank-and-file workers and community members, or at least not in their entirety. Because certain elements of railway work and neighborhood life are accentuated in these narratives at the expense of other points of view, not all subjects responded to them in the same way. Nevertheless, conversations, songs and stories about work and neighborhood life provided an accessible framework—a discursive structure--for railway workers and their families to think about why they should ally with each other.

Still, written sources and lived experiences were not the only means of creating a railway community. Corridos, which became popular during the Mexican Revolution, serve as vehicles for the popular classes to enshrine a local hero into the regional, and, in exceptional cases, the national consciousness. An accessible literary genre, corridos constitute a rich source of folk knowledge.¹¹ These songs enabled workers to think of themselves primarily as ferrocarrileros, linking them into a national workplace community.

No figure represents the wounded railway patriarch better than Jesús García, who has become memorialized in corridos such as “El héroe de Nacozari” as well as general

¹¹ Alvaro Custodio, *El corredor popular mexicano (su historia, sus temas, sus intérpretes)* (Mexico City: Ediciones Júcar 1975), 9; see also, *Revolución Mexicana a través de los corridos Populares, tomo I* (Mexico City: Talleres Nacional, 1962). On the corrido as a folk, or popular, genre, see Merle E. Simmons, *The Mexican Corrido* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957).

railway lore. García, a former rank-and-file member, died while turning away from town a locomotive caught on fire. García directed the train off the rails and over a cliff, saving a nearby railway town. The tale has become legendary, demonstrating railway workers' selflessness, toughness, and valor.¹²

Just as the STFRM stressed to workers that they all shared collective economic interests because they worked for the FNM, the tale of Jesús García reminded workers and their families that they shared the common experience of making enormous sacrifices for the good of the industry and the nation. The tragic fate of Jesús García came to represent the tragic condition of railway workers, who were regularly injured on the job, and railway families, who lost loved ones. These injuries and deaths were exacerbated in the 1940s and 1950s by the effects of decreased real wages earned by ferrocarrileros.

Due to the dangerous nature of toiling on trains and yards, the FNM and STFRM defined railway work as masculine. As a result, the company and union created a homosocial workplace, where women were, for the most part, excluded. (Those women who did work for the railways were circumscribed to office jobs.) In order to get the job done well and effectively, men developed their own "codes of manhood," which bound workers to perform their job as a condition of their masculine worker identity.¹³ The codes of manhood facilitated better work performance, which helped create a safe workplace and prevented co-workers from getting disciplined by bosses for the shoddy

¹² Jesús García became a railway martyr and was memorialized in poems, articles in the STFRM paper, as well as comic strips. See figure 1 for comic strip. For articles praising García as the "heroé de Narcozarí, see Nov. 30, 1950, *Unificación Ferroviaria*, which includes articles and a poem written in honor of García, See figure 2 for images of the fallen railway worker.

¹³ For a discussion of a similar case of codes of manhood created by men who worked in homosocial spaces, see Thomas Klubock, *Contested Communities: Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Mine, 1904-1951* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 128-129; Susan Gauss, "Working-Class Masculinity and the Rationalized Sex: Gender and Industrial Modernization in the Textile Industry in

work of one member of the crew. Train workers' dependence on each other combined with the exclusion of women workers on trains to create a homosocial workplace environment. In her influential study of homosociability, literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that "men's heterosexual relationships...have as their *raison d'être* an ultimate bonding between men; and that this bonding...is not detrimental to "masculinity" but definitive of it."¹⁴ Workers felt invested in being perceived as independent, tough and sexually virile; in order to be masculine, they had to demonstrate to each other that they were strong, aggressive, and heterosexual. Hence, workers strutted their macho stuff, performing their masculinity for the approval of other men by flirting with women, picking fights with other men, and proving that they could hold their liquor. In this way, railway work defined railway masculinity. Workers performed their masculinity at the workplace as well as in neighborhood spaces.

Workers had to prove themselves to each other in order to be respected and recognized as properly manly. They had to prove themselves every day on the job, moving steel tracks, dirtying themselves with grease, carrying and burning coal. For instance, Miko Viya, a former worker from Puebla, explains that workers derived pride from their oil stained clothes and enjoyed when people referred to their dirty uniforms. "We had respect for the trade, and pride of being a *ferrocarrilero*, people would call us "chorreados" [soaked], because when we worked [our clothes] were full of oil."¹⁵

Geraldo Niño Mendez, a former shop worker and activist from Puebla during the 1950s, informs us that the railway workers' body was central to the construction of

Postrevolutionary Puebla," in *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), Jocelyn Olcott, Mary Kay Vaughn, and Gabriela Cano, eds., 186-187.

¹⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), 50.

railway masculinity. Photographs of workers from the 1950s show trainmen with rolled up sleeves, exposing muscles, sneering at the camera. One afternoon, as I walked into Niño Mendes' house, he stopped me, pointed to the wall and a photograph of himself with former colleagues standing in front of a locomotive, and asked me to take a good look at his arms. Railway work made him strong, a real "carbon," he explained.¹⁶

Other former railway workers from Puebla, such as José Jorge Ramírez, Carlos Salazar Ramírez and Antonio Moreno explained over a series of lengthy interviews how railway men measured their masculinity on the job as well as by their actions outside of work. Moreno stressed how workers' ability to "conquer" girlfriends and mistresses informed their sense of manly identity, lowering his voice to confess to me that he, at the age of 81, still takes the overnight trip from Puebla to San Luis Potosí to visit his mistress every month or so.¹⁷ Demetrio Vallejo too was reputed to have many lovers across Mexico.¹⁸ And Juan Colín, a prominent railway activist from Mexico City, brags about his fifteen children sprinkled throughout the country.¹⁹ Railway men like Moreno, Vallejo and Colín equated railway masculinity with a hyper-sexual virility.

In his study of masculinity, Pierre Bourdieu points to the intimate connection between virility and manly identity. "Manliness, virility...remains indissociable, tacitly at least, from physical virility, in particular through the attestations of sexual potency...which are expected of a 'real' man."²⁰ Virtually all former railway men testify to the importance that workers gave to "conquering". Railway therefore men

¹⁵ Interview with Miko Viya, in Gloria Tirado Villegas, *Relatos del Interoceánico 2* (Puebla: Secretaría de Cultura Comión Puebla, 1992), 11.

¹⁶ Interview with Geraldo Niño Mendes, by author, Puebla, March 2004.

¹⁷ Interview with Antonio Moreno, by author, Puebla, April, 2004.

¹⁸ Personal conversations with Elena Poniatowska, Mexico City, 2004.

¹⁹ Interview with Juan Colín, by author, Mexico City, June 1999.

²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 12.

transformed the workplace into a sexualized space where they courted their future wives and mistresses.

The importance of women to railway community can be appreciated by reading or singing “La Reilera,” the most popular railway corrido. Railway corridos provided the discursive material that publicly recognized railway wives and daughters as part of the railway community, designating them as ferrocarrileras or reileras. Although the narrators of most corridos are male, a female protagonist narrates “La Rielera,” informing audiences about the heartache endured by railway women when their husbands are on the job.²¹ The corrido allows us to understand how women who did not work on the rails come to see themselves as part of the railway community. Lilia Benetiz remembers us that the song became politically charged in 1958 and 1959 when ferrocarrileras and ferrocarrileros in Mexico City chanted its lyrics during protests.²²

STFRM and the Making of a Discursive Community

Railway workers and their families acquired their sense of community from more than just sociability at work and on the street. The STFRM played an indispensable role in binding workers by serving as the institutional representative of their common interests and representing them when conflicts with the company arose. It derived its authority over workers through the collective contract; all rank-and-file employees had to belong to the union in order to work for a railway company. The STFRM protected workers

²¹ Although corridos were stories written predominately written by men about men, women protagonists were used in corridos as archetypes of “good” or “bad” forms of motherhood. In rare cases, such as “La Adelita,” which told the story of a woman who fought in the Revolution and stood beside her lover during battle, women served as the principle protagonists of corridos. See María Herrera-Sobek, *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 84-116.

against impositions made mainly on the part of the FNM, since it was by far the largest railway company, but the union also defended workers at smaller companies, such as the Ferrocarril Mexicano and the Ferrocarril del Pacifico, among others.

Since all rank-and-file employees had to be STFRM members to hold a job, the STFRM organized the rank-and-file into what can be considered a national workers' community, and one with considerable political clout. The union kept workers up-to-date on colleagues and stations throughout the country through the union paper, "Unificación Ferroviaria," submitted workers' grievances to the company, petitioned for higher wages on behalf of its members, and mobilized workers during local and national elections. In doing so, the STFRM facilitated the creation of a shared railway workers' identity by bringing rank-and-file employees together in a common institution, providing them with services, and, not least of all, informing them about their supposed and real common interests. The latter required the diffusion of information. Newspapers, fliers, and even contracts constituted the discursive material that brought far away railway workers together.

In Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson explains that the large-scale distribution of printed texts allowed for "communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact...to form, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of a nationally imagined community."²³ Anderson's insights on the relationship between print and nationalism can help us understand how workers and families from, say, the northern state of Chihuahua could claim solidarity with railway families as far south as the state of Chiapas. People from these railway neighborhoods were brought together by

²² Interview with Lilia Benetiz, by Elena Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972.

²³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6, 44.

their institutional affiliation with the STFRM and by the printed materials that the union distributed. The STFRM helped bind workers and their families because apart from train workers, who traveled throughout the country on their routes, most railway families' experiences were limited to just a few neighborhoods in a few towns or cities, depending on how many times the company relocated them. Nevertheless, they identified with other railway families throughout the country.

The union newspaper, "Unificación Ferroviaria," served an indispensable function in helping to create a common understanding that there existed a railway community.

Antonio Moreno and José Jorge Ramírez remember regularly reading the union newspaper. The paper circulated images of locomotives and workers in action, stories that transmitted the joys and travails encountered at work, and even short fiction describing how workers and their families participated in union and company life. These stories and reports provided the discursive material that made Moreno and Ramírez, as well as the many railway workers throughout the country, aware of their common interests and shared practices.

The union also created a sense of community through the family. Individuals acquired membership in the community by belonging to the STFRM or by being the son, daughter or spouse of an STFRM member. Carlos Salazar Ramírez, Geraldo Niño Mendez, and José Jorge Ramírez were given preference for a job with the FNM because their fathers and grandfathers had belonged to the union and worked for the FNM. During the 1958 railway movement, Vallejo used his position in the union to hire his cousin, Lilia Benetiz.²⁴ The intersection of union and family life can be gleaned from workers' dossiers that show that the sons, daughters, and even nephews of union

members were granted jobs because a family member belonged to the union.²⁵ The ability of workers to secure jobs for family members gave them a very compelling reason to feel allegiance to the union.²⁶ Workers and families viewed railway work and a place in the STFRM as a right that could be bequeathed to children.²⁷ The union paper also included wives and children as part of the broader railway community. “Unificación Ferroviaria” printed pieces that highlighted problems faced by wives and children of their members; editorials gave paternal advice to railway children, instructing them to be on their best behavior while their fathers were away on the job.

The STFRM constituted an integral part of—perhaps the glue that held together--the railway community. Union representatives believed that their principal mission was to define and defend the economic interests of its members. They defended members by writing letters to company officials on behalf of workers or by representing members before the labor arbitration board, the Junta de Conciliación y Arbitraje. In court, union representatives regularly won reinstatement for workers who had been fired, demonstrating the indispensable value of the STFRM.²⁸ Demetrio Vallejo himself is a

²⁴ Interview with Benetiz, by Poniatowska, 1972.

²⁵ Personnel Dossier, Esteban Harrera Alcantar, Box 2, Matías Romero, Puebla, *CEDIF*. An STFRM official wrote a letter to the FNM on Alcantar’s behalf, reasoning that he should be given preference because his uncle was a rank-and-file member of the union. Also see, Personnel Dossier, Tiburcio Cuevas Santiago, Box 3, Matías Romero, *CEDIF*.

²⁶ Families often had multiple members who belonged to the STFRM, making their allegiance to the union a family matter. See, for instance, the Victor Armendariz’s dossier, which shows that he, his father, and his son belonged to the STFRM. Personnel Dossier, Victor Ramón Castillo Armendariz, Box 3, Matías Romero, *CEDIF*; workers wrote officials invoking that their right to have their children join the rank-and-file. See AGN, ARC, v. 659, 513/91; some workers attempted to extend the “right” to give family members preference to nephews. See, FNM Personnel Dossier, Tiburcio Cuevas Santiago, Matías Romero, Box 3, *CEDIF*.

²⁷ Andrea Spears, “‘When We Saw the Fruit of Our Labor, We Swelled With Pride’: Community, Work, and Resistance on the National Railways of Mexico, 1940-1946,” (Austin: Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas, 1998.)

²⁸ STFRM officials successfully lobbied company officials to cancel workers’ demerits with astounding regularity. See, for example, Letter from FNM Superintendent to STFRM, Aug. 28, 1934, Humberto Venegas, Box 1 Puebla-Transportes, *CEDIF*.

case in point: he was fired for insubordination in the 1940s, only to be rehired after the union successfully defended him before of the labor arbitration board.²⁹

The arbitration board became a forum for the STFRM to battle supervisors and company officials, a political theater where workers disputed allegations made by their superiors and pleaded for reinstatement.³⁰ It is telling of how much power the STFRM wielded that the board often ruled in favor of the rank-and-file.³¹ Dossiers offer examples of workers being reinstated by the arbitration board after extreme acts of insubordination against supervisors, such as one combative employee who regained his seniority and position after having assaulted a supervisor.³² The STFRM's role in representing workers and getting them off the hook granted the union a privileged status in the lives of workers and their families.

The STFRM's use of the arbitration board enabled workers to combat company impositions while abiding by the rule of law—a practice that became all the more difficult when company-friendly officials took over the union in the *charrazo* of 1948.³³ In serving as an outlet for adjudicating offenses of all kinds, for years the Junta had facilitated worker compliance. Workers knew they could challenge unjust accusations, making the hierarchy less rigid. In doing so, workers were given an alternative to

²⁹ FNM Personnel Dossier, Demetrio Vallejo Martínez, Collection of Prominent Figures, Puebla, *CEDIF*.

³⁰ Interview with Maneses Domínguez, in *“Yo soy rielero....”*, 155.

³¹ Jorge Molina, a machinist fired in Oct. 1949 for his excessive drinking, took his case to the board and was reinstated in Jan. 1950. The FNM had no further recourse in the courts, unless, of course, Molina committed a different infraction. See Personnel Dossier, Jorge Molina, Puebla-Transportes, *CEDIF*; there is evidence to suggest that workers expected the Junta to rule in their favor. One worker wrote President Ruiz Cortines that he did not understand why he was not reinstated when it was so common for workers to be cleared of negligence, even when they caused accidents. See, *ARC*, v. 661, 513.1/5.

³² The worker was none other than Demetrio Vallejo, the leader of the 1958 and 1959 railway movement. See FNM Personnel Dossier, Demetrio Vallejo Martínez, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*.

³³ Kevin Middlebrook notes that the STFRM decreased the number of railway workers it defended in front of labor arbitration board after the *charrazo*. See Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution*, 195. Grievances submitted by the union rose again 1958 and 1959, with Demetrio Vallejo and the democratic union leaders in charge of the STFRM.

collective action. Individual punishments could be contested individually. The compliant leaders associated with the charrazo were less likely to stand up to company officials, and workers found fewer opportunities to question authorities as a result. Workers were punished more frequently for minor offences while officials treated them with increasing contempt.

As rules became inflexible, workers became more volatile, as evidenced by the “tortuguismo,” or slowdown actions of 1954, when train workers briefly slowed down their work rhythm to protest supervisors who pushed them to increase production. Accusations against supervisors rose after 1948 because workers could count on fewer leaders willing to defend them. When workers managed to have their case heard, the Junta took more time to reach a decision, leaving workers displaced for longer periods.³⁴ By 1958, it became clear to workers that union leaders had sold out. During this period of institutional crisis, workers drew on the culture of solidarity fostered by workplace and neighborhood experiences to mount a resistance to charros. The strength of their collective identity, along with a long history of workplace organizing and experience with union politics, enabled rank and file dissidents to organize in 1958 to kick out the charro leaders.

The Practice of Neighborhood

The STFRM may have operated as the institutional expression of railway workers’ shared identity, but the street served as the informal space where individuals associated

³⁴ Interview with Francisco “Pancho” Mortera, Mexico City, July 1999; Interview with Eleazar Tinajero, by author, Mexico City, June 23, 1999.

with the railway industry came to see themselves as part of a broader local and national railway community. Interviews with former ferrocarrileros and ferrocarrileras reveal how railway neighborhoods functioned as primary locations for the creation and practice of a distinct a railway identity. Through their actions in the streets, people communicated to others that they had a stake in the railway industry and in the union—as an employee or as a family member of one. If the neighborhood, as sociologist Michel de Certeau has claimed, is a unique social space where a dweller comes to be recognized by others by sharing everyday public practices, such as gossiping or going to the store, then railway neighborhoods did more than simply serve as a site for commercial exchange and recreation—they enabled individuals to see themselves as part of a greater whole, a collective.³⁵

The neighborhood, according to de Certeau, is a practice: people transform space for particular social purposes, making it distinct from other spaces in a city. For Geraldo Niño Mendez and Carlos Salazar Ramírez, the distinction between railway neighborhoods and other city spaces was obvious. Both former railway men remember with nostalgia the joy of living near the railway station and watching workers and their friends walk home; their children ran through the streets and became friends while business establishments catered to the needs of the rank-and-file and their families.³⁶

The very dynamic between railway workplaces and railway neighborhoods gave the latter its particular feel, which distinguished it from other spaces. In Mexico City where the FNM granted workers land and even constructed housing, the connection between the

³⁵ Michel De Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol. *The Practice of Everyday Life. Vol 2: Living and Cooking* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), 9.

industry and surrounding streets was particularly intimate.³⁷ Most railway workers in the capital lived in Colonia Guerrero, which had housed artisans and working class folks from its construction during the Porfiriato.³⁸ Colonia Guerrero was home to Buenavista Station—the principle railway station in the capital—as well as Nonoloaco, the main rail yard in the city, where faulty equipment and machines were sent to repair. Hotels and bars lined the streets around Buenavista, catering to railway workers spending the night or having a drink before their next shift.³⁹

Matías Romero’s downtown as well as the streets bordering the railway station in Puebla also catered to railway workers. Workers could be seen exiting or entering work in throngs, shortly after the morning whistle signaled the end of the late shift and the beginning of the day. Men clad in oil-stained overalls could be seen receiving their lunch, handed to them by a daughter or son. At night drunken railway men could be witnessed staggering out of watering holes, while trains arrived at the station.⁴⁰ These spectacles aided in “the production of [a] territorially bounded form of social solidarity” based on the railway industry, creating a pervasive if hard to quantify notion of a railway neighborhood.⁴¹

For Lilia Benetiz, Demetrio Vallejo and thousands of other ferrocarrileros and ferrocarrileras, there was no clear border between railway workspaces and the city or country. Railway tracks cut through rural and urban landscapes, bringing those who

³⁶ Street names often indicated the close relationship of a neighborhood with the railway industry. For instance, one worker and his family lived on Calle Ferrocarril (Railway Street) in Hidalgo, Chiapas. FNM Personnel Dossier, Adulio Arenas Antón, Matias Romero, Box 1, *CEDIF*.

³⁷ *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 March 1948.

³⁸ Michael Johns, *The City of Mexico in the Age of Díaz* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997.)

³⁹ Interview with Salvador Zarco, by author, Mexico City, July 1999; Interview with Juan Colín, by author, Mexico City, July 1999.

⁴⁰ Interview with Guadalupe Monroy in Gloria Tirado, *Relatos del Interoceánico* 2, 20-21.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

lived or worked near the rails into the orbit of the railway industry. Vallejo's mother was a case in point. As a Zapotec woman whose parents had lived in the countryside, she and her husband worked farmland outside of Mogoñè with the help of young Demetrio and his siblings. She sold her harvest at the railway station, where she would eventually find work for her son. The railway industry thus intimately affected the lives of campesinos and offered some, such as Vallejo, the promise of social mobility. Vallejo never forgot his rural roots, and he later spent time teaching campesinos how to read.⁴²

Auditory triggers also played an important role structuring the everyday lives of families. Workers at the rail yards in Oaxaca knew it was time to go to work when they heard the bells signaling the beginning of their shift.⁴³ In his influential study of oral history and working class culture, Alessandro Portelli explains how in a factory town "the whistle blow ... becomes the modern counterpart to the church bell, uniting the community around the factory and the machine."⁴⁴ A similar process took place in neighborhoods near stations. For example, men and women in Matías Romero, a city in eastern Oaxaca that once housed an important railway yard and station, recall that there was no need for them to wear a watch because they kept time by the station bells.⁴⁵ Bells rang five minutes before each shift, informing families that their loved ones would soon be home and reminding other employees that it was time to get to work.

⁴² Interview with Demetrio Vallejo, by Elena Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972.

⁴³ Interview with Esteban Rodríguez, by author, Matías Romero, July 2004.

⁴⁴ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral history* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 170; The classic statement on the relationship between the industrial workplace and the structure of people's daily routines is E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present*, 38: 56-97.

⁴⁵ Interview with Miguel Rodríguez, Oaxaca, Mexico, July 2004; Interview with Julio Martínez, Oaxaca, Mexico, July 2004.

Conductors such as the Mexico City activist Juan Colín used train whistles to let their family and friends know that they were coming into town.⁴⁶ Conductors enjoyed a fair amount of independence on the job, recounting that they and their fellow trainmen executed many of their routes without direct supervision.⁴⁷ Taking advantage of their relative independence, they molded company equipment, especially their whistles, to suit their own individual tastes. They took pride in modifying whistles in order for them to make a distinct pitch; each conductor tried to get his whistle to sound unlike any other.⁴⁸ The distinct pitch of a conductor's whistle enabled loved ones to know if it was their husband, father, or friend who was pulling into the station. As one worker recalls, a wife or friend could often identify their conductor by the whistle. "Oh, Juan is arriving."⁴⁹

Spaces bordering railway stations became zones of vibrant commercial and social activities. Narciso Nava and José Jorge Ramírez patronized the cantinas that lined the streets near the train station in Puebla. The cantinas were places for them to let loose, dance, and drink before returning to work.⁵⁰ In Puebla and Mexico City, for instance, restaurants, cantinas and hotels lined streets next to stations, providing food, drink and shelter to peripatetic railway men.⁵¹ Proprietors counted on railway men's reliable patronage for the success of their businesses, as evidenced by their practice of extending credit to ferrocarrileros and naming their establishments after elements relevant to the

⁴⁶ Interview with Juan Colín, by author, Mexico City, 2004; Interview with Miko Viya, in Gloria Tirado, *Relatos del Interoceanico* 2, 9.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Interview with Geraldo Niño Mendes, by author, March 2004.

⁴⁹ Interview with Geraldo Niño Mendes, Puebla, Mexico, 2003; Mendes drew a sketch of a whistle and explained how conductors modified it according to their tastes.

⁵⁰ Many male interviewees recall cantinas with nostalgia. Interviews with José Jorge Ramírez, Antonio Moreno, Narciso Nava, Fidel Vásquez, Juan Colín, Carlos Salazar Ramírez, all by author. See also Interview with Guadalupe Monroy, in Gloria Tirado, *Relatos del Interoceanico* 2, 19-21.

⁵¹ For list of hotels in Mexico City, see Interview with Miko Viya, in Gloria Tirado, *Relatos del Interoceanico*, 13.

railway industry, such as “El Durmiente” [“The Crossbeam”].⁵² The mere fact that many owners of cantinas chose the names of their businesses with railway workers in mind elevated the status of railway men among all those who lived or passed by the heavily trafficked streets surrounding the rail yards and stations.

Railway workers in Puebla surely took advantage of the special relationships they formed with cantina proprietors, such as drinking on credit, and still fondly recall the energy and reverie that existed inside cantinas.⁵³ When trainmen from distant cities rolled into town, they knew they could find a welcoming place to drink, eat and sleep just yards away from the station. Many of these hotels and cantinas gave credit to railway workers, counting on ferrocarrileros to pay them back when they received their pay. Demetrio Vallejo took advantage of the close relationship between cantinas, hotels and workers when he traveled around the country, organizing workers in 1958 and 1959. He stayed at a hotel in Colonia Guerrero that was near Buenavista station, giving him a close base to organize Mexico City workers.⁵⁴

Proprietors in smaller, less populated localities relied even more heavily on the consumption of railway workers and there is evidence to suggest that these small entrepreneurs joined in solidarity with the rank-and-file during periods of political unrest, such as those that occurred after World War II and in 1958.⁵⁵ Carlos Salazar Ramírez, who for two years was sent by the FNM away from Puebla to live along tracks in rural regions across the country while repairing bridges, explained that workers and their

⁵² “*Yo soy reilero...*”, 18.

⁵³ The importance that the city gave to its rank-and-file railway men can be gleaned from its coverage of the fiftieth anniversary of the first railway craft organization, the Unión de Mecánicos Ferroviarios, which was founded by workers in Puebla. Speeches, dances, and parties took place throughout the city, including at the main cinema and theatre. See, Aug. 28, 1950, *El Sol de Puebla*.

⁵⁴ Interview with Vallejo, by Poniatowska, 1972.

families in isolated regions received credit from restaurant and cantina owners. The relationship between railway families and small businesses in remote areas was reciprocal. Railway families relied on credit from merchants to get by until payday, and merchants gave them credit because they needed railway workers' business to keep afloat.⁵⁶

Letters written to the national government from representatives of small communities show that proprietors and non-railway workers who lived in these areas counted on railway families to inject money into the local economy.⁵⁷ People in those remote areas were dependent on the railway to deliver food, such as corn and frijoles, and relied on trains as a cheap form of personal transportation.⁵⁸ During the railway strikes of 1958 and 1959, Carlos Salazar Ramírez received credit and moral support from storeowners in rural areas in the state of Guerrero, where he repaired bridges for the FNM and slept in a tent yards away from the tracks.⁵⁹

Workers injected money into remote townships even when they lived shabbily. They spent their money at affordable hotels and exchanged their pesos for food bought

⁵⁵ In 1946, hotel, restaurant, and factory owners supported a railway strike to protest the rise in the cost of living. See, *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 May 1946.

⁵⁶ Interview with Carlos Salazar Ramírez, by author, Puebla, February, 2004. Salazar Ramírez spent months in remote regions of the country, repairing bridges and tracks as a company peone de via. He recalls that local business depended to such a degree on railway workers business that shop owners extended credit to the ferrocarrileros.

⁵⁷ Letter from Colonia Comité of Monterrey to Miguel Alemán Valdes, MAV, 451, 513/10. An association of neighbors petition the president to build homes on land belonging to the FNM; a letter from a president of a local cooperative of producers in Yucatan explains that the railway "improved the lives of people in the pueblo" and helped business. See, AGN, ARC, v. 663, 513.7/5; Records of the FNM consultants substantiate that people who lived near railway tracks often understood the railway to be national property, which justified their act of squatting on FNM grounds. See *Minutes of FNM Consultants Meetings*, Acta, no. 15, Jan. 7, 1946, *CEDIF*

⁵⁸ The president of the Maestros del Estado de Puebla pleaded President Adolfo López Mateos to construct stations in small towns, which he described as being "at the margins of civilization." Without the railway, the letter claimed, "the area will collapse [because it] needs the railway." See, AGN, ALM, v. 567, 513.2/6. The union was aware of that poor people relied on trains for affordable transport. See, *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 December 1958.

⁵⁹ Interview with Carlos Salazar Ramírez, by author, Puebla, May 2004.

from local vendors, many of whom were women trying to sustain their households.⁶⁰

Peon workers such as Salazar Ramírez, who were sent by the company to toil in desolate areas throughout the country, often walked miles after work to find an open cantina or a place to buy a plate of beans, rice and tortilla. They slept in tents beside the rails, or, if lucky, in containers provided by the company. Those who were not offered freight containers to use for housing built shacks out of rummaged wood. All workers relieved themselves outdoors.

This lack of services led the union in the 1940s to call for improvements in hygiene. If Alemán expected the FNM to modernize, STFRM officials argued, then the FNM should make bathrooms available to the rank-and-file.⁶¹ For diversion and a reprieve from their hard work and shabby living conditions, peons trekked into town. In small, isolated towns, the arrival of the train must have sounded like an explosion, and the vision of railway men draped in their classic blue, grease-stained overalls, announced the arrival of a raucous party, one cantina owners must have been most happy to host.

In larger cities, such as Puebla, the physical space of the railway neighborhood also provided cover for workers' excessive drinking and their proclivity for cavorting with prostitutes, a passtime fondly remembered by some workers.⁶² In an interview conducted by historians in Puebla, a former trainman, Guadalupe Monroy, remembers "una

⁶⁰ A letter from a representative of ranchers in Michóacan explains that for one year they have been asking for a railway station. They rely on the railway for traveling and for shopping because it is affordable. Without a station, they will continue to live in misery. See AGN, ARC, 659, 513/63.

⁶¹ *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 25 January 1941. In this issue the union declared that if higher ups could attain wage increases then workers in Matías Romero should not be made to go to the bathroom in the woods.

⁶² In interviews with former workers, many fondly recall their time spent drinking and dancing, but none were more enthusiastic than Antonio Moreno and José Jorge Ramírez. Interview with Antonio Moreno, Puebla, Mexico, May 2004; Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, Puebla, Mexico, February 2004. There are many some very valuable studies of Puebla ferrocarrileros that employ oral histories. See, Gloria Tirado Villegas, *Relatos del Interoceánico 2* (Puebla: Secretaría de Cultura, 1992) and Gonzálo Márquez González and José Antonio Ruiz Jarquin, *Relatos del Interoceánico 4* (Puebla: Secretaría de Cultura, 1992).

amiguita” that he had in one of the city’s cabarets. After work he and his railway buddies would visit cabarets within walking distance from the station. The women charged men per dance and were rumored to charge railway men a little extra because their dirty uniforms stained their dresses. Monroy explains with some nostalgia that in those days “prostitution was regulated, clean, not like today.”⁶³

Displays of male heterosexual desire in neighborhood sites, such as the cantina, structured relations among railway men. Oral histories are critical for this line of research because the FNM and the union generally overlooked railway men’s sexual practices. Oral histories reveal that workers often pressured each other to take part in exhibitions of heterosexual desire, such as pursuing women at cabarets, and those who did not might find co-workers questioning their masculinity, or, worse, their heterosexuality. Cantinas gave José Jorge Ramírez, a shop worker in Puebla, the chance to taunt a fellow worker he and his co-workers believed to be gay. Ramírez enjoys telling the story of how he and others pressured the man to dance with women. “We knew he didn’t like women, so we made him dance with them,” remembers Ramírez.⁶⁴ Cantinas and cabarets therefore served as spaces where workers displayed their masculinity to their male colleagues. To this day, retired male workers revel in telling stories set in cantinas, where they indulged the pleasures offered by alcohol and hired women. Although women were present at these establishments as servers and sex workers, railway men remember cantinas as masculine spaces, places where male coworkers traded stories of sexual conquest and performed their heterosexuality by dancing and leaving with women.

⁶³ Testimony of Guadalupe Monroy, in Villegas, Gloria Tirado, *Relatos del Interoceánico* (Puebla: Secretaría de Cultura Comisión Puebla V Centenario, 1992), 20- 21.

⁶⁴ Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, Puebla, Mexico, February 2004.

Hiring prostitutes went hand in hand with drinking pulque or tequila. Alcohol loosened inhibitions and created a sexually charged atmosphere.⁶⁵ As workers wet their lips, the cantina became a theatre for the performance of sexuality. By dancing with prostitutes and other women, men displayed their heterosexuality for all to see, proving their preference for the opposite sex. They may have simply been blowing off steam after work, but this leisure activity had specific consequences for structuring relationships between workers. Even workers who did not want to partake in cantina culture felt compelled to do so in order to avoid being taunted or shunned by their colleagues.⁶⁶ Needless to say, women workers, those employed as office workers or nurses, did not receive an invitation to the cantina. Hence, dancing and flirting with cantina women amounted to a performance by men for men. These acts constituted subtle but important rituals for stabilizing male workers' sexuality, linking the idea of railway manliness with heterosexuality.

Testimonies reveal that although it was commonplace among workers to deem alcohol consumption, sexual promiscuity, and a general toughness as essential to being a real railway man, not all railway men embraced this particular view of masculinity.⁶⁷ Geraldo Niño remembers cantina culture as a repressive element of railway workers' sociability. Niño spent most of his career toiling in the rail yard in Puebla fixing machinery, one of the most physically demanding jobs. As the son and grandson of railway men, his coworkers easily accepted him, even as they teased him for his lack of interest in alcohol. Niño remembers that he grew frustrated by the peer pressure, as his

⁶⁵ Interview with Guadalupe Monroy, in Gloria Tirado, *Relatos del Interoceánico* 2, 21.

⁶⁶ Interview with Geraldo Niño Mendes, by author, Puebla, February, 2004.

colleagues urged him to go to cantinas after work, insisting that he drink tequila. He recalls these instances with anguish, explaining that he did not like alcohol but felt that he needed to go in order to placate co-workers, especially his superiors. Niño felt that his absence from cantina culture might jeopardize his chances of promotion, for his boss expected those who worked under him to go get a drink with the crew. By drinking tequila with his colleagues, he became one of the boys. “It was terrible,” he recalls, “because I don’t like to drink. I’ve never been drawn to it.”⁶⁸

Manly performances in railway neighborhoods were not limited to demonstrations of sexual exploits and alcohol consumption. Fights broke out at cantinas with regularity.⁶⁹ These fights offered another opportunity for men to flaunt their physiques, flashing aggressive poses that signaled a masculine persona. In contesting other males, railway men proved that they were sufficiently tough, an important trait for every rank-and-file man. Workers valued strength and the ability to withstand pain, for on the job they had to carry heavy machinery and regularly suffered falls and bruises. By challenging each other to fights on the street or by pushing each other to work efficiently on the job, men displayed their assertiveness and combative character, characteristics that, coincidentally, would prove useful when protesting company impositions. Insofar as cantinas and cabarets provided a space for these performances of masculinity, they became important sites for the construction of the authentic “railway man.” As male workers frequented

⁶⁷ For instance, Demetrio Vallejo, the revered railway leader, explains how he took no interest in drinking and going to bars despite the pervasive custom among workers. Interview with Vallejo, Poniatowska, 1972. See testimonies in *Los ferrocarrileros hablan* (Puebla: Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 1983).

⁶⁸ Interview with Geraldo Niño Méndez, Puebla, Mexico, May 2004.

⁶⁹ Interview with Carlos Salazar Ramírez, Puebla, Mexico April, 2004. Sometimes the fights took place at work after a drinking binge. For instance, company officials explain that Silverio Aquino arrived drunk at work and invited the boss to fire him; in another case, officials claimed that Jesús García had the habit of arriving drunk and yelling and cursing at supervisors. FNM Personnel dossier, Silverio Caballero Aquino, Matías Romero, Box 3, CEDIF; FNM Personnel dossier, Jesús Pérez García, Puebla, Box 2, CEDIF.

these establishments in order to relax, share stories, complaints, and memories with each other, they created highly sexualized spaces, where they proved to the viewing public that they were tough and straight.

The importance that workers placed on alcohol consumption was not lost on company officials. When President Miguel Ávila Camacho initiated his program to modernize the Mexican railways in 1945, a program accelerated under the administration of Miguel Alemán, FNM officials sought to curb drinking among the rank-and-file. They did so by charging that alcohol consumption led to a general lack of discipline.⁷⁰ A piece published in *Ferronales*, the company magazine, acknowledged that company officials knew workers drank alcohol “to get loose” and “to get warm” but warned them that alcohol consumption violated moral standards and interfered in workplace relations. Moreover, the article explained that there was plenty of scientific evidence that showed the detrimental effects of alcohol consumption on the body, an aside that showed the increasing role that science played in FNM arguments concerning workplace regulations.⁷¹

The FNM’s charge warranted attention, for reports of employees coming to work drunk or skipping work for the cantina was a nagging concern.⁷² Moreover, it needs to be noted that the STFRM joined the company in urging workers to stay sober on the job,

⁷⁰ See *Ferronales*, Oct. 1946.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Accounts such as those filed in José Pinzon Guevara’s dossier were not uncommon. The report informed company officials that a witness claimed Guevara was too drunk to attend work. FNM internal memo, Sept. 20, 1934, Personnel Dossier, José Pinzon Guevara, Box 2, Puebla-Transportes, *CEDIF*. FNM documents substantiate the company’s concern that alcoholism among the rank-and-file would cost the company money in medical care. FNM memos made this argument when exchanging thoughts on the drinking habits of machinist Jorge Molina. FNM internal memo, Nov. 28, 1938, Box 1, Puebla-Transportes, *CEDIF*.

albeit the union did not stress the punitive consequences for working while inebriated.⁷³

The STFRM framed the problem of alcohol consumption as a health-related issue, an affliction rather than a lack of discipline.⁷⁴ Despite the best efforts of the company and union, cantina culture and alcohol consumption continued to play an important role in railway workers' sociability.⁷⁵

Not all practices deemed dangerous by railway authorities were hedonistic, however. Railway neighborhoods also became incubators for political dissent. Invoking the work of Friedrich Engels, political scientist Ira Katznelson describes how spaces such as those near the railways can become politicized. "The semi-free space of the neighborhoods," he explains, "[provide a space] to meet, to proselytize, to organize. In the sharply class-divided spaces of the cities...workers become 'conscious of the fact they form a separate class, and have their own interests, policies and points of view, which are opposed to those of the capitalist owners.'"⁷⁶ The process outlined by Katznelson captures how railway neighborhoods served as political spaces precisely because the overwhelming majority of the inhabitant acquired a working class identity, a process encouraged by the STFRM. The fact that workers and neighbors identified with the railway only buttressed their solidarity. Lilia Benetiz and Juan Colín organized railway workers by clandestinely attending meetings and making contacts with dissidents in Colonia Guerrero in Mexico City, which was within a short walk from Buenavista Station, the principle railway

⁷³ See "Las autoridades," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 March 1948,. STFRM expressed their dismay that cantinas existed near worksites and warned its members about the risks of drinking on the job.

⁷⁴ June 1, 1945, *Unificación Ferroviaria*.

⁷⁵ Some workers were particularly brazen about their alcohol abuse. Dario Pérez, for instance, showed up drunk for a visit with a company doctor. The doctor reported that Pérez reeked of alcohol and, when questioned about it, refused treatment. The company conducted a formal investigation of the incident. See, FNM Transcript, Jan. 24, 1935, Personnel Dossier, Dario Perez, Box 2, Puebla-Transportes, *CEDIF*.

station in the capital. Colonia Guerrero served as an incubator of radical labor politics and became a target of police when the railway movement was repressed in 1959.⁷⁷

The politicized space of the railway neighborhood grew in importance in the 1940s, as the national government and FNM sought to modernize the industry, seeking higher productivity from railway workers even as the rank-and-file's wages fell. Workers met at each other on the street and at the union hall, as well as each other's houses.

Neighborhood sites—workers' houses, street corners, union halls—provided the necessary space for worker-activists to talk to their colleagues about their workplace concerns. The union halls in Puebla and Mexico City were within walking distance to the train stations and were large enough to accommodate hundreds of union representatives who met weekly to discuss rank and file concerns.⁷⁸ During the railway movement of 1958 and 1959, union halls throughout the southeast welcomed Demetrio Vallejo and other dissidents who came into town to organize against charros.⁷⁹ The presence of STFRM union halls in railway neighborhoods made non-workers aware of issues that affected the rank and file and, during mobilizations, made railway neighborhoods sites of collective resistance.

Streets became highly politicized spaces during the railway movement of 1958 and 1959, as workers informed each other, and the general public, about their struggle by transforming streets into stages for political theatre. Protestors burned effigies of charro

⁷⁶ Ira Katznelson, *Marxism and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 151-152. He quotes Friedrich Engels *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Trans. W.O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1968), 273.

⁷⁷ Many former railway workers and their descendents live in Colonia Guerrero. They meet regularly outside of the FNM's principal building. The FNM building is across the street from Buenavista station, which is now defunct.

⁷⁸ Interview Juan Colín, by author, Mexico City, 1999; Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, by author, Puebla, 2004. Colín and Ramírez were STFRM representatives before the 1948 charrazo.

⁷⁹ Demetrio Vallejo, *Las luchas que conmovieron a Mexico*.

union leaders, carried banners outing corrupt politicians, and publicly humiliated scabs by denouncing them as traitors. These acts of political solidarity reminded workers and their families about the joys of belonging to the “comunidad ferrocarrilera”. In the process, workers rearticulated what it meant to belong to the “community,” identifying who to include (strikers) and who to exclude (scabs). The exclusionary aspect of community formation was no less important to forming a sense of unity than acts of solidarity.

The Ferrocarrileras

Strikers and their supporters created moments of political theatre throughout 1958 and 1959. During one strike in 1959, workers marched down the streets of Mexico City singing “La Rielera,” the most famous railway corrido.⁸⁰ Lilia Benetíz Vallejo recalls that workers sung “La Rielera” at union meetings in those heady days. When protestors recited the verses of this famous corrido, they discursively incorporated women who did not work for the industry into the railway community because the figurative wife of a railway worker narrates the song.

The presence of women in workplaces and streets has been excluded by scholarly accounts of the industry. In contrast, folk accounts of railway history—such as “La Rielera” and testimonies--include the wives of workers and rank-and-file women in their portrayal of railway communities. Short pieces of fiction published in the company magazine “Ferronales” and the union paper, as well as interviews with former workers testify to the important role played by women in the everyday life of railway

neighborhoods.⁸¹ The absence of women from railway history reflects a tendency in academic and popular literature focus on rank-and-file train and shop workers, a phenomenon that elides the experiences of office workers and nurses, many of whom were women. Even the National Railway Archive houses little material on female railway workers, to say nothing of workers' wives.⁸²

“La Reilera” concerns the emotional life of a railway wife, as she pines for her husband, who has been gone for a long stretch of time, working on a locomotive. Composed in the late nineteenth century, by a songwriter who held a strong affinity toward the railway and its workers, the song has been sung by generations of workers and their families.⁸³ Like “Maquina 501” and “Heroe de Nacozari,” railway discussed later in the chapter, “La Reilera” communicates a tragic scenario; but unlike the others, “La Reilera” does not involve a train accident or a case of physical injury. Instead the corrido depicts the relationship between railway workers and their wives. The railway wife stays behind, waiting for her man, as the husband labors for the company. Despite her longing, the reilera or ferrocarrilera is no passive, vulnerable type. On the contrary, she asserts herself in the community, as evidenced by the fact that the narrator's voice is that of a ferrocarrilera.

The identity of the narrator is unknown until the first chorus, however. When in the first line the narrator states, “I have a pair of guns / one is for my love / the other is for my rival,” we cannot be faulted for assuming that the narrator is either masculine or

⁸⁰ Interview with Benetiz, by Poniatowska, 1972.

⁸¹ For shorts pieces on *reileras*. see *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 Jan. 1946, 1 Dec. 1946, 1 May 1945, 15 Nov. 1945.

⁸² The few dossiers of FNM rank-and-file women do not correspond to the dates of this study. Francisca Martínez Cabrera's is an exception. She wrote letters in 1950 asserting that she deserved to be treated fairly by the union, explaining that she paid dues. See FNM Personnel dossier, Francisca Martínez Cabrera, San Luis Potosí, Box 16, *CEDIF*.

gender neutral, as is the case with most railway corridors.⁸⁴ When the stanza ends, however, we are confronted with an unknown and curious identity, as the chorus asserts, “Yo soy reilera...”.

“La Rielera”

I have my pair of pistols
To go out and travel
One is for my love
The other is for my rival.

Yo soy rielera.

All of the machinists
Cannot have a woman
Because they work at night
And cannot see them.

When the conductor says
That it’s time to move
I take him his lunch pail
With which he is going to eat.

Yo soy reilero.

In the military trains
I am going to wait for my man [“mi juan”]
So that he gives me the wad
That every fortnight he receives.

Adios boys from Laredo
Gómez Palacios and Torreon
They now go to fool around.

Yo soy rielero.⁸⁵

Apart from revealing the feminine identity of the narrator, the declaration also makes a railway identity available to community members who do not work on the

⁸³ “Yo soy reilero...”, 48.

⁸⁴ Don Margarito, “La Rielera”, in “Yo soy reilero...”, 49.

⁸⁵ Ibid..

rails—in particular, women. The invocation opens a space for women who are associated with railway workers—either as wives, as daughters, sisters or mothers—or who are affected by the industry, such as female employees, to make a claim to railway status. Moreover, the third stanza elaborates women’s engagement with the railway, explaining the pervasive habit of wives and daughters to meet the railway men in their families at work to hand them their lunches.⁸⁶

Given the dearth of official narratives that consider the railway woman, the centrality of women to “La Rielera” is all the more remarkable. As the song suggests, women were regularly present at stations. Those who were not delivering lunch to their fathers and husbands waited for trains or sold goods.⁸⁷ Their presence did not go unnoticed. One worker explains that he would often perform dangerous acts of bravado, such as jumping off trains, hoping to impress women at stations.⁸⁸ Moreover, young, unmarried workers flirted with women who brought their fathers’ lunches, and daughters of railway men often married workers who they met at stations.⁸⁹

“La Rielera” does more, however, than simply include women within railway communities. In addition, it portrays them as active protagonists in the daily lives of railway men. For instance, the fourth stanza explains how they waited for the second week of each month, when workers received their pay, to approach their husbands for their “candy,” or money. The scenario suggests that there was a pact between workers

⁸⁶ Interview with Ernesto Hernández Cordova, in Márquez González and Ruiz Jarquin, *Relatos del Interoceánico* 4, 19

⁸⁷ see photos in Hermanos Mayo Collection, AGN, Mexico City. The photographers known as Hermanos Mayos documented the railway workers on the job as well during mobilizations. Their collection holds photographs of ferrocarrileras and their men.

⁸⁸ Interview with Francisco Mortera, by author, Mexico City, 1999.

⁸⁹ Interview with José Arrellano, by author, Puebla, 2004. Arrellano met his wife, the daughter of his supervisor at the FNM, at the railway camp where they lived. The camp was comprised of tents, yards away from the rails, which he and his cohorts laid and repaired.

and their wives; railway men had financial obligations to fulfill and their wives did not wait passively for their biweekly money. In addition to challenging portrayals of women as passive subjects confined to the home or narratives that ignore railway women altogether, the scenario points to another, perhaps obvious, repercussion of the industry: it affected the intimate relationships between women and men.

More fundamentally, the “reilera” personality indicates that a railway identity for women was available and that folk knowledge played an important part in constructing a space for women in the community. The importance of the identity cannot be understated, for it explains how families could consider themselves to be part of a broader community, spaces where daily activities and collective identities were attached in some way to the railway.

Lilia Benetíz Vallejo considered herself a ferrocarrilera long before her uncle gave her a job with the STFRM in 1959. Like other women, she portrays herself as having been “born into the railway” industry.⁹⁰ Benetíz’s father, brother and uncle labored for various railway companies. Her mother identified as a ferrocarrilera because her husband worked on the rails and she was dependent on the railway industry for her livelihood. Benetíz’s neighbors and friends had fathers and brothers who took pride in being ferrocarrileros.⁹¹ The close, daily association with the railway industry shaped the subjectivity of these women as individuals who participated in a broader community.

Workplace Perils

⁹⁰ Interview with Guadalupe Acosta, by author, Mexico City, July 2004.

⁹¹ Interview with Lilia Benetíz Vallejo, by Elena Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972.

Like the narrator of “La Reilera,” railway wives and daughters knew that men faced precarious work conditions everyday. Parts fell off iron machinery and landed on shop workers’ heads and limbs; brakemen slipped off train cars; firemen and machinists ingested gases produced by burnt oil; and rain made conditions more dangerous and uncomfortable, exposing workers to viruses prevalent in marshy areas. Fatalities were not uncommon.⁹² The weight of a car door, for example, was enough to crush a worker to death. Brakemen rode on top of trains. When they fell off, only fortune determined their fate. And when two trains collided, engineers and conductors, who rode in the front and last cars, died on contact.

No wonder that trainmen such as Juan Colín and Francisco “Pancho” Mortera and shop workers like Geraldo Niño Mendez and José Jorge Ramírez, comprised the most combative lot throughout the industry, playing a leading role in the strikes of 1958 and 1959. Mortera, who worked on board as a ticket collector as well as a fireman, witnessed colleagues fall off trains, losing limbs.⁹³ Jorge Ramírez and Niño Mendez toiled in the rail yards, where they saw co-workers crushed attempting to lift steel rails or lose fingers while hammering.⁹⁴ The extreme danger associated with railway work makes the workplace central to understanding why ferrocarrileros came to think of themselves as a unique group, bonded by their dangerous work experiences and the sense that they all suffered a collective injury at the hands of the company.

⁹² Between 1951-1957 over 10% of the rank and file suffered injuries severe enough to merit inclusion in the official statistics of the Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes. While it is unclear what injuries were included and excluded, it is reasonable to suggest that those injuries that did not require medical attention or result in the loss of work days went uncalculated. Over 40 workers died on the job every year between 1951-1957. *Estadística de Ferrocarriles y Transvías (Sujetos a la ley de vías generales de comunicacion correspondiente al año 1958)*, (Mexico: Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes, 1959), 244-248.

⁹³ Interview with Francisco Mortera, by author, Mexico City, July 1999.

Any understanding of workplace relations must begin with a brief description of the hierarchy that determined workers salaries as well as their responsibilities. The FNM created a labyrinthine system of classification for its rank-and-file employees. The company divided the workforce into five branches. “Peones” (handymen), shop workers, train crews, and communication workers constituted eighty-two percent of the workforce while office workers made up the remainder.⁹⁵ Despite the relative comfort and prestige of office work, the FNM included office workers among the rank-and-file, and they were represented by the STFRM. In order to rise out of the rank-and-file, an employee had to become a “personal de confianza,” or a supervisor. The documents show that it often took many years before an employee could climb the ladder from rank-and-file employee to supervisor.⁹⁶ (And even when a worker was offered a supervisory position, which paid better than any rank-and-file post, an individual might decline the offer because it would require them to withdraw from the STFRM and enforce rules and reprimands on the very colleagues with whom they toiled for years.)⁹⁷ Within each branch, an elaborate hierarchy existed, which was based on seniority and, to a lesser extent, performance.

“Peones” constituted the poorest and least educated workers, residing on the bottom of the hierarchy. These employees felt the presence of the workspace more immediately than others; the railways pervaded all aspects of their lives as well as their families’ because the company literally dictated where they lived.⁹⁸ If the company needed bridges

⁹⁴ Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, by author, May 2004; Interview with Geraldo Niño Mendes, February, 2004.

⁹⁵ Carlos Villafuerte, *Ferrocarriles* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1959), 5.

⁹⁶ FNM Personnel dossier, Eleazar de los Santos García, Matías Romero, Box 4, *CEDIF*. García took became joined management after 31 of service.

⁹⁷ FNM managers asked Narciso Nava, a trenista from Puebla, to be an inspector. He declined out of loyalty to his co-workers and friends. Interview with Narciso Nava, by author, Puebla, April 2004.

⁹⁸ The FNM explained that peones faced daily dangers and gave advice on how they could avoid injuries. see “La seguridad de los peones de via,” *Ferronales*, June 1950.

or tracks repaired at the other end of the country, the peon and his family moved there.⁹⁹ Frequent transfers blurred the line between a peon's work and home life. When they arrived at their new work site, these families assembled their makeshift homes—which were sometimes little more than tents--feet away from the tracks. During better times, a peon family might share with another family a freight car allotted to them by the company. These cars, remembers one former peon, were “like ovens in the summer and freezers in the winter.”¹⁰⁰ By providing living quarters, the company ensured an available labor force and made the worker more dependent on it. Dismissal from work would result in eviction from company housing. Through transfers and company housing, the company controlled a peon worker's time, manipulated their work and social life, and disrupted their family relations. To make matters worse, in many of these locations, there were no schools. In such instances, the children either did not go to school or were sent to live with relatives.¹⁰¹

As a result of the general lack of training, and in many instances lack of schooling, peons earned the lowest wages and had the least control over how they could execute their tasks.¹⁰² While *trenistas* often spent days without a supervisor looking over their shoulder, peons such as Carlos Ramírez took orders from any worker with more seniority and was therefore always under supervision.¹⁰³ Their tasks ranged from revamping rails to guarding warehouses, from fixing bridges in isolated areas to signaling conductors of emergencies. When an extra hand was needed to unload cargo, the peon did the job. All day they toiled outside, confronting the hazards caused by the combination of inclement

⁹⁹ Carlos Villafuerte, *Ferrocarriles*, 15. “Yo soy reilero,” 46.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Juan Colín, Mexico City, May 1999.

¹⁰¹ Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, Puebla, Mexico, February 2004.

¹⁰² article on peons and accidents in *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 Aug, 1 1946,.

weather and heavy machinery. When not doing odd jobs, they repaired tracks, lifting the heavy steel, setting them down with crossbeams.

The case of peones illustrates how the switch in 1948 from combative to compliant union leaders affected rank-and-file members.¹⁰⁴ Peones secured a wage increase in 1945, under the combative leadership of Luiz Gómez Z, who was ousted in the charrazo (1948).¹⁰⁵ The charro leadership that took over the union in 1948 agreed to a collective contract that included provisions that allowed the FNM to transfers peons at will. In doing so, charros poorly represented the most vulnerable members of the union, making clear to peons that they could not count on union leaders to contest these difficult and dangerous working conditions.¹⁰⁶ In 1958 peones joined their union brothers and sisters in the movement for union democracy.

If peons constituted the least appreciated group among the rank-and-file, station agents stood among the most respected of STFRM members. For starters, agents lived in considerably better conditions, as the company allotted a section of the railway station to serve as living quarters for agents and their families.¹⁰⁷ Although the housing was considerably more comfortable than that granted to peons, it was not without its hazards. Families of agents lived on company premises and were therefore vulnerable—if the company found an agent guilty of a grave infraction, he and his family could lose their housing. In addition, family members breathed the fumes of burnt coal released by

¹⁰³ Villafuerte, *Ferrocarriles*, 17.

¹⁰⁴ The political context drew attention to incidents when the company came down on workers, such as one in which a peon was arrested for derailing a train. Since the union was fractured with the charrazo, the peon was accused of sabotage, suggesting officials believed he had political motivations. See AGN, ARC, 661, 513/.

¹⁰⁵ *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 July 1945.

¹⁰⁶ Villafuerte, *Ferrocarriles*, 27.

¹⁰⁷ Lourdes Roca, *Km. C-62: Un nómada del riel* (Mexico: Instituto Mora, 2000).

locomotives, and children had to take care when stepping outside, for trains presented a constant danger.

A blurred line existed for these workers between workplace and home life. How could it be otherwise, when tracks and locomotives served as a playground for their children? The ambiguity between workplace and home life existed for children as well, so it is no wonder that many of them went on to work for the company. The railway came to dominate their lives, so when a child turned working age, it seemed inevitable that he would sign on with the FNM.¹⁰⁸ The daughter of a station agent expresses the process poetically when she explains, “I was born into the railway.”¹⁰⁹ The expectation that boys would follow their father’s footsteps helped the workforce to reproduce itself, as children raised at tracks edge joined the STFRM and the company as soon as they reached the required age of sixteen.

Most workers did not experience the extreme connection between home and work life familiar to peons and station agents. Geraldo Niño Mendez and other shop workers, for instance, tended to live in railway neighborhoods near stations, rarely receiving company housing.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, shop workers shared peons’ frustration with company controls and neglect. Shop workers in the 1940s and 1950s knew that the FNM put a premium on them performing their job efficiently because the company frequently

¹⁰⁸ Such was the case for Juan Broissin Uribe. Born in 1935, he grew up in a station in Chiapas, where his father was Station Chief. When Uribe turned 16, he joined the union, asking to be employed under the supervision of his father. He lived in the station until he married in 1960. FNM Work Sheet, Personnel Dossier, Juan Broissin Uribe, Box 3, Matías Romero, *CEDIF*.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Guadalupe Acosta, Mexico City, July, 2004.

¹¹⁰ Lourdes Roca, *Km. C-62: Un nómada del riel*.

published articles in “Ferronales” that gave shop workers advice on how to increase their productivity by avoiding accidents.¹¹¹

But shop workers did not need to read the company magazine to know of their importance for the smooth functioning of the system, for the very distribution of repair shops made it clear that they were indispensable. The company distributed repair shops at strategic points on rail lines, usually near principal stations. Repair shops existed in Mexico City, San Luis Potosí, Puebla, and Matías Romero. Situated adjacent to stations, these shops concentrated large numbers of workers who repaired and cleaned train cars, machines, and their parts. They included mechanics and carpenters, welders and errand boys. Workers at shops performed strenuous and specialized tasks, but, with the exception of mechanics, the company provided little training, expecting workmen to teach each other. This was a major point of contention for Niño Mendez, who resented the fact that the FNM expected him to learn on the job without proper training. When he gained experience and seniority, FNM managers expected him to teach novices how to place parts onto locomotives and repair machines. Niño Mendez regarded the lack of training as a way for the company to save money, putting the burden of training new workers on the rank and file.¹¹²

On-the-job training bonded workers while making their jobs more difficult. More importantly, the lack of formal training reduced opportunities for promotions, keeping wages low.¹¹³ In addition to inadequate preparation, shop workers complained about their lack of autonomy. Like peones, they had to ask supervisors for permission to carry

¹¹¹ The articles demonstrate that the company was well aware of the myriad dangers faced on the job by their shop employees. A piece that appeared in the July 1950 issue, for instance, warned workers that they may lose their sight if they work without protective glasses and to take care around flammable gases. See, “Eliminemos la peligrosidad al trabajo con oxi-acetilero”, *Revista Ferronales*, July 1950.

out minor tasks associated with their job. Shop workers were even prohibited from talking with bosses. One retired worker explained, "...we couldn't interject in [supervisors'] discussions, because they were older and had a higher rank, we could only talk to [each other]."¹¹⁴ Because workers generally valued self-assertion and independence, associating it with masculinity, their subservience to supervisors was experienced as demeaning and emasculating.

Many shop workers aimed to move up the worker hierarchy and land a job as a "trenista," or trainman. Trenistas were the most independent and best-trained railway workers. It was their job to get trains from station-to-station; pushing their locomotives up mountains and through storms, they moved people and commodities across the country, fascinating onlookers along the way. They received the respect and admiration of fellow workers and the community alike because of the knowledge and training it took to become a train worker. Their independence, along with the fact that they were among the best paid, made their job all the more coveted. When the Fraternity of Trainmen and Boilermakers pushed to break away from the STFRM in 1943, they played up the fact that they were better trained, executed more important tasks, and enjoyed greater esteem than any other rank and file workers.

Popular images reinforced the idea that trenistas were a privileged group among railway workers. Representations of ferrocarrileros focused primarily on those who worked as trainmen or in the workshops.¹¹⁵ The classic red kerchief and blue denim worn by trenistas indicated that they were something other than your common industrial

¹¹² Interview with Geraldo Niño Mendez, by author, Puebla, May 2004.

¹¹³ Interview with Eleazar Tinajero, Mexico City, June 23, 1999.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Rodolfo Sánchez Fera, in "*Yo soy rielero...*", 129.

laborer. The attire indicated that he who wore it belonged to a special group of railway men.¹¹⁶ Trainmen felt invested in their status as the archetypical railway man.

Juan Colín and Niño Mendez nostalgically recall that *trenistas* took pride in their machines in a way no other workers did.¹¹⁷ They felt a deep affection for the locomotives that they steered, cleaned, and cared for. They often named their locomotives, conferring female names to the machines, such as “*negrita*” or “*morenita*.” They expressed control over the locomotives, tailoring parts, such as whistles, to reflect their own particular style. It was common for conductors to jimmy the train’s whistle to make a distinct pitch; when he rolled into town, his friends, children and wife knew his train was pulling in by the sound of his whistle. As a result, the machines themselves conferred a romantic quality to workers’ lives and gave them a sense of control over their labor.

In addition, *trenistas* romanticized their jobs by emphasizing their independence from bosses. They felt a sense of adventure and independence because they spent their entire days traveling on locomotives without supervision. Often no supervisors traveled with them, which solidified their sense of control and independence. *Trenistas* used this opportunity to put on performances of masculine virility, such as jumping on and off of moving cars, to the delight of those waiting at stations. Bosses regularly tried to curb trainmen’s independence by fining them for delays and charging that they drove carelessly. Trainmen resisted by taking the matter up with union representatives, who

¹¹⁵ For an example of how the image of the rank-and-file worker in overalls gets reproduced as the dominant image of the “authentic” railway worker, see John Mraz, *Imágenes ferrocarrileras: una visión Poblana* (Mexico: Secretaría de Cultura, 1991).

¹¹⁶ Interviewees regularly mention the pride and status conferred to those who wore the *trenista* uniform. See interviews in “*Yo soy reilero....*” Geraldo Niño still regrets having not ascended to the rank of *trenista* because he always wanted to wear the uniform. Interview with Geraldo Niño, Puebla, Mexico, May 2004.

contested the fines in labor court. These low-level battles between trainmen and supervisors formed the daily drama of railway life for *trenistas*. Their willingness to fight bosses and assert their independence further contributed to the belief that they were hyper-masculine.

Along with higher wages and the professional status they received, the company also distinguished trainmen by inventing a language for their status. By passing their exams, workers moved from second to first-class status.¹¹⁷ Their new category imbued them with a greater source of pride, but it also conferred more responsibility to individuals because they would now be expected to be part of a small team charged with guiding a locomotive. The company pressured crews to create a welcoming atmosphere for travelers, safeguard containers of merchandise, while working at a dizzying speed. When given demerits for delaying trains, workers resisted as best they could, which typically amounted to taking their case to the arbitration board. Despite the heightened pressure, trainmen embraced the hierarchy because it was the source of their special status in the industry and the community.

The lowest ranking trainman was the fireman, who stood with the engineer in the first locomotive. The fireman assisted the engineer in running the locomotive by adjusting the steam pressure to levels prescribed by the engineer; he did so by placing coal in the boilers to burn.¹¹⁸ This strenuous task required strength and endurance, and often taxed the body to exhaustion, causing many firemen to complain to the company

¹¹⁷ Interview with Juan Colín, by author, Mexico City, 1999; interview with Geraldo Niño Mendez, by author, Puebla, May 2004.

¹¹⁸ *Revista Ferronales*, December 1950,

¹¹⁹ Interview with Daniel Aguilera, July 7, Mexico City, 1999.

doctor of physical ailments.¹²⁰ Despite the hazards firemen encountered, the high wage, status and opportunities for advancement within the train crew hierarchy served as enticements to seek the position and to continue working at it, even after a workers' body might have had enough.

The fireman answered directly to the engineer, who was in charge of running the train, maintaining its speed and brakes. By braking smoothly to avoid overturning cargo, the engineer prevented economic losses for the company. As one worker explains, "the security of the cargo and passengers were entrusted to him."¹²¹ The engineer was known for his smarts and familiarity with equipment. He knew the anatomy of the train and all the tools used on the shop floor to repair it. He used this knowledge to address unexpected problems, repairing train parts en route if needed; sometimes he did so by improvising, constructing a piece that could serve the necessary function.¹²² The ingenuity, craftsmanship, and responsibility entrusted in engineers provided them with a sense of self worth.

Along with status and responsibility came the obligation to perform. The engineer felt the pressure of his supervisors precisely because of his great responsibilities. Efforts to modernize the railway in the 1940s and 1950s placed a great deal of pressure on all workers to increase production, but engineers felt the call for efficiency most profoundly. When a train was late, it was the engineer who risked being accused of purposely causing the delay to earn overtime pay.¹²³ (The charge became politically contentious in the 1950s, as workers put in extra hours because, as one former rank-and-file member recalls,

¹²⁰ "El Medico," *Ferronales*, June 1950.

¹²¹ "Yo soy rielero...", 39.

¹²² *Revista Ferronales*, March, 1957.

¹²³ Ibid.

“the regular salary was not enough to live on.”)¹²⁴ Officials blamed the engineer for tardiness regardless of the myriad causes that may have contributed to the delay, such as the poor performance of trains, unreasonably ambitious schedules, or the incompetence of fellow workers. The company fined engineers if they failed to gather their crew two hours before departure to discuss the day’s timetable.¹²⁵ If a fellow worker was late, the engineer had to bring it to the company’s attention, while suffering a penalty for not gathering his men.¹²⁶

The engineer was not alone in snitching on co-workers. To be sure, the FNM enforced regulations by making all trainmen responsible for alerting supervisors if a fellow *trenista* proved incompetent. The company required trainmen to file a report with foremen when their colleagues failed to follow rules, and workers’ reports were central for assuring the rank-and-file’s adherence to company regulations. The reports had two purposes. First, they served to hold trainmen accountable by encouraging them to inform supervisor about any mistakes made by colleagues, who were often friends. Trainmen policed one another in order to avoid punishments. Second, reports helped prevent injuries by making trainmen more dependent on each other. Time wasted taking care of an injury might result in a penalty for delaying the locomotive; hence, workers took care of one another to avoid fines for tardiness.

By absolving itself of blame for workers’ mishaps, the company redirected conflict horizontally, among workers.¹²⁷ Francisco “Pancho” Mortera emphasizes that workers pointed fingers at each other, filing reports to supervisors, to avoid company

¹²⁴ Interview with Manuel Meneses Domínguez, in “*Yo soy rielero...*,” 145.

¹²⁵ *Revista Ferronales*, March, 1957.

¹²⁶ AGN, ARC, v. 661, 513.1/5.

persecution.¹²⁸ The company's policy of penalizing workers individually belied the collective process of railway labor, and served to divide workers when accidents and delays occurred. When supervisors sought those responsible for laxness, disagreements and accusations between workers often obscured the company's domination over them.

As the head of the train crew, the company charged the conductor with the responsibility of keeping trainmen accountable. He made sure that the brakemen, fireman, and engineer executed tasks, reporting any violations of the men to the foreman, the station chief. The station chief would in turn report to his superiors, who promptly disciplined any employee guilty of an infraction. Punishments ranged from fines for minor offenses, such as tardiness, to jail time for workers charged with causing train accidents.¹²⁹

In addition to managers, the company designated a separate branch of white-collar employees, "inspectores especiales," to assure workers' compliance to rules. Inspectors acted essentially as company spies; they were the management's eyes and ears on the shop floor and in the offices.¹³⁰ They investigated large and small infractions, from

¹²⁷ This process appears to be acute among workers engaged in piece-rate production. See Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent*, 66-67.

¹²⁸ Letter to FNM Superintendent, Feb. 21, 1930, Personnel Dossier, José Pinzon Guevara, Box 2, Puebla-Transportes, *CEDIF*. Guevara petitions the Superintendent to rescind demerits issued against him for causing an accident, charging that the machinist was at fault.

¹²⁹ Dossiers reveal that workers faced the constant threat of dismissal—even if they were often successful in gaining reinstatement. Alberto Basurto was fired three times for delays; Romero Cruz López was fired for causing a train accident, as was Lamberto Caballero López; see FNM Personnel Dossier, Alberto Basurto, Matías Romero, Box 3, *CEDIF*; FNM Personnel Dossier, Romero Cruz López, Matías Romero, Box 3, *CEDIF*; FNM Personnel Dossier, Lamberto Caballero López, Matías Romero, Box 4, *CEDIF*.

¹³⁰ Workers' dossiers provide a rich and detailed view on the police functions performed by inspectors. See, Letter from Inspector to Superintendent, April 13, 1937, FNM Personnel dossier, Pilar Dominguez Juarez, Box 1, Puebla-Transportes, *CEDIF*. In the letter, an inspector explains that an accident was due to Juarez's negligence, not the machinery's allegedly poor state;

large-scale accidents that dented the FNM's finances to petty theft.¹³¹ And charges of theft, no matter how small, could lead to jail time.¹³² Trenistas complained about the presence of inspectors, filing complaints with the STFRM.¹³³ Inspectors and trainmen shared no occupational interests in common with the rank-and-file because they were not bound by the collective contract and did not belong to the STFRM. The fact that they did not fall under the collective contract allowed management to appoint them without consulting the union; this allowed the FNM to pluck union leaders away from the STFRM, luring them with higher wages and greater authority.¹³⁴ Because inspectors made unscheduled rounds, workers knew they had to be on their best behavior at all times or risk fines or dismissal.¹³⁵ The political consequences of the use of inspectors became clear during conflicts between the STFRM and the FNM. In such cases, the union argued that inspectors politicized accidents, charging trainmen with sabotage, revealing the tension that existed between management and the rank-and-file.¹³⁶

¹³¹ For instance, an inspector tracked the actions of Lorenzo Rocha, rank-and-file employee of no renown, writing him up for not paying a vendor for a beer. The document notes that he has been observed stealing in the past. FNM Personnel Dossier, Lorenzo Rocha, Box 2, Puebla-Transportes, *CEDIF*.

¹³² José Campos Gonzalez received two months in jail and a twenty peso fine for stealing a piece of steel worth a little less than three pesos. FNM internal memo, FNM Personnel Dossier, José Campos Gonzalez, Box 3, Matías Romero, *CEDIF*; for the union's position on the injustices of jailing workers for workplace actions, see "Encarcelar a los trabajadores," Nov. 30, 1950, *Unificación Ferroviaria* and "Distinción para Ferrocarrileros," February 28, 1950, *Unificación Ferroviaria*.

¹³³ AGN, MAV, 452, 513/70, President's Room, AGN. This source documents how FNM officials wrote the president, complaining that workers and the union are overstepping their bounds by frustrating the efforts of inspectors.

¹³⁴ FNM Personnel Dossier, Jesús Madrid Chabolla, Puebla-Transportes, Box 1, *CEDIF*. It took Madrid thirty one years to become an inspector.

¹³⁵ Those whose judgement lapsed faced repercussions, even dismissal. Adam Cortes Ceballos, for instance, was fired on Dec. 19, 1950 for stealing after having been investigated by an inspector. It is a testament to the strength of the union that he was reinstated fifteen months later. FNM Work History Sheet April 1963, FNM Personnel Dossier, Adam Cortes Ceballos, Box 4, Matías Romero, *CEDIF*; FNM management records at the state archive of San Luis Potosí reveal how inspectors investigated accidents and had trenistas fired for the offense. See FNM collection, expediente 7-29-L-331, State Archive, San Luis Potosí.

¹³⁶ An informe in 1953 to President Adolfo López Mateos provides a window into the politicization of the inspector position. The informe explains management positions are given on the basis of favoritism and that officials are too highly paid. The informe reflected the STFRM's charge that the FNM was mismanaged. "Calumniadores," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 18 May 1945,

The railway work process and hierarchy resulted in contradictory attitudes among workers. On the one hand, they considered themselves to be manly because of the active character of their work. They flaunted their masculinity by carrying out arduous work and courting women. They constructed spaces to support each other, while their work affirmed their sense of self-worth and pride. But on the other hand, workers were apprehensive about violating rules. They policed each other's behavior to avoid being penalized. Workers increased their pace of production when ordered to, and reported their co-workers' negligence, the very same co-workers with whom they socialized after work in railway neighborhoods. The maintenance of a worker hierarchy, along with the pride workers brought to their job, assisted their compliance with managerial authority and company rules.

Masculine Solidarity

Workers tempered the effects of the hierarchy by constructing an idealized culture of solidarity. The everyday petty squabbles, as well as the profound divisions exposed by the Fraternity of Trainmen in 1943 and the persecution of scabs during the strikes the late 1950s, are evidence that the masculine solidarity remembered by workers was always idealized, covering fissures that divided them. Nevertheless, many workers did create tight bonds based on their workplace experiences. The company's regulations and demands for higher productivity along with dangerous working conditions made workers dependent on each other to get the job done quickly and safely. Spending long hours at

work together, training each other, working in circumscribed spaces, and protecting one another from accidents bonded workers.

Their mutual dependence provided the basis for an idealized feeling of brotherhood, or masculine solidarity, among them. Trainmen especially formed intimate relationships because they spent days together in small spaces, struggling to get the train to the station on schedule. This homosocial space allowed for profound friendships to develop and created the conditions for a whole repertoire of attitudes and habits to form, informed, as they were, by a widespread understanding that a proper railway man exhibited physical attributes associated with masculinity.¹³⁷

Narciso Nava, a former trainmen from Puebla, describes how engineers and firemen developed close friendships because of their interdependence and constant contact. They spent over sixty hours a week together working in a small cubicle. Over time, they formed tight bonds, regarding each other as close friends, often providing comfort and support others may have expected to receive from family members. Their relationship took on added importance because trainmen were often separated from their nuclear family on trips away from home. They often spent six days traveling, only to spend their day off resting, preparing to do it again.¹³⁸ Sometimes they were away for weeks at a time. On the road, coworkers shared company and whatever comfort existed.

The extreme dangers that the engineer and fireman faced were well known. Tar caused both respiratory illness and ulcers.¹³⁹ The small space in which they worked increased the likelihood of ingesting the gases emitted by the tar. Both men had to

¹³⁷ When co-workers fell sick, they raised funds to support medical costs. See, "Agradece," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 March 1948.

¹³⁸ Interview with Manuel Sánchez Terrazas, in "Yo soy rielero...", 89.

¹³⁹ *Revista Médica del Hospital Colonia*, No. 1, tomo 1.

endure “the heat produced by the boiler, as well as the rain, dust, [and] cold”¹⁴⁰ they encountered on trips. The work of the engineer and firemen were such that it led one company official to write, “the position of fireman brings sorrows, . . . he must learn to share with the engineer the bitterness of his work. He must know all the dangers and how to avoid them because one mistake could cost him his life.”¹⁴¹ In short, firemen and engineers formed a brotherly relationship to overcome the hazards of the workplace.

Juan Colín, a former conductor, emphasizes that he and other conductors did their part to foment allegiance among the men in their crews. Not only did the conductor manage his coworkers, he unified “his men,” fostering a feeling of solidarity on the train.¹⁴² The conductor had weighty responsibilities. It was his job to make sure passengers and cargo reached their destination. Lives and cargo were under his supervision and authority. He inspected train cars before departures, listing the type and value of the cargo.¹⁴³ When the train arrived at its destination, he handed his list to the station chief. Colín took pride in this responsibility, conscious that he was indispensable for the transportation of minerals and materials. As the boss and often the eldest member of the train crew, he shared a paternal relationship with his men, watching over and reprimanding them when deserved.¹⁴⁴

The difficulties associated with working on locomotives united conductors with other trainmen. Exhaustion put the conductor and his coworkers in peril of accidents.¹⁴⁵ Demanding station bosses called for conductors to increase speed above proper levels,

¹⁴⁰ “*Yo soy rielero...*,” 40.

¹⁴¹ *Revista ferroviaria*, March, 1957, 26.

¹⁴² Interview with Gregorio Cervantes Cueva, in “*Yo soy rielero*,” 118.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Juan Colín, by author, Mexico City, 1999.

¹⁴⁵ Consider Carlos Bernal Romo, who lost his left hand due to a workplace accident. FNM Personnel Dossier, Carlos Bernal Romo, Matías Romero, Box 3, *CEDIF*.

increasing the chance of an accident.¹⁴⁶ Constant toil often left no time for meals, leading to malnutrition and fatigue.¹⁴⁷ In addition to exhaustion, inclement weather caused poor visibility and made footing on cabooses unsure, causing nasty spills off trains. Relationships were especially strong between trainmen who worked side by side, such as the engineer and fireman, who worked in the locomotive, and the conductor and brakeman, who worked in the caboose.

Brakemen such as Francisco “Pancho” Mortera and conductors shared an intimate relationship. Mortera depended on the conductor to wait for him to finish boarding passengers before departure, perceiving the conductors’ patience as an expression of concern.¹⁴⁸ Brakemen reciprocated by looking out for the conductor, making sure that the engineer did not leave the station without him—a major snafu, to be sure. These actions prevented injury and helped workers execute tasks and sustain productivity levels while forming a sense of dependence, respect, and love for one another.

Brakemen required the conductor’s help because they faced considerable dangers, executing tasks by hanging off the sides of trains and walking on top of cars.¹⁴⁹ If cargo seemed in danger of overturning, they climbed on the train cars and stabilized it. If an oncoming train was getting too close to them in the night, they hovered low to the ground to place a firecracker on the rail.¹⁵⁰ The firecracker would sound when the approaching train crossed it, signaling that there was a locomotive ahead. It was commonplace for brakemen to suffer broken bones from banging into road signals, falling off trains, and

¹⁴⁶ One worker explained this point to a letter he wrote to President Adolfo Ruíz Cortines. See AGN, ARC, v. 661, 513.1/8.

¹⁴⁷ *Revista Medica del Hospital Colonia*, No. 1, tomo 1.; see also, Villafuerte, *Ferrocarriles*, 24.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Francisco Mortera, Mexico City, July 1999.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Cervantes Cuevas, in “*Yo soy rielero...*”, 115.

slipping on train cars wet from rain.¹⁵¹ A lapse of judgement could lead to a brakeman's untimely death.¹⁵² Because of these dangers brakemen relied on conductors to watch out for them. Like engineers and firemen, brakemen and conductors inevitably became friends.

Nevertheless tensions existed as a result of the company hierarchy. As former brakeman Francisco "Pancho" Mortera explained, "Friends are friends and work is work."¹⁵³ Despite their friendship, conductors reported brakemen's incompetence when the need arose.¹⁵⁴ Tensions therefore existed between workers' solidarity and their occupational status. It is quite possible that the situation became even more straining after the charrazo because workers could no longer count on union representatives to defend them.

Mortera explains how each trip—and the welfare of each worker—depended on the smooth functioning of relationships among men. The conductor depended on the fireman to fuel the train without intruding on the conductor's space, while the brakeman was responsible for riding on top of train cars and surveying the land, making sure there were no obstacles on the rails, such as other trains or fallen debris, which might cause an accident. If the brakeman identified a problem, he was to report it to the conductor immediately. Because the irresponsibility of any worker might lead to a train's tardiness or a disastrous calamity, each trainman put his welfare and job in the hands of his colleagues. Workers expected each other to stick together on the rails and before supervisors. However, if a worker failed to carry out his duties without justifiable cause,

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² On the reality of dying while working on a locomotive, see, "Se erigirà un monumento a un hèroe ferrocarrilero," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, February 28, 1950.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

his coworkers disciplined him—either by submitting his name and offense to the supervisor or by confronting him personally.¹⁵⁵ When I asked Mortera how he could snitch on his friend, he sternly responded, “because the bastard who is a bastard is dead!”¹⁵⁶ In short, the pact between men served to designate workers who failed to fulfill their duties as incompetent, even insufficiently masculine.

Songs as Discursive Framework for Community Identity

Long before the strikes of 1958 and 1959 took place, workers had created their own version of reality, their own canon of narratives that served to show the tragic precariousness experience of work and the general disregard of the railway company. Many of these narratives simply told the history of a particular event, such as a series of famous railway strikes that took place in 1920s, and were disseminated to each new generation of railway families through oral tradition or the union paper.¹⁵⁷ Other narratives took the form of songs, poems, cartoons and memoirs.¹⁵⁸ These narratives helped workers create their own version of an authentic railway experience—however incomplete and open to debate the version may have been. Moreover, many of these stories, especially those told in corridos, were popular among the children and spouses of

¹⁵⁴ FNM Personnel dossier, Rosendo Iñigo Olvera, Puebla-Transportes, Box 1, *CEDIF*.

¹⁵⁵ FNM Personnel dossier, Felix Alvarado Hernández, Matías Romero, Box 2, *CEDIF*. Hernández, who sold tickets on a passenger train, explained to his superiors that the conductor was responsible for a delayed train; AGN, ARC, v. 661, 513.1/5.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Francisco Mortera, by author, Mexico City, June 1999.

¹⁵⁷ The 1926-27 strikes made the union paper in 1946 when internal divisions threatened the STFRM. See, *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 May 1946,.; a poem remembering 1926-27 strikes appeared two years later in the same publication. See, *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 31 Jan. 1948, Interview with Carlos Salazar Ramírez, by author, March, 2004. Ramírez learned from family members that his grandfather participated in the 1926-1927 strikes.

¹⁵⁸ The union paper published a cartoon depicting the actions of Jesús García, aptly titled “Historia del Héroe de Narcozari,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 28 February 1950. For a popular railway memoir, see

workers, suggesting that entire families (and, by extension, railway neighborhoods) heard of the dangers of railway work.

Two of the most popular corridos, “El Héroe de Nacozari” and “Maquina 501,” depict the arduous and perilous quality of trainmen’s jobs while vividly suggesting that people in railway neighborhoods witnessed and digested railway work as dangerous. “El Héroe de Nacozari” and “Máquina 501” both tell the tale of a particular worker—the machinist Jesús García Corona—who in 1907 died on the job while saving the town of Nacozari from a train car carrying exploding dynamite. Jesús García may be unknown to most Mexicans, but among railway families he serves as a foundational figure, instructing children and adults alike on the courage and fearlessness that proper railway men ought to exhibit.¹⁵⁹ The songs do more than simply memorialize the death of the selfless worker—they provided the rank-and-file evidence of their dire and precarious situation at work while illustrating their honorable character.

“Máquina 501” opens by personifying a railway car, a rhetorical move that was commonplace in the testimonies and songs of workers. As explained earlier, trainmen made locomotives objects of their affection, feminizing them with gendered nicknames. In this linguistic game, the steel objects became—like women--subjects of workers’ direction. The personification of the locomotive in “Máquina 501” therefore follows a standard script. Shortly after being presented with the physical and imposing force of the trains, as it runs, whistles and crosses terrain, we are introduced to railway workers, who are figured as a battered and injured group; some hold their breath while others cry. The image of a crying railway man belies the manly and stoic character that, according to oral

¹⁵⁹ The union paper published poems about Jesús García that were written by workers alongside an biographical article on the fallen hero. See *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 30 Nov. 1950.

histories, distinguishes the rank-and-file. The surrealism, or foreign-ness, of the image immediately arrests the reader.

The second stanza introduces Jesús García, the noble—almost mythic—personage who has come to symbolize the brave and altruistic character of railway men, and a reminder to railway communities of the dangers faced by the rank and file. García rests at home with his mother on what appears to be a lazy Sunday afternoon, when the frenzied whistling of a coming train alarms him; moments thereafter he learns that a locomotive carrying dynamite rolls down the tracks in flames.¹⁶⁰ As García makes his way to the tracks, the narrator assures the reader that García is a well known and trusted member of the community because the train's fireman addresses García with familiarity: "Jesús, we're jumping off, / because [the train car] behind us / is burning."¹⁶¹ The scene of the burning car reminds us of the hazardous quality of railway work; and though the situation is extreme, railway community members, the principle audience for "Maquina 501," knew that perilous obstacles at work sites were commonplace.¹⁶²

The depictions in "Maquina 501" of Jesús García's that follow are informed by the code of manhood. If enduring danger and sacrificing your body for the sake of a fellow worker demonstrated one's masculinity and earned one's place in a community of trainmen, then García's actions served as a window into trainmen's culture for outsiders

¹⁶⁰ The scenario here represents an extreme case of a locomotive catching fire. But FNM documents substantiate that trainmen put out smaller fires on their trains, and they did so without much fanfare. See FNM Work Sheet, April 1957, Personnel Dossier, Jesús de la Torre Romero, Box 2, Puebla-Transportes, *CEDIF*.

¹⁶¹ Friends and family of Manuel Castellanos might have easily related to this vivid depiction of the potential horrors faced by trainmen. Castellanos burned to death as a result of an on-the-job accident. FNM internal memo, March 1940, Personnel Dossier, Manuel Castellanos, Box 2, Puebla-Transportes, *CEDIF*.

¹⁶² The union claimed that the poor state of rails and defective equipment caused over 70% of accidents between 1938 and 1947. For our purposes, it is unimportant whether these figures are accurate; the statistics are important because they tell us what the union was communicating to its members. Clearly, the union felt compelled to address the issue because accidents took a toll on workers bodies. See *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 31 Dec. 1948.

as well as for rank-and-file neophytes learning the rules of workplace sociability. In responding to the fireman, García demonstrates his manliness in an extraordinary fashion. He declares, “I’ve got different plans / I don’t want to be the cause / of so many people’s deaths.” With these words, García takes responsibility for the impending danger and for the lives of those who reside near the rails. That García would rather sacrifice his life than witness countless deaths or the destruction of houses in his neighborhood becomes clear in the sixth stanza, which matter-of-factly informs us that at “six o’clock his life had ended.” García had mounted the train car and diverted it away from town, vanishing with the consequent explosion. The lack of melodrama in the depiction of his death frames his passing with the modesty appropriate for a stoic hero who expects nothing in return for his sacrifice.

But Jesús García is more than a hero. The penultimate stanza takes a religious turn by suggesting that our hero lives on as a divine being. In this stanza, García becomes sanctified as a martyr who attains a supernatural life. The song maintains, “On this unforgettable day / you have won the cross / you have won the palms / you are a hero, Jesús.” The image of the cross and the palm combined with the name Jesús confers a holy and supernatural aura to the protagonist and his actions. Like Christ, García’s great selflessness was beyond the capacity of regular men. As a result, he is awarded a place in heaven, which is symbolized by the cross and the welcoming palms of Christ himself. And like Christ, he could not escape the daily injustices of this world.

“Maquina 501” is not the most popular song memorializing Jesús García, however. This status belongs to “El Héroe de Nacozari,” the corrido most beloved by railway workers. Unlike “Máquina 501,” which begins with the scene of the weeping railway

man and unfolds slowly, “El Héroe de Nacozari” has the tone of a report, an accurate and objective statement of facts. The first stanza states, “Sirs, I am going to sing about / what happened in Nacozari / on the 7th of November when the [gun]powder boiled.” With this opening, the reader is asked simply to consider the facts that will be presented in the following stanzas. The narrator does not make a case for naming García a hero; rather, the protagonist’s heroic status is assumed, as he is referred to as “Hero Jesús García.” There is no need to make a case for what workers hold to be an irrefutable fact. Instead, the middle stanzas remind us of his uncomplicated courage, depicting a conversation between García and the trainman, in which the hero tersely states, “I will lose my life in order to save many people.” The comment is devoid of melodrama or pithy reflection.

In the speech, García pleads for the understanding of “la Virgen,” who no doubt refers to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the iconic feminine symbol of Mexican Catholicism. García explains that saving the lives of people justifies his actions (“I’d prefer to lose my life / so that I could save my people”). By intimating an afterlife, the conversation with the Virgin prepares us for the last stanza, which describes the hero’s body when found, presumably at the edge of the tracks. You could forgive a worker for thinking about dying on the job while hearing or reading the song, for it ends with a description of the gruesome state in which García’s body was found, as pieces of limbs were discovered torn off his torso.¹⁶³ One could understand how the image of the deformed and mutilated body of a fellow railway man might have jolted workers, inducing emotional pain, fear and horror, as they might very well reflect on their own injuries or might remember a

¹⁶³ Workers’ dossiers reveal that some workers viewed death as a possible consequence of their labor. Ernesto Wright Tinoco, for instance, explained that he had to retire because he feared that he would die on the job. The toll of railway work had ruined his “nerves”, a reference to his deteriorated psychological health. See Ernesto Wright Tinoco, FNM personnel dossier, Puebla-transportes, Box 1, *CEDIF*.

former colleague fallen on the job. One could also imagine how useful these songs might have been for rallying workers during demonstrations, reminding throngs of railway men that the dangers faced on the job justified contesting the company.

The protagonist's tragic fate, in short, serves once again to remind railway workers of the dangers associated with their labor. Sung repeatedly, the song facilitated an internalized sense of wounded-ness, an agreement that a collective scar existed among railway workers. Traces of workers' perceptions of themselves as wounded, violated employees can be found in workers' dossiers, as they submitted testimonies regarding accidents and injuries that they suffered on the job.¹⁶⁴ In these reports, workers detailed in length the injuries from which they suffered due to workplace mishaps; likewise, they wrote company officials to explain that they suffered from work-related illnesses. In these cases, railway workers presented themselves to the company as violated and injured. But if railway men thought themselves to be victims of company abuse and neglect, they were nevertheless active, independent and tough. They might have been the casualties of workplace hazards or suffered from the unjust accusations of supervisors, but they confronted these dangers and indictments with a masculine assertiveness, refusing to go down without a fight.

¹⁶⁴ FNM personnel dossier, Martín Navarrete Huerta, Puebla-Transportes, Box 1, *CEDIF*. Martin suffered from a hernia, chronic bronchitis and poor vision, and considered these ailments to be work related. Despite his failing body, he resisted the FNM's efforts to have him retire. He needed to keep working to provide for his family.

Conclusion

In singing a song or reading a tale of trouble, despair and unity on the rails, workers constructed a collective identity. A central component this identity was a belief that they represented a macho but violated group. Apart from railway corridos, the union paper spread the opinion that workers faced extreme dangers and were unduly penalized. By representing members who were disciplined by the arbitration board, union leaders enabled members to take a combative position, questioning company impositions and asserting their independence on the job. In doing so, the union allowed workers to think of themselves as both violated and combative.

This complicated identity, which allowed workers to feel at once tough and violated by the company, inspired workers to mobilize against charros in 1958. The new, independent leaders, led by Demetrio Vallejo, promised to heal the wound inflicted by supervisors on the daily basis and exacerbated by the lack of transparent union representation. Workers sought higher wages not just as a form of economic compensation but also as a means to rectify the injustices perpetrated upon them by the company and corrupt union officials since the charrazo in 1948.

Because the railway community included women and children, it was commonsensical for wives and children to participate in the railway movement of the 1950s. In 1959, railway dissidents successfully pressured the FNM to provide subsidized housing and free medical care to workers and their families. This victory reflected the importance of the railway industry to families. Wives and children expected the STFRM

to fight for material benefits to improve their standard of living. When charros failed to represent workers, they betrayed families as well. Railway women joined the most militant union movement of the post-Revolutionary era therefore drew on their everyday experiences and identity as ferrocarrileras.

Despite commonly shared neighborhood practices and workplace experiences, not all workers followed the STFRM line. Francisco Mortera's comments on everyday workplace relations show that contingency allowed for disagreements and conflicts. Workers snitched on each other when they feared being reprimanded; and they argued over who was at fault for delays. Likewise, heterosexual workers teased those suspected of homosexuality and those who did not drink felt compelled to join their colleagues in cantinas after work, or face becoming a pariah. In their everyday relations, disagreements and conflicts may have gone under the radar of outside observers but they were very real to the rank-and-file, and remind us of the diversity of experiences that existed among community members. When this diversity of experiences became politicized, fissures among the rank-and-file became exposed. It is precisely these fissures that we will look at more closely in our next chapter on the attempt by the Fraternity of Trainmen and Brotherhood of Boilermakers' to undermine the representational authority of the STFRM.

Chapter 3:

Post-War Modernization and the Imagined Railway Community

Railway neighborhoods and workplaces served as sites for the dramatization of personal disagreements and political divisions. These divisions became manifest in 1943 in a major dispute between union officials and union members. The dispute that took place between 1943 and 1945 pitted *trenistas* (conductors, brakemen, firemen, engineers) and boilermakers, grouped in the Fraternity of Mexican Trainmen and Brotherhood of Boilermakers (FMTBB), against the STFRM. The FMTBB formed a parallel union, calling into question the STFRM's position as the sole arbitrator of workers' concerns.

The battle between the STFRM and the Fraternity constituted a fight over who could best represent the rank and file. The Fraternity accused the STFRM, headed by Secretary General Luis Gómez Z. and Secretary of Organization, Education and Propaganda, Valentín Campa, of charging exorbitant dues. The STFRM in turn denounced the Fraternity for attempting to divide the rank and file. The public accusations made by each side made clear that, although workers created deep bonds, fissures among the rank and file existed, making the "railway community" contingent on workers and the STFRM fomenting a sense of unity. Thus, the battle between the STFRM and the Fraternity revealed that the railway community was no monolith. In order to stabilize the notion of a unified community and to solidify its power, the STFRM used its position as the official, government-recognized union to present itself as the sole representative of the rank and file. Gómez Z. and Campa used the idea of a united, homogenous "railway community" to discipline those who contested the STFRM's representational authority.

Managers at the FNM, especially FNM general manager Margarito Ramírez, encouraged trainmen and boilermakers, who were disgruntled at increased union dues, to break away from the STFRM.¹ Although President Ávila Camacho removed Ramírez from his position as FNM general manager in order to placate STFRM leaders, Ramírez and the FMTBB continued to challenge the STFRM's representational authority. The dissident trainmen and boilermaker movement proved that profound disagreements and conflicts existed among railway workers, as rank-and-file members struggled to define what it meant to belong to the “comunidad ferrocarrilera”.

The STFRM proposed an economic definition of what it meant to belong to the community of railway workers, arguing that all members shared essential class interests, which the union defended. Following this logic, any member or group of members who challenged the representational authority of the STFRM undermined the essential interests of the rank-and-file. Despite the union's best efforts to quell conflict among its members, workers fought over which leaders would best represent their interests.

The Fraternity of Mexican Trainmen and Brotherhood of Boilermakers lost its battle against the STFRM because the union's contract with the FNM stipulated that the STFRM had the exclusive right to represent the rank and file. President Abelardo L. Rodríguez supported the exclusion clause the STFRM-FNM contract in 1934 had included in this provision precisely to prevent divisive rank and file groups from questioning the authority of the STFRM. The clause provided the STFRM a monopoly on representing the rank and file, which had at least two important consequences. First, it gave the union great leverage when negotiating with the FNM

¹ Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 132.

and other railway companies because it could threaten to order a strike or work slowdown if its demands were not met. Second, it discouraged union members from contesting the power of STFRM leaders. Ultimately, the exclusion clause enabled the STFRM to become one of the strongest unions in the country and a major player in national politics, making the union the institutional voice for railway workers.

However, it also helped at times to mask—or silence—workers' discontent.

Throughout the 1940s discord among union members compelled Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa to discipline dissidents by outing them in the company paper and expelling them from the union. Although Gómez Z. and Campa's efforts to banish trainmen who supported ex-FNM general manager Margarito Ramírez against the union proved successful, as the FMTBB became defunct by 1945, Gómez and Campa found themselves overthrown and jailed by 1948.

Between 1943 and 1948, Gómez Z. and Campa led the STFRM struggle against the restructuring of the FNM by President Miguel Ávila Camacho and President Miguel Alemán. Ávila Camacho began an ambitious railway modernization project, which Alemán expanded considerably, to repair the industry's infrastructure (tracks, bridges, stations, equipment) while reducing operating costs. The plan required the STFRM to accept rank and file layoffs as well as concessions on wages. Gómez Z. and Campa refused to go along with the plan for modernizing the industry, arguing that the FNM could pay off its debt and pay for infrastructural improvements by increasing freight rates on business shipments. Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa's resistance to the FNM's railway modernizing plan led to their demise in 1948.

The divisions that surfaced with dissident trainmen and boilermakers in 1943 and the leadership loss of the PRI culminated in the forceful replacement of Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa and their STFRM team in 1948. On October 14, 1948, a

disgruntled faction of railway workers infiltrated the buildings of five union locals as well as the STFRM headquarters in Mexico City, reportedly backed by undercover police personnel as well as an army colonel. Led by Jesús Díaz de León, the faction deposed the existing union administration, replacing them with individuals loyal to the new union leader. The event has since been termed “the charrazo,” after Jesús Díaz de León, who enjoyed dressing as a “charro,” or cowboy.

Once again allegations centered on the STFRM’s misappropriation of union dues. Jesús Díaz de León had in fact been legally elected STFRM secretary general earlier in 1948, but he was quickly discharged because he allowed the federal attorney’s office to audit the union’s books. Díaz de León had hoped to show that the outgoing STFRM administration had stolen union money, but he instead infuriated the rank-and-file, which considered welcoming a federal audit as compromising the STFRM’s autonomy.

Alemán, who had been locked in a struggle with the STFRM leadership about how best to modernize the railways, backed Jesús Díaz de León. The charro refused to be ousted as secretary general, so he and his followers physically occupied the union center in Mexico City. The national government assessed that Díaz de León was more likely to work with President Alemán because the union administrators that the charro deposed had resisted the president’s plans to modernize the rails, which required workers to accept lower wages. Hence, Alemán and the PRI recognized the authority of Díaz de León as the new STFRM secretary general. In acknowledging the new union administration, Alemán granted legitimacy to a group of brazen rebels and their unethical union takeover. Historians have since recognized the episode as a

defining moment in post-revolutionary history because it enabled “the president to establish control over the labor movement.”²

The charrazo was a consequence of the broader disagreements among workers, disagreements that a few years earlier had been the basis for the conflict between trenistas and boilermakers. The charrazo therefore must be understood not simply as a result of political maneuvering by high level politicians but rather as a consequence of a crisis within the “railway community.” Our analysis departs from previous studies of the charrazo, which argue that supporters of the Díaz de León were limited to engineers, a skilled and small group within the union, because charro leaders offered to lower their dues.³ To be sure, engineers supported Díaz de León’s candidacy, but so too did workers with less political clout, such as José Jorge Ramírez, a low-level mechanic in Puebla.

Some workers supported the ouster of Gómez Z. and Campa in 1948 because they held that corruption plagued the STFRM. Ramírez supported the charro because he believed that Díaz de León was going to clean house and do away with union malfeasance. Rank-and-file workers like Ramírez do not figure in studies of the charrazo. Narratives of the event generally take for granted rank and file opposition to Díaz de León, concluding that the charro was imposed by the government and supported by a small group of engineers in the capital. Support of Díaz de León by low-level workers such as Ramírez complicates the notion that the rank and file was simply co-opted—duped, repressed or bought off—by charro leaders.

² Tzvi Medin, *El sexenio Alemanista* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1990), 101.

³ This position on the charrazo follows the logic that the government coopted the labor movement and, through repression, helped create a docile rank-and-file. See, Hobart Spalding, *Organized Labor in Latin America: Historical Case Studies of Urban Workers in Dependent Societies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 136-143.

In Paradox of Revolution, political scientist Kevin J. Middlebrook restates the theory of co-optation that has gained such currency in accounts of the *charrazo*.⁴ He argues that the political conflict between labor and Alemán led the president to initiate “a systematic government campaign to establish political control over major national industrial unions, [which was] key to creating a durable base of labor support for the post-revolutionary regime.”⁵ Middlebrook views the *charrazo* as the turning point in relations between labor and the government as it made clear Alemán’s intention to “control” labor. Since the railway industry was crucial to the country’s economic development, President Alemán needed a passive railway leadership in order to implement his modernization project.

The origins of the *charrazo* lay in the intra-union conflict that occurred five years previously (1943-1945) which exposed important conflicts that existed among the rank and file. This conflict arose from the efforts the Fraternity of Mexican Trainmen and the Brotherhood of Mexican Boilermakers and Helpers efforts to break away from the STFRM. In response, STFRM officials undertook actions to thwart dissident railway workers and reestablish control over the union. In doing so, union officials tried to stabilize the notion of a “railway community.” By presenting a heterogeneous group of workers as united in their support of the union, the STFRM leaders solidified the union’s representational legitimacy and control, which it required in order to contest company impositions.

⁴ See, Hobart Spalding, *Organized Labor in Latin America: historical case studies of workers in dependent societies* (New York: NYU Press, 1977); important studies that view state-labor relations as a practice of cooptation, see Ruth Berins Collier, *The Contradictory Alliance: State-Labor Relations and Regime Change in Mexico* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1992); Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.); Nora Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982).

⁵ Kevin J. Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*.

The rhetoric used by STFRM officials in their battle against dissidents served to construct the notion that there existed a stable, uncontested railway identity. The union did not exclusively use the phrase “railway community” to make this point. More commonly, leaders urged members to express solidarity with one another, principally because they shared economic and occupational interests. It was clearly an effort to control the political allegiances of the rank-and-file. But STFRM leaders could claim their right to direct their members only by first establishing that there was a singular railway community, without legitimate internal divisions. The Fraternity of Mexican Trainmen and the Brotherhood of Mexican Boilermakers and Helpers directly undermined the STFRM’s portrayal of a united railway “brotherhood”.

Until the formation of the STFRM in 1933, skilled workers had belonged to craft guilds based on their specialties. With the birth of the STFRM, specialized workers found themselves grouped with the masses of workers who did not have their occupational expertise and with whom they had not before identified. The Fraternity of Trainmen and Boilermakers enjoyed the allegiance of the most highly-skilled workers--boilermakers, firemen, machinists and conductors from across the country. These were men with specialized training, and therefore had more prestige than their lesser-trained colleagues, who did not have direct control over the operation of locomotives. The fight between these dissidents and the STFRM resulted from their occupational identities: the trainmen perceived themselves as apart from the masses of men who did the menial work, such as fixing rails and machinery. Dissidents wanted to return to a time when they differentiated themselves from other blue-collar workers employed at the FNM. In short, they viewed themselves as part of a separate community of skilled workers, a social network that excluded the unskilled.

Scholars who have treated the dissident trainmen and boilermakers have taken for granted the existence of a monolithic “railway community” and have therefore assessed the movement as a crisis within the union rather than as a crisis of community identity. Kevin Middlebrook and historian Andrea Lynn Spears have written the most thorough accounts of the movement, but they offer exclusively political narratives that focus primarily on the dissident movement’s threat to the institutional legitimacy of the STFRM. The main point of contention between the two interpretations turns on who controlled the dissidents. While Middlebrook argues that ex-FNM management officials, such as Margarito Ramírez, controlled the movement from behind the scenes in the hopes that a split would weaken the union’s bargaining power, Spears insists that rank-and-file dissidents, not company officials, held the reins. Spears reasons that rebel leaders ultimately needed to deliver benefits to the rank-and-file in order to attract members. Although Spears and Middlebrook disagree on who controlled the movement, they both portray the dissidents simply as defectors. In short, they present a political story in the narrowest sense, a tale about factions in competition over representational authority.⁶

This study shifts the emphasis of the historiography by asking what the debates surrounding the dissident movement tell us about the construction of railway workers’ collective identity. I argue that the dissident movement challenged the STFRM’s role as the institutional body that housed and defended a hypothetical, subjective collectivity—the “railway community,” or “la comunidad ferrocarrilera.” Rather than accepting that they all shared the same fate or interests, rank-and-file workers struggled to understand themselves as belonging to a unique community of people who worked on, and in some cases lived near, the rails. The case of the Fraternity of

⁶ Andrea Lyn Spears, “‘When We Saw the Fruits of Our Labor, We Swelled with Pride’:

Mexican Trainmen and the Brotherhood of Mexican Boilermakers and Helpers provides a window into just how difficult the struggle over identity could be. The STFRM emerged as the principle, and most powerful, enforcer of railway workers' identity. Using their legal status as the sole representative of workers' rights, they policed the parameters of what it meant to be a railway worker, as well as what interests workers should fight for. The STFRM defined workers primarily in economic terms, arguing that they needed to band together to defend their common class interests.

Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa

No one voiced this position more vociferously than Gómez Z, the Secretary General of the STFRM, and Valentín Campa, the Secretary of Organization, Education and Propaganda for the STFRM. Gómez Z. and Campa are major figures in the history of the STFRM. Gómez Z. began his career as an office employee and gained popularity among the rank-and-file by using his post as the union's Secretary of Education (1940-1942) to organize poetry readings and theatrical performances; his popularity catapulted him to the union's top position, Secretary General.⁷

Campa, who had been active in railway politics since he became a railway worker in 1921 contested the PRI's modernization plan by making use of his position as union leader.⁸ As Secretary of Organization, Education and Propaganda, he used the union paper to disseminate the views of STFRM leaders on topics that ranged

Community, Work, and Resistance on the National Railways of Mexico, 1940-1946," (Austin: Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas, 1998), 307-359. Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 132-135.

⁷ Spears, "When we saw the Fruits of our labor," 319.

⁸ Campa was expelled from the PCM in 1940 as part of an intra-party political struggle, during which Campa and others were judged guilty of "trotskyism"--deviating from the party line of seeking

from industrialization to alcoholism among the rank-and-file. In editorials and interviews published in “Unificación Ferroviaria” Gómez Z. and Campa insisted that workers should adhere to a cohesive worldview which emphasized that industrial workers were bound by their objective class position.

Campa and other STFRM leaders marginalized workers who rebelled against their views and authority. The STFRM relegated as outsiders those who took the drastic step of joining a competing union, kicking them out of the STFRM, which was tantamount to placing them outside the railway community. STFRM leaders realized what scholars have up until now ignored: factional disputes threatened more than the representational authority of the STFRM; they undermined the notion that rank-and-file members were bound by a collective identity.

The contest to stabilize the notion of railway workers’ solidarity made use of gender ideology, a system of thinking that defined the railways as a primarily masculine space and that designated railway men as the protectors of their female counterparts. Linda M.G. Zerilli has argued that in political debates between male political theorists in eighteenth-century France, women were reduced to signs, or abstractions, over which men argued. In these debates, women were not people with experiences and desires. French thinkers used signs that they considered feminine—such as beauty, chaos, and chastity—to argue political positions. In the process, women were disregarded and feminine signs gained importance. As she puts it, the French philosophers “never got to women; they are too captivated in their struggle with woman”.⁹

reformist measures. On Campa and the PCM purge, see Barry Carr, *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, 60-79

⁹ Linda M.G. Zerilli, *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 14.

Similar debates took place between railway men when they argued about the course that the union should take. In the case of the STFRM against the trainmen and boilermakers, the term “widow” became politically charged, as union leaders used the word and the idea of a passive, weak and husband-less woman to contest the Fraternity. Widows of men who supported the Fraternity of Trainmen found themselves in the middle of a political struggle between men. The case of Marina R. González, widow of Higinio R González, a high level trainman, provides an example of what could happen to the widows of dissidents. Marina González did not qualify to collect her husband’s pension because he had been expelled from the union for joining the Fraternity. Nevertheless, the STFRM decided to give her the pension despite her husband’s act of treason. In this and other cases, the STFRM positioned itself as the protector of widows, who had been put in danger by their husband’s decision to join the dissident movement.

Meetings between STFRM and FNM representatives also reveal that gender ideology structured the debates between union and company officials. Union leaders, company executives, and government officials reduced the experiences of women to a series of abbreviations: “wife,” “widow,” “daughter,” and “nurse.” They invoked these words in order to defend positions regarding a broad range of issues, from restructuring of the rails to company corruption. To be sure, the STFRM presented a detailed critique of company corruption by pointing to how officials used money to entertain their wives and mistresses. The importance that all male actors conferred to these gendered signs confirms the power that they contained. Indeed, the uses made of feminine signs by powerful men to debate the financial and political problems endemic to railways further underscored the patriarchal organization of the industry and demonstrates how the specter of ‘woman’ infiltrated even the high-level private

meetings of executives and representatives. It also serves to show the particular ways in which women played a subordinate role in the railway community. As we will see, women were used as metaphors for corruption. In one case where a FNM official stole from company coffers STFRM leaders implied that he pilfered the funds to impress his wife. Meanwhile, the STFRM portrayed itself as the protector of women by doling out money to widows of dissidents.

Corruption

Confrontations that occurred between the STFRM and Fraternity therefore took place as a struggle over representation. Both groups staked out discursive domains—newspapers, union halls, work sites where pamphlets were distributed—to represent the other as inauthentic in the hopes of convincing members to either turn to or stay on their side. Part of portraying the other as less authentic translated into labeling them as corrupt; the Fraternity claimed that the STFRM charged exorbitant union fees and the union accused the Fraternity of deception and manipulation. Accusations of corruption pervaded the union and company, demonstrating how useful the accusers believed those charges to be in shaping rank-and-file opinion. Finally, each group labeled the other as traitors to the nation, arguing that the exploitation of a nationalized industry like the railways and of Revolutionary veterans—which many railway workers were—proved that the opposition's stance was counterrevolutionary.

Ex-company executives, such as Margarito Ramírez, made up the leadership of the dissident faction, but there was no denying that rank-and-file members constituted its base. Engineers and boilermakers, protagonists in the intra-union conflict, were among the best organized, and they were accorded esteem by colleagues in other

specialties because of their high skill level. Loyalties to their craft and to a decentralized union structure endured beyond the inauguration of the STFRM.¹⁰ Their dissent should therefore be understood as resistance to what they must have viewed as a bureaucratic imposition—the STFRM—that diluted their sense of worth by grouping them with less prestigious occupational specialties. Moreover, STFRM union dues, which were higher than those they previously paid, exacerbated their discontent over the loss of their craft union buildings. Since rebels “constituted more than 10 percent of STFRM membership,” they wielded considerable political clout.¹¹

Competing Views of Railway Modernization

The lack of solidarity among the rank-and-file that surfaced with the founding of the Fraternity of Trainmen's in 1943 threatened to weaken the negotiating power of the union at a time when presidential and company politics began to take an increasingly stronger stance against workers' demands. The pro-business, anti-labor politics of presidents Ávila Camacho and Alemán provided the political and philosophical framework around which these conflicts took place. The ideological shift of presidential administrations left the union particularly vulnerable because its stance on a number of issues drastically diverged from those of Ávila Camacho and Alemán. The presidential administrations valued their relationship to the United States, supported measures to liberalize the economy, and aimed to expand domestic and foreign private investment in order actualize their respective modernization plans.¹²

¹⁰ Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 132

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Stephen Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption* (Delaware: Scholarly Press, 1999).

President Alemán took an especially strong interest in the modernization of the railway industry, investing millions of pesos in its rehabilitation and expansion.¹³ Part of Alemán's plan called for a restructuring of workers' contracts. He demanded that workers take a cut in overtime pay in money, while insisting that they increase productivity. When STFRM leaders complained, Alemán reminded them that workers had to make sacrifices for the country's industrialization.

Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa resisted these very important elements of Alemán's railway restructuring plan. The STFRM argued that railway workers had made sacrifices for the war effort by accepting higher productivity goals without a wage increase. Once the war ended, the rank-and-file expected a boost in pay to allay the rise in the cost of living. As Gómez Z. and Campa held steadfast to their commitment to increase the bargaining power of the union's members, the president simply took advantage of the crisis in the "railway community" and accepted Díaz de León as the new STFRM secretary general.

Competing policies for industrialization served as the backdrop for the intra-union disputes that unfolded throughout the 1940s, beginning with the Fraternity of Mexican Trainmen and Brotherhood of Mexican Boilermakers and Helpers and ending with the *charrazo*. STFRM leaders, such as Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa, insisted that the government needed to promote state-led industrialization. Union leaders opined that modernization required expanded government investment in industrial production and an increased commitment to combat the economic plight of workers and campesinos. They maintained that if the country were to modernize the state would not only have to invest in the railway, mine, and textile industries but it

¹³ For an overview of railway restructuring, see Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes, *El ferrocarril: historia de las comunicaciones y los transportes en México* (Mexico City: SCT, 1988), 133-140.

also needed to guarantee subsistence level wages, expand educational opportunities, and guarantee medical care for all citizens.¹⁴

The STFRM proposal for state-led industrialization conflicted with plans proposed by business leaders and officials in the Ávila Camacho and Alemán administrations. After WWII, PRI governments sought to attract foreign investment in industrial projects, such as the railways. Both Ávila Camacho and Alemán authorized the FNM to buy and rent diesel engines, freight cars, and machinery from American corporations. The stark contrasts in modernization plans between the union and government informed the tensions that arose between the union, company, and state between during this period.

Union officials invoked the existence of a unified railway community in order to persuade company officials to relent in their efforts to reduce the wages of the rank-and-file. The union in effect contested Alemán's railway restructuring program by threatening to mobilize the entire railway community against it.¹⁵ The minutes of the meetings of the Consultants to the Mexican National Railroads (FNM) Administration between 1945 and 1948 serves as a window into the debates between STFRM leaders and FNM and PRI officials.

Founded in 1938, the Consultants of the FNM Administration served as an institutional body in which representatives from the FNM, the STFRM, PRI, and industry discussed and debated the finances and policies of the FNM. These representatives met regularly to discuss the increase in the cost of living, the restructuring of the railway, job-performance expectations for the rank-and-file and

¹⁴ Luis Gómez Z., the Secretary General of the STFRM, and Valentín Campa, the Secretary of Education and Propaganda for the union, both expressed this position in various contexts but especially in the union newspaper, *Unificación Ferroviaria*. See, Valentín Campa, "Quién Obstaculiza," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 March 1946. Gómez Z. frequently voiced this position in private meetings with FNM and PRI officials. Acta no. 16, Jan. 31, 1946, Fondo Consultants of FNM, *CEDIF*.

corruption on the part of the union and company, among other issues. Often the parties approached the topic at hand from radically different points of view, as the STFRM called for socialization of capital and redistribution of wealth while PRI, FNM and industry representatives argued in favor of concessions for businesses.

The minutes give us access to the controversial proposals and complaints put forth by the secretary general of the STFRM at the time, Gómez Z and the General Manager of the FNM, Manuel Palacios. Debates at the meetings often grew heated as it became clear that the STFRM's plan for industrialization—which emphasized the use of native capital with raising wages--contrasted sharply with the views held by representatives from the PRI, FNM, and business sector. Significantly, Manuel Palacios and Ramon Beteta, the representative of the PRI, consistently championed measures aimed to reduce FNM operating costs and increase productivity. These measures conflicted with those expressed by the STFRM, which sought higher wages for its members and less burdensome working conditions.

As the former manager of Alemán's presidential campaign, Ramón Beteta's views were surely taken by everyone at the meetings as the position of the national government. STFRM leaders perceived Beteta's insistence that workers needed to make sacrifices and accept that industrialization required foreign investment as a concession to the business sector. Rather than call for workers to make sacrifices, Gómez Z. responded by threatening to mobilize rank-and-file workers against the president's modernization plan.

As it became increasingly clear in these meetings that the differences between the parties were irreconcilable, Gómez Z.'s legitimacy became more tenuous. In hindsight, it is no wonder then that Alemán did not lament Gómez Z.'s displacement

¹⁵ The minutes remained classified until the early 1990s, when the FNM donated them to the Center of

at the hands of the charro, Díaz de León, in 1948. After the charro and his men took over the STFRM leadership with Alemán's support, the union took a markedly less antagonistic stance toward national economic policy, agreeing that workers needed to make concessions on wages and increase productivity. Although the charro has since been demonized by workers and academics alike, charged of selling out the rank-and-file, he found sympathy and support among many rank-and-file members during his early days as head of the STFRM.

Workers such as José Jorge Ramírez did not have knowledge of the charro's backdoor dealings with PRI officials. They had no way of knowing of how the Alemán administration stood to benefit from the ouster of Gómez Z and Campa. The story of the events that led up to the charrazo makes clear how difficult it was for Gómez Z. and his cohort to persuade thousands of workers to agree to a monolithic notion a "railway community."

The Construction of a Scab

On May 1, 1945, "Unificación Ferroviara" highlighted the disruptive actions of the Fraternity of Mexican Trainmen and the Brotherhood of Mexican Boilermakers and Helpers. The article explained that the group threatened a work slowdown if the company did not agree to a wage increase.¹⁶ According to the plan, they would drive trains at a markedly reduced velocity, delaying passenger service and cargo delivery, which would frustrate business nationwide. The slowdown was a strategy often used by the STFRM and was therefore unexceptional. The dissidents' apparent confrontation with the company was also rather routine, since unions of various

Investigation and Documentation for Railway Studies (CEDIF), the national railway archive.

industries, including the railway industry, periodically protested the increase in the cost of living brought on by peso devaluations in the 1940s. If the action itself was banal, we must ask why it provoked the STFRM into a heated campaign through which it tried to discredit the dissidents.¹⁷

The answer sheds light on the complicated political machinations that took place between union officials, company executives, and political representatives. In this case, dissidents found common cause with company management against other rank-and-file members. The STFRM argued that a former FNM official, Margarito Ramírez, directed the trainmen and boilermakers, suggesting that the dissidents were reactionaries in cahoots with the company. Before Ramírez became associated with the dissidents, STFRM leaders and members already regarded him with contempt for his successful attempts to rewrite workplace rules while he was General Manager of the FNM.

In 1942, Ramírez, as General Manager, “announced a proposal for broad changes in workplace regulations and contract terms.”¹⁸ The proposal did not affect wages or hiring but rather increased managerial control over workers by “[adopting]...new disciplinary procedures that defined infractions more clearly and permitted supervisors to punish workers by suspending or dismissing them.”¹⁹ The measures reduced rank-and-file control over the labor process, a prospect rightly abhorred by STFRM leaders.

With his allied among the Fraternity of Trainmen and Boilermakers, Ramírez threatened to reduce further the power of the rank and file. The Fraternity challenged the authority of the STFRM as well as the notion that all rank-and-file

¹⁶ “Los Minoritarios Sabotean el Servicio Pretendiendo Contratos Gremiales”, *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 May 1945.

¹⁷ *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 June 1 1945.

¹⁸ Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 128.

workers shared a common sense of occupational identity. After his departure from the company in 1943, Ramírez took on the project of creating a railway union to compete with the STFRM.²⁰ From that moment on, the STFRM claimed, the Fraternity and Brotherhood organized to disrupt the STFRM and mislead workers. When dissidents threatened to slowdown work, it demonstrated that the group had become emboldened.

Although the planned slowdown would be the dissidents' most combative act since its inception, the STFRM expressed far greater concern over the Fraternity and the Brotherhood's attempt to negotiate a collective contract on behalf of its members. The gesture constituted a bold affront to the STFRM's representational authority, for the STFRM enjoyed a monopoly on representing company employees. Indeed, the Fraternity Brotherhood's very existence challenged that monopoly. Whereas the public might have interpreted the dissidents' threats as the standard fare of an authentic rank-and-file movement, the STFRM viewed it as the reactionary work of company men.²¹

STFRM leaders claimed that Ramírez and his group aimed to cause confusion among workers and the public generally—their presence made it difficult to know who stood for the rank-and-file, who represented the company, and which union was legitimate.²² The union refused to acknowledge that a significant number of trainmen and boilermakers felt that they held different interests from their rank-and-file colleagues. STFRM leaders could not accept the possibility that the dissident boilermakers, machinists, firemen, and conductors might not identify with STFRM

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Ahora a fortalecer nuestro sindicato," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 Jan. 1946.

²¹ "El sindicato sostiene la inexistencia del Pacto del dieciocho de Junio", *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 June 1945,

²² "A los Miembros de la Fraternidad de Trenistas y Hermandad de Calderos," *Unificación Ferroviaria*. Oct. 16, 1945,

members and might not support the its positions on how to modernize the industry. The union acknowledged that dissidents enjoyed limited grassroots support, but they argued that dissidents were drawn to the group mainly because the Fraternity promised to charge three pesos less in union dues.²³ In effect, the STFRM reduced a complicated disagreement over occupational identity and union legitimacy to a question of money.

STFRM faced the task of how to mobilize its members against the Fraternity. Leaders needed to convince members that dissidents did not really belong to the railway community. The task required a public relations campaign to isolate the dissidents, messages union officials circulated in every issue of the “Unificación Ferroviaria.” Union leaders were firm in their disapproval of the rebels, but they also expressed their concern for their fellow railway men. If all railway men held a common identity based on shared class interests, as the union proposed, then the union had to acknowledge and empathize with the economic suffering of Fraternity members.²⁴

The union employed rhetoric that turned the dissident trainmen into outcasts while claiming that union leaders were sensitive to the economic needs that drove dissidents. The rhetorical strategy had two parts. First, it labeled the dissidents as traitors; second, it insisted that Fraternity leaders manipulated defectors with false promises of increased wages and invented stories about union corruption.

It proved imperative for union leaders and writers to claim that rebels had been manipulated because it gave the union a justification for allowing defectors to return to the STFRM. Yet followers of the Fraternity could not return to the STFRM

²³ “Absoluta falta de seriedad de la Fraternidad de Trenistas,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 May 1945.

²⁴ For a discussion of the railway union’s position on the class interests of railway workers, see “A Los Miembros de la Fraternidad de Trenistas y Hermandad de Calderos,” *Unificación Ferroviaria* 1 Oct. 1945.

without paying a price. However, rebels were expected to show sincere regret for their desertion. In exchange for public declarations of remorse, they were allowed to rejoin the union.²⁵ Union officials delivered tough love: they punished incorrigible rebels but demonstrated to those who remained that the union understood their plight.

The STFRM stood in a strong position to shape the contours of the debate over who belonged in the railway community because, unlike the opposition, it derived its union status from national law. In addition, it had a sophisticated propaganda arm in place in the union newspaper. Soon after May 1945, when the dissidents' actions became more direct and combative, the union began rescinding dissident workers' memberships. The law required all rank-and-file employees to be members of the STFRM; therefore, those dissidents dismissed by the union found themselves fired by the company.²⁶ In addition to canceling their memberships, the union newspaper reported these cases each month in the union paper. The reports functioned as a warning to any member who might have considered joining the Fraternity of Trainmen. Finally, the STFRM reminded trainmen that there were plenty of colleagues who would be replace them and start earning a trainman's salary.²⁷

A report in the 16 July 1945 issue serves as an example of how the union created a discursive space that placed dissidents outside of the railway community, while leaving the door open for their return. The piece announces that eight workers from

²⁵ "En Matzalán regresan los trenistas al Sindicato," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 Feb. 1945.

²⁶ The FNM kept a dossiers on their employees detailing their work histories. The following dossiers record the firing and rehiring of Fraternity of Trainmen members. FNM Personnel Dossier, Jesús E. Hernández, Puebla-Transportes, Box 1, *CEDIF*. Hernández, a machinist, was reinstated in 1946, once it became clear that President Alemán sided with the STFRM; FNM Personnel Dossier, Fernando Morales Ramírez, Puebla-Transportes, Box 1, *CEDIF*. Ramírez was also reinstated. The union paper publicized firings, presumably in an effort to dissuade workers from dissenting. See, "Son destituidos del servicio por renunciar al Sindicato," *UF*, 16 June 1945.

²⁷ There is evidence that when dissidents returned to work they pressured the STFRM to demote workers who had been promoted to trainmen during the conflict. See, FNM Personnel Dossier, Rogelio Ramirez Castillo, Puebla-Transportes, Box 2, *CEDIF*. Rogelio and two others found permanent jobs replacing trainmen who had been fired for joining the Fraternity of Trainmen.; FNM Personnel Dossier, Angel Mercado, Puebla-Transportes, Box 2, *CEDIF*; FNM Personnel Dossier,

Nuevo Laredo will be fired because of their support of the Fraternity, a group that the union calls at turns “divisionists” and “minorities”. After going on to label their participation “desertions”, the writer makes a sudden revelation: the workers are not to blame. Rather, the blame should fall on “the perverse leaders who care only of reaching personal ends. They do not shy from using drastic means, such as fooling less educated workers in the attainment of their own ambitions”.²⁸ The author relies on the assumption held by many officials that its more humble workers lacked the cultural capital to defend themselves.²⁹ This supposition enabled the union to occupy a paternal role by denouncing rebel leaders for manipulating rank-and-file Fraternity members, which provided a ready-made reason for accepting dissidents back into the STFRM fold.

Framing them as gullible marked a shift in how the union discredited the dissidents. The July case differs from actions taken against rebels by the union earlier in the year. For instance, two employees linked with the group had been fired the previous month. However, the publication made no claims that they had been manipulated.³⁰ Whereas earlier the paper presented dissidents as traitors, the STFRM now claimed that dissident leaders took advantage of their member’s naivete, convincing them to act against their own interests.³¹ They patronized dissidents,

Rutelio Torres Castellano, Box 2, *CEDIF*; FNM Personnel Dossier, Rodolfo Archundia de la Concha, Puebla-Transportes, Box 1, *CEDIF*.

²⁸ Se Aplica la Cláusula de Exclusión a seis Renunciantes por Propia Voluntad y Separación del Trabajo,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 July 1945.

²⁹ During the conflict, leaders pointed to dissidents lack of education to explain why they left the STFRM. See, “El paro proyectado y la traicion de los Divisionistas,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 Sept. 1945.

³⁰ “Son Destituidos del Servicio Por Renunciar al Sindicato,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 June 1945.

³¹ There is sparse mention of the Fraternity of Mexican Trainmen and the Brotherhood of Mexican Boilermakers and Helpers in workers’ dossiers. Two cases that exist show involve dissidents who were fired for joining the dissidents but were ultimately reinstated, similarly to those discussed in the *Unificación Ferroviaria*. See, FNM Personnel Dossier, Jesús E. Hernández Jimenez, Puebla-Transportes, Box 1, *CEDIF*; FNM Personnel Dossier, Fernando Morales Ramirez, Puebla-Transportes, Box 1, *CEDIF*.

caricaturing them as unsophisticated and easily persuaded—so gullible, in fact, that they have campaigned against what was best for them.

We should understand the union's claim that Fraternity leaders manipulated their members as an attempt to restabilize the STFRM's imagined railway community. It gave dissidents an opportunity to renounce their affiliation with the rebel fraction. In addition, it provided the union with the justification for allowing remorseful rebels to return, and alerted rank-and-file colleagues that the union had forgiven defectors. Dissidents did not return unscathed, however. In exchange for their reinstatement, the union expected them to renounce their allegiance to the Fraternity of Mexican Trainmen and Brotherhood of Mexican Boilermakers and Helpers.

The STFRM, in turn, published parts of their statements in the union paper, turning what was a private consent to union authority into a public confession available to all railway personnel. It was not enough for workers to resign from the Fraternity of Trainmen; the union required them to publicly perform their regret and shame, to plea for readmission into the railway community.³² Ultimately, the STFRM alone reserved the right to confer, or deny, its forgiveness.

Soon after explaining to their readership that rebels had been manipulated, writers for the union paper began describing defectors as victims. By portraying rebels as victims, and publishing their apologies in the union paper, union leaders did their best to maintain the illusion of a united rank-and-file. If dissidents were victims, they could not be held accountable for their own actions. Their desertion therefore proved to be nothing more than a temporary lapse in judgement. Portraying dissidents as casualties in the battle between the union and disgruntled company managers became an important component of STFRM policy toward the rebels. By placing the

blame on Fraternity leaders, the STFRM encouraged rank-and-file dissidents to rejoin the STFRM. They did so by arguing that maintaining that not only had Margarito Ramírez duped dissidents but that these poor folks were in fact victims.³³

Within a month of the July article, the two unions openly confronted each other in the press. It became clear that the STFRM intended to make good on its promise to “crush” the Fraternity and Brotherhood while still enabling individual rebels to return.³⁴ For the first time, the union bestowed the label ‘victim’ to a group of dissidents that decided to renounce the Fraternity. The announcement turned into a public spectacle. Even those who had not written apologies were singled out, as the paper listed the names, ranks, and specialties of 13 dissidents.³⁵ Clearly, the STFRM chose to make the names of dissidents known because it served to shame them. Even in forgiveness, a price had to be paid. If the dissidents had been victims of a manipulative set of officials, as the union claimed, they were now subjected to a further abuse, the broadcast of their sedition.³⁶

The STFRM concluded that it was not sufficient to make public the names of the shamed dissidents who returned. Once again the union publicized the letters of apology of returning trainmen, essentially giving their readers access to the private thoughts of those who had rebelled. The union published these letters, of course, to discourage any members from abandoning the STFRM for the Fraternity and Brotherhood. But perhaps the union also intended the publication of the confessions to garner sympathy for returning rebels, because in reading the letters rank-and-file

³² The union paper quoted letters written by returning dissidents. See, “Renuncian a la Fraternidad,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 Sept. 1945.

³³ “La honestidad del sindicato en contraste con un litigante minoritario,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 Sept. 1945.

³⁴ The threat had been issued earlier when the union paper assured readers that “all maneuvers on the part of the ‘divisionists’ will be crushed”. See, “Los Minoritarios Sabotean el Servicio Pretendiendo Contratos Gremiales,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 May 1945.

³⁵ “Renuncia a la Fraternidad,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 Sept. 1945.

readers could understand that their colleagues were sincere in their disavowal of the Fraternity. If so, it is possible that union officials empathized with the two dissidents who wrote the company that “we beg you to take note that starting today we wish to become active members once again of the [union], ensuring that we will comply with all that the union demands that the Organization might demand.”³⁷ Whether or not the union wished to gain sympathy for these men, it nevertheless served to shame and designate them as restored traitors.

The struggle over public opinion in the union press demonstrated that the notion of a united railway community, in which workers were bound by common class interests or occupational experiences, had become destabilized. The disciplinary effects of the forced confession affected all railway workers by warning them that attempts to threaten the illusion of a unified railway community would be treated as treason. By challenging the union’s authority the dissidents did not just threaten the STFRM—it undermined the very notion that there existed a homogenous, unified, railway community. In this context, the political need for an essentialized notion of a unified railway community surfaced as paramount.

In order to articulate a notion of a railway community, the union needed to locate a point of commonality that bound the over 80,000 rank-and-file railway workers. Union leaders argued that railway workers were obligated to each other because they all shared essential class interests. The STFRM explained to the workers aligned with the Fraternity, “we issue an urgent call to you to unite, an invitation to join the ranks of your class...in this hour, every worker is a soldier of the worldwide defense of the proletariat against unemployment.”³⁸ The call made clear STFRM leaders defined

³⁶ The STFRM went to lengths to connect dissent with workers’ ignorance and gullibility. See, “Otras víctimas de la engaños ‘Fraternales,’” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 Aug. 1945.

³⁷ “Renuncian a la Fraternidad,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 Sept. 1945,

³⁸ “Los Miembros de la Fraternidad de Trenistas y Hermandad de Calderos,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*,

their union as an organ to defend primarily the economic interests of its members, assuming that their members felt that economic concerns trumped all other issues. Clearly, the actions of the rebels questioned the union's position that material interests united railway workers.

The pressure applied on dissidents by the STFRM functioned precisely because it combined the deprivation of the material—the chance one might get fired—with rhetoric that stigmatized dissidents, placing them on the outside of the railway community. The dissidents' threat acquired more strength as their national presence grew. The STFRM acknowledged sympathizers at work sites in Matias Romero, Puebla, Mexico City, Nuevo Leon, Tierra Blanca, and Veracruz, cities that housed major railway hubs.³⁹ The importance of the Fraternity and Brotherhood's presence in these hubs along with the existence of a group of dissident leaders prepared to attend to the dissidents' concerns created great disquiet for STFRM officials and informed their anxiety over a possible revolt. By September 1945, many rebels fell back in line, but the union continued to use its newspaper to demonstrate to its members the costs of defiance.

The Use of Gender Ideology for Policing “Community”

The diatribes issued by union leaders and writers show that railway gender ideology infused arguments over union legitimacy. In the struggle against dissidents, the STFRM presented the figure of the railway widow to prove that the union effectively protected workers and their families. Alongside a piece on a dissident's confession, the union paper presented the case of Marina R. González, widow of

³⁹ “Absoluta falta de seriedad de la Fraternidad de Trenistas,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 May 1945.

Higinio R González, an assistant to the Superintendent in the industry's Southeast Division.

The article gave Marina González the stage, reproducing her letter for readers. Her statement was short and modest: "The present letter is to acknowledge that...with the...intervention of [the STFRM] a payment was made to be as an indemnity for the death of my husband...."⁴⁰ Below her short letter, the paper informed readers that she had first contacted a representative of the Fraternity, who told the widow that she would have to pay for him to resolve the situation for her. Realizing that he intended to swindle her, she contacted the STFRM, which distributed the payment at no cost. The writer did not need to state what was so clearly implied: her husband died a dissident, and his wife nearly suffered the loss of her indemnity because of it. Fortunately for her, the union took pity and occupied the role of protector that her husband had vacated with his death, allotting the payment. The disbursement of money amounted to a generous gesture on the part of the union because it was under no obligation to indemnify rebels' widows.

Months later, readers learned that the union had similarly come to the aid of another widow. Just as the paper had published Marina González's letter, it also made public Antonia Chávez de Cárdenas's apology. Antonia's Chávez's husband, Marcelino Cárdenas Alcorta, had died on the job in January when his train engine exploded. Antonia Chávez's letter made apparent her desperate situation: "...my husband...was not in the union [but] I found myself needing to resort to contact [his] Section...because of my [economic situation], so that I could get a payment for the

⁴⁰ La Honestidad del Sindicato en Contraste con un Litigante Minoritario," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 Sept. 1945.

funeral costs and for his vacation pay....”⁴¹ The letter ended by thanking the section chief for his “valuable and effective help.”

The paper’s decision to pay attention to widows was a politically motivated departure from past practices. The widow became a politically charged signifier that the union filled with ideological content meant to contest the Fraternity. The publication of letters in the paper brought attention to a regularly ignored group within the community. However, it did so under the terms of the male editors at the paper. These men altered the context in which the widows had expected their letters to be received.

For the women, the letters were private displays of remorse given by them on behalf of their dead husbands. They testify to the women’s political savvy and familiarity with railway patriarchy, as they strategically place themselves as subordinates to their husbands and the union. Nevertheless, they provided a powerful weapon for the STFRM to use against the Fraternity. The letters served as evidence of what could occur to wives when their unionized husbands dissented. In addition, it might have helped cast dissidents as callous or incompetent for failing to take care of their comrades’ widows.

Women used the term “widow” strategically, reminding union leaders that they had an ethical obligation as men to protect widows. They made clear that they were subordinated to both their husbands and the union. If the union failed to deliver payment, it would fail to meet the obligations that the patriarchal system assigned to the union. Given their dire economic situation, embracing patriarchy was simply the best option for widows, and one with which they were no doubt familiar.

⁴¹ “Agradece las Gestiones de Nuestro Sindicato la Viuda de un Trenista,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 May 1946.

The STFRM's position that it alone enjoyed the right to define and defend the railway community was finally confirmed when President Ávila Camacho himself sided with the official union. The government helped deliver the final blow to the Fraternity of Trainmen by acknowledging that the STFRM held exclusive rights to represent railway workers. The president assured the STFRM that the Fraternity would not be allowed to petition on behalf of the rank-and-file.⁴² In doing so, the national government in effect drew the parameters of the railway community—the STFRM and its members were in, while the Fraternity and its members were out. By the end of 1946, the STFRM had defeated the Fraternity and dissidents slowly made their way back to the union throughout the year.⁴³

A Railway Community against Corruption

The contest between the Fraternity of Trainmen and the STFRM took place precisely as the STFRM witnessed its power to influence national politics declining and as workers felt their purchasing power plunge. In such a climate, the union needed to articulate an image of a railway community in solidarity. STFRM leaders expected Presidents Ávila Camacho and Alemán to heavily subsidize national industries and give priority to the economic needs of industrial workers. These expectations differed drastically from the vision shared by the two presidents as they sought to reign in the power of the popular sectors and implement business-friendly reforms. During this time of often-heated debate, the STFRM's ability to speak on behalf of the rank and file proved critical for presenting an image of a unified

⁴² "El Sindicato Refuta a Los Divisionistas," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 Sept. 1945.

⁴³ The union now charging that those still supporting the Fraternity were "gangsters" and "criminals", engaged in acts of sabotage. See, "No deben subsistir grupos organizados de saboteadores en los

industry. In meetings with representatives from the FNM, PRI, and industry, the STFRM found power in asserting its status as the sole arbiter of rank-and-file interest. The problem that most concerned the union regarded the standard of living of railway workers.

The modernization ethos articulated by government and railway officials could not compensate for the fact that real wages dramatically dropped for industrial workers between 1939 and 1946. As economic historian Jeffrey Bortz has shown, “the standard of living for Mexican workers in the industrial sector ...dropped in half in these years.”⁴⁴ The union tracked the decline of their members’ purchasing power closely. In January 1945, the “Unificación Ferroviaria” reported that prices on clothing had risen by seven hundred percent in three years. For example, in 1942 blue jeans sold for two pesos and twenty cents but had gone up to seven pesos; blankets a meter in length were priced at 17 cents in 1942 and now sold for 70 cents.⁴⁵ At the same time, the price of electricity rose sharply. In fact, complaints regarding electricity costs energized popular protest in Torreon, Saltillo, San Luis Potosí, and Durango.⁴⁶

The union responded to the increase in the cost of living by making demands on behalf of its members and the broader public. It was an inclusive strategy that reflected the union’s conviction that problems faced by the railway industry and its workers affected the entire nation. For the rank-and-file, the STFRM sought a wage increase; and for the broader public, it called for fixed prices on food and other necessities, a restructuring of the railway aimed at lowering the price of primary

servicios ferrocarrileros,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 20 December 1945. On the flow of returning workers, see “Vuelven al sindicato,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 Dec. 1945.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey L. Bortz, *Industrial Wages in Mexico City, 1939-1975* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 198.

⁴⁵ “Participemos todos en la batalla contra la Carestía!,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 Jan. 1945.

goods, and a government crackdown on businesses that hoarded merchandise in order to inflate its price.

The FNM responded by focusing on worker incompetence. Workplace inefficiency, it claimed, comprised an important part of the problem. Substandard productivity caused delays, waste, and cost the company overtime pay. Worker inefficiency cost the company money in overtime. The FNM passed the costs on to companies. Companies in turn raised retail prices on goods. This vicious circle explained why workers' standard of living had declined. If railway workers were to produce more efficiently, overtime pay would decrease, allowing businesses, workers, and consumers to benefit from the savings in the long run.⁴⁷

These discussions exposed the fundamental ideological disagreements between union and company officials. The union argued that the problems of the railway industry, such as worker inefficiency and FNM debt, were interrelated and that they must be addressed within the context of a plan for national development and modernization.⁴⁸ It argued that the government needed to take an active role in workplace relations by mandating wage increases to compensate for the rise in the cost of living. In addition, it maintained that discussions regarding rank-and-file productivity needed to acknowledge that the poor state of the rails and equipment diminished workers' ability to produce efficiently.

The FNM vs. Gómez Z.

⁴⁶ "El encarecimiento de la energía eléctrica choca con la repulsa Popular," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 Oct. 1945.

⁴⁷ "Mensaje del Gerente General: la seguridad—tarea administrativa," Sept. 15, 1946, *Ferronales*.

⁴⁸ Gómez Z. and the STFRM insisted on the need for railway machine parts to be made in Mexico in order to reduce costs and facilitate industrialization. Articles in the union paper stressed this point, but

Throughout Gómez Z.'s tenure as Secretary General of the STFRM, the company blamed workers for company deficits—arguing that they were inefficient and highly paid. Gómez Z. used his time at the meetings with company officials to counter the FNM's critique of rank-and-file inefficiency by voicing his outrage at corruption among railway management and the PRI. Gómez Z. argued for the railway to exist for the benefit of the poor masses, not to facilitate the growth of capital and private profits.

Gómez Z. (and other labor leaders) insisted that political cronyism at the executive levels of the FNM exacerbated the burdens placed on the railway to subsidize Mexican industry. The PRI used the FNM to subsidize agriculture and industrial sectors by charging low rates that did not even cover transport costs, much less earn a profit. If the FNM was to be used to subsidize industry, then the company should be run as a state enterprise, exempt from abiding by the logic of profit maximization.⁴⁹

This became the de facto “official” position of the union between the tenure of Gómez Z. and the charrazo. Representatives argued that railway workers could become more efficient but only if the government provided the necessary funding for new tracks, modern machinery, and more employees to help get the job done.⁵⁰ The FNM needed to get its house in order by promoting ethical executives with knowledge of the railway industry. The STFRM had grown tired of negotiating with FNM officials who received their positions as perks for backing the PRI. These

Gómez Z. also insisted on native industrialization during the meetings of the Consultants to the FNM, see Aug. 26, 1946, Junta Extraordinaria, *CEDIF*.

⁴⁹ Luis Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa articulated this position on the pages of *Unificación Ferroviaria* throughout the year, and, as we will see below, Gómez pushed this policy at the Consultants Meeting of the FNM. See an interview with Gómez Z. published in the union paper, “Opina el sindicato sobre los problemas del transporte, entrevista con los compañeros Gómez Z. y Valentín Campa,” Feb 16, 1946, *Unificación Ferroviaria*.

⁵⁰ Acta # 16, Jan. 16, 1946, *CEDIF*.

politically motivated appointees had little or no background in the business. The STFRM wanted a complete makeover for the FNM.

Gender Ideology and the Restructuring of Railway Industry

The debates between STFRM, FNM, PRI and industrial leaders at the Consultants Meetings of the FNM reveal that railway ideology infused and structured discursive contests between them. During these meetings, representatives used the figure of woman to defame their opponents. The common strategy was for representatives to show that their opponents had mixed business with pleasure to the detriment of FNM finances. Officials took advantage of their positions and company resources to court mistresses or take wives on trips. In each case, the feminine figure served to signal a contamination in the industry, as they marked acts of corruption and deceit. Officials mentioned women exclusively to indict opponents of corruption. Comments regarding company abuses provide a window into the political uses and power accorded to the figure of woman and the impact that railway ideology had for hammering out the financial decisions of the industry.

Gómez Z. and STFRM members in particular deployed the image of woman to demonstrate that white-collar consultants hired by the FNM were corrupt outsiders damaging the industry. In one case, the company had sent two consultants to the U.S. to purchase railway cars.⁵¹ The STFRM in the past condemned the company's use of outside personnel to conduct company business. Gómez Z. suggested that consultants did not understand railway gender relations because they did not belong to the FNM or STFRM. If they were railway men, they would have known that it was improper

⁵¹ Ibid.

for them to take their wives with them on the trip abroad.⁵² Gómez Z. framed the trip as nothing more than a vacation, financed by the company. The STFRM leader lamented, “workers observe this, and imagine what the *compañeros* say when they are denied something just and they see this frivolous waste.”⁵³ Clearly, workers would interpret the presence of women on official business as a sign of the FNM’s disregard for the rules and general corruption.

The response of the executives demonstrates how seriously they regarded allegations that company representatives might have allowed women to intrude on what was properly a male space. The executives insisted that the men traveled without their wives. Outraged, they invited the union representative to call the wives to ask them if they had gone on the trip. Manuel Palacios, the FNM General Manager, feared that the concocted story of spousal accompaniment served to sully the reputation of the men and of the company in ways that other allegations could not. There was no denying that shady deals had been committed in the past, or that executives received large bonuses. Mismanagement was a problem to which Palacios conceded.⁵⁴ However, these constituted acts of acceptable corruption because they were committed by and for men.

The allegation concerning the wives served to emasculate the officials and show that they were outsiders, unaware that true railway men did not bring women into their professional space. The figure of the wife should be read as a sign that derived its power to discredit the representatives precisely because women were considered politically marginal and outside of decision-making relationships. Gómez Z. and the rank-and-file introduced the sign of ‘woman’ because it marked the form of

⁵² Acta # 16, Jan. 16, 1946, *CEDIF*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

corruption as unfamiliar, peculiar even. Furthermore, the lack of authenticity of the feminine figure further underscored for the union that the officials lacked the credentials to represent the railway industry. Their outsider status became exaggerated once it became clear that they were ignorant of railway gender relations. Unlike proper railway men, they allowed the interference of wives in their work.

Women had been used before, Manuel Palacios explained, to tarnish his reputation for political purposes. Earlier that year he had a car radio delivered to his house, for which he intended to pay out of pocket. However, when the radio arrived, his wife made the mistake of not paying for it, and it was later charged to the company as a result of his wife's mishap. Rumors circulated at work sites that he had "[used] company money to buy a radio for one of his 'girlfriends.'" He considered these rumors as the work of irresponsible slackers with political motivations, condemning them as products of "a constant, nebulous attack," fueled by "drunken fits."⁵⁵ In this example, workers and Palacios use the feminine symbol for different causes. For workers, it signals Palacios corruption; and for Palacios, it points to the workers lack of discipline, as they spend their time inebriated and gossiping (like women) when they should be working.

In both cases, representatives of the union and the company emptied the term 'wife' of empirical value. The real, breathing women did not matter. The officials removed the actual women represented by the word from discussions and transformed 'wife' into a politically charged abstraction. In the context, "wife" and "girlfriend" marked a contagion within the industry, a sign whose power resided because of feminine properties, its outsider quality. When rank-and-file workers used the image

⁵⁴ Ibid. Beteta admitted as much when he stated, "if [company executives] do wrong, if there are wasteful, poor decisions, address them properly, but not as a reason to give [employees] a [raise] that the company cannot afford..."

⁵⁵ Ibid.

of the girlfriend to mock and scorn Palacios, it had much the same effect as when Gómez Z. shamed the consultants for having taken their wives on a business trip. In both cases, representatives linked women with corruption. The feminine figure was appropriate because women were perceived to belong outside the industry, just as the consultants were outsiders. Although women worked for the railway, employees regarded it as primarily a male occupation. At the executive levels of the company and union, it went beyond perception, as no women held executive decision-making powers. Indeed, no women attended the Consultants Meetings.

Fighting for the Future

Gómez Z.'s allegations of impropriety among railway officials followed the union's broader plan of shaping the direction of the country's political economy. The STFRM used the opportunity opened by the end of the war to propose a state-led development plan. In a provocative interview published in the union paper, Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa explained that the railways could be repaired and made efficient in six months if the government were to implement a "large-scale program to...reconstruct locomotives and heavy machinery [used at] the workshops."⁵⁶ According to the STFRM's plan, the government would redirect the "four hundred million dollars accumulated during the war, which [are used to buy] cars, nylon pantyhose, and other luxury goods...[and] invest that money in large textile and metallurgy industries, in machinery, materials and tools."⁵⁷ These industries would be nationalized, ending the country's dependence on foreign investment in vital sectors, such as electricity.

STFRM officials argued that private investors had profited greatly from the war and insisted that the profits should be reinvested in Mexico rather than allowed to gain interest in banks. The union interpreted the end of the war as an opportunity to redistribute the nation's wealth. Gómez Z. and Campa envisioned the PRI setting up tariffs on foreign commodities and using government monies for investing in industry. The PRI would commit to producing railway machinery, such as freight cars and diesel engines, which the FNM bought and rented from American corporations. The STFRM's plan promised to create good paying jobs for the working class, while freeing the country of its dependence on foreign investment and consumption goods.

FNM leadership regarded the end of the war as an opportunity to trim the costs incurred by the company during the war. They wanted to restructure the industry in order to increase efficiency and lower operating costs. Overtime pay quickly became a contentious issue over which the company and STFRM debated. During the war, the company needed workers to put in overtime hours because a large number of Mexicans traveled north to the U.S. on train to find work as braceros. The bracero program raised the number of passengers on FNM railways considerably.⁵⁶ With the war over, the FNM no longer needed the rank and file to work as many overtime hours. Workers would be negatively affected by a decrease in overtime pay. They maintained that FNM wages were so low that they needed overtime pay in order to make ends meet. These workers expected the union to defend overtime pay as a social and industry need. However, the STFRM refused to budge on the issue of overtime pay during Consultants Meetings of the FNM.

⁵⁶ "Opina el sindicato sobre los problemas del transporte: entrevista con los compañeros Gómez Z. Y Campa, , *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 Feb. 1946.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ The STFRM condemned the treatment of braceros by U.S. employers, adding to the list of complaints that it had against the people they called "yanquis". See, "Bàrbara explotaciòn de braceros mexicanos en país vecino," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 Jan. 1946.

By 1947, the struggle came to a head. In February's Consultants Meeting, Manuel Palacios, the General Manager of the FNM, explained that the company paid 32 million pesos in overtime pay. Ramón Beteta, the PRI's representative at the meetings, also expressed his dismay at the excessive reliance on overtime work. He took advantage of the opportunity to declare that "...the railways should be administered like a commercial company, one that has obligations to meet and contracts to respect."⁵⁹

When Beteta went on to declare that the FNM should be run by "...a decentralized administration which the government helps, but nothing more,"⁶⁰ it became clear that the PRI did not share the STFRM's view that the government ought to heavily subsidize industry, including the FNM. The meeting did not mark a sudden shift in policy but was rather part of a longer process in which the company, government and union officials debated which course the industry should take, whether it should be run as a non-profit arm of the government or as a private company. Both STFRM leaders and company executives viewed the reduction of overtime pay as part of the logic of privatization. While company officials favored the reduction as a necessary cost-reducing measure, the union complained that it disregarded the economic distress felt by workers.⁶¹

The specter of a unified railway community, prepared to defend its class interests, loomed during sessions of the Consultants Meetings of the FNM. Although only high-ranking politicians were privy to the discussions at the meetings, the rank and file made their presence known through Gómez Z.'s often-heated comments.

⁵⁹ Acta no. 22, Feb. 6, 1947, *CEDIF*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Railway workers joined other working-class groups to protest the standard of living, see "La batalla contra la carestía de la vida," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 June 1946; in Jalapa, railway, hotel, restaurant, factory, and electrical workers threatened to strike in opposition to their lack of purchasing power. See, "Movilización contra la carestía el 7 de Junio," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 May 1946.

Executives understood that they had to proceed “with caution in order to avoid [rank-and-file] agitation”.⁶² To be sure, Palacios and Beteta, knew that a proposal to cut overtime hours could lead to mass discontent. Workers already were frustrated at the decrease in their standard of living. With the end of the war, they expected their incomes and purchasing power to rise and instead found that they continued to endure financial hardship.⁶³

In order to appease the rank-and-file and avoid protests, Palacios and Beteta couched their proposal in the language of paternal capitalism. They put aside, for the moment, concerns about productivity and argued that revisions in the collective contract were necessary because excessive overtime work risked the health of employees. Palacios spoke eloquently, insisting that “an employee who works an excessive amount of hours is a person that naturally will not live long...in no way should extra hours [at work] cost one their life...and in no way should they be payment for to [prevent] workplace conflict.”⁶⁴ In order to show that he knew that workers’ health concerns went beyond the issue of overtime, he added that the company also needed to repair rails. Poorly maintained rails, the union had long insisted, were the cause of many accidents. Palacios’s recognition of the problem was no doubt an attempt to temper the discord that the overtime proposal might cause. In short, executives employed the language of paternal capitalism to convey to workers that the company cared for their health and well being..

Gómez Z., enlisted with the duty of protecting his members, defended the attack on the rank-and-file’s overtime hours, concerned that members’ standard of living would further deteriorate as a result. Despite Palacios’ best efforts to sell the

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ STFRM representatives made clear that their members expected recompense for their role in the war effort. See, Junta Ordinaria de los representates de Consultantes de la FNM, May 6, 1946, *CEDIF*.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

proposal, Gómez Z. interpreted the policy as a radical departure from worker-employee relations, and, as such, a threat to the union-company bargaining process. If implemented, it could threaten the union's role as protector of rank-and-file interests. Members' discontent was pervasive, and they expected the union to be more, not less, combative. Despite the fissures that existed among members, many workers supported the language of protest, encouraged, as they were, by their union, which portrayed its members as victims of a poor economy and unjust demands imposed by the company.⁶⁵ Gómez Z. and other union leaders geared up for a fight, and they did so in the name of a collective community—the ferrocarrileros—however imagined and imposed.

Gómez Z. hunkered down and fought the company's decision to reduce costs by cutting overtime hours. His diatribes reflected the union's perception that workers had been taken advantage of for far too long, as they worked with poor machinery, atop outdated rails, and suffered unjust reprimands by company officials. He reminded the executives that during the war the FNM needed workers to put in overtime because the company hauled triple the cargo that it did before the war.⁶⁶ Workers exhausted themselves in order to deliver goods, which consisted of primary materials shipped to the U.S. to be used for the war effort.⁶⁷

The image of a unified railway community enabled Gómez Z. to threaten company officials that efforts to reduce overtime hours would lead workers to protest. He subtly implied that discontent had grown so pervasive that workers might choose to resist the company's new policy. He insisted that workers had the right to decide whether to put in overtime hours, implying that if the company cut overtime, the rank-

⁶⁵ "Las tarifas ferrocarrilera y la carestía de la vida," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 16 Jan. 1947.

⁶⁶ Citalli Esparza González, *Comentarios sobre la historia del Contrato Colectivo de Trabajo de los FNM*, in *Memoria del tercer encuentro de investigadores del Ferrocarril* (Puebla: Museo Nacional de los Ferrocarriles Mexicanos, 1999), 15.

and-file could simply decide not to work any extra hours. The rhetorical move was subtle but meaningful, because it reminded company executives of the rank-and-file's ability to affect production. FNM General Manager Manuel Palacios immediately grasped the insinuation, threatening to leave the room and cut the meeting short. Gómez Z. upped the ante: if Palacios left the meeting, the union would order workers to stay on the job for only their scheduled hours for three consecutive days. He reasoned that the action would make company officials realize that without overtime work the system would come to a halt.⁶⁸ In short, Gómez Z. threatened a worker slowdown, a drastic measure that railway workers sparingly used in their fights against the company. FNM executives must have expected the union to take a hard position against the reduction of overtime work, and Gómez Z. did not disappoint.

The Philosophy of Modernization

The struggle concerning overtime hours comprised a part of the debate about post-war modernization and the restructuring of the railway. It was a contest that pitted the rights of railway workers against President Alemán's plan for the country and the railway industry, specifically. The minutes of the Consultants Meetings of the FNM reveal that the STFRM and FNM conflicted in their understanding of the priorities of the railway industry and their view on who should benefit from the railway. The FNM argued that the railways should efficiently facilitate commerce and needed to cut costs now that the war had ended. The STFRM maintained that the railways and railway workers were a national resource and should be regarded as a social good.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

These philosophical disagreements led to intense arguments, during which leaders came unhinged, particularly when wage issues surfaced. In hindsight, the minutes open a window to the debates between the union and company during a critical time in the country's history. They show that the independent, leftist leaders of the STFRM became marginalized because they were unwilling to go along with the modernization plans of the Alemán administration, which focused on curbing the power of workers in order to increase productivity standards.⁶⁹

Specifically, the meeting with Palacios marked the beginning of the struggle between the union and company regarding overtime work, a struggle that would last until 1948, when police arrested Gómez Z and others in his STFRM administration. As the issue gained momentum, the parties' positions became more fixed, and room for negotiation diminished. The company's plan picked up steam at the June 1947 meeting of the Council Meeting of the FNM. At the meeting, Palacios called attention to the wages earned by office workers, detailing the costs assumed by the company for their salaries. He singled out office workers in particular, a group within the STFRM that had been pushing for a wage increase throughout the year.⁷⁰

The company suggested that office workers earned high wages and that they banded together and cheated on their pay sheets in order to increase overtime work—decreasing FNM earnings.⁷¹ Palacios cited the amount the company spent on overtime pay for office workers, underscoring the relative privilege of *oficinistas*. He

⁶⁸ “Las tarifas ferrocarrilera y la carestía de la vida,” Jan. 16, 1947, *Unificación Ferroviaria*.

⁶⁹ According to one study, Alemán had reason to be concerned about productivity since had fallen between 1944 and 1948. However, the same study concludes that the decline in productivity was due to the combination of poor rails and heavily loaded trains, which resulted in reduced speeds for trains. See, Sandra Kuntz Ficker and Paolo Riguzzi, “El triunfo de la política sobre la técnica: ferrocarriles, estado, y economía en el México Revolucionario, 1910-1950,” in *Ferrocarriles y vida económica en México (1850-1950): del surgimiento tardío al decaimiento precoz*, Sandra Kuntz Ficker and Paolo Riguzzi, eds., 309- 325.

⁷⁰ “Refutación a una circular de la comisión eventual de Oficinistas,” *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 1 July 1947.

⁷¹ Junta extraordinaria de Consultantes a FNM, June 1947, *CEDIF*.

explained that the FNM spent \$393,895.45 (peso) on overtime pay for office workers; employees averaged \$509.64 (peso) in overtime pay per month.⁷² In later meetings, Palacios continued to portray oficinistas as a privileged group, reminding union representatives that office employees earned more than some government workers.⁷³ The collective contract exacerbated the problem because it set no clear structure for assigning overtime work among office workers, as it did for other specialties, where overtime was assigned according to seniority.⁷⁴ The lack of structure opened the possibility that employees might assign overtime hours to friends and those in their favor, rather than according to seniority. The FNM representative at the Consultants Meeting warned that the public would turn against office workers if they continued their insubordination. He explained that the public will “believe that the union will try to block any efforts at reorganizing [the industry],” and will oppose the union because the “Ferrocarriles finds itself in an incalculably disastrous situation.”⁷⁵

The events that followed the FNM’s threat indicate why it was critical for the STFRM to count on the image of a “railway community,” which portrayed workers as loyal to one another. The strength of the union was predicated upon the loyalty of its members. It was precisely at moments like these, when the STFRM leaders found themselves denounced by outsiders for defending workers that the union had to claim that workers stood together in solidarity. Whatever fissures existed had to remain silenced.

Unlike the situation in 1945 when the trainmen and boilermakers exposed a weakness in the organizational strength of the union, the STFRM by this time rendered the opposition ineffective and garnered what appeared to be unquestioned

⁷² Acta # 25, June 6, 1947. *CEDIF*.

⁷³ Acta # 26, June 27, 1947. *CEDIF*.

⁷⁴ Acta # 25, June 6, 1947. *CEDIF*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

support among the rank-and-file, even among trainmen.⁷⁶ Gómez Z. struck back at Palacios attack on office workers by assuring company officials that workers would shut down the railways for four days if the union instructed members to stop working overtime.⁷⁷

With the Fraternity of Trainmen marginalized, Gómez Z. knew that he could count on the support of the trainmen, the most important group of railway workers during a strike because they drove the locomotives. Although workers from across specialties promised to support office employees' efforts to better their standard of living, trainmen proudly occupied the role of vanguard. They took advantage of the status they enjoyed to organize rallies and speak in defense of their colleagues.⁷⁸

During negotiations, Gómez Z. once again employed the notion that class interests bound workers, creating a united community of working-class comrades. He framed trainmen's support of oficinistas as evidence that they shared common economic interests. Trainmen shared office workers' concerns regarding cuts in overtime and feared the pay reductions that would follow as a result. Efforts to adjust or drastically decrease overtime would be met with resistance. At the Consultants Meetings, the STFRM General Manager warned FNM representatives not to anger trainmen, "Your plan attacks train personnel. [They] have security instructions based on the rules of the Railway...and if it is put into action, which would be lawful, it is evident that the system [would be] paralyzed."⁷⁹ In this way, he gave legal justification for a potential work slowdown. Gomez Z. spoke honestly, for it was well known that even though trainmen broke speed regulations and worked past their

⁷⁶ Despite the STFRM's best efforts, a number dissidents remained loyal to the Fraternity of Trainmen, even as it became clear that they stood no chance of gaining official union status. See, "Adecuada respuesta a los traidores," Feb.1 1947, *Unificación Ferroviaria* .

⁷⁷ Acta # 25, June 6, 1947, *CEDIF*.

⁷⁸ Feb. 1, 1947, *Unificación Ferroviaria*.

⁷⁹ Junta Extraordinaria de Consejo de Administración, June 6, 1947, *CEDIF*.

scheduled hours, delays were pervasive and productivity goals were not met.⁸⁰

Adherence to the letter of work regulations would wreak havoc on distribution.

As the STFRM's intransigence grew, public opinion turned less sympathetic toward the union. To be sure, company and industry representatives at the Consultants Meetings felt confident that they had the backing of public opinion. "We find that there is a very marked, palpable public satisfaction," one executive remarked, "with the plan developed by the company."⁸¹ Union officials agreed that workers were viewed negatively by the reading public, but they argued that it was so because the media and company willfully blamed trainmen for accidents and delays that were the result of a poorly managed and under-financed industry. For all of its efforts, the union was losing the struggle in the papers over how problems with the industry were portrayed. The union's loss of public sympathy reinforced the company's opinion that the STFRM had gone too far.

The Charrazo, October 1948

The debates over restructuring the railways revealed differences between company and union leaders as well as among workers themselves. Ideological conflicts between the STFRM and company officials reflected philosophical differences between President Alemán and his advisers and STFRM leaders, who presented themselves as radical leftists. The dispute between dissident trainmen, boilermakers and the STFRM exposed the disagreements among railway workers, differences that may have been silenced in 1947 but did not go away. To be sure, there existed those among the rank-and-file who questioned the STFRM leadership's

⁸⁰ Ibid.

integrity. These fissures created by a minority of workers provided an opening for rival union officials to contest the power of Gómez Z. and Campa's radical leadership. It provided an opportunity exploited by Jesús Díaz de Leon, a former rank-and-file worker who sided with the politics and economic project of President Alemán.

Díaz de Leon was elected as the Secretary General of the STFRM in 1948, only to be ousted for having allowed federal officials to audit the union's books to discern if outgoing leaders, principally Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa, had pilfered STFRM funds. Some STFRM members perceived the invitation to government scrutiny as highly unusual and in direct conflict with the union's history of autonomy, which was a source of pride for both the rank-and file and union bureaucrats. Because members cherished the independence of their union, those who opposed the charro perceived Díaz de Leon's request of government oversight as inappropriate, if not a sign of outright corruption.⁸² When the STFRM's oversight committee concluded that he had overstepped his bounds and voted to discharge him from his newly-acquired position as union head, it became clear that the charro had miscalculated in going after Gómez Z.⁸³ Díaz de Leon, however, refused to back down, and on October 13, 1948 he infiltrated union headquarters in Mexico City with the help of 600 sympathizers and the city police. Since the event, the group that supported the charro—the October 14 Group—has become infamous. The charrazo had such a profound impact on labor history that corrupt union politicians continue to be referred to as charros, regardless of the industry they represent

Much of the literature on the charrazo, as well as testimonies by former workers, portrays Díaz de León as a traitor and the charrazo as an act against union

⁸¹ Acta #20, August 1946, CEDIF.

democracy.⁸⁴ They point to the forcible takeover of union headquarters on October 14 as the moment in which Díaz de León became a public figure, ignoring his victory in the national union election. In this narrative, the charro's take over symbolizes the descent of the union into an albatross of corruption that lasted for decades. This narrative profoundly shapes historical memory among former workers. If workers were to acknowledge that they supported Díaz de León in the election or, worse, in his attacks on Gómez Z. and Campa, they might be considered responsible, in part, for the union's subsequent downfall.

Despite what folk histories of the charrazo claim, however, a diversity of opinion existed at the time. The evidence is scarce because workers' dossiers and company records did not record workers' political opinions regarding the charro. Oral testimonies, which are key for reconstructing the intimate lives of workers and their families, prove problematic when it comes to researching the charrazo. Since historical memory has constructed the charro as a political crony, compliant to the PRI, it is difficult to find former workers who attest to having supported Díaz de León. Nevertheless, some workers acknowledge that they support Díaz de León. Newspapers and union papers, as well as interviews conducted with two former workers and political activists, reveal that at least some workers supported the charro

⁸² Medin, *El sexenio Alemanista*, 99.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ This holds true for former workers interviewed by the author as well as those interviewed for public collections. See the testimonies of Enrique Ochoa, Jesús Rangel, and Rafael García Venegas in Lourdes Roca, *Km. C-62: un nómada del riel* (Mexico: Conaculta, 2000), 120 – 128; Interview by author with Juan Colin, Mexico City, 1999; Interview by author with Carlos Ramírez, Puebla, Puebla, 2004; Interview by author with Geraldo Niño Mendez, Puebla, 2004. The testimony of José María Escamilla stands as an exception to this pattern. He fully supported Díaz de León. Escamilla had been a rank-and-file worker at the time of the charrazo but joined the ranks of management after the strikes of 1959. Among former workers who I interviewed, he is considered to be a “company man”, or a charro, which helps explain why he does not condemn Díaz de León and the charrazo. Interview with José Escamilla by author, Puebla, June 2004. Escamilla's views can be found in a text published by the Mexican National Railway Museum. Emma Yanes Rizo, *Testimonios: José María López Escamilla “Don Chema,”* (Puebla: Mexican National Railway Museum, 2004).

because they believed he stood against corruption.⁸⁵ The charrazo itself was therefore not a cause of divisions among railway worker but rather a symptom of these divisions.⁸⁶

José Jorge Ramírez, a former shop worker who enjoys a reputation among retired railway men in Puebla as an independent leftist activist, attests that he and others supported Jesús Díaz de León when the charro ran for secretary general of the STFRM. Ramírez approved when the charro took over STFRM headquarters in October 1948. As a well-known critic of union corruption who is respected by his peers as an uncompromising activist, Ramírez does not fit the typical characterizations of Díaz de León supporters—he is not, nor has he ever been, a company man. Workers who later accepted managerial positions with the company may openly tell of having supported Díaz de León’s rise to power, but it is rare for a rank-and-file member to do so, especially one who has attained the status of a democratic representative.⁸⁷

Ramírez explains that he and the several hundred members who assisted Díaz de León applauded his efforts to get to the bottom of union corruption. They believed the charro acted in good faith when he allowed federal authorities to inspect the STFRM’s books and investigate whether Gómez Z. had enabled officials to misappropriate members’ funds. Ramírez and other supporters believed that by ousting Gómez Z. and Campa, the charro aimed to bring a measure democracy to the union. When questioned whether he supported Díaz de León, Ramirez responded,

⁸⁵ See, “Juntas secretas de dirigentes de Trabajadores,” *Excelsior*, 16 October 1948.

⁸⁶ The article cites a worker who argues that “those who assaulted [asaltaron] the locals are not authentic railway workers”. The interviewee opposed Díaz de León. However, the article claims that the “majority of workers in the Federal District [Mexico City] continue to support Díaz de León. Clearly, divisions were pronounced.

⁸⁷ Interview by author, José López Escamilla, Puebla, June 2004..

somewhat embarrassed given the consensus now that the charro sold out the STFRM, “all of us did, because Díaz de Leon convinced us, all of us.”⁸⁸

There seemed to have been little reason for Jorge Ramírez and his cohort to question Díaz de Leon’s integrity. A close look at the charro’s work history gives no indication that he would be a corrupt official. His company dossier reveals an ambitious blue-collar worker who had trained to upgrade his job skills without joining the white-collar sector of the company.⁸⁹ Although by the 1940s he enjoyed the prestige and better pay that came with being a workshop electrician, he reached that position by moving up the ranks slowly, without any noticeable indiscretions, such as bribes. When he joined the company in 1920, he was hired as an assistant to the workshop mechanic, a job that required few skills. Rank-and-file workers would have recognized the problems that he endured getting promoted, because eight years after joining the STFRM he still had not risen beyond the modest station of workshop packer.

More important, in 1928 he was fired for having “abandoned service” during the celebrated strikes of 1927-1928. His participation in those strikes still haunted him in 1937, when he petitioned the company to trace his seniority rights back to 1920, arguing that he was wrongly dismissed in 1928.⁹⁰ Hence, when the charro accused Gómez Z. and Campa of misappropriating union funds, there was simply nothing in his Díaz de León’s record that would have indicated that he did so out of compliance with the company.

Even so, Jorge Ramírez’s assertion that all workers supported Díaz de Leon during the October 14 movement is clearly a misrepresentation, a rhetorical move

⁸⁸ Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, by author, Puebla, Feb. 26, 2004.

⁸⁹ Employees were divided into white-collar and blue-collar branches. Office workers, trainmen, workshop employees, and nurses were designated as “blue collar” and as such were members of the union.

designed to shield himself from the indignity of joining the “wrong side.”⁹¹ Given the stakes, it is understandable that Ramírez forgot that many railway workers mobilized against the charro from the day he occupied STFRM offices with the support of the police. Protests raged throughout the country in response to Díaz de León’s raid on STFRM headquarters on 14 October 1948.⁹² By presenting a divided occupational group as a cohesive force, Ramírez simply keeps to the standard script so often invoked by workers and union leaders.

Conclusion

Ramírez and his colleagues found that they had become key protagonists in the post-war debate over the role of railway restructuring for the country’s economic development. The debates took place on discursive fields that provided varying degrees of access. On the street and at worksites, the rank-and-file mounted protests and staged slowdowns, demonstrating that there existed a diversity of opinion among railway workers, as evidenced by the Fraternity of Trainmen and the Brotherhood of Mexican Boilermakers and Helpers’ rejection of the STFRM. This ideological conflict between railway personnel became muted and contained when it penetrated more exclusive sites, such as the “Unificación Ferroviaria” and the private Consultants of the FNM Meetings. Union leaders used their control over the union newspaper, as well as their representative role at the meetings, to mask disagreements and project a

⁹⁰ Personnel Dossier, Jesús Díaz de León, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*.

⁹¹ Those who opposed Jesús Díaz de León took out a full page ad in *Excelsiôr* denouncing his infiltration of union headquarters, making their dissent public. See, “Sindicato de Trabajadores Ferrocarrileros de la República Mexicana: ¡ Protestamos contra un brutal Atentado!,” October 15, 1948, *Excelsiôr*; “Lio Ferrocarrilero,” *Excelsiôr*, 18 October 1948; “Cada momento se complica mas la pugna intergremial en los F.F.C.C.,” *Excelsiôr*, 19 October 1948.

⁹² Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, p. 141. The author notes that “twenty-four of the thirty-six local STFRM sections throughout the country protested his forcible takeover of union offices.”

united “railway community.” Workers who threatened this necessary abstraction were ousted from the union and transformed into outsiders, or scabs.

The construction of a hegemonic railway identity proved critical at meetings with company executives and government officials. It allowed STFRM leaders to make demands on behalf of a supposedly cohesive workforce, and, when these demands were challenged, it enabled them to issue warnings of potential work stoppages or strikes. These threats were not simply imaginary, for the discursive formation of a railway community was produced in conjunction with the grassroots, as the rank-and-file mobilized for salary increases for office workers and against the social costs enacted by pervasive inflation. However, those who opposed these mobilizations, or, more generally, the STFRM’s legitimacy, challenged the terms of the hegemonic railway identity, putting them at risk of expulsion. Josè Ramirez’s efforts to cover these fissures—years after the fact--further demonstrate the seductive, disciplinary power of the “comunidad ferrocarrilera.”

The charrazo led rank and file workers across the country to strike in 1958. Between 1948 and 1958, charro officials were perceived by workers to have sold out to the PRI and FNM in return for their union posts. Dissident railway workers were fired and arrested in 1954 when they circumvented charro authority and staged slowdowns. The 1958 railway movement successfully circumvented charro leaders by visiting workshops and stations clandestinely. Dissidents promised to fight for higher wages, which charros had refused to do. By August 1958, railway rebels had obtained higher wages for the rank and file and overthrew charro officials. Despite the overwhelming support of the independent union, divisions continued to exist among railway workers. We now turn to the story of how ordinary railway workers

suppressed these divisions in order to organize a mass movement against charros, FNM officials, and PRI modernization policies.

Chapter 4:

Democratic Opening: the 1958 Grassroots Revolt against Railway Charrismo

Charrista politics radicalized rank-and-file workers, giving birth to a militant railway movement that took over the streets of the capital as well as other large and small cities with railway communities. Workers and their families came out en masse in 1958, enabling their demands to break through official narratives of progress and modernization. Pictures of them protesting made the papers, and their insights on the failure of the national economy grabbed the attention of readers. Mobilized masses belied the picture of national economic stability and prosperity put forth by the ruling party.

The railway movement should be viewed as a large-scale grassroots campaign to democratize the politics of the STFRM, which had become a puppet organization of the PRI. This thesis rejects the view that maintains that the strikes occurred “spontaneously” after years of “labor peace.”¹ On the contrary, dissident rank-and-file activists clandestinely organized colleagues from November 1957 through the early months of 1958, tapping into grassroots dissatisfaction with charro representatives. The incompetence and corruption of STFRM leaders was reflected in their refusal to demand a wage increase during negotiations for the collective contract in 1957. As a result, railway activists understood that the economic—a wage increase—depended on the

¹ On labor peace, see Viviane Brachet-Marquez, *The Dynamics of Domination: State, Class, and Social Reform in Mexico, 1910-1990* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994), 107. Antonio Alonso’s work, the most authoritative monograph on the strikes to date, frames the movement as “spontaneous struggles.” See, Antonio Alonso, *El movimiento ferrocarrilero en México, 1958-1959* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1972), 99.

political—charros control of the STFRM. In view of the STFRM's unwillingness to fight for economic concessions, railway dissidents organized a fight for democratic unionism.

If charros expected union members to stand by apathetically while wages remained stagnant, they had miscalculated; the rank-and-file complained that their wages had dropped, the cost of living had increased dramatically, and they demanded that their union defend their material interests. The complaints issued by railway workers contrast with the rosy depiction of this time period as Mexico's "Golden Age," the period from the onset of Miguel Alemán's push for privatization in 1946 to the student protests of 1968. Economic growth was not as steady and economic distribution was not as even as scholars who have trumpeted the period as "golden" have assumed. Moreover, the rosy depiction of those days presumes that the PRI ruled without any significant grassroots challenge to its dominance until the infamous "massacre" of student protestors in 1968.² Events were hardly as static as this portrayal of the period assumes, for in the particular case under study, railway workers suffered the effects of post-war inflation, witnessing their purchasing power decrease throughout the nineteen-fifties, as the STFRM leaders stood watch.

In November 1957, dissident unionists in Mexico City organized behind the backs of charro officials and requested that Ricardo Velásquez Vázquez, the STFRM secretary general, demand that the FNM increase the wages of the rank-and-file.³ The request never got off the ground because Velásquez Vázquez declined to present the request to Roberto Amorós, the FNM General Manager. Díaz de León, the original charro, may no

² For a critical treatment of the "Golden Age" periodization, see Joseph, Rubenstein, and Zolov, *Fragments of a Golden Age*, 3–19; a classic text on the student movement is Elena Poniatowska, *La noche de Tlatelolco* (Mexico City: Biblioteca ERA, 1972).

longer have been the STFRM's leader, but the collaborationist posture vis-a- vis- the FNM that he established continued. The request nevertheless amounted to a bold political gesture because it challenged the autonomy of the STFRM leaders, who dissidents maintained collaborated with the FNM. The activists' action pressured charros to make their political sympathies public: either charros supported the rank-and-file by demanding a pay-hike or they backed the company.

STFRM and FNM officials did not know that organizers carefully calculated the political implications of circumventing charro leaders. Dissidents planned their rejection of charros, and the demand for a higher wage, to coincide with the presidential campaign of Adolfo López Mateos. For the next several months, dissident railway workers rallied their base around a proposal for a wage increase. They visited work sites, conducted clandestine meetings, and made contacts with other industrial union members, preparing to take advantage of the political opening presented by the national election.⁴

Meanwhile, PRI candidate López Mateos also toured the country, visiting railway yards and city centers, courting the industrial working class by presenting himself as defender of the Revolution. López Mateos, who was serving as the Secretary of Labor for President Ruíz Cortines, planned to ride a populist campaign message all the way to the Presidential Palace. His campaign speeches indicate that he was well aware that working class citizens blamed their economic hardship on increased cost of living

³ Organizers did not indicate what percentage increase they wanted. See Alonso, *El movimiento ferrocarrilero*, 110; Max Ortega, *Estado y movimiento ferrocarrilero, 1958-1959* (Ediciones Quinto Sol, 1988), 27.

⁴ Gill, *Los Ferrocarrileros*; Campa, *Mi Testimonio: experiencias de un Comunista Mexicano* (Mexico City: Ediciones de Cultura Popular, 1977).

brought on by the devaluation of the peso in 1954.⁵ He assured them that the PRI remained revolutionary, determined to attend to the needs of “pueblo.”

Railway workers found inspiration instead in Demetrio Vallejo Martínez, a rank-and-file worker from the state of Oaxaca. Amid the clandestine meetings, in May 1958 Vallejo emerged as the voice of the rank-and-file dissidents in Torreon (Local 27) and Matías Romero, Oaxaca (Local 13).⁶ In 1958, workers in Matías Romero continued the struggle initiated by activists in Mexico in November 1957. Led by Vallejo, the rank-and-file in Torreón and Matías Romero decided to demand a \$350 peso a month increase per worker to offset the decline in real wages that they experienced throughout the 1940s and 1950s. From May until late June, the activists hurried to organize workers in locals throughout the country in anticipation of a possible strike.⁷

When Velásquez Vázquez’s term expired, he was replaced by Samuel Ortega as secretary general of the STFRM. Ortega quickly joined FNM general manager Amorós in publicly condemning workers’ requests for a wage increase. The FNM and STFRM officials deployed three arguments for denying the wage increase petition. First, they argued that the company operated at a loss and could therefore not afford raising wages. Second, they maintained that railway workers constituted a privileged sector of the working class, pointing to FNM expenditures on a new company hospital and sporting facilities as evidence of benefits enjoyed by the rank-and-file. Finally, they insisted that the railways constituted a national resource and that workers ought to consider the needs

⁵ “Los trabajadores ferrocarrileros lucieron sus clásicas prendas ante el candidato López Mateos,” *Revista Ferronales*, May 1958.

⁶ Local 13 grouped workers from the eastern city of Veracruz to Matías Romero in the west. Alonso, *El movimiento ferrocarrilero*; Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*; Gil, *Los ferrocarrileros*; These books cite Vallejo, *Las luchas*, as their primary source of information. Vallejo’s account of the movement is the richest source for understanding the railway movement.

⁷ Ibid.

of the country over their personal wants. In response to the company's and the union's intractable positions, railway workers went on strike in June. This was to become the first of two summer strikes.

During the summer of 1958, railway workers took to the streets and practiced democracy in action. They took over buildings and avenues, unmasking the pervasive discontent with the STFRM and PRI's politics as usual. In the process, they found support among thousands of other workers and citizens whose standard of living had plummeted due to post-war inflation. Teachers, oil and telegraph workers as well as electricians conducted their own protest actions and expressed their solidarity with railway families by joining picket lines.⁸ Students, too, mobilized on behalf of the ferrocarrileros, their participation memorialized in some of the most poignant images of those days.⁹ In short, the railway movement spearheaded a general urban insurgency as railway workers fought to democratize their union.

By August, railway dissidents proved unwilling to settle for the wage increase they won as a result of the June strike. When President Adolfo Ruíz Cortines intervened in the strike and granted workers a wage increase of \$215 pesos a month per worker, he must have assumed that the railways would go on functioning without further disturbances. The June victory instead emboldened the railway rank-and-file to demand an independent union. They shut down the rails again, demanding that Vallejo be

⁸ See, "Los granaderos: obreros del crimen," *Siempre!* 19 Sept. 1958.; "Ordenada manifestación de ferrocarrileros bajo la mirada de soldados y policías," *Excelsiór*, 20 July 1958; For a history of the teacher's movement during this time, see, Aurora Loyo Brambila, *El movimiento magisterial de 1958 en México* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1979). Alonso chronicles the participation of teachers, as well as oil and telegraph workers, in 1958. See Alonso, *El movimiento ferrocarrilero*, 99-110; for a short, general commentary on how these mobilizations intersected with those of the railway workers, see, Ernesto González Camacho, *Las luchas, ferrocarrileras, 1956-1959* (Mexico City: SEP, 1986), 12.

⁹ Comprehensive visual documentation is housed at the Archivo General de la Nación. See, Hermanos Mayo Collection, Fototeca, AGN.

recognized as the secretary general of the STFRM. When the smoke cleared, Vallejo was elected in overwhelming fashion, as democratic unionism returned to the railway industry. This was an important victory for Mexican democracy: when rank-and-file railway workers took back their union and demanded that politicians live up to the promises of the Revolution.

The Dark Side of the Golden Age

World War II had brought unprecedented economic growth to Mexico. President Alemán instituted pro-business policies that encouraged foreign investment, manufacturing and export agriculture. Despite the growing optimism about economic prosperity, the benefits of Alemán's policies were not distributed among all Mexicans. There were dark clouds on the horizon for working people.

Wide-eyed supporters of Alemán's conservative political philosophy failed to understand how shady business practices further alienated the working class and provided labor organizers ammunition to use against the government and its business allies.¹⁰ Big business as well as small entrepreneurs engaged in acts of hoarding, as "machines, spare parts, and primary materials accumulated in importers' warehouses," waiting for scarcity of these products to set in. The consequent rise in prices led to a windfall in profits.¹¹ The inflation that followed reduced real wages, which hit the working class particularly hard. The criticisms and gloomy prognostications expressed by Gómez Z. and Campa at

¹⁰ For an favorable treatment of Alemán's industrialization program, see Timothy King, *Mexico: Industrialization and Trade Policies since 1940*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 22. The author notes that "the war years were years of the fastest economic growth Mexico had yet experienced."

the beginning of Alemán's tenure now proved prescient, for campesinos and working class folks had not received any noticeable benefits from these policies.¹² Labor leaders were public and vocal about protesting the increased cost of living, but complaints by poor people came from regions throughout the country as well.¹³

The Mexican economy suffered a severe blow when the Korean War ended. Alemán's development scheme was in jeopardy. Economist Clark Reynolds has argued that the end of the war negatively affected profits in the agricultural sector, as Mexico principally exported primary goods. The U.S. simply reduced its consumption of Mexican goods and thus contributed significantly to the contraction of economic growth in Mexico.¹⁴ The U.S. recession during the early Eisenhower administration further diminished Mexican exports north, though it is unclear exactly to what extent the recession affected Mexico's overall economy.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it was clear that the export boom was over.

The country's urban population dramatically grew between end of the war and the 1958 mobilizations; it rose eighty percent between 1940 and 1950, followed by an

¹¹ Olga Pellicer de Brody and Esteban L Mancilla, *Historia de la Revolucion Mexicana, 1952-1960* (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico,) 117.

¹² Readers should recall our long discussion of STFRM leaders Luis Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa in Chapter 2. After months of public criticizing Alemán's pro-business industrialization policies, the labor leaders charged of misappropriating union funds and arrested. The events known as the charrazo soon followed.

¹³ MAV, v. 451, 513/10, Presidents Gallery, AGN; *Unificación Ferroviaria*, July 1950.

¹⁴ Clark W Reynolds, *The Mexican Economy: Twentieth-Century Growth and Structure* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 109.

¹⁵ Adolfo Ruiz Cortines discussed the impact of the U.S. recession in length in 1958. See, "Letter from President Eisenhower to President Ruíz Cortines," Mexico City, July 17, 1958, in *Foreign Relations, 1958-1960*. The U.S. embassy informed Washington that the "only industry directly hurt by the U.S. recession seems to be lead, zinc, copper mining and secondary effects o the economy on the whole appear to be not very great. See "Airgram from the Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State," Mexico City, May 21, 1958, in *Foreign Relations, 1958-1960*.

additional sixty-three percent growth between 1950 and 1960.¹⁶ Although studies have not yet asked how population growth in this period affected available housing, we do know that railway workers complained about the lack of affordable housing during this period, explaining that the poorest among them fashioned houses out of discarded material.¹⁷ In short, population growth during this period seems to have contributed to a decline in available affordable housing, making life more costly for working class residents.¹⁸

Finally, real wages also markedly declined between 1939 and 1968, leading to greater disparity between the working class and the affluent. Jeffrey Bortz and Marcos Aguila explain that “real wages fell sharply in 1939, reached a low point in 1946, remained exceedingly low until 1952, and did not recover their 1939 level until 1968.”¹⁹ Clark adds that the bottom twenty percent of the population was worse off economically in 1957 than they were in 1950, while the top twenty percent during this period were better off during this period.²⁰ Rank-and-file workers at the FNM were justified in complaining that their wages had fallen, for they saw their earnings decline by almost forty percent.²¹

Shortly after President Ruíz Cortines (1952-1958) succeeded Alemán, the new administration changed course in response to the bleak economic outlook. The Ruíz

¹⁶ Centro de Estudios Económicos y Demográficos, *Dinámica de la población de México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2 ed, 1981), 126.

¹⁷ The complaint was issued by Luis Gómez Z. during a Consultants Meeting. Interview with José Arellano, by author, Puebla, March 2004.

¹⁸ “El problema de vivienda,” *Excelsiôr*, 1958. The report states that approximately 366,000 housing units are needed due to increased population in the capital. In Mexico City, over forty percent of the population lived in shantytowns.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Bortz, “Los salarios industriales de la Ciudad de México, 1939 – 1975,” (México: FCE, 1988), 270, quoted in Jeffrey Bortz and Marcos Aguila, “Earning a Living: A History of Real Wage Studies in Twentieth-Century Mexico,” *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 41, No. 2, June 2006, 126.

²⁰ Reynolds, *The Mexican Economy*, 80.

²¹ Bortz and Aguila, “Earning a Living,” *LARR*, June 2006, 125

Cortines administration increased public spending and made more credit available for industry with the goal of sparking a growth of domestic industry.²² In order to make Mexican goods cheaper and therefore more competitive on the world market, the administration devalued the peso on April 18, 1954. Union leaders argued that an effective response to the end of the Korean War and the U.S. recession required a long-term strategy that made Mexico less dependent on its export economy, but by devaluing the peso the administration settled for a measure that placed too much emphasis on making Mexican goods competitive on the international market.²³

Although devaluing the peso had the desired effect of increasing exports, prices also increased markedly. The devaluation of the peso placed imported goods further out of reach of working class consumers. To make matters worse for railway workers, their collaborationist union leaders refused to fight for higher wages for the rank and file. Increased prices combined with decreased wages to strain workers' purchasing power. The cost of living, which had risen by 6 % in 1954, rose by 15.7 % in 1955.²⁴ Prices on commodity goods simply soared.²⁵ Workers in traditionally combative unions—particularly the electrical, telegraph, oil, teachers' and railway unions--began to question the passivity of union bosses.²⁶ How could their leaders stand idly by while members

²² Brody, and Mancilla, *Historia de la Revolución Mexicana*, 138.

²³ The U.S. embassy in Mexico conveyed Ruiz Cortines's turn to protectionist policies during this period to Washington. These correspondences detail the competing interests among industrialists and the popular sector. See "Memorandum from the Officer in Charge of Mexican Affairs (Hughes) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs (Holland), Washington, March 25, 1955; "Memorandum for the Files, by the Ambassador of Mexico (White), Mexico City June 10, 1955) in *Foreign Relations, 1955-1957*, vol. VI.

²⁴ Brody and Mancilla, *Historia de la Revolución Mexicana*, 169.

²⁵ Timothy King, *Mexico: Industrialization and Trade Policies since 1940* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 22. "An immediate effect of the devaluation," writes King, "was a rise in the price level", adding, "prices in 1954 was about 9 per cent above their 1953 level; those in 1955 were a further 14 percent higher."

²⁶ See Howard Handelman, "The Politics of Labor Protest in Mexico", *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 18, no. 3, August 1976; Evelyn P. Stevens, *Protest and Response in Mexico*

struggled to pay the rent and put food on the table? By 1958, Ruíz Cortines and the PRI faced a quandary: it was an election year, and workers expected the ruling party to reverse the almost two-decade downward trend in their standard of living.

The Candidacy of Adolfo López Mateos as a Political Opening

Ruíz Cortines caught observers off guard by naming López Mateos, his Secretary of Labor, as the candidate for the PRI because traditionally presidents chose the Minister of Interior as their successor. López Mateos and the press played up his close ties to labor, presenting himself as a populist caudillo of the Revolution, which suggested that his administration would prioritize the economic concerns of industrial workers.²⁷

“Siempre!,” a politically moderate magazine in the capital, did its part to support the PRI candidate. It explained, for instance, that a vote for López Mateos amounted to a vote for the Revolution. The article pointed to comments the candidate made during a stop in Autlán, Jalisco, which, the piece suggested, demonstrated that he planned to switch the nation’s course away from Alemán’s conservative policies and return to the populist agenda of Lázaro Cárdenas. “There is a part of the country paralyzed by pain, by misery, by injustice and ignorance,”²⁸ he lamented, showing his concern for the plight of workers and campesinos.

The FNM and the STFRM endorsed López Mateos. “Revista Ferronales” for its part paid close attention to the campaign and told workers that it was in their interest to vote

(Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974); Ian Roxborough, *Unions and Politics in Mexico: The Case of the Automobile Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.)

²⁷ Raul Trejo and Anibal Yañez, “The Mexican Labor Movement: 1917-1945,” *Latin American Perspectives*, vol.3, no.1, *Imperialism and the Working Class in Latin America*, (Winter 1976), 147.

for the PRI candidate. The publication presented powerful visual images to substantiate the candidate's populist rhetoric and to prove that railway workers supported him. The magazine displayed photographs of workers in Aguascalientes dressed in their classic blue denim overalls with red kerchiefs tied around their necks. Listening attentively to the candidate, they hold signs that read "Ferrocarrileros with López Mateos."²⁹ In a separate frame others wear t-shirts with the PRI insignia emblazoned on the chest, above which reads "Ferrocarrileros." An editorial buttressed the information conveyed by the images, shamelessly endorsing the candidate, "never had such a concentration of ferrocarrileros been seen, such as those that presented themselves [for] López Mateos, at his arrival in Aguascalientes, where they enthusiastically received him."³⁰ Workers wore the uniform, according to another editorial, to "honor the popular candidate."³¹ The use of the uniform carried political weight, signaling that the PRI still had the support of the one of the most important sectors of the industrial working class. The new Secretary General of the STFRM, Samuel Ortega, enthusiastically introduced the PRI candidate. "For five years," Ortega pronounced, "you were Secretary of Labor and during that time we observed [you] defend our collective interests."³²

In case there was any confusion about how to vote and whom to vote for, the magazine devoted a section of the June issue to provide clear instructions, strongly advising workers to vote for López Mateos. The first page showed a calendar with the election date, July 6 1958, followed by a reminder that they needed to attain a voting

²⁸ "Desde Autlán, López Mateos fija un programa Mínimo," *Siempre!*, 2 April 1958, 59.

²⁹ *Revista Ferronales*, March 1958,

³⁰ *Revista Ferronales*, May 1958,

³¹ "Los trabajadores ferrocarrileros lucieron sus clásicas prendas ante el candidato López Mateos," *Revista Ferronales*, May 1958 May 1958.

³² *Ibid.*

credential. Finally, the last page displayed an image of the candidate from the chest up with the following caption below:

As a Mexican, you are completely free to vote for the candidate who is best in line with your ideas. But if you believe that the work of revolutionary governments for Mexico's progress should be advanced, if you think that we should conserve our independence and our liberties, and that we should continue to fight for the well being of all Mexicans, vote for the national candidate for the President of the Republic: Adolfo López Mateos and for the legislative and senatorial candidates of the Institutional Revolutionary Party³³

The FNM's efforts to mobilize railway workers for López Mateos may have reflected the PRI's uncertainty that it could count on their support. Despite pictures of workers attending rallies in support of López Mateos, the PRI found itself in a weakened position as workers and students protested throughout the capital, complaining about increases in the standard of living. Moreover, oral histories suggest that not all railway workers attended PRI rallies because they were enamored with the candidate. José Arellano, a former railway handyman in Oaxaca and Puebla, joyfully recalls attending PRI rallies not because he supported the ruling party but rather because the FNM gave him the day off work with full pay to attend, while the STFRM provided lunch and transportation.³⁴ How could he not take them up on the offer? Fidel Tabares Velazco, a former machinist in Oaxaca, is less sanguine about the relationship between the PRI and the STFRM during those days. "The union's [job] is to defend rights, not to defend those who steal," he explains, "but they would take people to the rallies. All the union cared about was votes for the PRI."³⁵ Clearly, for Velasco, the STFRM's blind endorsement of López Mateos was yet one more sign of the union's corruption.

³³ *Revista Ferronales*, June, 1958.

³⁴ Interview with José Arellano, by author, Puebla, March, 2004.

³⁵ Interview with Fidel Tabares Velazco, by author, Matías Romero, August 8, 1958.

U.S. embassy officials were well aware of the discrepancy between circulated images of mass support for López Mateos and opinions of the PRI on the ground. Officials contended that the Mexican government took measures to cover up the fissures that existed among the electorate during the presidential campaign. “Strenuous official efforts,” the document explains, “were required to cover up for citizens’ apathy and indifference.”³⁶ The telegram forcefully blamed the masses’ apathy on the PRI’s unwillingness to effectively respond to the increase in the cost of living. Moreover, the embassy directly linked the party’s ineffectiveness with its control over the country’s politics. “Without effective opposition,” it asserts, “[the] ruling group of politicians appears to have become smug and overconfident.”³⁷ The telegram notes with concern that citizens mock the administration of President Ruíz Cortines, whose 1954 campaign “promises contrast to actual increases in beans, potatoes, meat, corn, [and] bread over the last six years.”³⁸ The “average Mexican,” it notes, “is ‘painfully aware of their worsening poverty.’”³⁹

Demetrio Vallejo and the Southeast Plan

As López Mateos traversed the country on the campaign trail, railway activists prepared to challenge the authority of official STFRM representatives by insisting on an across-the-board wage increase for the rank and file. While railway dissidents did not at

³⁶ “Telegram from the Embassy in Mexico to the Department of State”, Mexico City, August 29, 1958, *Foreign Relations, 1958-1960, Volume V.*, 841.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid.*

first demand the resignation of charro representatives, dissidents' independent organizing efforts along with the wage demand in effect put charros' representational authority into question.

Vallejo seemed an unlikely candidate to lead the rank-and-file. Unlike previous independent STFRM leaders, such as Valentín Campa and Gómez Z., Vallejo did not make his home in the capital or any of the country's other large cities.⁴⁰ In 1958, Vallejo lived in Coatzacoalcos, an important railway town in the state of Veracruz.⁴¹ Coatzacoalcos could hardly be mistaken as a city of significance for national or even regional politics, the way perhaps Monterrey and San Luiz Potosí were in the north of the country. Hence, Vallejo was very much outside of the national political scene and off the radar of the national press.⁴²

Although Vallejo did seem to enjoy the esteem of workers in the southeast when he served as a local union representative in the early 1950s, word of him did not seem to have reached the rank-and-file in other parts of the country.⁴³ His anonymity seems to served him well, however, for it took some time for STFRM and FNM officials to understand that he posed a serious threat to status quo union politics. Vallejo detractors within the charro union were surprised by his quick rise to prominence among the

⁴⁰ On Vallejo's numerous residencies in the Southeast of the country during this time, see Interview with Demetrio Vallejo, by Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972.

⁴¹ Unless otherwise indicated, this discussion is based on Elena Poniatowska's interview with Vallejo. Interview with Vallejo, by Poniatowska, Mexico City, Mexico City, 1972.

⁴² His work dossier indicates that he spent his entire time at the FNM working in one of the stations in the southeast as a telegraph messenger. See, Demetrio Vallejo, FNM personnel dossier, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*, Puebla.

⁴³ The transcript of Vallejo's interview with Poniatowska makes clear that he spent most of his time before the June strikes organizing in the Southeast and center of the country. The north received word of the independent railway movement via telegrams and *trenistas*, whose mobility enabled them to transport news from throughout the country.

grassroots, dismissing Valljeo as a “Don nadie” (“Mr. Nobody).”⁴⁴ What his critics failed to understand was that Vallejo had a history of defending workers and other residents in the southeast. In the southeastern city of Coatzacoalcos, he worked with representatives of local unions to lobby for pro-worker candidates in municipal elections. He connected his local activism to national labor organizing by supporting Gómez Z. in his quest to become head of the CTM.⁴⁵ When Fidel Velazquez beat Gómez Z. and the latter formed the CUT, Vallejo followed and was elected head of the southern wing of the organization.⁴⁶ While with the CTM Vallejo helped organize petrol workers in Veracruz, where he claims to have been beaten by police and arrested.

Finally, Vallejo had intermittently held leadership positions at the STFRM Local 13 in Matias Romero, Oaxaca since 1936.⁴⁷ Local 13 grouped workers who labored on the rail line that connected the eastern city of Veracruz to the western city of Oaxaca. Because their labor on the rails enabled shipments from the Atlantic coast to reach ports on the Pacific, the workers were of strategic importance for the industry. If his colleagues had not heard of him in the center and the north, those in this highly important local had embraced him as a leader.

Apart from his alleged provinciality, Vallejo’s ethnicity may have contributed to his detractors’ disbelief in his popularity and leadership. Most national railway leaders up

⁴⁴ Partido Popular, *El Conflicto Ferrocarrilero*, (Mexico City: May 1959). This is an open letter from ferrocarrileros aligned with Lombardo Toledano’s Partido Popular, denouncing the radicalization of the railway movement.

⁴⁵ The formation of the CTM and the CUT are discussed in chapter 2.

⁴⁶ It is unclear exactly what position Vallejo held. In his comments to Poniatowska, Vallejo calls his position “secretary of the south.” See Interview with Vallejo, Poniatowska, 1972.

⁴⁷ Chronology of work history, March 1943, FNM. FNM Personnel dossier of Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*.

until this time presented themselves as urban mestizos.⁴⁸ Class, not race, served as the identity around which they typically organized. Vallejo also emphasized his class identity over his ethnicity. But when it became known that he was descended directly from indigenous people, he was differentiated from national labor leaders. This may have provided further reason for his critics to condemn him.⁴⁹

It took a few months for Vallejo to make national headlines because the push for a wage increase first came to the fore in Mexico City in November 1957. There, J. Guadalupe López, a member of Local 15 in the capital, led his colleagues in demanding that the FNM raise workers' salaries.⁵⁰ It was commonplace for workers' salaries to be raised every two years when the collective contract was signed between the STFRM and the FNM.⁵¹ However, The FNM failed to raise salaries after signing the collective contract in January 1957, leaving workers disaffected at one more concession made by STFRM charros. There is not much known about Padilla except that he and other disgruntled workers at Local 15 had their demand rejected by STFRM officials, who refused to transmit it to the company brass.⁵²

It was at this point in late 1957 and early 1958 that railway activists began to organize clandestinely, creating the seeds of what unfolded to become a dissident movement for union democracy. Dissidents in Mexico City concluded that the STFRM

⁴⁸ There is no study on ethnicity among labor leaders. This claim is therefore based on my readings of a wide range of sources cited throughout the present study.

⁴⁹ "Condena todos los Sectores la huelga ferrocarrila," *El Universal*, 26 Feb. 1959. One illustration in the very same issue of *El Universal* exaggerated Vallejo short stature, a subtle allusion to his indigenous background.

⁵⁰ Ilán Semo, Dolores Groman, and María Eugenia Romero, *México un pueblo en la historia*, vol. 6, ed. Enrique Semo (Mexico City: Alianza Editorial, 1989) 42; Journalist Mario Gill identifies J. Guadalupe López as one of the most vocal dissident ferrocarrileros in Mexico City in 1957 and 1958. Mario Gill, *Los ferrocarrileros*, 161-162.

⁵¹ Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 147.

⁵² Padilla is mentioned in Vallejo, *Las luchas*, which is the source for journalist Mario Gil's inclusion of Padilla in *Los ferrocarrileros*, 161-162.

refused to fight for a wage increase on behalf of its base.⁵³ They found support among colleagues in the city of Torreón; activists at both locals agreed to mobilize workers throughout the country in support of an across-the-board increase of \$350 pesos. Informing thousands of members across a territory as large as Mexico about their plans took time, and it was not until May 2, 1958 that dissidents were able to meet in Mexico City to take inventory of their efforts and to decide on how to proceed.⁵⁴

Democratic practices strongly contrasted with the bureaucratic, hierarchical decision-making which dissidents had come to associate with charro leadership. During the interval, rebel leaders emerged in the largest work centers, including Jalapa, Tonalá, Tierra Blanca and Veracruz. Each local created a local Pro-Raise Commission, working outside the official union bureaucracy. Men such as Jorge José Ramírez, who served on Puebla's Pro-Raise Commission, communicated with leaders of the Grand Pro-Raise Commission in Mexico City.⁵⁵ Because elected colleagues led these commissions their very formation represented a direct call to democratize practices at the STFRM, as rank-and-file activists voted for leaders to circumvent official STFRM bureaucrats!⁵⁶ Neither dissident leaders nor the rank-and-file framed the act of circumventing official representatives as an attempt to wrest control of the union. Rather, they explained that they simply wanted a pay raise.⁵⁷

Samuel Ortega and FNM

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ The FNM magazine addressed the desire for a wage increase among workers in the May issue, without mentioning dissidents by name. See, *Revista Ferronales*, May 1958.

⁵⁵ Readers will remember Ramírez as one of the cantina patrons from Chapter 1. Interview with Jorge José Ramírez, by author, Puebla, May 2004.

⁵⁶ See, Alonso, *El movimiento ferrocarrilero*, 110; Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 28.

Both Samuel Ortega, secretary general of the STFRM, and Roberto Amorós, the General Manager of the FNM, took measures to discredit the dissidents' demands while dismissing rebels' attempts to circumvent official STFRM channels. It is in fact difficult to discern a difference in the comments made by these officials. Both Ortega and Amorós stressed that railway workers needed to "make sacrifices" for the good of the national economy. Officials at the STFRM and the FNM feared that increased wages would trigger a trickledown effect: higher salaries for workers would result in elevated costs for the FNM, which in turn would lead to increased rates for companies transporting their goods via rail.⁵⁸ Increased costs for companies could slow hiring and raise costs on commodities. In order to prevent the unfolding of such a bleak set of economic events, officials urged workers to behave as citizens concerned for the national economy rather than as workers worried about their household economy.

Ortega must have felt his power questioned by the incipient democratic unionism practiced by those who supported their local Pro-Wage Commission because he agreed to look into the situation.⁵⁹ He organized a study of the finances of the FNM to be conducted by a team of experts in order to ascertain whether the company could afford to deliver a salary increase. While we do not have access to what Ortega's intentions might have been, we can reasonably deduce that he intended the study to justify dismissing the request for a wage demand because it was well known that the FNM had been in the red

⁵⁷ "Carta del Gerente," *Revista Ferronales*, June 6, 1958.

⁵⁸ Oct. 29, 1958, *Siempre!*. The article claims that industrialists initiated a media campaign to threaten that commodity prices increase as a result of workers' wage gains.

⁵⁹ Alonso, *El movimiento ferrocarrilero en México*, 110.

for years.⁶⁰ The FNM could not afford to raise wages without increasing rates on cargo, which would, as mentioned above, have repercussions for national economic growth.⁶¹ Hence, when Ortega presented his team's conclusions to the Grand Commission no one had reason to be surprised that the study found the FNM unable to afford to grant a \$350 peso increase to its employees.⁶²

There was no more room for negotiation. Ortega disbanded the Grand Commission and informed its leaders that local section officials would take over the duties of organizing the rank-and-file.⁶³ The STFRM Executive Committee, in short, reasserted its role as sole arbitrator of rank-and-file interests. In his classic history of those days, Demetrio Vallejo accuses Ortega of stalling in order to "block and frustrate the work of the Grand Commission...[with] the intention of dissolving it."⁶⁴ Moreover, he charges that Ortega entrusted secret agents and riot police to stand outside the union hall to intimidate dissidents. Vallejo and the dissident leadership viewed the study as a farce.⁶⁵

Ortega suggested that workers should stop complaining about the increased cost of living and take pride that by accepting lower wages their helped the country progress.⁶⁶ Workers had to make sacrifices, Ortega explained, because "we think that as patriotic citizens and workers, we can wait for the rehabilitation of the industry, which will bring

⁶⁰ One study conducted at the time traced the FNM's financial woes to the railway's origins in the nineteenth century, arguing that the industry suffered from a lack of adequate financing from its inception. The study contributes a good deal of the industry's economic problems to its low shipment rates. See, Ing. Santos Barcena, *La realidad en los ferrocarriles de México*, (Mexico City: Ediciones EL COCO, 1958).

⁶¹ At the end of 1958 and in early 1959, FNM General Manager Benjamin Méndez detailed the FNM operating costs as justification for not raising wages. See Dec. 1958, no. 12 and Feb. no. 2 1959 *Revista Ferronales*.

⁶² Alonso, *El movimiento ferrocarrilero en México*, 111.

⁶³ Stevens, *Protest and Response in Mexico*, 108-109.

⁶⁴ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 6.

⁶⁵ "Izquierdas, derechas, y el centro hablan del paro," *Excelsi6r*, 5 Aug. 1958.

⁶⁶ Ortega and Amor6s' positions were indistinguishable. *Revista Ferronales*, June 1958.

economic stability to us and the nation.”⁶⁷ In urging workers to act as patriotic citizens, Ortega sought to differentiate between the needs of workers and the responsibilities of citizens. The “self-less worker” served as the official, government-sanctioned ideal for railway workers, and it became politically useful in denying demands of dissidents.⁶⁸ The fact Ortega, the union leader, sided with the company powerfully demonstrates how blurred the institutional line between the STFRM and FNM had become.

Ortega’s comments demonstrate a broader rhetorical strategy employed by those in power. Throughout the days of the railway movement, company and government officials called on workers to embrace their identity as citizens, which, they argued, conflicted with their interests as workers.⁶⁹ As workers they might require a wage increase but as citizens they should understand that a financially stable railway industry was a necessary condition for modern Mexico.⁷⁰ Whatever economic plight workers might suffer, the interests of the country should take priority, a point reiterated in newspaper editorials.⁷¹ In taking such a stand, company and government officials equated the interests of the railway company with the interests of the nation. The discursive positioning of the railway company as a national resource meant that acts of resistance, defiance, and rebellion against the FNM amounted to traitorous affronts to

⁶⁷ *Revista Ferronales*, Nov. 1958.

⁶⁸ Article in the press throughout the period urged workers to prioritize the needs of the nation. See, “Política Ferrocarrilera,” *Excelsi6r*, 22 July 1958; Criticisms of strikers was not limited to reporters and bureaucrats. A railway worker editorialized that his colleagues needed to quite complaining and think about the needs of the country, see “Habla un ferrocarrilero Sensato,” *Excelsi6r*, 28 July 1958.

⁶⁹ Roberto Amor6s made precisely this point in an paid advertisement printed in a national newspaper. See, “Ferrocarriles Nacionales de M6xico: a todos los trabajadores Ferrocarrileros,” *Excelsi6r*, 4 August 1958; see also, “Contra los intereses de M6xico,” *Excelsi6r*, 16 August 1958; “Huelga contra el Estado,” *Excelsi6r*, 13 August 1958. “Sindicatos, l6deres y Pueblo,” *Excelsi6r*, 2 August 1958; “Atentado contra el Pais,” *Excelsi6r*, 4 August 1958.

⁷⁰ “Habla un ferrocarrilero Sensato,” *Excelsi6r*, 28 June 1958.

⁷¹ “Política Ferrocarrilera,” *Excelsi6r*, 22 July 1958.

fellow citizens as well as the government.⁷² In short, Ortega's pronouncement stood as a first step in figuring dissident workers as defiant outcasts whose actions threatened social cohesiveness, this making their elimination necessary for the maintenance of social and economic stability.

The labor official's comments demonstrate the tendency among critics of the movement to portray railway workers as a privileged sector among the working class.⁷³ The FNM conveyed this depiction by emphasizing its benevolence toward its employees. Newspaper and magazine editorials portrayed railway workers as an aristocratic sector of the working class.⁷⁴ Workers' access to company housing, newly-constructed sports fields, and hospital care when injured on the job demonstrated the rank-and-file's privileged treatment in relation to other blue-collar workers.⁷⁵ The company magazine responded to the demands of the rank-and-file by running articles arguing that the company's generosity towards workers had served to put it in a precarious financial position; the company hospital, schools, and recreation center cost the FNM 65,300,000 pesos.⁷⁶

Ortega took sides with the company and stressed that the company hospital and recreation center was evidence of railway workers' advantageous position. Throughout the period, "Revista Ferronales" ran articles describing various company expenditures on

⁷² *Revista Ferronales*, June 1958.

⁷³ *Revista Ferronales*, February 1958. Entrepreneurs took turns condemning the railway movement, warning that a strike would bring business to a halt. "Mercancías en peligro de descomposición," *Excelsiôr*, 28 June 1958.

⁷⁴ *Excelsiôr*, 6 April 1958.

⁷⁵ The company publicized expenditures in hospital construction and care, as well as in sports fields, in its magazine. For hospital and sports-field costs in Monterrey, see "Obras sociales en Monterrey," *Revista Ferronales*, January 1958; for costs in San Luis Potosí, see, "Descripción de las obras sociales en San Luis Potosí," in *Revista Ferronales*, January 1958; for details on the company hospital, see "Hospital Central de los Ferrocarriles," in *Revista Ferronales*, February 1958.

behalf of its employees, in many cases itemizing the costs assumed, from the construction of soccer fields to the provision of subsidized foodstuffs available at the few company stores in Mexico City.⁷⁷ Never mind that these stores were poorly stocked and that those workers living away from them did not experience their benefits or that many workers, especially trainmen, found themselves too exhausted from work to take advantage of the recreational facilities.⁷⁸

In addition to these benefits, the company magazine also praised FNM president Amorós for initiating a literacy campaign among workers, further developing the image of a benevolent company and of workers as a privileged group among the working class. Such programs were unavailable to workers in other sectors and represented real company concessions.⁷⁹ In light of these projects and the FNM's fiscal insecurity, disgruntled workers appeared as ungrateful and unpatriotic.⁸⁰

The STFRM faced a problem that affected any claims of benevolence in defense of the FNM. Ortega simply did not have credibility among railway workers, making it unlikely that dissidents would accept that he was negotiating in good faith. He lacked credibility with the rank-and-file because he never served as a railway employee and because it was clear that he had political aspirations that conflicted with his

⁷⁶ See *Revista Ferronales* Jan. 1958, Feb. 9, 1958, June 1958, Sept. 1958,; FNM expenditures on sports facilities for workers was reported in "Ferrocarril construcciones en Jalapa, Veracruz," *Excelsi6r*, 6 April 1958.

⁷⁷ *Revista Ferronales*, June 1958.

⁷⁸ Only one former worker that I interviewed took advantage of sports facilities. Interview with Geraldo Ni6o Mendes, by author, Puebla, March 2004.

⁷⁹ The literacy campaign began during Miguel Alemán's administration and was heavily promoted in the company magazine. See, "Nuevo Centro de alfabetizaci6n en Aguascalientes," in *Ferronales*, January 1946; "Los ferrocarriles y la Alfabetizaci6n," in *Revista Ferronales*, February, 1946; "Informnaci6n Nacional," *Ferronales*, September 1949 and "La Secretarí de Educacion felicita a ferrocarrileros por su labor Educativa, in *Revista Ferronales*, April 1958. The issue reproduces a letter from the Secretary of Education to Roberto Amorós, congratulating FNM for its literacy campaign.

responsibilities to grassroots workers. In 1958 Ortega ran as PRI candidate in the senatorial race in Tlaxcala, a small city in the state of Puebla.⁸¹ Observers understood Ortega's PRI candidacy to be a clear indication of cronyism.⁸²

Ortega's candidacy presented a conflict of interest because, as STFRM Secretary General, workers expected him to defend them against criticisms from other political bodies. If a conflict between railway workers in Tlaxcala emerged, who would he defend, business interests or the rank-and-file? Even observers outside of the STFRM admonished the PRI for conferring the important position of STFRM General Manager on Ortega. Ortega, one critic maintained, was a "false leader without professional or union credentials...[he] was designated from outside the [STFRM] and he was confirmed...by politicians and other false leaders, instead of looking for support from true workers."⁸³ The article concluded by haranguing PRI functionaries, declaring that Vallejo "demonstrated that false leaders serve no one...[especially the PRI] "because they bring them ridicule, and increase their disrepute."⁸⁴

Ortega's lack of legitimacy among the rank and file proved to be an insurmountable obstacle to any efforts on his part to defuse the workers' movement.⁸⁵ Local STFRM leaders registered the workers' concern over their stagnant wages. Vallejo argued that there was no need to further study the finances of the industry because the Grand Commission had already conducted a thorough review that concluded that the FNM

⁸⁰ This point was made at various moments during the summer by critics of the railway movement, including Roberto Amorós. See, "Responsibilidad por los Paros," *Excelsiôr*, 1 August 1958; "Subversión del orden Legal," *Excelsiôr*, 30 June 1958; "Ante el gravísimo Problema," *Excelsiôr*, 30 June 1958.

⁸¹ "Los líderes ferroviarios no podrán ser al mismo tiempo legisladores," *Excelsiôr*, 18 July 1958.

⁸² Alonso, *El movimiento*, 116.

⁸³ Alvarado, Dr. José, "La huelga...", *Siempre!*, 20 Aug. 1958, 20.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ He would eventually resign from the STFRM. "El conflicto ferrocarrilero," *Excelsiôr*, 5 Aug. 1958.

could afford to offer their blue collar employees a raise.⁸⁶ In addition, he reminded the representatives that they were entrusted to carry out orders from their respective locals and could not concede to Ortega without authorization from the rank-and-file. Therefore, the commission had a responsibility to continue its organizing work despite Ortega's threats. Finally, Vallejo urged members to calculate the importance of the political conjuncture embodied in grassroots unrest, warning, "it is very dangerous to underestimate the general discontent among workers."⁸⁷

Regional charros tried their best to defuse dissident democracy by agreeing to request a wage increase on behalf of the rank-and-file. On May 20, charro secretaries of union chapters responded to the activist's petition by offering one of their own. After a closed-door meeting, the local charros presented Ortega with a petition for a 200 peso increase per month for each full time worker, as well as for retired workers.⁸⁸ The measure was clearly meant to undermine the growing popularity of the Grand Commission and persuade workers who were on the fence about joining the rebels to stick with the official union. Amorós countered that the FNM would respond in two months, as it conducted its own study of the company's finances.⁸⁹ The local section leaders deferred to Amorós, as most workers waited for the company's pronouncement.⁹⁰

The Railway Hub of Matías Romero, Oaxaca

⁸⁶ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 7.

⁸⁷ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 7.

⁸⁸ Alonso, *El movimiento*, 111.

⁸⁹ Amoros, *Revista Ferronales*, July 1958.

⁹⁰ Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 30.

Workers in Matías Romero, Oaxaca, however, proved less compliant and made a definitive stand for union democracy. Despite what Vallejo recalls as a “fear and confusion” among many in the rank-and-file, Matías Romero’s Local 13 decided to continue organizing outside of official union channels.⁹¹ They voted to reject the STFRM’s proposal of a 200 peso increase, which was under review by the company. Instead, they resubmitted that workers deserved a 350 peso hike. In addition, they voted to depose two charro leaders, representatives who managed the Local Executive Committee and Local Committee of Security and Finances respectively, choosing dissidents as replacements. They agreed to present these changes to the STFRM officials while mobilizing sections in the southeast of the country to support and prepare to defend the accords. Finally, they called for the union to recognize the new leaders.⁹² This last demand extended the objectives of the movement. No longer were political goals limited to economic demands. Dissidents now demanded a fundamental change in the political status quo, as the rebels set their sights on STFRM leadership positions.

It is significant that resistance to charros found such strong support among workers and community members in Matías Romero. Unlike Mexico City, which had an array of industrial sectors, each with their own history and neighborhoods, citizens of Matías Romero held a strong affinity for the railway because the city developed as a result of the introduction of the line. The city took its name in fact after an Oaxacan native, who went on to become Porfirio Díaz’s foreign minister and worked tirelessly to promote foreign

⁹¹ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 6.

⁹² Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 9.

investment in the Mexican railway industry.⁹³ As the largest employer in town, the FNM sponsored dances and sports for its workers and for the town residents during the 1950s.⁹⁴

Margarita Orozco, a long-time resident of Matías Romero and a member of a railway family, recalls how she attended dances in a small park adjacent to the railway station. Dances were festive, community affairs. “Ferrocarrileros went to park to dance marimba,” Orozco explains, “[and] in February, they gathered for Fiesta de San Matías. The women wore tehuano outfits and the men arrived on horseback.”⁹⁵ Another vallejoista woman, whose husband worked for FNM and supported the railway movement explains that “[Matías Romero] didn’t have its own life, just the railway; There were no schools here...just the railway.”⁹⁶ In addition to providing employment and leisure activities to the people of Matías Romero, informants remember that the industry created bungalows as company housing for English railway managers.⁹⁷

By the 1950s, the English managers were gone, but the fancy bungalows still stood near the railway station, as a constant reminder of the class differences between officials and the rank-and-file.⁹⁸ If workers needed any more reasons to resent company officials for their declining real wages, they could walk past the local casino, where supervisors gathered to relax and test their luck.⁹⁹ The economic disparities between managers and workers may have played a role in the creation of class resentment among the rank and

⁹³ Francie R. Chassen-López, *From Liberal to Revolutionary Oaxaca: the View from the South, Mexico 1867-1911*, (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2004), 51-56

⁹⁴ Interviewees, especially women, stress the importance of dances and STFRM-sponsored parties for creating a sense of community. Interview with Margarita Hernández Orozco, by author, Matías Romero, August, 2004; Interview with Fidel Tabares Velázquez, by author, Matías Romero, August, 2004.

⁹⁵ Interview with Margarita Orozco, by author, by author, Aug. 8, 2004.

⁹⁶ Interview with María del Cielo Watanabe, by author, August 8, 2004.

⁹⁷ Interview with Maria del Cielo Watanabe; Interview with Margarita Hernández Orozco; Interview with María Estel Medina; all by author, Matías Romero, July, 2004.

⁹⁸ The houses can still be viewed today, a physical reminder of times when the town flourished.

⁹⁹ Interview with María del Cielo Watanabe, by author, August 8, 2004.

file, but it alone cannot account for why it was workers in Matías Romero rather than those in Pueblo or Mexico City that took the extreme step of circumventing charros by organizing independently.

Perhaps Matías Romero workers took the lead rather than those in the center of the country because the mobilizations in Mexico City by petrol, electrical and telegraph workers already had authorities on alert.¹⁰⁰ Workers may have perceived that railway officials increased their vigilance once dissidents in the capital pushed for a wage increase in November 1957. Railway workers in the capital had seen riot police and military guards unleashed on mobilized teachers and students that winter.¹⁰¹ Situated in the southern state of Oaxaca, Matías Romero simply provided more cover for clandestine organizing.¹⁰²

In June 1958, dissident leaders in Matías Romero took over Local 13, occupying the building. Dissidents dispatched organizers to union sections throughout the southeast, entrusting them to “orient, organize, and prepare” the rank-and-file.¹⁰³ A sense of urgency prevailed, as leaders sought to take advantage of the political opening made possible by the national election as well as by workers’ discontent. Organizers expected the rank-and-file to ratify the dissidents’ petition for a wage increase. Failure to do so, they worried, threatened to undermine whatever legitimacy dissidents in Matías Romero claimed to enjoy. In addition to persuading local sections to ratify the demand, organizers informed workers that they should be prepared to strike in the event that

¹⁰⁰ Teacher, telegraph, petrol and electrical workers had taken to the streets in the capital for months. “El servicio se suspendió en toda la República,” *El Universal*, 7 Feb. 1958,

¹⁰¹ Ibid. The press also reported on riot police beating protesting petrol workers the previous fall. “Los granaderos: orden del crimen,” *Siempre!* Sept. 1958.

¹⁰² This point was made by an organizer in Puebla. Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, by author, May 2004.

¹⁰³ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 10.

authorities denied their petition.¹⁰⁴ In short, organizers hurried to spread the word to ferrocarrileros throughout the country that a group of dissidents in Matías Romero proposed to challenge the charro union and company head on.¹⁰⁵

On June 11 1958, workers in Matías Romero voted to present the FNM with an ultimatum: the company had ten days to concede to the 350 peso raise and to recognize the new leaders of the locals as legitimate.¹⁰⁶ The demands challenged charrista politics head on. The rank-and-file blamed PRI-appointed STFRM leaders for their declining wages and wanted their union to take a more combative position to secure higher wages. They gave the FNM until June 26 to come to a decision, after which time workers threatened to deliver a series of general work stoppages. The first stoppage would occur on June 26 and would last two hours; the stoppages would then be extended by two hours every day thereafter until the company conceded. Since the locals that first signed on to the petition were in the southeast, the committee named the petition Plan Sureste, or Southeast Plan.¹⁰⁷

The importance of the presidential campaign of 1958 loomed large.¹⁰⁸ With the election just a month away (July), organizers took advantage of López Mateos's

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Matías Romero workers' FNM personnel dossiers are full of memos that track their participation in the railway movement, and in the strikes in particular. See the dossiers of Juan Ernesto Broissin, Fondo Matías Romero, Box 3; Felix Alvarado Hernández, Fondo Matías Romero, Box 2; Hector Casanova Martínez, Fondo Matías Romero, Box 4; César Carbajal Vallejo, Fondo Matías Romero, Box 4; Eleazar de los Santos García, Matías Romero, Box 4; Adam Cortés Ceballos, Fondo Matías Romero, Box 4; Adulio Arenas Anton, Fondo Matías Romero, Box 1; Adrian Cruz Cabrera, Fondo Matías Romero, Box 5; CEDIF, *MFNM*, Puebla.

¹⁰⁶ Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 33-34.

¹⁰⁷ Organizers named the agenda ("Southeast Plan") in Veracruz. Veracruz and Matías Romero belonged to the same rail line, so workers from these cities interacted regularly and were part of the same social milieu. See Alonso, *El movimiento*, 112.

¹⁰⁸ A memo from officials in Chiapas alerted President Ruíz Cortines that "antipatriotic workers" had drafted a subversive document called the "Southeast Plan". ARC, v. 660, 513/148, AGN, Mexico City.

positioning of the PRI as the party of the populist revolution.¹⁰⁹ Valentín Campa, the long-time railway leader who was ousted with the *charrazo*, met with Vallejo and other rebel leaders throughout the time of the movement. Although he no longer worked as a railway man, he took a leadership role, conducting meetings and working closely with Vallejo on strategy. Campa reports that railway dissidents planned their demand for a wage increase and their consequent protests to coincide with the national elections. “The Pro-Raise Commission,” Campa explains, “agreed to initiate [work] stoppages in June, a week before the general presidential, senatorial and legislative elections...with the objective of taking advantage of the political situation.”¹¹⁰ The political opening of the national election presented a remarkable opportunity for dissidents to make demands that in a non-election year might have been dismissed out of hand.¹¹¹

Amorós failed to grasp the determination of rebel leaders and their grassroots supporters, folks who felt that a democratic union and a concomitant wage increase were within reach. In the June issue of the company magazine, Amorós warned readers that the “demands will bring ruin to industry since it is their source of work and in their collective interest.”¹¹² He informed readers that he would take sixty days to review the workers demands, promising to use the time to study the finances and technological needs of the industry.¹¹³ Clearly, Amorós failed to understand how pervasive discontent had grown among the rank-and-file and that dissidents were not prepared to wait two months for the company to conduct its study.

¹⁰⁹ Howard Handelman, “The Politics of Labor Protest in Mexico,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 18. No. 3. 1976, 8-9.

¹¹⁰ Campa, *Testimonios*, 144.

¹¹¹ Handelman, “The Politics of Labor Protest in Mexico,” 9.

¹¹² Roberto Amorós, “Carta del Gerente,” *Revista Ferronales*, June 1958, 6.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

Ten days later, just four days before the deadline, thousands of railway workers throughout the country voted to back democratic unionism. Colleagues in other southeastern railway towns and cities, such as Tonla, Veracruz, and Tierra Blanca, joined the movement.¹¹⁴ Workers in Mexico City, Monterrey, Acámbaro, Guanajuato, among others, also backed what had become an unprecedented challenge to the charros in power and, by extension, the presidential administration that worked with them.¹¹⁵ The dissidents, it should be noted, remained committed to obeying legal protocols in presenting their demands and were not yet calling for the resignation of all charro representatives. While it is true that they had elected new leaders and deposed charros at regional locals, they were not yet demanding national STFRM bureaucrats to step down.

Nevertheless, Ortega may have very well interpreted the overthrow of regional local representatives as a threat to his own authority, for he refused to take sides with the dissidents, charging that only regional union bosses aligned with the official STFRM enjoyed the authority to submit a request for higher wages.¹¹⁶ With Ortega refusing to submit the demands, dissidents went over his head, directing their demands to Amorós and personally urging him to conduct negotiations to prevent the impending stoppages.¹¹⁷ Once again, the FNM General Manager questioned the legitimacy of dissidents, declaring that he could not meet with them because they were not entrusted with representational authority. Amorós stated he would meet only with the official leader of the rank-and-file, Samuel Ortega.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Alonso, *El movimiento*, 112.

¹¹⁵ Gil, *Los ferrocarrileros*, p. Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 34.

¹¹⁶ Alonso, *El movimiento*, 111.

¹¹⁷ Gill, *Los ferrocarrileros*, 163.

¹¹⁸ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 18

In response to Amorós' refusal to negotiate with independent leaders, Vallejo and organizers in the southeast prepared to strike. They rushed to organize workers throughout the country, sending telegraph notices of the planned actions to locals in the north and arriving at locals in the southern and center of the country.¹¹⁹ Vallejo personally visited work sites in the center and southeast.¹²⁰ Though leaders were confident that they enjoyed widespread support among the rank-and-file, they could not be certain that people would take the drastic step of walking off the job and in effect of challenging the authority of STFRM representatives and the president, who supported the charros.

Anxiety ran through the minds of dissident leaders the night of June 25. Elena Poniatowska in her novel on the railway movement, El tren pasa Primero, captures the restlessness and disquiet felt by dissidents:

los rostros desencajados no habían pegado el ojo en toda la noche se juntaron en un círculo que empezó a girar sobre si mismo, como si obedeciera a la fuerza de succión centrífuga. The silence turned into stone. No one moved...el embudo invisible los jalaba a su interior¹²¹

Vallejo would later recall, “in our faces signs of insomnia were noticeable. No one could sleep well that night, wondering whether would suspend work at the precise moment, for failure would mean, at the very least, our dismissal from work.”¹²² At 10 am, June 26, telegraphs began arriving from across the country announcing that workers had walked off the job. When news came from Mexico City that trains stood still, the rebels rejoiced,

¹¹⁹ Interview with Vallejo, by Poniatowska, 1972.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Elena Poniatowska, *El tren pasa primero* (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 2005), 1. The novel begins with this paragraph.

but it was only once they received word that sections throughout the northern part of the country had participated that dissidents realized the impact of their movement.¹²³

Demands for democratic unionism and a wage increase was widespread among the rank-and-file. Workers shut down the entire railway system for two hours.¹²⁴ Office workers joined their denim-clad counterparts in an act of solidarity among railway workers not seen since the days of the Revolution.¹²⁵ The company's last ditch efforts to prevent the strike, such as cutting down telegraph lines that enabled workers from the sections across the country to communicate with leaders in Mexico City, proved ineffective.¹²⁶ Of the twenty nine STFRM locals, only three refrained from participating in the action— locals in Chihuahua, Coahuila and Monterrey.¹²⁷ But these locals joined the following day when strikers shut down the rails from 10 am to 2 pm. The strike was hardly a "strangely spontaneous" event, as political scientist Antonio Alonzo maintains.¹²⁸ It occurred as a result of widespread discontent with charrista politics as well as the tireless organizing efforts among the grassroot leaders.

Practicing Democracy: the June Victory

After years of charro rule and decreased wages, workers demanded workplace democracy as a measure to resist the effects of post-war modernization policies on the

¹²² Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 19.

¹²³ "La ley, ante la fuerza," June 30, 1958, *Excelsi6r*.

¹²⁴ Alonso, *El movimiento*, 115.

¹²⁵ An important collection of interviews with railway workers who participated in the Mexican Revolution is housed in Instituto Mora. See Interview with Jos6 Luna Lara, by Alexis Arroyo, March 1916. Archivo de la Palabra, *Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. Jos6 Marialuis Mora*, Mexico City.

¹²⁶ Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 35.

¹²⁷ Ibid..

¹²⁸ Alonso, *El movimiento*, 115.

railway industry and on the rank and file. As the strike continued, workers made their presence felt on city streets as well as in remote towns, where peones stopped repairing bridges and laying tracks and walked off the job.¹²⁹ The sight of such a large-scale, collective force of workers, family members and their supporters turned Mexico City into a stage where a coalition of working-class industrial workers voiced their outrage at the PRI. Electrical, petrol and telegraph workers, as well as university students, supported the ferrocarrileros in their fight to democratize the workplace.¹³⁰ Clearly, charros autocratic practices were perceived as enabling the PRI post-war anti-labor politics. By democratizing the country's most important union—the STFRM—workers could better contest the PRI's plan to keep industrial wages low in order to aid industrialization. In short, railway workers received such widespread support from other unions and students because a democratized STFRM promised to benefit the working class in general.¹³¹

Workers who participated in those early days of the movement express idealized memories of those events. One important trace present in many of these accounts indicates that a sense of euphoria pervaded work sites and that workers took pride in asserting themselves publicly on streets and in front of colleagues, friends and family. Enrique Ochoa suggests how workers may have perceived the strike as a personal and collective triumph:

I installed [speakers] in a car in front of the station...I started to talk. And I noticed that everything was normal, with only minutes left for [the strike]. But a workshop trolley passed and stopped on a rail that was not in use...another passed and it stopped. Workers came out yelling happily: 'We don't hear Mexico'; 'and we don't hear Monterrey'; 'and we don't hear Durango'. The telegraph stopped and the railways shut down." "Well, I have to tell you that it was tremendous!, something that have never been

¹²⁹ Interview with Carlos Salazar Ramírez, by author, March 2004, Puebla. Salazar Ramírez was sent from Puebla to a remote town in Guerrero, whose name he does not recall. On the day of the strike, a telegraph message came to his encampment, stating that they were ordered by the STFRM to walk off the job. He remembers that later in the day military personnel were stationed at the encampment to protect railway equipment from acts of railway workers' sabotage.

¹³⁰ *Siempre!*, 6 August 1958; *Excelsiôr*, 22 July 1958; *Excelsiôr*, 30 June 1958,

¹³¹ see, Aurora Loyo, *El movimineto magisterial de 1958 en México* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1979).

seen, a terrific unity.¹³²

Likewise, Eliazor Tijanero, a shop worker in Mexico City, recalls that workers walked around with pride, stuck their chests out, and had a renewed spirit.¹³³

Manuel Meneses Domínguez remembers the dissident movement as a fight for democratic rights. Domínguez fondly recalls those days in June when dissident delegates arrived in Puebla to publicize the Southeast Plan.¹³⁴ They were welcomed in the workshops, and workers requested an assembly to air their news. The local secretary, a charro, declined the request because he opposed petitioning the FNM for a wage increase.¹³⁵ He recalls, in a triumphant tone, that he and his co-workers circumvented charro officials, assembling to create a Pro-wage Commission in Puebla. As the movement unfolded, they supported the Southeast Plan as word of it made its way north from Oaxaca. In addition to the importance of the wage proposal, Domínguez welcomed the Southeast Plan because it was an act of grassroots democratic unionism. “When workers are offered a clean and generous fight,” he insists, “[that] seeks to reestablish their rights, they respond in an organized [fashion].”¹³⁶ Domínguez and his cohorts mobilized for the right to democratic control of their union. For these ex-activists, the June strikes still represent a moment of unity and excitement at the democratic possibilities ahead.

¹³² Interview with Enrique Ochoa, in “*Yo soy Rielero...*”

¹³³ Interview with Eliazor Tijanero, by author, Mexico City, June 1999; the newspapers reported on workers newfound elation and confidence. “Espíritu de unidad del gremio Ferrocarrilero,” July 19, 1958, *Excelciór*.

¹³⁴ Interview with Manuel Meneses Domínguez in “*Yo soy reilero...*”, 149.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 150-151.

On June 27, workers once again made good on their promise to walk off the job if their demands remained unmet, shutting down the system for four hours.¹³⁷ As a result, Amorós went to the negotiating table with dissident leaders. In a gesture meant to signal that dissidents had not displaced charro officials, the STFRM Executive Committee attended the meeting. Amorós agreed to a wage increase of 180 pesos a month, well short of the 350 pesos dissidents proposed.¹³⁸ Moreover, retired workers would not receive the increase but would instead be offered an 800 peso buy out, a concession that fell far short of the dissident request that retired workers receive a monthly increase.¹³⁹ Furthermore, the proposal did not mention the timely revision of work contracts in the future, a critical issue for dissidents, for workers pointed to STFRM leaders' refusal to revise the collective contract as evidence of their corruption. If dissidents were to remain true to those they represented, they needed to assure them that officials had eliminated corruption and would faithfully represent the rank and file. Amorós's concessions fell short of meeting strikers' expectations. The next day, on June 28, workers walked off the job for six hours.¹⁴⁰

That night Amorós, Ortega and the leaders of the Comisión Pro-Aumento met to arrive at an agreement. Workers agreed to lower their wage-increase request to 250 pesos, but on the condition that the raise be retroactive to the beginning of the year.¹⁴¹ Amorós responded that the company was willing to sign on to the proposal if workers promised to not request a wage hike the following year. The request was unsatisfactory because dissidents could not concede to freezing wages without appearing to be

¹³⁷ "Ayer se hizo otra paro y fue de 4 horas," *Excelsiór*, 28 June 1958.

¹³⁸ "Ayer se hizo otra paro y fue de 4 horas," *Excelsiór*, 28 June 1958; Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 20; Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, pp. 37-38; Alonso, *El movimiento*, 118.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

following charro policy. The company was in a tight spot because the stoppages had delayed and frustrated passengers, costing millions of pesos in losses.¹⁴² The losses continued to mount, for on June 29 an eight-hour stoppage spread throughout the railways, lasting from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.¹⁴³ The company fought back, firing leaders from local sections in San Luis Potosí, Nuevo Laredo, Orizaba, and Tamaulipas.¹⁴⁴ But the FNM's dismissal of rebels proved ineffective. On June 30, dissidents shut down the rails for ten hours, paralyzing the most important form of transportation in the country.

For many observers, the action amounted to rebellion. President Ruíz Cortines clearly sensed that the workers and company officials were far from arriving at a settlement, for he sent word through Amorós to request the presence of dissident leaders at the Presidential Palace.¹⁴⁵ At six-fifteen in the evening of July 1, leaders from the Commission met with Ruíz Cortines and Amorós, during which time the president assured workers that he was a friend of ferrocarrileros; he had reviewed their petition and had arrived at a resolution that would treat both parties fairly.¹⁴⁶ Ruíz Cortines offered FNM railway workers a monthly increase of 215 pesos; retired workers received 100 pesos more a month.¹⁴⁷ The president made no demands on workers to withdraw their rights to have wages raised in future contracts, understanding, perhaps, the importance that railway workers gave to the contract negotiating process.

¹⁴⁰ , *Revista Ferronales*, 9 July 1958,

¹⁴¹ Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 38.

¹⁴² Viveres destruidos, nulo turismo y otros Daños," *Excelsiór*, 2 Aug. 1958; "Contra los intereses de Mexico," *Excelsiór*, 16 August 1958.

¹⁴³ The press explained how industrialists, petty merchants, campesinos, as well as those who made their living on tourism, suffered great losses due to the railway strikes that summer. "Viveres destruidos, nulo turismo y otros Daños," *Excelsiór*, 2 Aug. 1958; "Contra los intereses de Mexico," *Excelsiór*, 16 August 1958.

¹⁴⁴ Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 38.

¹⁴⁵ The FNM informed readers of the president's role in negotiations in the July issue of the company magazine. *Revista Ferronales*, July 1958.

¹⁴⁶ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 20.

The independent railway representatives accepted the president's offer and instructed the grassroots to go back to work. Dissidents had done the seemingly impossible. They had circumvented charros and were given a meeting with president. It was no secret afterwards that the representatives felt intimidated by the grandeur of the Presidential Palace. Vallejo recalls that he and the other representatives were struck with awe as they walked through the building.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, when they received the president's proposal, they felt they simply could not turn down an offer made by the president himself. Vallejo insisted he wanted to take the offer to work sites, for members to vote on it, but the other representatives outvoted him, considering imprudent to make the president wait for a rank-and-file vote.¹⁴⁹

U.S. embassy officials did not receive Ruíz Cortines's negotiation with railway dissidents kindly. American officials concluded that widespread labor insurgency served as evidence that the PRI had lost touch with its popular base. The political system, the ambassador explained, suffered from ineffectiveness because for years leaders had been insulated from widespread critique and did not have to face grassroots hostility. The embassy judged that "after years of almost undisturbed control [the] ruling group seems devoid of leaders equipped by experience and character to handle [the] fast developing labor situation."¹⁵⁰ The PRI's incompetence became obvious during its negotiations with railway workers. The embassy concluded that "the government's handling of the strikes has been marked by indecision, lack of plan, and final resort to out-dated and ineffectual

¹⁴⁷ Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 39.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Vallejo, by Poniatowska, 1972.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. Vallejo's statements on this topic in his discussions with Poniatowska follow what he had written previously. See Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 19-20.

¹⁵⁰ "Telegram from Embassy," 841-842.

methods characteristic of discredited capitalist employers.”¹⁵¹ The lack of a plan resulted in methods that the embassy judged to be not only “outdated” but also “reactionary.”¹⁵² The embassy interpreted Ruíz Cortines’s decision to first repress the strike and only to later concede to a wage hike as a sign of ineffectual, personalist politics.

It criticized Ruíz Cortines for failing to present a clear policy on labor unrest, pointing to events in June when the president first supported charro leaders and then held a closed-door meeting with dissidents. “In such a climate”, the embassy reporter lamented, “every sort of rumor spreads rapidly and the public is left with [a] sorry spectacle of a drifting leaderless and impotent government.”¹⁵³ Part of the problem consisted in the president’s own ambitions, and the inability of his closest advisors to force his hand to take a strong position against or for labor democracy. “[The] President,” it maintained, “in his ambition to leave office with an unblemished record and to be recorded as a great statesmen in Mexican history, has permitted himself to be pushed around by new, rougher elements and he lacks aides strong enough to force him to make decisions.”¹⁵⁴ Clearly, the embassy interpreted the labor insurgency to be part of a broader national political crisis, caused in large part by entrenched corruption within the PRI and worsened by an inept presidential administration, whose members proved more concerned about self-aggrandizement than the political stability of the country.

The dissident victory signaled the end of Ortega’s term as Secretary General of the STFRM. On July 9, at the urging of Ruíz Cortines, Ortega resigned from his post at STFRM headquarters in Mexico City. Salvador Quezada Cortés was named the union’s

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

new Secretary General. The choice of Quezada demonstrates that dissidents had made headway in convincing STFRM officials that they did not stand for the status quo practice of naming people with no railway experience to union posts. Quezada worked as a conductor from 1917 to 1947, when he earned a promotion to a management post.¹⁵⁵

The new Secretary General immediately agreed to reduce union dues as well as the salaries of STFRM officials, construct company housing, and promised to “stay in permanent contact with the country’s ferrocarrileros” while remaining “loyal to the government of the revolution.”¹⁵⁶ While Ortega’s resignation and their pay raise constituted significant gains for the rank-and-file, Quezada was no grassroots representative. On the contrary, rank-and-file activists regarded Quezada as the latest charro. With newfound confidence imbued in them by their victory, dissident workers now pushed for the total overthrow of charrista politics.

Democratizing Union Politics, the August Strike

However dramatic the June victory for higher wages may have been for the rank-and-file, the charros still held power in the STFRM. Dissidents had won a wage hike, but their leaders had not acquired any official standing within the union hierarchy. The July 1 victory did, however, leave charro officials in a severely weakened position. Dissident leaders proved that charros were out of touch with their followers by circumventing their authority and organizing a massive work stoppage—with over 80,000 workers participating, which forced a meeting with Ruíz Cortines. The President’s direct

¹⁵⁵ Salvador Quezada Cortés, FNM personnel dossier, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*.

¹⁵⁶ Max Ortge, *Estado y movimiento*, 47.

negotiation with dissidents legitimated dissident leaders. As a result, the rank-and-file paraded in the streets in restless enthusiasm, signaling their appreciation for dissidents' democratic practices as well as their willingness to combat FNM policy. Shortly after the July resolution, dissidents organized to overthrow charro leaders once and for all. The effort must be viewed as an extension of a democratizing process that had originated during mobilizations in June.

As described above, intransigent charro delegates of certain local sections who refused to submit a wage-increase petition had been removed and replaced by railway dissidents.¹⁵⁷ These local actions provided evidence that charros could be deposed when broad rank-and-file support could be counted upon.¹⁵⁸ On July 12, dissidents attended the VI Convencion General Sindical Extraordinaria (CGSE), a meeting held with the purpose of electing a new STFRM executive committee.¹⁵⁹ Delegates at the CGSE chose Demetrio Vallejo as the new Secretary General of the STFRM, and they informed STFRM charro leaders that they had to turn over union headquarters in Mexico City as well as union documents and archives to independent union leaders.

The CGSE delegates gave charros until July 26 to comply with the order, otherwise dissidents would instruct the rank-and-file to stop working; workers were to remain at their positions but simply stop what they were doing.¹⁶⁰ Dissidents planned the stoppage to take place from 10 am to 12 pm on July 31; from 10 am to 1 pm on August 1; and from 10 am until 2 pm on August 2. The stoppages would take place everyday thereafter for

¹⁵⁷ The first sections deposed of charros were in the southeast but as the movement grew in strength other sections followed suit. By the end of June, sections in San Luis Potosí, Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, and Orizaba had been placed under democratic control. See, Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, p. 38.

¹⁵⁸ The press reported instances where local charros were ousted by independent unionists. See, "No admitarian los F.C. que les impogan condiciones onerosas," *Excelsi6r*, 30 June 1958,

¹⁵⁹ Velljo, *Las luchas*, p. 22; Alonso, *El movimiento*, 120-122.

¹⁶⁰ "Hay repudro contra Vallejo por el paro Ferroviario," *Excelsi6r*, 26 July 1958,

four hours, until charros stepped down.¹⁶¹ The action constituted the rank-and-file's boldest political action since the charros had taken power, for it amounted to a direct call for union democracy.¹⁶² Moreover, unlike the June strikes, the August actions were strictly political, as workers made no demands for economic concessions.¹⁶³ As Vallejo would later assert, the August strikes took place to "defend a right: [the right to] choose and depose our leaders."¹⁶⁴

In July and August, the streets of Mexico City became politicized as workers and students claimed them as their own, practicing direct democracy over public space.¹⁶⁵ These demonstrations showed in high relief how dissatisfied workers and students throughout the city were with their standard of living and with the PRI's response to their economic deprivation. Teachers and students joined workers from the petrol, electrical, and telegraph industries in supporting the railway movement.¹⁶⁶ On July 19, these groups took over the streets, marching from the Monumento a la Revolución to the Plaza de la Constitución, voicing their support of the Southeast plan.¹⁶⁷

These sites are significant, for they provided a visual and physical reminder to protestors that their ancestors had fought in the Revolution of 1910 and had won the right

¹⁶¹ "La duraciòn aumentarà una hora diariamente," *Excelsiòr*, 30 July 1958,

¹⁶² Quezada insisted that 95% of the rank and file preferred him over Vallejo. "Lealtad al comité ejecutivo Rielero," *Excelsiòr*, 22 July 1958,

¹⁶³ This point was emphasized by reporters who denounced the strike for its political motivations, suggesting it was reasonable for workers to complain about pay but subversive for them to demand changes in the political status quo. "Trabajo negò el reistro a los Vallejistas," and "Responsibilidad por los Paros," *Excelsiòr*, 1 Aug. 1958,

¹⁶⁴ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 29.

¹⁶⁵ "Por un asunto meramente sindical, Vallejo insiste en provocar Zozobra," *Excelsiòr*, 23 July 1958.

¹⁶⁶ "Rechazan las Ofertas," *Excelsiòr*, 29 July 1958. The article notes that teachers, petrol and electrical workers join the ferrocarrileros.

¹⁶⁷ "Ordenada manifestaciòn de ferrocarrileros, baja la mirada de soldados y policias," and "Va a permitirse la Anarquia?," *Excelsiòr*, 20 July 1958.

to strike, which became codified in the Constitution of 1917.¹⁶⁸ These sites were of particular import for railway workers, for their folklore stressed that revolutionary railway men played a critical role in making the Revolution a success by driving trains to transport soldiers.¹⁶⁹ In the Zócolo, activists listened and cheered while dissidents, as well as student and petrol workers leaders, took to the stage to criticize Salvador Quesada and the charros.¹⁷⁰ Elena Poniatowska cogently describes the symbolic importance of the Zócalo for grassroots street politics: “The Zócalo is the center of the country, the navel. The tall windowpanes of the National Palace open to the most political plaza in the world because from below signs petitions, denouncements and insults are cast at the president”.¹⁷¹

The discontent with the national government was not limited to workers and students. To make matters worse for the PRI, two days later bullfighters protested in another part of the city, threatening to conduct a strike of their own.¹⁷² They were followed by petrol workers, who, inspired by the example of railway dissidents, called for the resignation of charro leaders in the petrol union and for government recognition of independent petrol workers representatives.¹⁷³ Clearly, the strikes constituted a broad working-class insurrection, as unions representing a large segment of the working class

¹⁶⁸ On the importance for public commemorations of the Revolution for national identity, see Thomas Benjamin, *La Revolución*.

¹⁶⁹ see interviews in “*Yo soy reilero...*” and *Los ferrocarrileros hablan*.

¹⁷⁰ “Ordenada manifestacion de ferrocarrileros bajo la Mirada de soldados y policies,” *Excelsiór*, 20 July 1958.

¹⁷¹ Poniatowska, *El tren pasa primero*, 59.

¹⁷² “Una huelga ordenada por la Union de Matadores,” *Excelsiór*, 20 July 1958.

¹⁷³ “Amenazan con paros las secciones 34 y 35 del STPRM, por lios Sindicales,” *Excelsiór*, 29 July 1958.

publicly backed the railway rebels.¹⁷⁴ Moreover, the mobilization of students suggests that discontent encompassed sectors of middle-class youth as well.¹⁷⁵

On August 2, 1958, workers carried out the planned stoppages in their continuing effort to democratize the STFRM.¹⁷⁶ If Kevin Middlebrook is correct in stressing the indispensable role of the STFRM for solidifying the PRI's dominance in national politics, then dissident demands to depose charro leaders indirectly challenged the PRI's authority as well.¹⁷⁷ The government's response suggested that PRI officials felt the railway movement challenged the ruling party's legitimacy. Riot police surrounded striking workers, and dissident leaders reported that "secret agents" followed them on the streets.¹⁷⁸ In response to fears of repression, negotiations became less formal, as Vallejo and Amorós resorted to holding meetings in cars, streets and in houses.¹⁷⁹ According to Vallejo, in these meetings Amorós expressed his concern that the strikers called into question the authority of the Ruíz Cortines administration.¹⁸⁰ Workers stood firm as Vallejo negotiated with Amorós. Meanwhile, authorities had infiltrated union buildings,

¹⁷⁴ Conservative observers regarded the protests as a sign of a national crisis. Rodrigo Garcia Trevino, "¿Crisis Sindical?," *Excelsiór*, 23 July 1958.

¹⁷⁵ The press wondered if the cross-industry, as well as student, solidarity was due to the work of communist organizers. "Es comunista el movimiento de Vallejo," *Excelsiór*, 27 July 1958. Chapter 4 discusses in depth how critics of the movement portrayed strikers as having been duped by communist organizers.

¹⁷⁶ "Grandes daños en todo el país esta causando el paro de trenes," Aug. 3, 1958, *Excelsiór*.

¹⁷⁷ As discussed earlier, Middlebrook argues that the STFRM's support of the PRI from the time of Lázaro Cárdenas' administration enabled the PRI to establish its political monopoly. See, Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 153-155.

¹⁷⁸ "Grandes daños en todo el país esta causando el paro de trenes," and "Sabotajes en los patios del F.C. Mexicano," Aug. 3, 1958, *Excelsiór*; Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, pp. 62-63. Ortega states that 800 riot police officers and 200 police special police agents "mounted an attack against four sections." Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 29.

¹⁷⁹ Interview by author with Elias Tehran Gomez and Juan Colin, Mexico City, July 1999.

¹⁸⁰ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 29.

the police had manhandled strikers, and newspaper editorials alarmed readers that the railway movement had brought anarchy and chaos to the capital.¹⁸¹

The principal concern of the company and government, however, appeared to be Demetrio Vallejo. The new leader's ability to mobilize thousands of workers across the nation solidified his stature as a powerful political figure. Vallejo differed from more mainstream leftist leaders because he was able to find support among various industrial working groups. In addition to enjoying a majority of rank-and-file support among railway workers, he also garnered support from students, electrical workers, teachers, and the petrol union.¹⁸² His enormous popularity along with his refusal to comply with PRI directives posed a threat to the ruling party. Roberto Amorós insisted that Vallejo end his efforts to become the secretary general of the STFRM, but dissident delegates proposed instead that an election for Secretary General be held, with Vallejo as one of the candidates. Amorós remained determined that Vallejo not run for Secretary General; he conceded to holding an election but only if Vallejo eliminated himself from the list of candidates.¹⁸³

Workers continued to practice direct democracy. They took to the streets and occupied the national STFRM headquarters in Colonia Guerrero in Mexico City. Colonia Guerrero bustled with activity during the railway movement. The colonia housed a largely working class population, many of whom worked for the railway industry because STFRM headquarters, Nonoalco (the railway workshop), and the main train station in the capital were located within its limits. Tlateloco square, the plaza that would become

¹⁸¹ "Solo volverán al trabajo si lo ordena Vallejo," and "Vallejo no esta preso, pero lo Buscan," *Excelsiór*. 4 Aug. 1958; Carr, *Marxism and Communism*, 208.

¹⁸² In Mexico City, the police infiltrated and disbanded an assembly at which electrical workers were to vote on staging solidarity strikes in support of the *ferrocarrileros*. Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 71.

famous as the site where a student protest in 1968 was violently repressed by the military, served as a popular center of working-class recreation and was within walking distance of the railway station and STFRM headquarters.¹⁸⁴

During early August, neighbors witnessed workers scurrying through Colonia Guerrero as they organized the meetings and protests which ultimately led to the dissident take-over of STFRM headquarters on August 2. On that night, residents saw over 100 riot police officers and armed secret-service agents break down the doors of the union building to force out rebel railway men and women. The next day, *Excelsi3r* reported that fights broke out between police and a small number of workers. According to the newspaper, police found Molotov cocktails and rifles, signaling that dissidents had plans to fight.¹⁸⁵

There is reason to suggest that the report may have not been exaggerating. According to Lilia Benet3z Vallejo, the railway leader's niece, Vallejo carried a gun during those days; and former workers have recalled their use of Molotov cocktails to defend themselves against deployed infantry and riot police.¹⁸⁶ Police arrested workers who resisted that night, including Guillermina Lira Rodr3guez, a ferrocarrilera who was found with a gun.¹⁸⁷ Vallejo evaded their grasp, the newspaper reported, as he

¹⁸³ Alonso, *El movimiento*, 124.

¹⁸⁴ I have walked the short distance from Tlateloco to Buenavista station many times. Newspaper reports detail the close proximity of union head quarters to the rail workshop, known as Nonoalco, and to the Buenavista railway station. Nonoalco and Buenavista were within walking distance to the union head quarters of electrical workers, making it easy for railway and electrical workers to meet and organize. See, "Se lanzan a la huelga siete mil telegraphistas," *Excelsi3r*, 5 Aug. 1958,

¹⁸⁵ "Arsenal en el edificio de la seccion 16," *Excelsi3r*, 3 August 1958,

¹⁸⁶ Juan Col3n, a well-known railway activist in Mexico City, confirmed that strikers in the capital used Molotov cocktails; Geraldo Ni3o Mendes confirms the use of violence among strikers in Puebla. Interview with Juan Col3n, by author, Mexico City, 1999; Interview with Geraldo Ni3o Mendes, by author, Puebla, May 2004. For confirmation regarding Juan Col3n's status as a rank-and-file leader, see Mario Gill, *Los ferrocarrileros* (Mexico City: Editorial Extempor3neos, 1971), 164 and Alonso, *El movimiento*, 115.

¹⁸⁷ "Los locales sindicales devueltos a S. Quesada," *Excelsior*, 3 August 1958.

disappeared during the commotion at the union building.¹⁸⁸ Officials would spend the next few days knocking on doors in Colonia Guerrero searching for Vallejo.¹⁸⁹ Hotels popular with railway workers were searched as well after word got out that the leader stayed in neighborhood hotels when in town.¹⁹⁰ But who in the railway neighborhood would give up their beloved leader?

Despite the arrests, strikers continued to mobilize and their supporters appropriated streets to advance their politics of independent unionism. At Buenavista station during the next days, strikers carried placards denouncing Quesada, insisting that only Vallejo's orders could get them to return to work.¹⁹¹ The FNM baseball field was flooded with strikers and military personnel assigned to keep workers from getting out of order.¹⁹² Students joined workers once again in taking over the Monumento a la Revolución, signaling that protestors expected the PRI to make good on promises made to the popular sectors as a result of the Revolution. The students and railway workers were arrested, but their demand could not be erased from public consciousness.¹⁹³

Workers in traditionally powerful unions rallied around the railway movement.¹⁹⁴ Electrical workers and teachers gathered to discuss whether they should conduct sympathy strikes asking for the government to accept Vallejo as the STFRM General Manager.¹⁹⁵ The electrical workers voted against a sympathy strike, but they did allow

¹⁸⁸ Vallejo no esta preso, pero lo Buscan," *Excelsi3r*, 4 August 1958.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ "Tres hotels fueron cateados," *Excelsi3r*, 4 August 1958,

¹⁹¹ "Solo volveran al trabajo si lo ordena Vallejo," *Excelsi3r*, 4 August 1958, "Partelones insultantes," *Excelsior*, 4 August 1958.

¹⁹² "Estamos en platicas y van Bien," *Excelsi3r*, 5 August 1958.

¹⁹³ "Rechazan ofertas de pagos extras y deciden seguir adelante con el paro," August 5, 1958, *Excelsi3r*.

¹⁹⁴ Telegraph workers had their own workplace beef with their company and expressed resentment with their union leaders, who they also deemed charros. "Se lanzan a la huelga siete mil Telegraphistas," *Excelsi3r*, 5 Aug. 1958,

¹⁹⁵ Critics denounced cross-industry solidarity. See, "Zapatero a tus Zapatos," August 28, 1958, *Excelsi3r*; "Extraña Conspiraci3n," *Excelsi3r*, 27 August 1958,

Vallejo to conduct meetings at their union hall.¹⁹⁶ The use of the union hall was critical because their own union buildings were infiltrated with police and charros.¹⁹⁷ The teachers union in Mexico City, for its part, decided to back the railway strikes, shutting down schools in the capital until the government recognized the rebel railway leader.¹⁹⁸

The government's determination to prohibit Vallejo from becoming the Secretary General of the STFRM shows that officials had not fully appreciated the strength of the movement as well as grassroots support for him. As one worker commented at the time, "el compañero Vallejo is a symbol for us. We won't let the government impose on us when we are in the right. [Vallejo] is our leader and he defends our interests."¹⁹⁹ In a sign of how important Vallejo had become for the rank-and-file, workers revised lyrics to "La Reilera" in order to celebrate their leader and their movement.

"La Rielera Vallejista"

I am a reilero, I have a plan
It's about the Southeast, we are going to win,
And if they tell me they are going to pay,
We will triumph!

Viva Demetrio Vallejo,
Whom we will lift
To preside over the rank and file
And our union home [hogar].²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Demetrio Vallejo, by Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972.

¹⁹⁷ "Improvisado mitin rielero fue resuelto," *Excelsi6r*, 5 August 1958,. Workers walked from the Nonaloco workshop in colonia Guerrero to the electrical workers union hall near Monumento de la Revoluci6n.

¹⁹⁸ "Otra vez los ninos quedaran sin clases," *Excelsi6r*, 5 August 1958; "Asamblea en electricistas," *Excelsi6r*, 5 August 1958. Vallejo discusses the importance of receiving support from electrical workers in his interview with Elena Poniatowska. Interview with Vallejo, by Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972.

¹⁹⁹ "Apoyo a Vallejo," *Excelsi6r*, 5 August 1958.

The revision of “La Reilera” demonstrates the political uses of folk songs as well as the playful improvisation of the rank-and-file. The affection and commitment to Vallejo among workers is movingly captured in the second stanza; workers promise to carry Vallejo to the position of Secretary General. The union is metaphorically figured as a place of safety by the word “hogar.”

The strike persisted, as workers made good on their threat of staying out until the FNM and government recognized Vallejo as their leader. With over 80,000 workers mobilized in support of the dissidents, Vallejo refused to give in to Amorós’s request that he step down. He informed the General Manager that only the rank-and-file and the president could force him to withdraw as the leader of the STFRM. Vallejo claims that it was the force of his argument that persuaded Amorós to reconsider the proposal of an open election, but it was more likely the cost of the strikes—the political cost to Ruíz Cortines and the economic cost for the FNM.²⁰¹

Conclusion: The August Victory

On August 5, 1958, Demetrio Vallejo negotiated a settlement with FNM General Manager Roberto Amorós.²⁰² Amorós agreed to have police and STFRM officials vacate union buildings throughout the country and announced that strikers would not be punished.²⁰³ Moreover, he added, police would release workers who had been jailed during the protests. Most important, Vallejo and Amorós called for a transparent union

²⁰⁰ *Corrido histórico Mexicano: voy a cantarles la historia (1936 – 1985)*, tomo V (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1998), 138.

²⁰¹ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 30; on the costs to businesses and the FNM see, Mario Gill, *Los ferrocarrileros*, 167-168; and “Mercancías en peligro de Descomposición”, *Excelsiór*, 28 June 1958.

election that would take place between August 12 and 20.²⁰⁴ The negotiation process demonstrates the intimate connections between the FNM, STFRM, and the PRI. If Amorós could guarantee the release of prisoners, then he must have had the backing of President Ruíz Cortines. If Amorós could grant union elections, then it follows that charro union officials deferred to the FNM General Manager, and hence were not independent.

Dissident leaders assured the grassroots that democratic unionism had arrived; leaders instructed the rank-and-file to suspend the strike and get back to work. They assured members that fair election would take place.²⁰⁵ When the votes came in, Demetrio Vallejo had received over 59,760 votes against 6 votes for José María Lara, the candidate associated with charrismo.²⁰⁶ The extraordinarily low total for María Lara may be an indication that opponents of the movement were too intimidated to go to the polls that day.²⁰⁷ Even so, the rank-and-file showed overwhelming support for democratic unionism represented by Vallejo.

Officials at the U.S. embassy viewed the union election, as well as the labor mobilizations that preceded it, as a referendum on the PRI and the culture of corruption that pervaded the party. On August 28, the ambassador wired a detailed telegram to the Department of State summarizing the political climate of the southern neighbor. The document began by saying that the dire economic circumstances in which the poorest

²⁰² "Se firmó un convenio en la Sria de Trabajo," *Excelsiór*, 8 Aug. 1958.

²⁰³ "El regreso al Trabajo," *Excelsiór*, 8 Aug. 1958.

²⁰⁴ Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 75-76.

²⁰⁵ Se firmó un convenio en la Sria de Trabaajo," *Excelsiór*, 8 Aug. 1958.

²⁰⁶ "Vallejo, Nuevo líder de los Ferroviarios," *Excelsiór*, 24 Aug. 1958.. Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, p. 76; Alonso, *El movimiento*, 129. The number is cited in Gill, *Los ferrocarrileros*, 172. Neither charros PRI officials nor FNM management challenged the election.

Mexicans lived had led to cynicism toward the ruling party. “Discontent among poorer classes is widespread,” the embassy explained, “owing to constant increases in cost of living, without compensatory wage increases.”²⁰⁸ The official portrayed the situation as urgent for the PRI, for the “poorer classes” aimed their criticisms directly at the ruling party and were beginning to question its ability to provide the benefits promised by the Revolution. Furthermore, the telegram condemned the PRI, informing Washington that “disillusionment with the revolution is deep as poorer classes [of the] last generation watch politicians gaining in wealth while mouthing struggle for the masses.”²⁰⁹ In short, the railway movement represented a widespread revolt against the union politicians who gained in wealth “while mouthing [about] struggle” for the rank-and-file.²¹⁰

Reporters and commentators, having tracked the labor mobilizations by teachers, oil workers and electricians throughout the year, offered informed and astute conclusions about the railway strikes and their consequences for national politics. One writer provided a particularly subtle analysis, arguing that “there’s something...that distinguishes these railway strikes...from the strikes of Cárdenas times, [which] had exclusively economic objectives. The railway strike, in contrast, had political origins and motives. It was, in concrete terms, a strike against the PRI.”²¹¹ After ten months of organizing and taking to the streets against charristas politics, dissident leaders and the railway movement won an impressive victory--a democratic leadership emerged after ten

²⁰⁷ People who did not support Vallejo recall that they were threatened and, at times, beaten by strikers. Interview with José Gualalupe Escamilla, by author, Puebla, May 2004. Chapter 4 discusses the tensions between dissidents and pro-charro workers that existed at the time.

²⁰⁸ “Telegram from Embassy,” .840.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. 841.

²¹⁰ Ibid..

²¹¹ Dr. José Alvarado, “La huelga...”, *Siempre!*, 20 Aug. 1958, 20

years of charro rule. The new, independent representatives officially took over on August 27, 1958.²¹²

²¹² The date for when the democratic union took over varies slightly. Vallejo dated the transition on Aug. 27, while Palacios and Max Ortega date the event on Aug. 28.

Chapter 5:

The Democratic Railway Movement's Last Stand

Cold War fears of communism framed disputes between railway companies, the PRI and the railway movement. As workers expectations grew and mobilizations continued after the democratic union election and wage increases of 1958, the government, mainstream press and railway bosses claimed that communist agitators pushed workers to step up their demands. While workers in 1958 limited their demands to workplace issues, such as a democratic union and a wage boost, the rank and file extended their demands to include benefits for family members. To be sure, the wage issue was still important, as the 1959 railway movement requested another wage hike for the rank and file to strengthen the wage gains won in 1958. But the rank and file—headed by the democratically elected Demetrio Vallejo-- also demanded that the company pay for medical services for their wives and children and construct company housing for workers. These demands were made all the more controversial once STFRM members who worked the private firms of Ferrocarriles de Yucatán, Terminal de Veracruz, Ferrocarriles Mexicanos and Ferrocarriles de Pacifico demanded the same benefits that workers at the government-run FNM had won in 1958.

The dissidents' take over of the STFRM had represented a radical rupture in labor politics and aroused workers to demand greater benefits from railway companies. This chapter tells the story of how the increased expectations of workers and their families led the STFRM to demand a 16.66 % wage increase over what they attained the previous year as well as medical care for family members and company housing, how these

benefits were won through a confrontation with the FNM, and how the union's efforts to expand these gains to workers at private railway companies led to the repression of the railway movement. The chapter concludes by setting the repression of the movement within the context of Cold War fears of communist infiltration in Mexican politics. For detractors of the movement, Demetio Vallejo became a symbol of how communist militants infiltrated and manipulated naïve union leaders in an effort to overthrow the state.¹

In petitioning for medical benefits and housing, the independent union made clear the intimate connection between workplace and community identities. The struggle to attain these benefits culminated in two strikes. The first strike took place on February 25, 1959, which aimed to extend demands to workers at the state-run FNM, ended when López Mateos intervened in favor of the rank and file. The second strikes, which took place a month later, pressured private firms Ferrocarriles Mexicanos, Terminal de Veracruz, Ferrocarril del Pacifico and Ferrocarril de Yucatán to confer the same benefits to their employees that workers at the FNM had won. The strikes against private firms doomed the movement. Opponents in the press, government and industry condemned the rank and file for its avarice, which these detractors claimed signaled that communist agitators had manipulated workers.

The battle between railway workers and the PRI pitted two versions of democracy against each other. Workers viewed democracy as including the right to elect their own leaders as well as the right to mobilize for benefits, such as higher wages and medical care. For workers, the Constitution of 1917 and its defense of the right of workers to

¹ One editorialist conjectured in 1958 that Vallejo and railway leaders were using the railway movement to organize a revolution against the PRI in order to establish a workers' state. See, "Plan trenista para la

strike provided the legal basis for democratic unionism. While some workers belonged to Marxist parties, such as the Mexican Communist Party (PCM), the Partido Obrero Campesino Mexicano (POCM), and the Partido Popular, most framed their fight for wages, company housing, and medical care in the language of nationalism. For these rank and file activists, including Demetrio Vallejo, the movement embodied the democratic, populist impulses codified by the Constitution. Their democratic union should have been a source of national pride for all Mexicans.

The PRI viewed democracy in procedural and bureaucratic terms. Party officials framed democracy as the right to choose between ruling party candidates and their opponents. PRIistas expected workers and citizens to express their opinions through designated bureaucratic bodies, which would in turn lobby the PRI directly. The policy allowed PRI officials direct contact and influence over grassroots leaders, as we saw in the previous chapter when President Ruíz Cortines met personally with Demetrio Vallejo in 1958, negotiated a settlement to the strike, and soon after permitted a democratic union election. When the railway movement continued to fight for benefits for colleagues at private firms after the intervention of President López Mateos in March 1959, railway workers misjudged the president, who had generously granted their wage, healthcare and housing demands on the FNM in February but was unwilling to negotiate further concessions.

The STFRM decision to strike against private capital proved disastrous. The government refused to disrupt the business of private firms. By the end of 1959, workers' increased demands and mobilizations against private firms combined with the fear of communist machinations gave the government a justification for repressing

revolución obrera,” *Excelsiór*, 4 Aug. 1958.

railway activists. The drama ended in the arrest of Vallejo and other railway leaders, who were publicly condemned by editorials in the press, PRI officials, and company managers as communist manipulators of a naïve rank and file. Even the judge who presided over Vallejo's trial harangued the railway leader for becoming the puppet of communist instigators.²

While railway men debated each other at the workplace and during union meetings throughout 1958 and early 1959, railway women represented the *comunidad ferrocarrilera* on the streets. Lilia Benetíz, Demetrio Vallejo's niece, became an activist during these heady months, even participating in late-night meetings among union leaders. When police arrested activists, Benetiz and other *ferrocarrileras* rallied outside police stations and experienced harassment from the police.³ After years of *charro* rule, *ferrocarrileras* had become emboldened along with *ferrocarrileors*. Women had a stake in the struggle to pressure railway companies and the PRI to raise wages and confer medical and housing benefits to railway families. For women and men, the railway movement was more than just a workplace struggle.

Railway movement leaders argued that private firms and the FNM could pay for the proposed wage increase and benefits by raising freight rates on industrial goods, such as steel, carbon, zinc, and iron, a proposal highly contested by industry and company officials alike.⁴ By repressing the strikes, the PRI enabled railway companies to avoid

² Carcel Preventiva, D.F., Exp. B-61 4032/59 and Aug 6. 1970 doc Supreme Court in Personnel Dossier, Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*.

³ Valentín Campa's daughter recalls police officers harassing her mother regarding her husband's political activities. Interview with María Campa, by Elena Poniatowsk, Mexico City, 2004.

⁴ It was well known that the FNM offered artificially low rates to industrial companies moving these metals. During World War II, the U.S.-owned Ferrocarril del Pacifico carried petrol and agricultural goods to the U.S. Over 12% of its fleet shipped goods exclusively to the U.S. market. Carlos Villanueva, *Ferrocarriles* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1959), 161, 165-166.

raising freight rates on industrial goods. The fight over freight rates was not new. Since WW II, the STFRM had argued that freight rates on minerals and industrial goods remained artificially low, constituting less than the cost of shipping. During the war, the government had argued that the subsidy was necessary to support the U.S. in its fight against the Axis powers. With the end of the war, there was no reason to maintain the subsidy, but charro leaders shelved the proposal to raise rates because the PRI argued that higher rates would cut into the earnings of industrialists, and negatively affect economic growth.⁵

In 1958 and 1959, the independent union argued that it was long overdue for Mexican and U.S. companies to pay for the entire cost of shipping.⁶ The union proposal became a hotly contested issue in 1959. The STFRM conducted a study detailing the FNM's budget and showed how raising freight rates would enable the FNM and private firms to boost wages.⁷ The General Manager of the FNM, Benjamin Mendez, dismissed the study and reiterated the long-held position that increases would hurt industry and impair the economy. By proposing that the FNM raise rates, the union acted unpatriotically, he said. Disagreements between the STFRM and PRI over freight rates proved to be an insurmountable obstacle to negotiating wage increases.

The Cold War crusade against communism, and communist sympathizers, profoundly shaped the portrayal of the railway movement in the media as well as the trials of Demetrio Vallejo and other dissidents. The national media criticized workers at

⁵ We detailed these debates in great length in chapter 2.

⁶ Before the charrazo, STFRM Secretary General Luis Gómez Z. had publicly made this exact point on numerous occasions, blaming industrialists, especially U.S. industrialists, for profiting from artificially reduced freight rates. This issue is discussed in length in chapter 2.

each turn, maintaining that they were victims of communist leaders.⁸ When government lawyers deposed former workers Miguel Serrano Rodríguez, Guillermo Hass and César Márquez Gómez during Vallejo's trial, lawyers asked them about Vallejo's commitment to communism and if they knew whether communists had infiltrated the movement.⁹

Campa, a prominent railway activist who had been jailed during the charrazo, was well known for advocating Marxist revolution.¹⁰ He had served as STFRM Secretary of Education, Organization and Propaganda and edited "Unificación Ferroviaria" before his imprisonment in 1948. He held no official position in the STFRM in the late 1950s, but he had intimate ties to Vallejo and railway leadership, attending meetings and urging the STFRM to strike in March. As rank-and-file protests increased in number and combativeness, newspaper commentators became more adamant in linking outsiders, such as Campa, to the movement.¹¹

The fear of communism and of the influence of the U.S.S.R. over Mexican politics led the government to try Demetrio Vallejo for the crime of social dissolution. The government invoked Article 145 in the Federal Penal Code against Vallejo and other leaders.¹² Under President Miguel Ávila Camacho the Mexican Congress had enacted

⁷ Max Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 89-92. On the relationship between artificially low freight rates and FNM's budget deficit, see Ing. Santos Barcena, *La realidad en los ferrocarriles de Mexico* (Mexico: Ediciones de El COCO, 1958).

⁸ By February 1959, reporters alleged that Vallejo was a communist without providing any evidence other than his decisions as STFRM secretary general. Likewise a group of anti-communist university students, the Frente Universitario Anti-Comunista, alleged that Vallejo, Valentín Campa and other communists aimed to overthrow López Mateos' government. See, "Vallejo, agitador comunista," Feb. 25, 1959, *El Universal*.

⁹ Carcel Preventiva, D.F., Exp. B-61 4032/59 and Aug 6. 1970 doc Supreme Court, Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*.

¹⁰ Campa, *Mi testimonio: Memorias de un comunista mexicano*.

¹¹ "Contra la patria, el derecho de la huelga se degenera en delito," *El Universal*, 27 Feb. 1959; Ferrocarrileros no comunista tildan a Vallejo," *El Universal*, 16 March 1959. "Vallejo contra Mexico," *El Universal*, 18 March 1959.

¹² Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 119.

Article 145 in 1941 to protect the country from Axis agents by outlawing “speech or writing that carried on political propaganda among foreigners or Mexican nationals.”¹³ Anyone who committed such acts would be guilty of “social dissolution.” After World War II, the government used Article 145 to prosecute political activists, such as Vallejo and Campa, maintaining that the government had a responsibility to protect citizens from Soviet infiltration. In practice, the law provided justification for jailing dissidents opposed to the political status quo.¹⁴

The rank-and-file interpreted communism as they saw fit. A minority sympathized with U.S.S.R. Some, though no doubt fewer, had read Marx and Engels, even if they did not understand what they read.¹⁵ Still others rejected Marxism. Most preferred to focus on their immediate desire for greater autonomy from bosses at the workplace and for concrete benefits for themselves and their families.¹⁶

Accusations of communist sympathies strongly affected the course and outcome of the movement, giving the company and courts justification for imprisoning dissident leaders. Memories of communist accusations continue to shape workers’ remembrances. Testimonies from two former railway workers in Puebla, Narciso Nava and José Jorge Ramírez, provide a window into how rank-and-file members responded to accusations that they were duped by communist ideologues. Nava acknowledges that some leaders

¹³ Evelyn P. Stevens, “Legality and Extra-Legality in Mexico,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 1, (Jan.1970), 1.

¹⁴ Critics of the law against “social dissolution” denounced the law before 1959 because it could be used by the government against dissidents. See, *Siempre!*, 1 Oct. 1958.

¹⁵ Demetrio Vallejo explained to Poniatowska that he read Lenin and Marx but had no idea what any of it meant. Interview with Vallejo, Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972.

¹⁶ Interview with Narciso Nava, by author, Puebla, May, 2004; Interview with Carlos Ramírez Salazar, by author, March 2004; Interview with Antonio Moreno, by author, February, March, May, 2004. Interview with Roberto Huerta, Mexico City, 1999; Interview with Francisco Mortera, by author Mexico City, 1999; Former railway activists who identified as Marxists lament that the majority of workers were uninformed of

and colleagues held Marxist sympathies but insists that workers supported Vallejo because he was honest and led workers in gaining pay hikes and a sense of self respect.¹⁷ Ramírez, on the other hand, credits Vallejo and Campa for turning him on to socialism and helping him develop a critique of capitalism.¹⁸ Both workers agree that workers themselves made the movement a success, rejecting the view put forth in newspapers that the union hierarchy manipulated the rank and file.¹⁹

Not all railway workers supported the railway movement. The literature on the movement has paid little attention to rank-and-file detractors of the independent union. Pro-company workers allied with charros joined the Workers' Unity Bloc, (BUO) a coalition headed by Fidel Velázquez, notorious for his support of the PRI. Formed in 1955 to serve as a bulwark against communism, the organization's "sole purpose was to legitimize agreements drawn up by industry, charro-controlled unions and the government."²⁰ During 1958 to 1959, BUO ran full-page ads in major newspapers denouncing the railway movement for its autocratic leadership and links to international communism.²¹

Workers allied with the Marxist Partido Popular (PP) became alienated by the independent union's confrontation with the FNM. Vicente Lombardo Toledano, a prominent Marxist intellectual and labor leader, led the PP. Lombardo had pushed for the

Marxism and lacked a revolutionary critique of the PRI and capitalism. Interview with Juan Colín, by author, Mexico City, 1999; Interview with Geraldo Niño Mendes, by author, Puebla, 2004.

¹⁷ Interview with Narciso Nava, by author, Puebla, May, 2004.

¹⁸ Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, by author, Puebla, March 2004.

¹⁹ Interviews with Roberto Huerta (1999), Carlos Ramírez Salazar (2004), Geraldo Niño Mendes (2004), and Antonio Moreno (2004), by author. See also the interviews with former ferrocarrileros conducted by ethnographers in Puebla in "*Yo soy rielero...*"

²⁰ Norman Caulfield, "Labor Control in the Declining Mexican Revolution," in *Work, Protest, and Identity in Twentieth-Century Latin America*. Vincent C. Pelosi ed., 221.

²¹ "Apoyo de BUO al Presidente," Feb. 25, 1959, *Excelsiôr*.

Labor Unity Pact in 1942, which committed labor leaders to concede wages in order to support the war effort. In the 1950s, he continued to support the popular front strategy of finding a middle ground between labor and business.²²

The testimony of José María López Escamilla, or Don Chema as friends and colleagues know him, reveals the tensions that existed among the rank and file. Don Chema affirms the testimony of other informants who remember having been pressured to join the movement.²³ Pro-and-anti-vallejistas recall that dissidents beat and publicly shamed ferrocarrileros who opposed the movement. Don Chema's testimony enables us to write the scab, or the company man, into the history of the railway movement, adding an extra layer of complexity to our story of the strikes.

The literature on the railway movement has emphasized that the repression of the independent union enabled the PRI's continued hegemony over national politics and signaled a tendency in the party toward authoritarian responses to democratic organizing.²⁴ While it is true that the repression enabled the PRI to continue to exercise its influence over the STFRM, the railway movement did more than simply momentarily break the corrupt relationship between co-opted union representatives and their PRI backers. It brought to the surface a heated debate about the democratic future of Mexico. On the streets and in newspapers, working class men and women critiqued the PRI's post-war modernization model, which favored subsidies for big business over wage gains for the masses. Studies that focus primarily on the incorporation of labor unions fail to

²² Barry Carr, *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, 190, 214-215; and Campa, *Mi testimonio*, 188.

²³ Interview with José María López Escamilla, by author, Puebla, May, 2004.

²⁴ This is a key conclusion of all the major works on the movement. See Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*; Alonzo, *El movimiento ferrocarrilero*; Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*; and Stevens, *Protest and Response in Mexico*.

register the profound desire for democracy that existed among most working class men, women, and children.²⁵ This desire for a voice in national politics shook the streets of cities in 1959.

The Politics of Increased Expectation

The railway rank and file expected the independent union to take an aggressive approach when negotiating the 1959 contract with the FNM. Expectations ran high. The independent STFRM inherited petitions and complaints that charro leaders had disregarded since the 1948 takeover of the union.²⁶ Station managers who had been wrongfully dismissed during charro rule expected redress from the FNM. Train dispatchers anticipated a long-awaited wage increase. A large number of workers, especially the unskilled peones de via, demanded indemnification for relocation costs incurred for following company orders and moving throughout the country to fix bridges, repair tracks, and carrying out menial tasks. Finally, telegraph, shop, and dispatch men awaited supplementary pay that they were owed for overtime work.²⁷

All workers counted on railway leaders to renegotiate the collective contract. A major sticking point of the settlement between dissidents and President Ruíz Cortines in 1958 included the provision that workers would be allowed to negotiate a new contract when the present one expired in 1959. Workers had viewed the 1958 settlement as simply a stop gap measure to provide an immediate wage increase until the anticipated contract

²⁵ Ibid. No studies of the railway movement address the role of women in any length.

²⁶ The excitement and renewed strength of the grassroots was chronicled in *Siempre!*, Mexico City's premier cultural and political newsweekly. See "La Batalla de los Ferrocarrileros," *Siempre!*, 17 Sept. 1958.

negotiation of 1959. When Vallejo won the union election in 1958, expectations rose further. Workers now assumed that the 1959 contract would deliver a more comprehensive set of wage increases and work-place improvements to recompense for years of stagnating wages and poor treatment.²⁸

The independent union met expectations by securing benefits for the rank-and-file shortly after the democratic union election of 1958. Station managers, who had been hit especially hard by charrista politics were the first to reap the benefits of an independent union. In the fall of 1958, the STFRM made sure that the FNM rehired the many station managers who had been fired during the charrista period. In addition, the independent union fought for station managers who were in charge of express trains because they had not received a wage increase in three years.²⁹ In September 1958, the newly-elected, Vallejo-led STFRM gained a ten percent pay increase for these workers, garnering over 3 million pesos in back pay for the previous three years.³⁰ Train dispatchers who worked on the express line obtained a pay increase of thirty-two percent. Workers who were disgruntled for having to pay their own relocation costs were compensated. Finally, the salaries of shop and telegraph workers, who believed they should be well paid because they were among the best trained, were raised by fifteen percent.³¹

The STFRM strove to have salaries meet the rising cost of living. Ten years of conciliatory union politics and frozen wages required the union to fight for significant pay increases in order to improve the economic situation of workers immediately and to convince the rank-and-file that dissident leaders would continue to represent their

²⁷ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 25.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 79-80.

³⁰ Ibid., 122.

interests. By immediately gaining benefits for workers, the union suppressed worries that power and status might corrupt new leaders. Union leaders in Vallejo's administration took a combative stance toward the company that many of the grassroots regarded as part and parcel of the union's history and mission.³²

The Sweet Smell of Victory

Along with economic benefits, workers expected the democratic union to take a stand against the poor treatment of the rank-and-file by supervisors. Through the election of dissident leaders, workers were conscious that they were fighting for more control in their workplace.³³ Observers of the movement recognized the importance of worker control. One journalist sympathetic to the movement explained that workers would no longer have to endure unjust penalties and harassment by bosses. Echoing the sentiments of workers, the writer accused charros of not fighting for shop floor improvements and of refusing to represent injured workers.³⁴ "Vallejo," in contrast, "walks beside workers."³⁵

Increased worker control resulted in enthusiastic workers.³⁶ One shop worker claimed that productivity grew substantially. According to his (very unscientific)

³¹ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 36.

³² Worker testimonies in "*Yo soy reilero*" and "*Los Ferrocarrileros hablan*" affirm that workers viewed Vallejo as following in the combative tradition of the STFRM, a tradition jettisoned by charros. Workers also point out that ferrocarrileros were combative even before the formation of the STFRM in 1933. For a popular history of the most important railway strikes of the 1920s, see Elías Barrios, *El escuadrón de hierro* (Mexico City: Ediciones de Cultura Popular, 1978).

³³ Interview with Roberto Huerta, Mexico City, June 30, 1999. The sentiment is expressed by former workers interviewed by Puebla ethnographers in *Los Ferrocarrileros hablan*, (Puebla: BUAP, 1988). Also see interviews in "*Yo soy rielero...*".

³⁴ *Siempre!*, 17 Sept. 1958.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ The enthusiasm and united among workers had been noted in the mainstream press as a change from workplace attitudes during charros' tenure. "Espíritu de unidad del gremio Ferrocarrilero," *Excelsiór*, 1958.

estimate, workers repaired 20 cars more an hour after the union elections.³⁷ They labored with greater ease and satisfaction, he said, knowing that union leaders would represent them against the bosses in case of a dispute. The rank and file's greater control of the workplace was reflected in an increase in the number of grievances filed against supervisors. Workers' grievances against the company increased after the union election of 1958, only to decrease after the fall of Vallejo in 1959, further suggesting that the brief window of union democracy radicalized the rank-and-file at the workplace.³⁸

Gueremo Treviño and Carlos Ramírez, both of whom worked on the rails in Puebla at the time of the movement, affirm that workers at the time became enthused equally by their newfound control and their August 1958 wage increases. Treviño waxes nostalgic about how the movement unified workers, remembering that “an overwhelming unity existed, almost the whole workforce was vallejista.” Overwhelming grassroots support and “a clean [union] had led [Vallejo] to the leadership [of the STFRM].³⁹ Carlos Ramírez Salazar remembers that the new union elated workers because it won wage hikes. Vallejismo “was a positive thing for us” because with charros at the helm workers' wages had drastically fallen. With charros, “we were earning only nothing!” he recalls.⁴⁰

Rather than quell union radicalism, the wage increases and overthrow of the charros in 1958 further politicized the railway rank and file. Workers became more rebellious with their newfound independence at work and within the union, using their clout to support demands made by teachers as well as petrol and electrical workers. Avenues

³⁷ Interview with Eleazar Tinajero, by author, Mexico City, June 23, 1999.

³⁸ Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*, 195.

³⁹ Gloria Tirado, *Quiero morir como nací: historia de un líder ferrocarrilero, 1904-1991* (Puebla: Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades, Benémerita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla), 1992), 70.

became sites of political theatre, where students and industrial workers met and marched to articulate a critique of post-war modernization's decrease in the standard of living of the popular classes.⁴¹

Railway workers and their families had their sights set on the contract negotiation that was scheduled to take place during the first month of 1959. In January 1959, workers took to the streets in response to any sign that the FNM might not include a wage increase in the new contract.⁴² The rebelliousness of the rank and file frustrated union leaders, especially Vallejo, who felt it was his job to direct the rank and file.⁴³ In short, the August victory over charros created a sense of revelry and enthusiasm among workers.

The FNM's Response to the Demands in 1959

FNM officials spent the last months of 1958 delivering public statements explaining why the company could not afford to grant workers additional benefits. During Ruíz Cortines's administration, the company spent over 2 million pesos to repair rails, bridges, shops, equipment and terminals.⁴⁴ Renovation costs and concessions to workers,

⁴⁰ Interview with Carlos Ramírez, by author, Puebla, March 2004.

⁴¹ One commentator called the unity among students, electrical, petrol, telegraph and railway workers a "conspiracy". Meanwhile, pages in the newspaper presented photos of students marching alongside workers in Plaza Reforma, a much-trafficked section of the capital. See, "Extraña Conspiración," Aug. 27, *Excelsiór*. The following articles in the same issue of the newspaper also detail the participation of students at railway and petrol workers' protests. "Gases lacimogenos contra los Huelgistas," "Petroleros en manifestación, Mañana"; More photos of protesting students appeared in "Los sucesos de Ayer," *Excelsiór*, 20 Aug. 1958.

⁴² "Rotas las pláticas con los ferroviarios", *Excelsiór*, 16 Jan. 1959.

⁴³ Interview with Roberto Huerta, by author, Mexico City, 1999; Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 36.

⁴⁴ *Revista ferroviarios*, Sept. 1958,

company officials claimed, resulted in a deficit of 1,500,000 pesos. The FNM needed to tighten its belt by reducing its operating budget and increasing worker efficiency.⁴⁵

The STFRM insisted that the company could increase wages if it made cuts elsewhere. The union proposed that the FNM fire management personnel as a cost-cutting measure. For years the company had resisted laying-off management, focusing instead on ways to make the rank-and-file more productive. But in February 1959 grassroots pressure finally convinced the company that it had to let managers go; the FNM dismissed 500 managers.⁴⁶ The STFRM won a temporary victory, but the act made clear that the FNM faced a truly dire fiscal reality.

Recognizing that benefits for workers strained the FNM's solvency, the union commissioned a study of railway finances to come up with a plan to enable the FNM to increase wages without bankrupting the company. The STFRM concluded that the FNM could increase rank and file wages, but only if the company substantially increased freights rates on industrial goods.⁴⁷ Union leaders lobbied for higher charges on minerals, such as zinc, which, the STFRM argued, were given artificially low rates.⁴⁸ Every year Mexican companies sent millions of pesos worth of minerals north to the U.S via the railroad. The STFRM argued that rates on minerals failed to cover the costs of transporting them, much less allow for a profit. By keeping rates artificially low, the FNM subsidized Mexican and U.S. industries. The STFRM plan would add enough

⁴⁵ Villafuerte, *Ferrocarriles*, 27. "Reajuste en ferrocarriles para salvarlos de la Ruína," *El Universal*, 11 Feb. 1959.

⁴⁶ *Revista ferronales*, February, 1959; "Reajuste en ferrocarriles para salvarlos de ruina," *El Universal*, 11 Feb. 1959.

⁴⁷ The STFRM had urged the FNM to increase tariffs in order to pay the rank and file higher wages, but when the charros took over the STFRM, the compromised union leaders did not demand that the FNM increase tariffs. Hence, Vallejo's demand that the FNM increase leftist wages reflects a positions taken by STFRM leaders before the charazo. On the tariff issue in 1958, see *Revista Ferronales*, No. 6, June 1958.

revenue to enable the company to improve infrastructure, raise wages, and provide free company housing and medical care to workers and their families.⁴⁹

STFRM leaders focused on swaying PRI officials. In December 1958, the union presented recently inaugurated President López Mateos with the STFRM study of the company's administration and finances, urging the president to raise rates on minerals.⁵⁰ As Minister of Labor in Ruíz Contines' administration, López Mateos had run on a pro-labor platform. Union leaders remained optimistic that the president would prove to be the friend-of-labor he claimed he was during his campaign. Union representatives were therefore disappointed when Eduardo Bustamante, Secretary of National Patrimony, informed them that the President decided to deny their plan.⁵¹ The action agitated workers, who believed that without raising rates the FNM would argue during the upcoming contract negotiations that it could not afford to raise wages.

The Struggle for Public Opinion

Workers had not stood idly by as the government and company attacked the members of the movement throughout 1958 and early 1959. Activists pointed to the government's praise of railway workers as indispensable for the national economy in order to persuade the public that the rank and file was worthy of a pay raise and of proper union representation.⁵² In addition, they portrayed the movement as overwhelmingly grassroots, countering the perception that sophisticated communists manipulated workers.

⁴⁸ Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 100.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 89.

⁵¹ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 40.

Most important, railway dissidents argued that the movement held true to the goals of revolutionary nationalism embodied in the Constitution of 1917 and the memory of the Revolution.⁵³

The construction of narratives to counter company and government accusations began virtually at the onset of the mobilizations to oust the charros in 1958. An article reporting on the initial work stoppages quotes a rank-and-file member who asserted, “we are neither communists nor agitators, explaining, “since our union won’t act [on our behalf] we must take the initiative.” The striker ended by ensuring the interviewer that “we do not have leaders.”⁵⁴ The worker also denied any association with the PCM and communism.

The comments of the interviewed striker stand as one of the many efforts by dissidents to portray their movement as enjoying the support of everyday workers and their communities. By emphasizing the grassroots, democratic character of the movement they drew a sharp contrast to the political protocol of the STFRM and the national government—institutions that were increasingly viewed as authoritarian. The large-scale mobilization of railway workers as depicted by the above striker and others proved subversive simply because it contrasted with the autocratic practices of the PRI and union. Hence, the very nature of the railway movement was perceived as an affront to the government, the company and charro officials.

⁵² “Emplazron de huelga a la empresa de Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico,” *Excelsior*, 18 Jan. 1959.

⁵³ Interviewees regularly assert that they fought for rights granted to them by the Constitution of 1917, a claim made by Demetrio Vallejo during his trial after his arrest in 1959. We discuss Vallejo’s trial below. Interview with Geraldo Niño Mendes, by author, Puebla, February 2004; Interview with Antonio Monero, by author, Puebla, November, 2003; Interview with Narciso Nava, by author, Puebla, May 2004.

⁵⁴ “El servicio se suspendió en toda la República,” *El Universal*, 7 Feb. 1958

In addition to defending themselves against claims that they were communists, workers used newspaper editorials and interview opportunities to lobby for public support, noting that ten years had passed without a raise in their real wages. As pressure mounted against the movement, they insisted that their demands were fair because they embodied the principles of the Revolution. Strikers insisted that patriotism and deference for the Revolution bonded railway workers with other citizens.⁵⁵

Union members made use of newspapers and public space to revise and protest official narratives.⁵⁶ They penned objections to their opponents' claims that they should be content with the gains won in August 1958. In editorials and advertisements in newspapers, they made their case that the company could offer them more: better housing at reduced rates, medical care for families, and yet another wage hike. Expectations had risen and dissidents felt energized by the movement's momentum.⁵⁷

Mobilizations on busy city streets punctuated the battles waged in periodicals. Strikers deployed a counter-plot to contest the official story by carrying signs, painting political messages on company property, and chanting songs in public.⁵⁸ In Puebla, workers put on a community dance after Vallejo's ascent to union head, appropriately

⁵⁵ The STFRM wrote ads for national newspapers in which they detailed their reasons for asking for higher wages and medical benefits. They also explained to the public that the FNM could pay for the demands by raising rates on freights. See, "Al exigir revision de tarifas, el sindicato ferrocarrilero defiende los intereses nacionales," *Excelsi6r*, 11 Feb. 1959, "Es preciso acabar con los despilfarros y la imoralidad con los ferrocarriles," *Excelsi6r*, 14 Feb. 11, 1959,

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ The energy and optimism was reflected in the fact that workers at private companies now made demands for higher wages and medical benefits. "Huelga ma1ana en los F.F.C.C. Yucat6cos," *Excelsi6r*, 2 Feb. 1959.

⁵⁸ Workers painted anti-government and anti-press signs on company freight cars, some of which served as worker housing. See the photographs in the Hermanos Mayo Collection, AGN, which can be found appendix B. Lilia Benet6z recalls in detail the festive and frenzied quality of the protests. Interview with Lilia Benet6z, by Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972. We discuss Benet6z role in the movement in Chapter 5.

naming the event the “Dance of Victory.”⁵⁹ Treviño informs us that “La Rielera was always a musical source in dances and in struggles.” In Puebla, railway families listened to the revised, Vallejista version of “La Reilera, which exclaimed, “Viva Demetrio Vallejo, who we will support, to represent our workforce, our union home, I am reilero, I came to fight.”⁶⁰ “El Universal” reported that workers and families in Mexico City marched from Buenavista station—the main railway station in the capital—to the Plaza de la Constitución singing “La Rielera,” accompanied by a musical band.⁶¹

In these ways, railway families articulated an alternative, workers’ narrative that served to idealize their value to the country’s political process and economic development.⁶² By advancing arguments for increased wages and control over the work place, they figured railway workers as patriotic and humble but alienated by years of abuse and neglect. They portrayed themselves as politically independent and the movement as vigorously democratic, repudiating critics’ claims that autocrats misled naïve workers.

Critical commentaries in national newspapers did not go unnoticed by strikers. The rank-and-file were well aware that the mainstream media had taken the side of the company and they continued to respond on streets and in newspapers. During one demonstration, strikers responded to these characterizations by shouting, “Down with the reactionary press!” as they marched onward singing railway songs.⁶³ In another case, a railway family wrote, “Don’t buy newspapers that sell us out”, on the rail car in which

⁵⁹ Gloria Tirado, *Quiero morir como nací*, 73.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ “El líder Vallejo dió Contraorden,” *El Universal*, 22 Feb. 1959,

⁶² The creative use of banners during mobilizations is evident in photographs. See, “Huelga de los Ferrocarrileros,” envelope no. 12609, Hermanos Mayo Collection, Fototeca, AGN.

⁶³ “El líder Vallejo dió Contraorden,” *El Universal*, 22 Feb. 1959,

they lived.⁶⁴ Finally, photographs reveal that protestors paraded effigies of charros and wrote the names of arrested or fired workers on coffins. These creative responses demonstrate how workers' mobilizations went hand in hand, and how rank-and-file protestors constantly resisted official narratives. Paradoxically, newspapers published workers' condemnation of the press alongside editorials denouncing the railway movement, demonstrating how street protests and chants became selectively inserted into the public dialogue through the press.

The February Strike

On December 1, Adolfo López Mateos designated Benjamín Méndez as the General Manager of the FNM.⁶⁵ It was one of his first acts as president, and one that was meant to reclaim his power over the FNM. Méndez's predecessor, Roberto Amorós, had made a habit of publicly denouncing the railway movement while remaining flexible and willing to negotiate behind closed doors. In 1958, Amorós had conducted negotiations in cars and private residences as well in the more formal setting of the National Palace. He later helped orchestrate the backdoor deliberations that eventually led to Ruíz Cortines's settlement on a FNM wage increase in 1958. In contrast to Amorós's flexible style, Méndez put an end to behind-the-scenes bargaining.

By appointing Méndez, López Mateos symbolically ended clandestine negotiations with the railway movement. Upon taking office, Méndez emphasized that the country counted on workers to help modernize the railway industry by putting their demands for

⁶⁴ Sleave 13.313, Hermanos Mayo Collection, Fototeca, *AGN*.

⁶⁵ *Revista ferroviaria*, No. 12, December 1958.

higher wages on hold. He informed workers through the company magazine, “Ferronales”, that he expected them to make sacrifices for the good of the nation and to facilitate the rehabilitation of the railway system. Most important for the STFRM, Mendez stressed that rates would not be increased.⁶⁶ The rank-and-file, he wrote, would have to bear the company’s restructuring with workplace discipline and a patriotic attitude.⁶⁷ In short, the FNM attempted to re-establish the conciliatory union-company relationship that existed before the dissident movement took over the STFRM.

Rate increases on freight proved too controversial a measure for López Mateos to back.⁶⁸ Just as Presidents Ávila Camacho, Alemán, and Ruíz Cortines had refused to raise freight rates, so too did López Mateos reject the STFRM’s plan to redistribute wealth from industries to the FNM and its employees. Many workers felt betrayed by López Mateos and argued for increasing the militancy of the movement. Miguel Hernández, a member of the STFRM’s Executive Committee of Local 14 in Mexico City, expressed the sentiments of workers in his local when he suggested that they strike.⁶⁹ The rank-and-file felt slighted by the president’s rejection of rate increases, and Local 14 workers believed that shutting the system down would force López Mateos to reconsider.

Vallejo and others among the STFRM leadership urged members at Local 14 and others who itched for a strike to allow the STFRM to continue negotiations. Vallejo considered a strike to be imprudent because there had been no violation of the collective contract.⁷⁰ He instead planned to seek a resolution with the company concerning rates on

⁶⁶ “Reajuste en ferrocarriles para salvarlos de ruína,” *El Universal*, 11 Feb. 1959.

⁶⁷ *Revista ferronales*, No. 12, December 1958.

⁶⁸ “Un escollo en las pláticas en F.F.C.C.,” *Excelsiór*, 3 Feb. 1959.

⁶⁹ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 37.

⁷⁰ “Se dividen los ferrocarrileros,” *El Universal*, 18 Feb. 1959.

commodities. He promised to explore the possibility of calling a strike if conciliatory measures failed.⁷¹

Méndez took a firm stance against raising freight rates. PRI representatives, FNM officials and industrialists stuck to their postwar position that industrial modernization required low transportation costs. In addition, The FNM's General Manager refused to raise rates on minerals because it would have increased the company's budget, giving workers reason to believe the company could afford wage increases and other benefits.⁷²

When STFRM leaders received Méndez's rejection of rate increases, they quickly returned to the combative style that had brought them acclaim and power in August. The union presented the following demands on January 17:

- 16.66 percent raise above the 215 peso increase for all members
- 52,500,000 pesos a year for medicine and medical attention for families of workers
- a savings plan
- 60,000 units of company housing for all workers or 5 pesos a day for rent⁷³

Union leaders estimated that the benefits would cost the company around \$210 million pesos, which could be covered by the rate increase on minerals. The company rejected the demands, leading once again to a confrontation between the rank-and-file and the FNM.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 38.

⁷² "Reajuste en ferrocarriles para slavarlos de la ruína," *El Universal*, 11 Feb. 1959.

⁷³ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, pp.39-40; "Posible huelga ferrocarrilera," *El Universal*, 18 Jan.1959.

⁷⁴ "No pueden los F.C. dar aumento de salarios," *Excelsiór*, 11 Feb. 1959. Méndez explained that for every one peso earned by the FNM it spends 1.3 pesos. Hence, the FNM operated in the red and needed to make cuts, not take on the increased costs that a salary adjustment would require.

For the first time during the movement, FNM workers joined their grievances with those of their counterparts from a private railroad company, Ferrocarriles del Pacifico.⁷⁵ The decision to include workers at Ferrocarriles del Pacifico reflected the STFRM's sense of political power.⁷⁶ The union had previously limited its demands to workers at FNM, presumably because the government, which managed the FNM, could be pressured to abide by its populist rhetoric. Owners at Ferrocarriles del Pacifico had no such allegiances to "the people," had no obligation to express sympathy with, or "revolutionary solidarity" for, workers. In short, the STFRM took a major risk by linking the demands of workers at FNM with those at Pacific Railways. The STFRM now confronted capitalist-owners head on.

The union planned a strike for February 25, 1959.⁷⁷ Like FNM workers, the rank-and-file at private companies expected the company to revise the collective contract. They had come to believe that they could exact from their private employer the same benefits that the government-employed workers at the FNM demanded. By combining their demands with those of workers at the FNM, workers at Ferrocarriles del Pacifico escalated the pressure on the president to come to an agreement with the STFRM.⁷⁸

The railway movement flexed its muscle on the streets and in newspaper, but the arguments put forth by dissidents did little to win over commentators whose editorials

⁷⁵ Vallejo, "dispuesto a que no se mueva un solo tren en el país," *El Universal*, 19 Feb. 1959.

⁷⁶ The fact that Benjamín Méndez continued to negotiate with the STFRM added to the perception that workers were in a position of strength. "Si iniciaron las pláticas tendientes para evitar la huelga de los ferrocarrileros," *Excelsi6r*, 21 Jan. 1959.

⁷⁷ In January the STFRM made it public workers would strike on February 25 if their demands were not met. The press reported that a strike was unlikely because President López Mateos would **probably** intervene. "Confian en pronto arreglo ferroviario," *Excelsi6r*, 21 Jan. 1959; "Lo mas probable es que no se llegue a realizar la huelga ferroviaria," *Excelsi6r*, 1 Feb. 1959.

⁷⁸ "Puntos Principales del convenio Anoche," *El Universal*, 27 Feb. 1959.

appeared daily in the national press.⁷⁹ In fact, as the movement grew in strength and determination and the government grew more inflexible, commentators sided with the company and openly condemned the strikers.⁸⁰ By late February 1959, articles no longer questioned the legitimacy of FNM officials' position.⁸¹ The company, editorials affirmed, could not afford raising wages and confer medical coverage to railway families.⁸² Echoing the opinion of government officials, one commentator matter-of-factly condemned strikers for developing a "movement of agitation," contrasting the movement with the government, which sought to "promote order and tranquility" in the capital.⁸³

In addition to the discursive battles that took place in newspapers, the railway movement had to contend with how to incorporate workers from the Ferrocarriles del Pacífico into their negotiations.⁸⁴ All workers belonged to the STFRM, but the union now had to conduct negotiations with two employers and acquire a consensus with workers at a public company and those at a private one. The difficulty of juggling these two lines of negotiation became clear when, one day before the strike, STFRM representatives of workers at Ferrocarriles del Pacífico decided--without consulting the

⁷⁹ Soonafter Méndez announced the FNM could not afford to raise wages articles appeared in the press which affirmed Méndez's position and lambasted the position of the STFRM. "La economía de los ferrocarriles," *Excelsior*, 2 Feb. 1959; "Los F.F.C.C. no pueden dar aumentos: deficit de 603 millones," *Excelsior*, 24 Feb. 1959; In "La posición del sindicato," *Excelsior*, 12 Feb. 1959 a reporter described ferrocarrileros as "antipatriotic" and concluded that their demands were based on a "criminal egoism".

⁸⁰ "Revision económica en los F.F.C.C.N.N.," *Excelsior*, 14 Feb. 1959.

⁸¹ "Huelgas y sabotaje a la Patria," Feb. 27, *El Universal*; "Contra la patria, el derecho de huelga degenera en Delito," *El Universal*, 27 Feb. 1959.

⁸² "Todo indica que habrá huelga rielero," *Excelsior*, 24 Feb. 1959.

⁸³ "El mantenimiento del orden Social," *El Universal*, 22 Feb. 1959; Other articles denounced the STFRM's "socialist" position. "Socialismo de estado vs. libre empresa," *Excelsior*, 14 Feb. 1959.

⁸⁴ Problems between railway workers and the Ferrocarriles del Pacífico had been brewing for at least four years before the STFRM sought benefits for their members in 1959. In 1955, for instance, workers at Ferrocarrile del Pacífico asked President Ruíz Cortines to intervene on their behalf and pressure the private

rank-and-file at FNM-- to extend the deadline for their demands. Sensing perhaps that the stage was set for state repression of the movement, union leaders at Pacifico locals lobbied for breathing room. The decision to suspend talks with the president would have damaging ramifications.

On February 25, 1959, railway workers throughout Mexico shut down the rail system. Although Ferrocarriles del Pacifico workers had left their demands in abeyance for the moment, they nevertheless struck in solidarity with their FNM *compañeros*, as did workers from the private companies of Ferrocarriles México and the Terminal de Veracruz.⁸⁵ The decision of workers at the Ferrocarriles del Pacifico to strike after having temporarily shelved their demands reflects the frenzied, unpredictable turns that the railway movement took during those heady days of mobilization. It also indicates the organizational strength of the STFRM. Ferrocarriles del Pacifico workers could waiver on whether to stick to their own demands, but the STFRM insisted that all of its members strike in support of the FNM rank and file.

As workers, their families, as well as their supporters in other industrial unions and student groups filled *zócalos* across the country, the Federal Labor Court convened to hear the STFRM's legal justification for striking.⁸⁶ The STFRM argued in court that workers had the right to strike because negotiations over the contract had hit a wall. STFRM lawyers contended that the action was legally sound because Federal Labor Law and the Constitution protected the right to strike. The court disagreed. To Vallejo's

railway company to give the rank and file a \$150.00 peso a month increase. The President disappointed them. See ARC, v. 658, 513/10 and ARC, vol. 658, 513/19, AGN.

⁸⁵ "Otro ferrocarril, ya son cuatro, va a la huelga," *Excelsiôr*, 17 Feb. 1959.

⁸⁶ Meanwhile, the police in the capital was busy threatening workers and their supporters that they would face arrest if they protested. Reporters from *Excelsiôr* took sides with the police, explaining that workers

shock, the labor arbitration court determined that the strike was illegal⁸⁷ because the union failed to present documents proving that workers voted in favor of the strike.⁸⁸ Workers perceived the decision to be a glaring violation of their rights, since the court's requirements were not specified in the Constitution or in Federal Labor Law.⁸⁹ In their opinion, the decision represented a painfully obvious political measure aimed at defusing the movement. In light of the labor arbitration court's decision to outlaw any potential strikes, the mainstream press now described all strike and protest actions as "criminal."⁹⁰

Rumors of communist sympathies among workers continued to serve detractors as a handy ideological weapon to wield against the movement.⁹¹ An article in "El Universal" serves as an emblematic example of the effort to marginalize workers through the discourse of communism. The writer maintained that "people agree that the strike should have ended by now and are wondering if its continuation is due to outside influence."⁹² A common rhetorical move, in fact, was to designate strikers as participants in "an agitation movement," implying that they intended to destabilize the economic and

presented a "threat to the country's economy." See, "La policía de D.F. hace responsable a Vallejo de cualquier desorden, hoy," *Excelsi6r*, 21 Feb. 1959.

⁸⁷ "Huelga inexistente; 24 horas para volver a sus labores," *El Universal*, 26 Feb. 1959; Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 41.

⁸⁸ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 41.

⁸⁹ "Sindicato de Trabajadores Ferrocarrileros de la Rep6blica Mexicana," *El Universal*, 2 March 1959. This is an ad put out by STFRM leaders.

⁹⁰ "Una huelga criminal," Feb. 24, 1959, *Excelsi6r*.

⁹¹ In "Llega al mante el plan general de agitaci6n," *Excelsi6r*, 25 Feb. 1959, a reporter concluded that "communists use the railways for their manifestations."; "Una costosa agitaci6n manejada por el Partido Comunista y pagada por el Sindicato ferroviario," and "Costosas Experiencias," in which a reporter claims that the strikes were caused by "agents of disorder, apostles of scandals, *propaganistas* of disoriented communist theories that seek to implement in Mexico Soviet authoritarianism". Both articles appear in *Excelsi6r*, 25 Feb. 1959.

⁹² "Intereses extra6os impeden Arreglo?," *El Universal*, 19 Feb. 1959.

political system rather than remedy the problem of workers wages. In short, the press transformed workers into agitators against the nation.⁹³

In view of government hostility, some members of the union's General Executive Committee proposed to go back to work, but rank-and-file expectations had to be taken into account before unilaterally calling off the strike. Vallejo warned that cutting the movement short might cause workers to turn against the union, and leaders might be perceived as traitors. The memory of the charrazo must have permeated discussions, for failure to abide by rank-and-file demands might have created the political conditions for the government to appoint new leaders, as it had done in 1948.

Vallejo weighed the chances that the government might repress the strikes against workers' desire to continue to picket. He proposed-and leaders approved-to seek a middle ground by hiring lawyer Mario Pavón Flores to negotiate with López Mateos in order to get the contract revisions passed. It was a last minute tactic to buy time for the union before deciding whether or not to continue the strike.

Pavón must have had some impressive powers of persuasion because López Mateos granted FNM workers their demands for higher wages and medical benefits for family members. The decision surprised workers, the company, and the press. But the president denied the request that the company build housing and develop a savings fund for families.⁹⁴ The president's decree perplexed both the STFRM and the company, because it had seemed that the president was preparing to cancel negotiations with union leaders.

As the strike ended, workers once again reaped the benefits of democratic unionism and direct action mobilization. Once again pressure from below had forced union leaders

⁹³ "El mantenimiento del orden Social," *El Universal* 22 Feb. 1959; "Conjura contra la patria: a todos los trabajadores ferrocarrileros del país a la opinion pública de Mexico," *Excelsi6r*, 23 Feb. 1959

to challenge the government. For the second time in less than a year, workers' plan of action brought major gains that seemed like a pipedream just a year before with charros in power. In August, they had won an independent union; in February, they received a pay hike and family medical insurance. How could anyone now question the power of worker and community militancy?

The Strikes against Private Firms

That only FNM workers triumphed with the president's decision ultimately undermined the movement. Pacific Railway workers still waited for union leaders to attain the same benefits that FNM workers had won. The decision taken earlier by local STFRM leaders to extend the timetable for actions had cost them because the president acceded to the demands of only their colleagues at FNM. The situation strained the union because it had to negotiate once more with the president, who now had to consider the interests of the private company's investors.

Making matters more difficult, workers from the privately-owned Ferrocarriles Mexicanos, Ferrocarriles de Yucatán, and the Terminal de Veracruz joined their comrades at the U.S.-owned Ferrocarriles del Pacífico in demanding a contract that granted them a 16.66 percent raise and company housing.⁹⁵ The demands made by workers at the four privately-owned company demonstrated in bold relief the pervasive enthusiasm and sense of power held by railway families. It had been nearly a year since

⁹⁴ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, 42-43.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46. ; "Mañana: huelga en el F.C. Mexicano," *El Universal*, 8 March 1959. The Veracruz Terminal Company was a train station in Veracruz. The FNM, Ferrocarriles Mexicanos, and Ferrocarriles del Pacífico owned its stock, but it was managed independently of the three companies.

the Southeast Plan had been clandestinely written in the house of a Mexico-City railway family. The Southeast Plan helped bring a movement that simmered in secret meetings, cantina culture, and street life into national politics. Workers at private companies now were ready to fight to get their due.

Once again the union assigned its attorney, Mario Pavón Flores, to negotiate with the president on its behalf.⁹⁶ The STFRM must have perceived that it was taking a risk by trying to negotiate better terms for workers at private companies because it instructed Pavón to limit the union's request to the 16.66 percent wage increase that workers at the FNM had won. In contrast to the demands the union made when dealing with the FNM, union leaders took company housing and family medical care off the table when negotiating with the private firms.⁹⁷ Workers at the private companies would presumably have to wait until a later date to receive additional benefits.

After meeting with López Mateos, the attorney announced that the president agreed to grant the concessions. Workers at Ferrocarriles de Yucatán, Ferrocarriles del Pacifico, Terminal de Veracruz and Ferrocarriles Mexicanos must have been overjoyed when they received word from their union representative that the president had granted them a wage hike. It seemed that the STFRM had attained yet another major victory for its members.

The victory proved painfully short lived. The next day FNM General Manager Méndez asserted that no agreement had been finalized between the president and the union.⁹⁸ Although Méndez represented the FNM and did not have jurisdiction over the private companies against which workers mobilized, he served as President López

⁹⁶ "Platicas para evitar la huelga en el Mexicano," *El Universal*, 9 March 1959.

⁹⁷ Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 105.

⁹⁸ Gill, *Ferrocarrileros*, 191.

Matoes spokesperson on railway issues.⁹⁹ The president himself released no comments and his evasive behavior angered workers because they thought that they deserved the same contract revisions that were granted to their FNM counterparts.¹⁰⁰

By canceling negotiations the president gave railway families two options: the rank and file could go back to work, or railway families could spill into the streets yet again. On March 25, 1959, workers at Ferrocarriles del Pacífico and Ferrocarriles Mexicanos workers struck. Colleagues at the Terminal de Veracruz joined them the next day. By March 27, the entire railway system shut down, as FNM workers took to the streets in solidarity.¹⁰¹

The state and FNM immediately took measures to end the movement. First, the labor arbitration court declared the strike illegal.¹⁰² It granted the companies permission to hire scabs and fire recalcitrant employees. The FNM circulated an announcement that gave workers a 48-hour grace period to return to work. Those who failed to return to work were dismissed.¹⁰³ Workers who chose to return had to go before a FNM panel and sign a document stating that they regretted participating in the strikes. More specifically, the document stated that the striker agreed that the FNM had justly fired him due to his participation in the strikes. It amounted to a public confession, a *mea culpa* for

⁹⁹ Méndez's role as interlocutor on behalf of the publicly-operated FNM as well as the private firms demonstrates the blurry line between the position of the FNM, PRI and the private firms. In essence, Méndez, a public employee with the ear of the president, negotiated with the STFRM regarding the union's contract with the private companies.

¹⁰⁰ This point was made to me by Antonio Monero, who worked for the FNM. Interview with Antonio Monero, by author, Puebla, February 2004.

¹⁰¹ Vallejo, *Las luchas*, p. 46; "Juzgan inexistente la huelga; 24 horas para volver," *El Universal*. 26 March 1959.

¹⁰² "Repudia México las ideologías," *El Universal*, l. 27 March 1959.

¹⁰³ "Juzgan inexistente la huelga," *El Universal*, l. 26 March 1959.

participating in the independent union movement. No worker could return to work after the 48-hour grace period without signing the document.¹⁰⁴

Peones de via, the poorest and lowest ranking workers in the industry, faced a particularly harrowing situation because many of them lived in company-owned encampments, which consisted of tents, makeshift houses, or rail cars.¹⁰⁵ Better off station managers, who lived adjacent to stations in fairly comfortable housing, faced a difficult dilemma, too. Both had to decide between crossing the picket line and keeping their jobs and houses or standing in solidarity with their comrades by refusing to go back to work. Those who continued to strike after the 48-hour window risked the military physically removing their families from their homes.¹⁰⁶ The decision was particularly tormenting for a ferrocarrilera who was pregnant during the strikes. Facing the possibility of finding herself homeless, she urged her husband to respect the picket line and stay loyal to his comrades.¹⁰⁷

On March 28, the government replaced workers with soldiers. Work centers became militarized, as soldiers assisted those who had returned to work in moving trains.¹⁰⁸ Military personnel infiltrated union buildings and arrested over 5,000 strikers.¹⁰⁹ STFRM leaders who had not returned to work were prosecuted as anti-government

¹⁰⁴ Marcelino Aquino B., FNM Personnel Dossier, Matías Romero, Box 1, *CEDIF*; Carlos Bernal Romo, Box 3, *CEDIF*.

¹⁰⁵ On the peons' living conditions, see Villafuerte, *Ferrocarriles*, 1959, 17.

¹⁰⁶ This was a concern for Carlos Ramírez, whose family lived in a tent in a remote town. Interview with Carlos Ramírez, by author, Puebla, March 2004.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Guadalupe Acosta, by author, Mexico City, July 2004.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*; Gill, *Ferrocarrileros*, 199.

¹⁰⁹ April 1959, *Revista Ferronales*; Over police arrested 700 strikers at both Guadalajara and Torreon. See, *Siempre!* 15 April 1959.

rebels. Soldiers escorted leaders and rank and file protestors to military camps, where they were held prisoner.¹¹⁰

Company records show that the FNM used the repression of the strikes as an opportunity to dismiss employees with physical disabilities, with records of union activism, or those who simply had a history of arriving late to work and performing poorly on the job.¹¹¹ In at least one case, as strikers were rounded up and imprisoned, the FNM replaced a highly skilled machinist with a soldier who had been hired as a scab.¹¹² Some workers contested their dismissal for years, arguing that the company used the strikes as an opportunity to do away with jobs it viewed as unnecessary and so reduce the payroll.

Public opinion opposed the strikers, in part, because the strikes took place during Holy Week and because the strikes negatively affected those in remote regions, who counted on the railways for their basic provisions.¹¹³ The STFRM miscalculated when it

¹¹⁰ Marcelino Aquino B., FNM Personnel Dossier, Matías Romero, Box 1, *CEDIF*, *MNFNM*; Carlos Bernal Romo, Box 3, *CEDIF*. These dossiers document the existence of soldiers at stations during the strikes. See Appendix B for photos of soldiers at stations.

¹¹¹ FNM fired Octavio Bonilla del Rivero, an STFRM representative, on March 30 for his role as an “instigator” Personnel dossier, Octavio Bonilla del Rivero, Matías Romero Box 3, *CEDIF*;

¹¹² Marcelino Aquino B., a soldier who replaced a railway worker during the strike, stayed on after the strike to become a full time FNM employee. He replaced Carlos Bernal Romo, a striker who had no left hand. FNM documents reveal that company officials found Romo’s involvement in the strikes as an opportune reason for not allowing him to return to work. Marcelino Aquino B., FNM Personnel Dossier, Matías Romero, Box 1, *CEDIF*, *MNFNM*; Carlos Bernal Romo, Box 3, *CEDIF*.

¹¹³ In 1958, an article in the FNM magazine calculated that the FNM transported 500 million passengers during Holy Week. Buenavista station, the principle railway hub in Mexico City, hosted 280,000 passengers a day. FNM used all of its locomotives during Holy Week. See, *Revista Ferronales*, April, 1958; President López Mateos received letters from people in small towns near Texacoco explaining how the railway enabled them to move their products to the capital. Adolfo López Mateos, volume 568, 513.3/4, Presidential Gallery, AGN, Mexico City; The president received letters from people in Ocotlán, Puebla complained that the strike violated their right to have trains run. Adolfo López Mateos, Presidential Gallery, volume 567, 513.1/3, AGN, Mexico City. A letter from Puebla countryside explained that without the railway the “area will collapse, commerce needs the ferrocarril.” Adolfo López Mateos, volume 567, 513.2/6, Presidential Gallery, AGN, Mexico City.

had scheduled the strikes to coincide with Holy Week.¹¹⁴ Whatever pressure the timing may have placed on government officials, it put the movement in jeopardy of losing whatever public support it still enjoyed by inconveniencing people of all classes who relied on the railways during the holiday. The press ran stories of travelers stranded in isolated towns, waiting for trains that never came. The reports underlined the strikers' insensitivity to passengers, who were at no fault for the dispute between the companies and the union. Critics once again accused union leaders of following orders from the USSR, claiming that communist leaders, taking advantage of workers, led the railway movement.¹¹⁵

By March 28, the STFRM was prepared to accept defeat. Vallejo met with the Secretary of Labor, Salomón González Blanco, to end the strikes. Despite lacking political leverage, Vallejo demanded that the government re-admit fired workers who had been evicted from their houses and release arrested workers from jail. In return, the union would call off the strike. With work centers surrounded by soldiers, the STFRM was in no position to present demands.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, González Blanco agreed to

¹¹⁴ "Ferrocarriles Nacionales," March 25, 1959, *El Universal*. Below are the names of other railway activists fired by the company for participating in the strikes. I have included where they worked and the box numbers where their personnel record could be found in CEDIF. César Carbajal Vallejo, Matías Romero, Box 4, Daniel F. Cinta Valencia, Matías Romero Box 3, Eleazar de los Santos García, Matías Romero, Box 4, Francisco Rodríguez Barrientos, San Luis Potosí, Box 11, Francisco Espinosa Villalobos, Matías Romero Box 6, Obdulio Arena A., Matías Romero, Box 1, Adrian Cruz Cabrera, Matías Romero, Box 5, Gildardo de la Herrera, Matías Romero, Box 5, Roldán Alfaro Germanño, Matías Romero, Box 5. Felix Alvarado Hernandez, Matías Romero, Box 2; Adan Cortés Ceballos Matías Romero Box 3, Ildefonso Aquino Castillo Matías Romero, Box 3, Hector Casanova Martínez, Matías Romero Box 4.

¹¹⁵ "Vallejo, Agitador comunista," *El Universal*, 25 February 1959,

¹¹⁶ See appendix B for photographs of soldiers occupying train stations. Soldiers had occupied stations a month earlier during the February strike. See. "No se pararán dos días que duro la huelga," *Excelsior*, 24 Feb. 1959.

arrange a meeting between union leaders and the companies' representatives.¹¹⁷ The encounter never occurred.

At approximately 5 pm on March 28, undercover police officers arrested Demetrio Vallejo in Mexico City at a restaurant adjacent to STFRM headquarters as he waited for González Blanco and officials from the companies.¹¹⁸ The strikes had been extinguished the day before with the military takeover of work centers, but Vallejo's incarceration marked the end of the independent union. It also permitted the reemergence of charrismo. The STFRM's democratic days were over.

Red Baiting Ferrocarrileros

The repression of the movement was aided by an intense publicity campaign aimed at portraying railway leaders as communists who manipulated the rank and file. Between August 1958 and May 1959, opponents of the independent STFRM had demonized the railway movement and Vallejo in particular.¹¹⁹ Vallejo's victory sparked a counter-offensive campaign led by FNM and PRI officials, as well charro labor leaders. Soon industrialists and newspaper commentators joined the chorus of detractors, admonishing the STFRM for its combativeness, threatening that wage gains for workers would result in a higher cost of living for Mexicans.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Blanco later announced he had no intentions of meeting with STFRM leaders to negotiate a settlement. *Revista Ferronales*, April 1959.

¹¹⁸ *El Universal*, 29 March 1959; Ortega, *Estado y movimiento*, 119.

¹¹⁹ For instance, on August 25, 1958, days before the union election, *El Universal* reported that Vallejo had met with José Revueltas, the prominent Mexican Marxist. The article reported that members from the Kremlin were present at the meeting. See, "Discute Vallejo sus planes con una junta comunista," *El Universal*, 25 Aug. 1958.

¹²⁰ *Siempre!*, October, 1958.

In 1958, comments conflating dissidents with communists had buttressed the image of President Ruíz Cortines as the guardian of the nation against outside forces. President Ruíz Cortines had advanced this image in numerous speeches, presenting himself as defender of the “Revolution, patriotism, and the people.”¹²¹ He reiterated that the government’s role was to establish order, thus wittingly or unwittingly providing a rationalization for repressing railway workers’ protests, which were commonly portrayed as chaotic and disorderly.

Detractors tried to sully the reputation of railway leaders and undermine the railway movement by labeling union leaders “communists.”¹²² The interests of railway leaders, it followed, conflicted with the interests of Mexicans and with the revolutionary nationalism articulated by the Constitution of 1917. By linking railway leaders to communism, opponents effectively charged them with promoting a foreign ideology and aiding foreign state—namely, the U.S.S.R.¹²³ While the PRI offered a Mexican vision of economic development based on nationalism, rebels fomented anarchy by subscribing to the exotic and dangerous politics of Marxism.¹²⁴ These critiques belied the democratic character of the movement—its grassroots support—in favor of a conspiratorial analysis that centered on Soviet infiltration of the STFRM.

¹²¹ “Puntos salientes del mensaje Presidencial,” *El Universal*, 2 Dec. 1958.

¹²² President Ruíz Cortines had been warned in 1954 that communist activists associated with the POCM had success organize among railway workers in Guadalajara. The memo named Valentín Campa and Luis Gómez Z., the two former STFRM incarcerated as a result of the 1948 charrazo, as Marxist agitators. See, memo to President Ruíz Cortines, ARC, v. 659, 513/19, AGN. Former railway workers Jesús Padilla Soto recalls that the PCM had support from Section 13, Matías Romero, the section to which Demetrio Vallejo belonged. Jesús Padilla Soto, *A los ferrocarrileros Nacionales se los llevo el tren* (Mexico City: Editores de Comunicación, 1979).

¹²³ Discute Vallejo sus planes con una junta comunista,” *El Universal*, 25 Aug. 25, 1958; “Vallejo y sus correligionarios conspiran,” Feb 9., *El Universal*; “Abajo los usurpadores,” *El Universal*, 25 Feb 1958.

¹²⁴ “La secretaria de trabajo obra con apego a la ley,” *El Universal*, 30 August 1958.

Fidel Velázquez, head of the CTM, emerged as one of the principal labor antagonists of the railway movement. Through the Worker's Unity Bloc (BUO), a pro-PRI coalition of charro leaders, Velázquez and BUO supporters condemned union leaders for their "unpatriotic" attacks on the economy and the people.¹²⁵ The BUO placed ads in Mexico City newspapers to inform readers that the movement was run by demagogic leaders who aimed at subverting the state's authority. The BUO's comments gained weight when read side-by-side comments made by FNM officials. FNM officials penned editorials warning readers to not "underestimate the actions of communists who agitate . . . taking advantage of circumstances to provoke riots."¹²⁶

Commentators wrote bluntly about their concern that communists directed the railway movement. One piece, appropriately titled, "Vallejo, a Communist Agitator", argued that dissident actions demonstrated workers' lack of patriotism, asserting that "workers have forgotten their place as Mexicans and have embraced doctrines which oppose the Mexican Revolution...Communists are laughing at laws and openly acting against the spirit of the nation."¹²⁷ According to the commentator, the union needed to be purged of communist leaders because they deceived and manipulated the rank and file into striking.

Critics of the railway movement called on humble workers to reject the extreme demands that they claimed were imposed by union leaders. In patronizing style, detractors suggested that those who led the movement took advantage of the non-

¹²⁵ "BUO's ads ran regularly in *El Universal*. See, Superación de las clases proletarias," *El Universal*, 2 Dec. 1958; "Contra la Patria," *El Universal*, 27 Feb. 1959. The paper supports BUO's claims that the STFRM manipulates its members.

¹²⁶ González Camacho, *Las luchas*, 21.

¹²⁷ "Vallejo, agitador comunista," *El Universal*, 2 Dec 1958.

intellectual mass of workers.¹²⁸ These were the decent, honorable workers, who had made economic sacrifices for the railway and country's modernization but who were now being led astray.¹²⁹

Demetrio Vallejo served as the principal target of the critics who aimed to frame the movement as Bolshevik.¹³⁰ Workers perceived Vallejo, a long time political activist with a history of resisting company rules and questioning the authority of his superiors, to be an honorable rank-and-file colleague.¹³¹ One commentator at the time explained the difference in the perception of these new leaders by the rank-and-file and the broader public:

For the majority of the public, the new leaders of the STFRM, Demetrio Vallejo [and others] are names that are beginning to become identified with an era that announces that it will be clean [and] honest. For ferrocarrileros of the entire country, those names were already well known and they were always associated with...rebellion against corruption¹³²

Vallejo's reputation encouraged workers to believe that as head of the STFRM he would transform the union into a democratic institution and defend the interests of rank-and-file members.

Critics countered the rank-and-file's representation of Vallejo by portraying him as a ruthless manipulator leading an ignorant mass of workers toward a confrontation with the

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ "Demetrio, el Gladio," *El Universal*, 27 Feb. 1958; "Huelgas y sabotaje de la Patria," *El Universal*, 27 Feb. 1958.

¹³⁰ "Apunte del Día," *El Universal*, 24 February 1959.

¹³¹ Those who opposed dissidents marveled at how Vallejo's rise to power. José Padilla, for instance, maintains that Vallejo was a "Mr. Nobody", known primarily in Oaxaca and Veracruz, **standing out for** his commitment to communism and leftist organizing. Jesús Padilla Soto, *A los ferrocarrileros Nacionales se los llevo el tren* (Mexico City: Editores de Comunicación, 1979).

¹³² Yolanda Palacios, *Siempre!*, 75.

state.¹³³ If the official narrative depicted the movement as a contest between communist leaders and worker-citizens, Vallejo was then the head communist, a Lenin among Bolsheviks, whose ultimate intentions were to turn Mexico into a Soviet satellite state. Subtlety had no place in statements by detractors concerning Vallejo. For example, a caricature in a major newspaper depicted the union leader with a hammer and sickle emblazoned on his arm.¹³⁴

The image plays off an ad placed earlier in the month by an anti-dissident cohort who claimed that Vallejo led a conspiracy against the government.¹³⁵ The ad accuses, “the dissident union is fanatically communist.” It points to Vallejo’s meeting with a representative of the Guatemalan government, who was purportedly a communist sympathizer. The ad characterizes the meeting as “mysterious, suspicious, and threatening,”¹³⁶ attributes that became attached to Vallejo by implication. Readers would have known that Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz had been overthrown in 1954 for allegedly holding communist sympathies. Hence, the allusion to Guatemalan Marxists was yet another effort to portray the railway movement as manipulated by communists.

A month later, a commentator in the same pages took it a step further, warning that Vallejo planned to install a dictatorship to replace the existing political system.¹³⁷ In fact, efforts to depict the movement as led solely by Vallejo and his accomplices was so marked that those who opposed the movement were named anti-Vallejistas. The neologism indicates the hazards of aligning a movement too strongly with the persona of

¹³³ “Contra la patria, el derecho de huelga degenera en delito,” Feb. 27, 1959, *El Universal*; “Huelgas y sabotaje a la Patria,” *El Universal*, 27 Feb. 1959.

¹³⁴ “Apunte del día,” *El Universal*, 25 Feb. 1959.

¹³⁵ “Vallejo y sus correligionarios Conspiran,” *El Universal*, 9 Feb. 1959.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ “Vallejo contra Mexico,” *El Universal*, 18 March 1959.

a leader. Critics had used the dissidents' self-affirming identity—vallejista—to suggest that the movement was indeed top-down. Every invocation of the term by newspaper commentators served to reproduce the notion that the union leader steered the movement from above and diminished the everyday acts of political commitment of the rank and file.

The same qualities that conferred legitimacy and honor to Vallejo among his colleagues also served to make him a rogue in the eyes of company officials. If his coworkers granted him status for his tendency to rebel against company rules, company officials reasoned that such behavior was a sign of a troublesome employee and grounds for demotion and dismissal. Throughout his tenure with the FNM, the company sought to punish Vallejo by lowering his rank and cutting his pay. Each time, the STFRM successfully defended Vallejo.¹³⁸ The ability of Vallejo to resist supervisors and win battles in court served to magnify his status as a troublesome employee and increase his standing among STFRM member.¹³⁹

Workers Remember the Red Scare

Workers' memories of the movement reflect the prominent role that the accusation of communist influence played at the time. Interviewees went to great length during our exchanges to downplay the role of communism in the movement. Most workers acknowledge that Vallejo considered himself a Marxist or communist, but they reject the charge that the movement found inspiration in Marxism. Narciso Nava, a highly trained

¹³⁸ Personnel Dossier, Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*.

machinist, who claims to hold no strong political identification, dismisses the influence of communists on the movement—portraying those communists that participated in demonstrations, such as Valenitín Campa, as bit players, even outsiders. He insists on the ideological purity of those who constituted the base of movement. The rank and file sought workplace justice, not the pursuit of a political abstraction such as communism. My interview with Nava reveals that like other workers Nava knew about but disregarded Vallejo's Marxist politics because the leader behaved in the workers' best interests.

Alegre: So, what did you think of Vallejo, of the movement?

Nava: Well, I tell you one saw the pro and con. You saw that they fought in favor of the workers, which is what Senor Vallejo did. He had cronies, people who were with him, they were cronies. In general all workers wanted to be in favor of Señor Vallejo, because he fought for something just.

Alegre: The press accused him and the movement of communism?

Nava: Well, I tell you, that's political. He was the Secretary General of the union. People latched on to him, like Señor [Valentín] Campa, people that were strong [figures] in the left. Because, as I tell you the railway was a very big industry, the biggest there was in Mexico.

Alegre: So the press, when they called workers communists...

Nava: No, not workers, the movement, those who led it, workers weren't Right or Left. Workers were workers. The movement was treated as being of a leftist current, because of the leaders that joined themselves with him, Señor Vallejo. But that was in Mexico

¹³⁹ Interview with Juan Colín, by author, Mexico City, August, 1999.

[City], there, at the government level, not at the level of workers. The worker either supported or did not support.

Alegre: And what did they do to you if you did not support...

Nava: Nothing, nothing.

Nava's testimony that workers had no Marxist or communist sympathies during the movement reflects the most common memory of the politics of the movement among interviewees. In their testimonies, most workers reiterate the position that they circulated at the time of the movement, namely that workers with no allegiance to communism and the Mexican Communist Party were the main supporters of the movement. The memory follows the rhetorical strategy used in 1958 and 1959 by portraying Vallejo as primarily a democratic leader.

Nava's emphatic denial of communist influence belies the clout that Valentín Campa and others in the Mexican Worker-Peasant Party (POCM) enjoyed among railway workers.¹⁴⁰ Campa, due to his well-known allegiance to the POCM, became the principal symbol for Mexican communism and the target of workers who wanted nothing to do with communism and communists.¹⁴¹ But he also attracted the admiration of workers who sought to further the militancy of the movement. At least in the capital, Campa asserted his opinions at rallies, informal meetings and in the press.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Vallejo, Campa, and other railway leaders belonged to the POCM. See, Carr, *Marxism and Communism*, 195.

¹⁴¹ See footnotes above for the press's focus on Campa. Interviewees who held no Marxist sympathies blame Campa for sullyng the reputation of the movement. José Jorge Ramírez, a avowed Marxist, fondly remembers Campa. Interview with Narciso Nava, by author, Puebla, June 2004; Interview with Antonio Moreno, by author, Puebla, February 2004; Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, by author, February 2004.

¹⁴² Campa, *Mi Testimonio*, 244-251.

Campa in fact met with Vallejo and other leaders regularly to plan the times and designate places for protests.¹⁴³ Juan Colín, a railway activist in Mexico City who regularly held clandestine meetings at his house, confirms that Campa could claim the allegiance of many politicized workers in Mexico City, where Campa lived.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, Campa's former position as Secretary General of Communications and Propaganda of the STFRM in the 1940s and his imprisonment as a result of the *charrazo* conferred credibility on him among many of the rank and file. He was no longer a member of the STFRM in 1958 and 1959, but he continued to garner respect from the rank and file leftists in the capital, though non-ideological workers resented his effort to influence the movement.¹⁴⁵

Despite grassroots efforts to distance the movement from communism, critics were right to point out that dissident leaders had made communism attractive to at least some railway workers. José Jorge Ramírez, for instance, credits the railway movement and Vallejo in particular as leading to his political awakening.¹⁴⁶ He explained that the events of 1958-1959 exposed and attracted him to leftist politics. "I didn't sympathize with the left, or the Communist Party, until the movement of 1958," Ramírez explains. But "Vallejo," he approvingly declares, "he was a communist!"

¹⁴³ Campa details his role in the movement in his autobiography. Campa, *Mi testimonio*. Vallejo confirms Campa's involvement. See, Vallejo, *Las luchas ferrocarrileras*.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Juan Colín, by author, Mexico City, July 1999. Colín's role as organizer during the movement, including the use of his house for meetings attended by Demetrio Vallejo, is mentioned in Gil, *Los ferrocarrileros*, 164.

¹⁴⁵ Juan Colín and José Jorge Ramírez, railway leaders in Mexico City and Puebla respectively, identified as Marxists and held Campa in high esteem. Meanwhile, workers who did not want the movement to associate itself with Marxist parties, such as Narciso Nava and Antonio Moreno viewed Campa as a self-interested pest. Interview with Juan Colín, by author, Mexico City, by author, July 1999. Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, by author, December 2003 and February 2004; Interview with by author, Narciso Nava, May 2004; Interview with Antonio Moreno, by author, January, March and May, 2004.

¹⁴⁶ Interview, by author, José Jorge Ramírez, Puebla, December 2003.

Ramírez's respect and admiration for Vallejo (and later for Campa) made him curious about Marxism. Ramírez fondly remembers going to Autonomous University of Puebla during those days to listen to Campa lecture on labor issues. Campa impressed Ramírez during the talks. "He talked about socialism, communism," Ramírez explains, "to find the betterment of social life, not just the workers but in general."¹⁴⁷ These ideas helped Ramírez make sense of his life and the everyday, socio-economic obstacles that he, his coworkers and ordinary Mexicans endured.

Ramírez supported Vallejo because of the gains that he had fought for and ultimately helped acquire for workers. Once he learned about Vallejo's Marxist commitments Ramírez sought to learn about Marxism by attending rallies organized by the Mexican Communist Party and by seeking out communist leaders. On the surface, Ramírez's radicalization appears to follow the script told by detractors of the movement who claimed that railway activists led their members astray. These critics failed to grasp, however, how Ramírez and others like him made Marxism and radical politics their own by setting aside abstractions, petty squabbles between communist groups such as the PCM and POCM, and by focusing on "the betterment of social life" promised in speeches by communist activists. Ramírez identified as a Marxist, but he belonged to no party.

Ramírez's memory does not correspond to how most workers remember Vallejo and the railway movement.¹⁴⁸ For Ramírez, the movement and strikes represented more than a period of democratic euphoria. The movement marked the time in his life when he became engaged in leftist politics and came to identify as a socialist. Vallejos's

¹⁴⁷ Interview by author with José Jorge Ramírez, Puebla, December, 2003.

¹⁴⁸ The most comprehensive published testimonies of former workers can be found in "*Los ferrocarrileros hablan*" and "*Yo soy rielero...*".

communist sympathies reinforced his image as an authentic representative of the rank-and-file. Ramírez's praised Vallejo for making Marxism relevant to his life as a worker.

Nevertheless, Ramírez expresses a minority point of view among those who participated in the strikes. Just as grassroots workers in the past chose to deny the communist sympathies of some of its leaders, so too do workers today remember the movement as largely devoid of Marxism. The fact that Demetrio Vallejo considered himself a Marxist and was a member of the POCM remains an uncomfortable truth among former railway activists. Many workers, such as Carlos Salazar, prefer to discuss Vallejo's fight for a democratic union and higher wages: Vallejo's communism "was a government thing. The person who stands up is labeled agitator. Anyone who wasn't with government was called a communist. Vallejo was called a communist. He had his ideas but he helped us."¹⁴⁹

The Cold War Case Against Demetrio Vallejo and other STFRM Organizers

Railway workers from across the country found themselves imprisoned in military camps. The camp outside of Mexico City became most infamous because it is where the government held Demetrio Vallejo and Valentín Campa, but FNM documents indicate that camps existed in other regions as well. For instance, military personnel escorted strikers from Matías Romero to an army base in nearby Salina Cruz, an important railway town.¹⁵⁰ The company exhorted strikers who were not arrested to return to work or face

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Carlos Salazar Ramírez, by author, Puebla, March 2004.

¹⁵⁰ César Carbajal Vallejo, a trainman from Matias Romero, was jailed for over a week at the Salina Cruz military encampment. He was one of the many workers permanently fired from the FNM for participating

dismissal. Since strikers held in military camps could not return to work in time to meet the deadline, the FNM fired many of them.¹⁵¹

Some found ingenious strategies for remaining loyal to the strike while protecting themselves against arrest. José Jorge Ramírez, for instance, feigned illness.¹⁵² He visited the doctor complaining of sudden chest pains just as the military arrived. While his activist comrades ran from the police or landed in camps, Ramírez languished at a doctor's clinic in Puebla. He stayed out of work as long as he could before making a break for the railway yard the morning when the 48 deadline was set to expire. He takes no pride in having eluded arrest and having returned to work. "We betrayed [Vallejo]. We betrayed the movement. All of us," he tells me in his kitchen in Puebla over forty years later.¹⁵³

Railway women rallied together in response to the government crackdown. Lilia Benetíz Vallejo found the solidarity extended to her by fellow ferrocarrileras critical for sustaining the movement during the incarceration of her uncle and other prominent leaders. Benetíz brought news of her uncle to worksites, where she gathered donations

in the strikes and refusing to sign a confession. See César Carbajal Vallejo, FNM Personnel Dossier, *CEDIF*.

¹⁵¹ See Marcelino Aquino, Matías, FNM Personnel Dossier, Romero, Box 1. Aquino was hired as a scab to replace a fired worker and is a good example of how the FNM scrambled to higher replacements for jailed workers. The following workers were fired. Octavo Bonilla del Rivero, FNM Personnel Dossier, Matías Romero, Box 3; Eulalio Alamilla Carmuna, FNM Personnel Dossier, San Luis Potosí Box 7; Francisco Espinosa Villalobos, FNM Personnel Dossier, Matías Romero, Box 6; Hilario Badillo Leos, FNM Personnel Dossier, San Luis Potosí, Box 7; Daniel Cinta Valencia, FNM Personnel Dossier, Matías Romero, Box 3; Ildefonso Aquino Castillo, FNM Personnel File, Matías Romero, Box 3; Octavio Bonilla del Rivero, Matías Romero, Box 3; and Adán Cortés Ceballos, FNM Personnel Dossier, Matías Romero, Box 3. These documents are housed in *CEDIF*.

¹⁵² Company records suggest others may have faked sickness in order to avoid making the decision to cross the picket line and go back to work. Emilio Borges Brioso, a warehouse worker in Chiapas, claimed to be sick between March 16, 1959 and April 24, 1959. Emilio Borges Brioso, FNM Personnel Dossier, *CEDIF*.

¹⁵³ Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, by author, Puebla, March 2004.

from workers to hand to Vallejo's wife, Laura Garamendi.¹⁵⁴ These donations put food on the table while Vallejo served his time. Railway women in Matías Romero report sheltering dissidents on the run from police, while others prepared food for activists hiding in the sierras outside the city.¹⁵⁵ These men and women waited for news about dissidents held in camps, especially their leader.

On April 13, 1959, authorities moved Demetrio Vallejo from the military camp to the penitentiary in Mexico City and charged him and other prominent dissidents with the crime of social dissolution. The judge who presided over Vallejo's case later explained that social dissolution applied in cases in which "a national or foreigner circulated ideas, programs or plans by foreign country that threatens Mexican sovereignty. The ideas could be written or spoken [as long as they] incite one or more persons to subvert the nation; to disturb public peace." The judge explained that the law also applied to actions that "give material or moral support to foreign invasion."¹⁵⁶ In short, the law criminalized the communication of thoughts, attitudes and political views that authorities perceived to undermined PRI rule.

The court recognized that the law of social dissolution constituted an inherently political piece of legislation. The judge presiding over Vallejo's case defined social dissolution as a political crime because it "concerns the juridical and political structure of the state." Since the strike threatened the security of the country, the judge explained, the

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Lilia Benetíz, by Elena Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with Maria del Cielo Watanabe; Interview with Margarita Hernández Orozco; Interview with María Estel Medina; by author, Matías Romero, July, 2004

¹⁵⁶ The following discussion of Vallejo's trial can be found in Vallejo's work dossier, which is held under lock and key in the Museum of the Mexican National Railways. The document is well over a hundred pages and details the legal arguments in great detail. It also includes the depositions of witnesses who testified against Vallejo. See, Carcel Preventiva, D.F., Exp. B-61 4032/59 and Aug 6, 1970 doc Supreme Court, Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*

strike undermined the “structure of the state.” In this way, the court reasoned that strikers, and especially organizers, were guilty of social dissolution.¹⁵⁷

Vallejo’s lawyers argued that the “crime” of social dissolution was unconstitutional because it undermined the right to organize and strike.¹⁵⁸ The judge offered no legal reasoning, countering simply that the social dissolution law remained the law of the land and that “as long the political regimen exists” the defendants were guilty. Vallejo did not seem to understand that the PRI was willing to subvert the Constitution in order to get him and the rank and file mass off the streets. The judge’s response to the defense lawyer revealed the power of the PRI over the judicial branch.¹⁵⁹

Cold War anxiety over communist infiltration provided the court with a political justification for incarcerating Vallejo.¹⁶⁰ The prosecutor argued that Vallejo served the interests of the U.S.S.R by propagating communist ideas, which undermined nationalism and the Mexican government. The prosecutor pointed to Vallejo’s membership in the POCM and his close ties to leaders in the PCM, such as Valentín Campa. “The goal of the PCM and POCM is [to bring about] socialist state and communism— [following] Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin,” the prosecutor charged. Members of these parties “infiltrate workers’ groups and encourage them to seek class rights given to them by the

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ The press had reported that critics of Article 145 argued that it violated the Constitution. See, “Contra el delito Social,” *Siempre!*. 1 Oct. 1958.

¹⁵⁹ Carcel Preventiva, D.F., Exp. B-61 4032/59 and Aug 6. 1970 doc Supreme Court in Personnel Dossier, Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*.

¹⁶⁰ *Siempre!*, which had supported the strikes of 1958, now linked Vallejo to “foreign interests”. *Siempre!*. 22 April 1959.

Constitution.” They aim to “control and conquer public power and destroy the state, turning Mexico into [another] China, Poland, and U.S.S.R.”¹⁶¹

The judge found the prosecutor’s arguments persuasive. He reprimanded dissident leaders for wielding Marxist ideas against the Constitution of 1917. It was no secret that PCM and POCM members worked closely with Vallejo. Many of the railway dissident leadership belonged to the Marxist organizations, even if the mass of the rank and file eschewed Marxism. The judge made a connection between the PCM and Vallejo by citing a PCM pamphlet that called for the abolishment of capitalism. The judge cited the pamphlet as proof of Vallejo’s intent to overthrow the PRI.¹⁶² The judge was correct in noting dissident leaders’ Marxist sympathies, but he failed to understand that they viewed themselves as patriotic and believed that they were abiding by the Constitution’s populist spirit.

The press’s barrage of editorials accusing Vallejo of manipulating the movement had made an impression on the court. The judge repeated claims made by the national press that workers were pawns of Marxist organizers. The “agitators,” the judge concluded, used psychological tricks to tap into the working class’ perception that they were poorly treated. “Agitators exist who charge the administration with cost of living, devaluation of peso, poverty,” the judge explained. Dissident railway leaders and POCM and PCM members wrongly blamed the PRI for the “social, economic and political phenomena that affect the classes with most needs.”¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Carcel Preventiva, D.F., Exp. B-61 4032/59 and Aug 6, 1970 doc Supreme Court, in Personnel Dossier, Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*.

¹⁶² Days earlier the press had reported that Vallejo intended to overthrow the government. “Vallejo contra Mexico,” *El Universal*, 18 March 1959.

¹⁶³ Carcel Preventiva, D.F., Exp. B-61 4032/59 and Aug 6, 1970 doc Supreme Court, in Personnel Dossier, Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*.

Vallejo and his lawyers decided that the best way to undermine the social dissolution charge was to establish that Vallejo did not have the power to orchestrate the strikes and therefore could not be guilty of trying to overthrow the government. Vallejo's lawyers did their best to separate their client from the strikes. His lawyers methodically pointed out their client was not the author of the Southeast Plan, the manifesto written in the winter of 1958 that propelled the railway movement and led to the overthrow of charro authorities.¹⁶⁴

Vallejo's lawyer could not convince the courts that his client did not lead the masses of workers and their families. The exposure that he gained while propagating the Southeast Plan brought him national credibility as a railway leader. Vallejo became the face and leader of the movement, which is why he won the 1958 union election in a landslide. It was too much to ask the court to separate Vallejo's role as leader and organizer in the railway movement and the coordinating efforts that brought about the February and March strikes.

Vallejo continued to insist that the rank and file organized and led the strikes. For months after his arrest, Vallejo argued that contrary to what press reports indicated, he did not lead workers to strike. Workers walked off the job on their own accord. Locals operated independently. Local leaders organized workers, planned actions, and executed the strikes. Vallejo especially distanced himself from the strikes at the Veracruz Terminal and Mexican Railway, insisting that the press was wrong to link him to those actions.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ *El Universal*, 18 Sept. 1959.

¹⁶⁵ Carcel Preventiva, D.F., Exp. B-61 4032/59 and Aug 6. 1970 doc Supreme Court, in Personnel Dossier, Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*.

The FNM argued that it was public knowledge that Vallejo had ordered the strikes. The company lawyer admonished Vallejo for mocking the court by insisting on proof that he organized the walkouts. Furthermore, the FNM argued that it was common knowledge that Vallejo, as head of the STFRM, organized and led the strikes. He therefore bore responsibility for the financial harm done to the company and the national economy, as well as for inconveniencing passengers.¹⁶⁶

Prosecutors deployed company and union documents, as well as newspaper accounts and worker depositions, to convict Vallejo of social dissolution.¹⁶⁷ STFRM memos in which the strikes and their consequences were discussed proved that Vallejo knew of and encouraged the strikes. They presented company circulars that warned workers that the strikes were illegal and would lead to their dismissal to demonstrate that Vallejo had led workers to act against their best interests.¹⁶⁸ Newspaper articles that named Vallejo as the leader of the strike proved that his influence was public knowledge. Moreover, prosecutors presented reports that the government had expelled U.S.S.R. diplomats who had supported the strikes.¹⁶⁹ They used these reports to show that Vallejo was guilty of serving “dangerous foreign interests,” a crime under the law of social dissolution.¹⁷⁰

The court proceeded by issuing subpoenas for workers to testify against Vallejo. Prosecutors deposed Miguel Serrano Rodríguez, a retired worker from Guadalajara, Guillermo Hass Rodríguez, a former railway activist from Tierra Blanca, and César

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

Márquez Gómez, a former dissident from Mexico City. Hass and Márquez had supported the railway movement in 1958 and had served as STFRM representatives in the capital. Márquez served as part of the Mexico City contingent that met to write the Southeast Plan. During the 1958 events, Márquez had escorted Vallejo around Mexico City, introducing the young Oaxacan leader to workers at union halls and in people's houses.

Both Hass and Márquez had become disgruntled with Vallejo during the course of 1959. Márquez became angered when Vallejo relieved him of STFRM duties, for reasons that remain unclear. Haas's reasons for rejecting Vallejo remain equally cryptic, but he did reveal at the deposition that he had spoken on television and radio against Vallejo and the strikes of 1959.¹⁷¹ It is possible that Marquez and Hass rejected the movement's continued militancy after Vallejo became head of the STFRM.

Márquez hung the STFRM leader out to dry, stating that Vallejo ordered the strikes of February 25 and March 25. Márquez assured the court that Vallejo was the "principal director" of the strikes. Haas went a step further by charging that Vallejo and his supporters intimidated railway workers into striking. He explained that those who were reluctant to join marches and walk off the job feared reprisals if they did not fall in line with dissidents. Like Márquez, Hass assured the court that Vallejo ordered the strikes of March 1959. He explained that rumor had it that Vallejo at did not want to strike at first, but decided to call the walk out after intense debate with STFRM leaders.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Grupo Especial Numero 1; Mendez circular; Letter from local 33 to Valle 3. Newspaper article from La Prensa and Excelsi6r describing Vallejo's role as a leader 4 Circular showing strikes cause by "outside influence," Personnel Dossier, Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*.

¹⁷¹, Jan. 1, 1960 Especial no.1 522/59, Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*

¹⁷² Grupo Especial no. 1, 522/59, Nov. 30, 1959. Deposition of Guillermo Haas Rodriguez and Cesar Marquez Gomez, Personnel Dossier, Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*,

After months of depositions, the presentation of press clippings and vague links between foreign ideologies and Vallejo, the judge leaned on an internal STFRM telegram that Vallejo had sent on February 25 to a representative at Local 33 in Mexico City. The telegram illustrated Vallejo's disregard for national law as well as his persistent militancy. In the telegram, Vallejo acknowledged that the national arbitration board declared the strike illegal, but he instructed leaders at Local 33 to direct a walk out in the capital. Presumably, he sent similar telegrams to other parts of the country, for how else could workers from as far away as Chihuahua, Chiapas, and Guerrero synchronize walk outs on the morning of February 25. The telegram served to prove Vallejo's organizational command over rank-and-file protests.¹⁷³

The judge compared Vallejo's role in the strikes to that of a worker sabotaging a machine. Vallejo destroyed capital by shutting down the entire railway system. The strike choked the internal market, halting the distribution of basic foodstuffs. Agricultural producers resented that the strikes ruined their perishable commodities, as loaded freight trains stood unmoved as workers put down their tools and walked out of stations. Industrial representatives complained that costs rose with every shipment delay. According to the private sector, the strike constituted an economic crime. Like a lowly employee causing a train wreck by dislodging a rail, Vallejo wielded those under his control against the national economy and the PRI.

For drawing on "foreign ideas" and disrupting the national economy, Vallejo received eleven years and four months in prison and an 11, 800 peso fine. For their part in organizing the strikes, other STFRM leaders based in Mexico City also received

¹⁷³ Carcel Preventiva, D.F., Exp. B-61 4032/59 and Aug 6. 1970 doc Supreme Court, Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*.

draconian sentences. Gilbert Rojo Robles was given eight years and ten months with a 9,700 peso fine. The court served Miguel Aroche Parra with eleven years and two months jail term along with an 11,800 peso fine. Roberto Gómez Godínez, who had been present in Mexico City when the Southeast Plan was written, received 7 years, six months in prison with a 9,150 peso fine; Enrique Caballero Zaraté received five years and four months in jail and a 6,700 peso fine. Each defendant could choose to serve an extra month in jail in lieu of paying the fine.¹⁷⁴

The Story of the Scabs

The depositions of Vallejo's critics reveal an untold history of rank and file discontent with militancy of the railway movement in 1959.¹⁷⁵ No scholarly account of the railway movement explores why some workers rejected Demetrio Vallejo. Some disliked the movement from the beginning, while others slowly became estranged by what they perceived as its overly strident rhetoric. Although there can be no denying that the overwhelming majority of the rank-and-file supported the strikes of 1959 and embraced Vallejo as their leader, defectors existed and became useful witnesses for the government as it tried railway leaders.

Workers allied with the Partido Popular were especially critical of the movement's combative actions. They followed their leader, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, and publicly denounced railway activists. For example, a contingent of ferrocarrileros

¹⁷⁴ Carcel Preventiva, D.F., Exp. B-61 4032/59 and Aug 6. 1970 doc Supreme Court, Personnel Dossier, Demetrio Vallejo, Collection of Prominent Figures, *CEDIF*.

enlisted with the Partido Popular issued an analysis of the railway movement shortly after the end of the strike. They justified the government's actions by arguing that Vallejo had been manipulated and duped by PCM members, especially Valentin Campa.¹⁷⁶ This had in fact become the Partido Popular line on the railway movement.

Both pro-and-anti-Vallejo informants recall that workers faced public ostracism and even beatings if they spoke against the movement.¹⁷⁷ In fact, testimonies from supporters and detractors of the movement confirm that activists tarred and feathered scabs.¹⁷⁸ José María López Escamilla, a former trainman who opposed the railway movement ascended to positions in management after the strikes explains, "There were two sides: you were either with Vallejo or you exposed yourself to being ridiculed, joked about and pressured by your compañeros."¹⁷⁹

In Puebla, activists poured grease on detractors, covered them with feathers, and forced them to walk over ten city blocks from the railway station to the Zócalo.¹⁸⁰ The performance emasculated the railway scab, shaming him for his perceived cowardice. The ritual indicated just how little room for negotiation existed for those reluctant to join the movement. During my interviews with him, he made sure to distinguish himself from

¹⁷⁵ *El Universal* reported on anti-communist railway workers who denounced vallejsmo. See, "Ferrocarrierlos no comunistas tildan de traidor a Vallejo," *El Universal*, 16 March 1959.

¹⁷⁶ *El Conflicto Ferrocarrilero*, (Mexico City: n/p, 1959). PP members who worked for the FNM as highly-skilled rank and file authored and signed the pamphlet. They were mainly as trenistas, station agents, and telegraph operators.

¹⁷⁷ Newspapers reported Vallejista attacks on pro-charro workers. "Chocan los de Vallejo con los de Quezada," *Excelsiør*, 13 Aug. 1958.

¹⁷⁸ Resentment between pro-and-anti-vallejistas continued after 1959. One anti-valljesta received a beating from admirers of Vallejo two years after the repression of the movement. See, Personnel dossier, Rosendo Iñigo Olvera, *CEDIF*.

¹⁷⁹ I interviewed Escamilla in an office in the Museum of the Mexican National Railways, where he spoke at length about his opposition to Vallejo. Interview with José María Escamilla, by author, June 2004.

¹⁸⁰ *Excelsiør* reported on the tar and feathering of scabs in Mexico City as early as August 1958. See "Con golpizas nada conseguiran los vallejistás," *Excelsiør*, 11 Aug. 1958.

the rank-and-file by explaining that he is Protestant, a freemason, and experienced as a *trenista* and manager.¹⁸¹

Escamilla is one of the few former workers who rejects *vallejismo*, assuring me that he did not support Vallejo after 1958.¹⁸² Don Chema insists that he supported the movement in 1958 when it limited its demands to union democracy, but he did not support the dissident movement thereafter because its “leaders sought to directly confront the government” through strikes. He especially abhorred activists’ combativeness against other workers. “In the assemblies,” he explains, “those who stood up against [the dissidents] were taken outside ‘a golpes.’”¹⁸³

Escamilla reserves his greatest criticism for the STFRM’s decision to strike at the Mexican Railway and Veracruz Terminal after already having attained medical insurance, company housing, and wage increases for workers the FNM. On this point, Don Chema reflects a widespread opinion among FNM workers. No former FNM activist I interviewed admits to having backed the STFRM’s support of strikers at the private companies. Why, they ask themselves, did Vallejo and other STFRM leaders back workers at the private companies when the union only narrowly attained company housing and medical provisions for workers at FNM?¹⁸⁴ Of course, informants have the luxury of hindsight, and there is no way of knowing how they felt about the issue at the time.

¹⁸¹ Interview with José María Escamilla, by author, June 2004, Puebla.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Yanes Rizo, *Testimonio: José María López Escamilla*, 61-62.

¹⁸⁴ Supporters of Vallejo share Escamilla’s opinion that the STFRM should have never pressured the private companies to strike. Vallejistas Antonio Monero, José Jorge Ramírez, Geraldo Niño Mendez, Carlos Ramírez, and Narciso Nava have expressed their deep disappointment in the STFRM’s decision to strike against the private companies. Interview with Monero, Jorge Ramírez, Niño Mendez, Carlos Ramírez, and Nava, by author, Puebla, 2003-2004.

Unlike Escamilla, Naciso Nava supported dissidents and identifies as a vallejista. His testimony provides a poignant contrast to Don Chema's critique of union members who pressured colleagues to support the movement. Nava justified ostracizing colleagues who refused to fall in line. At the same time, his comments reveal that even those who supported the movement, such as he, felt pressured to "siguir la corriente" (go with the current) as he put it. His testimony affirms Don Chema's claim that workers were seen as either for or against the movement. There was no middle ground. Let's turn our attention once again to Nava.

Alegre: Did you support the movement?

Nava: Well, basically, what they did was, like I tell you I wasn't politico, I didn't like politics, so one did what one had to do.

Alegre: And what did you have to do

Nava: Well, siguir la corriente. If ten workers said "yes", you weren't going to say "no".

Alegre: But what if one wanted to work?

Nava: Well, what one wanted was to work, because in those days the Railways, it had 70,000 workers, the union was one of the strongest. The railway industry was in the entire country, there were workers in the whole country, it was one of the largest companies in Mexico, one of the first companies.

Alegre: But what did one do if one didn't want to strike, [but] wanted to work?

Nava: No, your compañeros would reject you, the word would go out about the esquírol, who was on the side of the company.

Alegre: But perhaps that person has needs

Nava: No, no, no, even if they didn't have needs, there were always people against any movement. No one asked you if you thought one way and [not] everyone thought alike, everyone had their own way of thinking, and you were free, free to think.

Alegre: And why were you not an esquirol?

Nava: because I went on strike...to defend what was being asked for, salaries...it was when the workers got seguro social [medical benefits]. Ferrocarrileros got seguro social (medical benefits)!

Alegre: So, what did you think of Vallejo, of the movement?

Nava: well, I tell you one saw the pro and con. You saw that they fought in favor of the workers, which is what Señor Vallejo did. But he had cronies, people who were with him, they were cronies, they cynically supported the strikes, but in general all workers wanted to be, or had to be, in favor of Señor Vallejo, because he fought for something just.

Conclusion

“We were never the same again. The 1958-59 movement caused great harm to the country's economy, but above all [it harmed] the morale of workers and the company: each had lost confidence in the other”¹⁸⁵

The STFRM's strategic mistake to strike against the privately-owned Ferrocarriles Mexicanos, Ferrocarriles de Yucatán, Terminal de Veracruz and Ferrocarrile Del Pacifico led to the downfall of the movement, the firing of strikers who refused to cross the picket line within the forty-eight hour window provided by the railway companies and the

ultimate imprisonment of STFRM leaders. By March 1959, the press had circulated the Cold War narrative that warned readers of foreign, communist ideas and political operatives and their ability to manipulate railway leaders and the rank and file. By the time workers went on strike against the private firms, the government drew on fears of communism to justify the repression of the railway movement. Cold War politics of fear and accusation found its way into the trial of Demetrio Vallejo, who was jailed for the crime of “social dissolution”, a law passed during the hysteria of WWII, which circumscribed Mexicans constitutionally-protected right to organize and protest. In short, by repressing the railway strikes and incarcerating its leaders, Adolfo López Mateos sided with the conservative, pro-business and anti-communist policies enacted by presidents Avila Camacho and Alemán. The labor movement, which sought to turn the clock back to the politically progressive, pro-labor policies of Lázaro Cárdenas, had lost out.

Despite the bleak conclusion of the railway movement, scholars have underestimated the way that the independent union left an enduring mark on lives of railway families by attaining a significant wage increases for all FNM workers. FNM workers’ wages were raised in 1958 and then again in 1959. With the fall of the railway movement, the wage increase remained on the books as a lasting legacy of the movement’s accomplishments. In addition to the 16.66 percent pay hike, the medical care and housing benefits for FNM workers’ families remained permanent. Workers who joined the company after 1959 benefited from the healthcare and housing provisions, a fact that became part of folklore among railway families, which explains in part why

¹⁸⁵ Yanes Rizo, *Testinomios: José María López Escamiila*, 63.

retirees who joined the company after 1959 continue to regard Demetrio Vallejo and movement leaders with awe.

Ferrocarrileras appreciated that the independent union managed to frame the needs of workers families as a union issue. Demands for company housing and medical benefits demonstrated that workplace struggles could grow to incorporate community needs. Railway employees were more than just workers—they were husbands and wives with sons and daughters, all of whom needed housing and healthcare. With the emergence of the independent union, workers and families voiced their desire to live in adequate housing and have medical care for spouses and children. Without these benefits, there could be no justice.

By 1959, the battle between railway activists and their detractors turned into a struggle over representation. Each side strove to represent the other as undemocratic and illegitimate. The STFRM represented itself as a grassroots democracy, beholden to the average, impoverished but proud railway man. The STFRM contrasted its democratic practices to the closed politics of the PRI, which promoted the sort of nepotistic policies that would allow for the General Manager of the FNM, Samuel Ortega, who had no railway experience, to serve as a PRI senator.

Each side charged the other of violating the principles of the Mexican Revolution. Railway dissidents charged the PRI of jettisoning the Revolution's promise of providing for the working masses by siding with business interests—especially foreign ones--over the needs of the people. The PRI charged dissidents with choosing communism over revolutionary nationalism. The foreign “Other” acted as a menacing threat in each case.

Workers demonstrated their media savvy by latching on to FNM and PRI depiction of workers as humble, hardworking and crucial for modernizing Mexico. Railway dissidents appropriated this “official story” in order to forward a critique of the company and justify their militant mobilization. By challenging the official story of railway workers, dissidents implied that the company, government and media offered an incomplete narrative of the movement and of railway activists. Workers served a key function for the country’s economy and deserved to be properly recompensed. The appearance in newspapers of workers’ voices and perspectives demonstrates how newspapers offered an opening for alternative narratives—even if newspaper editorials vigorously repudiated workers’ arguments.

The ability of dissidents to appropriate official stories for their own ends demonstrates the malleability of such narratives while reminding us to eschew simplistic analyses that describe government discourses as unyielding structures. Yet pointing to the ways in which workers revised official stories does not invalidate critiques of the government’s actions at the time or in any way exonerate the company and government from injustices perpetuated against ferrocarrileros and ferrocarrileras. When railway workers shut down production at privately-owned companies, they could no longer count on the press to offer them a venue to articulate their position. As the police and military apprehended stikers, caging them in military stations, railway families learned that the PRI’s modernization plan would favor capital over the working class.

Chapter 6:

Las Reileras: Lilia Benetíz and the Oaxacan Railway Women

Women were crucial participants in the everyday life of railway neighborhoods. As wives and daughters of railway men, women came to identify with the railway industry because their livelihood was dependent on the wages earned by their ferrocarrilero spouses or fathers. The importance of railway women to railway neighborhoods was reflected in folk songs, such a “La Reilera,” which described the difficulties endured by railway women. Their husbands earned poor wages, were often taken away from home to work, while women worried that their ferrocarrilero husband might suffer an injury on the job. The lived commonalities shared by railway women led to a lexical creation: the “ferrocarrilera” and its synonym, “reilera.” Railway women came to think of themselves as special for belonging to a nationwide community connected to the railway industry. Ferrocarrileras came to understand that their local experiences as women and daughters of ferrocarrileros were shared by women in other railway neighborhoods throughout the country.

We must redefine the sense of who participated in the railway movement of 1958 and 1959. In 1958 and 1959, railway women drew on their identities as ferrocarrileras to participate in protests for higher wages, company housing, and medical care for railway families. This chapter writes women into the narrative of the strikes through a discussion of Lilia Benetíz Vallejo, the niece of Demetrio Vallejo, whose life story serves as a window into the participation of ferrocarrileras in the railway movement.¹ Benetiz was

¹ The classic scholarly treatment of the railway strikes is Antonio Alonzo, *El movimiento ferrocarrilero en México, 1958 – 1959*; Mario Gil, *Los ferrocarrileros*.

like many other railway women. She was the daughter, granddaughter, sister and niece of railway men. In her earliest memories, the railway industry, and railway neighborhoods, loom prominently. Her deep roots in railway community life, and close relationships with ferrocarrileros, led her to think of herself as a ferrocarrilera. She was unique among railway women, however, for having such a prominent ferrocarrilero relative, her uncle Demetrio Vallejo.

When her uncle became head of the STFRM in 1958, he called on his favorite niece to stand by his side and serve as a union secretary. Benetíz obliged, and soon found herself in the thick of a vibrant political movement, as she gained access to the male-dominated meetings of STFRM leaders. Her exceptional story as a ferrocarrilera who participated in discussions and organizing efforts with the most prominent railway dissidents in the country allows us to reconsider those engaged in the railway movement beyond the point of production, where men were the central protagonists. While other ferrocarrileras did not participate in formal and informal meetings with Vallejo and other railway leaders, ferrocarrileras throughout the country participated in the movement by attending rallies and, in exceptional cases, physically confronting opponents of the movement.

We must also reconsider the subjection of women in the everyday construction of railway communities as well as during the railway movement of 1958 and 1959. Women faced prejudices and abuses at the hands of railway men. Benetíz's testimony complicates our understanding of domination and power that railway men exerted over railway women through her discussion of how the ferrocarrileros in her life—especially her father and uncle Demetrio—policed her sexuality and, at times, beat her for stepping

out of line. Vallejo's politically progressive views on workplace democracy did not cross over to the private space of the family, especially in his relationship with Benetíz when she was an adolescent and young adult. To be sure, Benetíz paints a portrait of him as domineering and sexist.

This intra-class and intra-community domination indicates that railway women faced forms of subjection unknown to railway men, having to fight harder than their male counterparts in order attain recognition as people worthy of a political and social voice. But railway women did not passively concede to second-class status in railway neighborhoods. Benetíz and many other railway women developed a sense of self worth as well as a political consciousness through their relationships with other ferrocarrileras. Women in Oaxaca and Cárdenas overcame everyday forms of sexism and made their voices heard during the railway movement. Benetíz took advantage of her relationship with Vallejo to gain esteem and status as a union activist, as she rose from a generally unknown STFRM secretary to organizing money for her uncle during his jail term. In short, unlike railway men, ferrocarrileras had to overcome both the economic difficulties common to working folks as well as the sexism specific to working class women.

Benetíz story is remarkable for her ability to overcome patriarchal prejudices and expectations that she be an honorable ferrocarrilera to eventually command the attention of ferrocarrileros when she gathered donations for her uncle after his imprisonment in 1959. After a period of difficult years in which Benetíz dealt with marital abuse, the death of her child, and social ostracism for living as an unmarried women, Benetíz eventually found satisfaction in a life of political engagement as a railway activist in the strikes of 1958 and 1959. The transformation was extraordinary, documenting how the

railway movement enabled at least some ferrocarrileras to express publicly their identity as railway community members, as they attended protests and confronted scabs.

Nevertheless, Benetíz structures the story of her path from wife and daughter to worker and activist as having depended on the men in her life, particularly Demetrio Vallejo, who got her a job with the STFRM once he became the Secretary General in 1958 and included her in railway politics. Even in her politicization she found herself dependent on a man.

By presenting the memories of ferrocarrileras, we come to appreciate that women offer accounts of railway neighborhoods that subvert the romantic and nostalgic memories of ferrocarrileros. The remembrances of ferrocarrileras function as counter-memories to the macho stories of sexual and political conquest told by railway men. In addition, they serve to place women in the center of railway history, and in doing so offer a corrective to ferrocarrileros' accounts. Although a few former railway workers discuss the role of ferrocarrileras, most interviewees downplay the experiences and accomplishments of women.² The testimonies of ferrocarrileras indicate that they wish to be remembered as no less combative and brave as the railway men, but they also stress the difficulties of being women living among ferrocarrileros.

Elena Poniatowska, one of Mexico's leading intellectuals, realized early on that the story of the railway movement included the actions and ideas of women. She took care

² Poblano workers interviewed for "*Yo soy rielero...*" tended to gloss over ferrocarrileros, while ferrocarrileros interviewed by railway historian Gloria Tirado discuss the economic hardships endured by ferrocarrileras. The difference in these testimonies may very well be the result of the questions posed by the interviewer. See, "*Yo soy rielero...*," and Tirado, *Relatos del Interoceánico* 2. During interviews I conducted with in 1999, 2003 and 2004, I noticed that male interviewees discussed the role of ferrocarrileras only when asked directly.

to record the memories of Lilia Benetíz Vallejo.³ In 1972, Poniatowska extensively interviewed both Lilia Benetiz and Demetrio Vallejo with the intention of writing a biography of the railway leader.⁴ She knew that Benetíz's close relationship with Vallejo, as well as her participation in the railway movement, lent her testimony weight. Working as a journalist in Mexico City, Poniatowska visited Vallejo during his 12-year prison stay and during that time they developed a friendship that was based on their shared commitment to the country's poor as well as their distaste for the social injustices perpetrated by the government. After publishing *La noche de Tlatelolco*, a landmark collage of interviews with people who experienced the infamous suppression of the student movement of 1968, Poniatowska went to work on the life of the railway leader. She never completed the biography, deciding instead to fictionalize the railway movement in her novel, *El tren pasa Primero*.⁵

During Vallejo's prison sentence, Poniatowska met Lilia Benetíz, who continued to stick by her uncle's side. The journalist soon realized what historians of the railway industry have been too quick to ignore--women took part in the everyday life of railway communities and participated in the railway movement. Poniatowska turned her tape recorder to Lilia Benetíz, taking down her life history. The transcript of her interview of Lilia Benetíz is the best source we have for understanding the experiences of *ferrocarrileras*.

In addition to revelations about Benetíz's own involvement in the railway movement, her testimony also points to women activists who assisted her and her uncle.

³ Poniatowska discussed her relationship with Vallejo and Benetiz with me during numerous meetings in the spring of 2004.

⁴ Conversations with Elena Poniatowska, by author, Mexico City, May 2004.

Moments of intimacy shared between Benetíz and other women activists demonstrate a sense of solidarity based on shared experiences as railway women. Scenes between Benetíz and ferrocarrileras are not always clearly political. For instance, Benetíz relates the story of a woman who gave her a shawl as she stood outside the court with a group of Vallejo supporters. The *compañera*, whose husband worked as a railway handyman, insisted, “take my rebozo because you might catch a cold.”⁶ The gesture as told by Benetíz signals that forms of solidarity among railway women were sometimes subtle, as simple and tender as keeping a fellow ferrocarrilera warm. With their political activism historically shadowed by the acts of men, Benetíz makes a point to single out these women in her narrative of the strikes, demonstrating to the reader that women supported the movement and each other.

Women in Matías Romero, Oaxaca, hotbed of railway radicalism, also took pride in their participation in the movement. Maria Estel Medina, Maria del Cielo Watanabe and Margarita Hernández Orozco were born into railway families in Matías Romero. While men remember with delight the promiscuous and inebriated lifestyle of rank-and-file trainmen, and point to strikes and workplace resistance as signs of their machismo, these women convey a decidedly less romantic portrait of living in a railway neighborhood. Medina, Watanabe and Orozco each recall the economic hardship that railway wives and children endured while men spent time on the job or in cantinas. Railway women, they inform us, compensated for their husbands’ meager income--and habit of spending pesos

⁵ I assisted Poniatowska with her manuscript in the spring and summer 2004. In exchange, she provided copies of the transcripts of her interviews with Benetíz and Vallejo.

⁶ Interview with Lilia Benetíz, by Elena Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972.

at bars—by selling goods at market and by washing laundry.⁷ They lived shabbily and they tried their best to earn money to help the family get by, which surely explains why ferrocarrileras would fight for the FNM to grant their husbands higher wages, and grant families company housing and medical care.

The memories of these women indicate that they suffered more than economic hardship. As Benetíz's story underscores, ferrocarrileras fell victim to domestic violence.⁸ The men exerted social, economic and physical power over the reileras. Women who did not suffer physical abuse still worried about contracting diseases, as promiscuous railway men spread syphilis and other venereal diseases to their wives.⁹ The problem of venereal diseases among railway men turns up in workers' dossiers, medical journals, and company magazines as well as testimonies by railway men.¹⁰

Ferrocarrileras do not wish to be remembered as victims, however. Guadalupe Acosta was the daughter of a station agent child living in a railway station in Hidalgo.¹¹ As a child during that time, she witnessed the economic difficulties and patriarchal limits with which her mother had to live. Acosta talks with pride of the conviction with which her pregnant mother backed the railway strikes, even though she and her husband risked

⁷ Interview with María Estel Medina, by author, Matías Romero, July 2004; Interview with María del Cielo Watanabe, by author, Matías Romero, July 2004; Interview with Margarita Hernández Orozco, by author, Matías Romero, July, 2004.

⁸ The women and men I interviewed noted that domestic violence pervaded the private lives of railway families. Interview with María del Cielo Watanabe; Interview with Margarita Hernández Orozco; Interview with María Estel Medina; all by author, Matías Romero, July, 2004; Interview with Antonio Moreno, by author, Puebla, February 2004; Interview with Carlos Ramírez, by author, Puebla, March 2004; Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, by author, February, 2004; I have found no published testimonies that recount domestic abuse of ferrocarrileras. For instance, "*Yo soy rielero...*", the collection of testimonies published by the state university in Puebla, interviews no women and makes no mention of any kind of abuse perpetrated on ferrocarrileras.

⁹ Interview with Narciso Nava, by author, Puebla, 2004. Narciso Nava talked in length about the problem of venereal diseases among men, noting that men frequented a doctor near the station who had a reputation for providing good service to ferrocarrileros. Both the FNM and STFRM used their publications to inform workers about the dangers of syphilis. See, *Unificación Ferroviaria*, May 1, 1945; "El Medico," *Revista Ferronales*, May 1950.

losing their company housing (which they enjoyed because he was a station manager) for backing the movement. Acosta grew up to work for the Mexican National Railways, taking advantage of the hiring preferences given to the children of STFRM members, and later became a railway activist in Mexico City in the 1960s and 1970s, when student protestors demanded the release of Demetrio Vallejo from jail. Acosta drew on her mother's participation in the railway movement as inspiration for her own activism, believing that her mother provided her with an image of ferrocarrileras as combative and unyielding.¹²

Virgina López López has attained exalted status in Matías Romero for her political activism and support of the railway movement. Legend has it that she housed Demetrio Vallejo when he visited town in 1958 to organize workers, sheltering him from company spies.¹³ The ferrocarrileras in town refer to her with the same awe and reverence with which men remember Vallejo.¹⁴ Their memory of López powerfully reveals the sex segregation of some experience. No men in Matías Romero included López in their version of the railway movement.

No document provides unmediated access to past experiences, and oral histories present their own set of challenges because they record the feelings about the past at the time of the interview. The stories told by Lilia Benetíz and other women interviewees help us construct an alternative collective memory to the dominant, male centered memories circulated in published testimonies and ethnographies.¹⁵ Although these

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Interview with Guadalupe Acosta, by author, Mexico City, June 2004.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Interview with María Estel Medina, by author, 2004.

¹⁴ Interview with Medina and interview with Orozco, by author, 2004.

¹⁵ In addition to "*Yo soy rielero...*", it is noteworthy that the most important railway ethnography, published by the Instituto Mora, one of Mexico's premier educational institutions, relies on the testimonies

stories represent those of just a handful of ferrocarrileras, they can be read to gain insight into a broader experience: the poverty and sexism that women endured, as well as the political commitment and courage that they expressed. In his recent study of memory in Chile during the Pinochet regime, Steve J. Stern calls memories “that purport to capture an essential truth about the collective experience of society” emblematic memories.¹⁶ They are “emblematic because many people believe them.”¹⁷ Like folklore, these memories must refer to events, habits, and facts that ring true in order to claim to represent a general railway experience. The term is useful as a narrative strategy because it enables us to take historical memory seriously while acknowledging the difference between memory and other primary documents.

The most widely circulated emblematic memory of ferrocarrileras involves a group of railway women from Cárdenas, San Luis Potosí during the strike in August 1958. Women in Cárdenas famously prevented a locomotive operated by strikebreakers from leaving the station. The action pitted women against men, father against daughter, and striker against scab. At one climatic point, when the strikebreakers tried to move the train, a woman lifted her skirt and exhorted her father, one of the men on the train, to “put on his pants,” act like a man, and join the strikes.¹⁸ In this way, the ferrocarrilera made use of normative gender roles to shame her father into joining the strikes. The other

the ferrocarrilero who is the main subject of the study and his male friends. see *Lourdes Roca, Km. C-62: Un nómada del riel* (Mexico City: Instituto Mora/CONACULTA, 2000); a documentary of the same name was produced as a visual companion piece to the book.

¹⁶ Steve J. Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 68.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ This story is conveyed in two of the most cited and useful sources for the railway movement, Gill, *Los ferrocarrileros*, 77. and Demetrio Vallejo, *Las luchas*

women equally tried to shame their men folk by heckling them and treating them as if they were cowards.¹⁹

A long-time scholar of women's movements, historian Temma Kaplan argues that "shaming rituals are a means of fighting back and nonviolently undermining the legitimacy of the authorities."²⁰ When women use shaming rituals to single out the incompetence, corruption or general failures of male authority figures, they guard and reinforce norms and expectations placed on men by society. Railway women resorted to shaming rituals to remind men that they had an ethical responsibility to protect their wives and families by fighting for higher wages. In such cases, women took on normative masculine attributes, such as courage and toughness. By claiming that those who took sides with the company were "without pants," women questioned the workers masculinity conferred to them by railway labor, as we saw in Chapter 3. Like their male counterparts, they took active roles, put themselves in harms way, and challenged men in power. The aggressive behavior of the ferrocarrileras during the strikes has made such an impact on railway workers' collective psyche that it is not uncommon for interviewees to comment that ferrocarrileras "had more pants than some of the men."²¹

It is telling that our richest account of women in the railway industry comes to us in the form of an interview. Oral history has proven to be a useful methodology to gain insight into women's experience in diverse historical settings. Some feminist scholars have been drawn to oral history for its potential to aid in subverting male-centered

¹⁹ Gil, *Los ferrocarrileros*, 177.; "La participación de la mujer en la lucha ferrocarrilera (1958), Cárdenas, San Luis Potosí, Colección, "La mujer in la lucha obrera," n/d.

²⁰ Kaplan, *Taking Back*, 6-7.

²¹ Interview with Geraldo Niño Mendes, by author, Puebla, Feb. 2004; Interview with Fidel Tabares Velázco, by author, Matías Romero, Aug. 8, 2004.

narratives.²² This subversive potential is particularly important for students of institutions that are strongly defined as the exclusive domain of men, such as the railway industry and union.

The Power of Patriarchy

In 1918, Lilia Benetíz Vallejo was born in Magoñè, Oaxaca in her grandparents' house, where her uncle, Demetrio Vallejo, lived. Their families bridged rural and industrial worlds, as well as indigenous and mestizo cultures. Vallejo's father worked on the rails but maintained a parcel of land in the countryside, where he farmed corn on the weekend for extra income. He and Benetíz's father, a ferrocarrilero himself, married Zapotec sisters. Their mothers did not speak, read, or write Spanish; Zapotec was their language of intimacy.²³ Benetíz does not remember her father, who died of lung disease. When he died, her mother panicked, leaving Benetíz to live with her grandparents as well as her beloved Uncle Demetrio.²⁴

By reviewing the main themes and moments remembered by Vallejo and Benetíz concerning their adolescence, we are able to discern the social limitations put on Lilia and other railway daughters. Vallejo and other male children were encouraged to go out on their own during adolescence; to get a job with the railway company and spend time at work instead of with the family. Both women and men policed Lilia Benetiz and other railway daughters. Daughters went to market, to the railway workshops and stations to

²² Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Worlds: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991); two exemplary studies in Latin American history are Ann Farnsworth-Alvear, *Dulcinea in the Factory: Myths, Morals, Men and Women in Colombia's Industrial Experiment, 1905 – 1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) and Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

²³ Interview with Demetrio Vallejo, by Elena Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972; Interview with Benetíz, by Poniatowska, 1972.

²⁴ Interview with Benetíz, by Poniatowska, 1972.

deliver lunches to their fathers, and even to dances, but always under the supervision of a family elder or brother.²⁵

Unlike Vallejo, who moved about town and the railway station on his own and without supervision, from early on in her life Benetíz's relationship to the railways Benetíz and Vallejo formed a tight bond as Vallejo took his niece to the station, introducing her to the life enjoyed by ferrocarrileros—the jokes, knowledge and habits that distinguished them as a group. Railway work was in fact the Vallejo family profession. In railway families, sons were expected to follow in their father's footsteps and work for the railway company, while daughters often married ferrocarrileros.²⁶ Taking after his father, Vallejo proudly trained to operate railway telegraph machines, and he often took Benetiz to watch him study and send telegraphs. She fondly remembers asking inquisitively about the machine before wandering about the station in awe.²⁷ In her enthusiasm for the rails, she was like many other children—both girls and boys—who took pleasure in visiting and playing at the station and railway yard.²⁸

María Estel Cortes Medina, a native of Matías Romero, shared Benetíz's curiosity and love of the railway station and neighborhood. Medina recalls the excitement of living as part of a railway community. "We played with daughters of ferrocarrileros," she recalls nostalgically, "I liked the ferrocarril as a girl, there was movement, there was

²⁵ Both ferrocarrileros and ferrocarrileras remember that daughters and wives spent afternoons preparing and delivering food to men at stations. Interview with Maria del Cielo Fuentes, by author, Matías Romero, 2004; see interviews of male workers in Tirado, *Relatos del Interoceánico 2*.

²⁶ As mentioned throughout the study, ferrocarrileros sought to attain jobs for the children, especially boys, with the company. Interview with Fidel Tabaro, Puebla, November 2003; Interview with Carolos Ramírez, by author, Puebla, March 2004; Interview with Geraldo Niño Mendes, by author, Puebla, February 2004. Worker Personnel Dossiers also show that ferrcarrileros lobbied the STFRM and FNM to attain jobs for their daughters. See, FNM Personnel Dossier, María Cristina Cruz Zarate, Matías Romero, Box 3, *CEDIF*; FNM Personnel Dossier, Diana Cruz Orozco, Matías Romero, Box 3, *CEDIF*.

²⁷ Interview with Benetiz, by Poniatowska, 1972.

²⁸ Interview with Guadalupe Acosta, by author, Mexico City, June, 2004; Interview with Carlos Ramírez, Puebla March, 2004.

life.”²⁹ Clearly the railways captured the imagination of both girls and boys, socializing them to identify with railway sounds, sights, and energy.

Women interviewees’ mention dances held at the station pointing to how women carved a place for themselves in the memory of railway communities. They make a point to mention dances because their parents allowed them to go out at night to attend them. Medina vividly remembers that the company “held dances in the park every Saturday.”³⁰ The importance that these dances had for women as a venue for socializing outside the boundaries of their houses can be appreciated by the fact that nearly all women I interviewed remember the dances while no men in Matias Romero mentioned them.³¹ Men did not have to look forward to dances to have permission to walk at night in town or dance with women.³²

Like Medina, Benetíz recalls the experience of going to the station as an adventurous departure from her home life, even if her uncle normally accompanied her. “When I heard the train whistles,” she recalls, “I would run. I ran and ran so that my mom wouldn’t ask, ‘Lilia, Lilia, where are you going?’ I would already be gone, running to the station to be with [Vallejo].” Going to the railways enabled Benetíz to develop a public persona, independent of whatever her parents and family thought she ought to be doing with herself. “I always liked to go to the station. Everyone in Magoñè knew me.” I have a great devotion for the railways.”³³ Nevertheless, her adventures around town, the station and rail yards depended on the sanction of her uncle Demetrio. He provided cover for her playful escapades away from home.

²⁹ Interview with María Estel Cortes Medina, by author, Matías Romero, Aug. 8, 2004.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Interview with Medina, Orozco, Watanabe, by author, July 2004.

³² Ibid.

Benetíz's time spent at the railways became a family concern, however, once she reached adolescence. As her body developed, neighbors and friends worried that her trips to the station might put her sexual honor in danger. They would warn her grandparents, "take care of that muchacha; she goes to so and so's store too much...something could happen." Sexual experimentation became a source of anxiety for her grandparents and uncle Demetrio, who now laid down rules to deal with the problem of her maturing body and the intentions of men in the neighborhood. Vallejo warned her against having relations with the young men in town and even prohibited her from talking to girlfriends her own age.³⁴ Benetíz recalls, "I wanted to die. It was terrible. I felt imprisoned because they wouldn't let me leave the house." The patriarchal fear of sexual dishonor kept a check on where she could go.

Vallejo was encouraged to join the public sphere while Benetíz increasingly saw her mobility circumscribed. Unlike Benetíz, Demetrio Vallejo's memory of his sexual maturation was a source of pride and pleasure. He proudly recalls having his first sexual experience at fourteen with a teacher in her twenties.³⁵ When his mother found out, she no longer required him to attend church. As he transitioned from boyhood to adolescence he no longer was expected express piety and virtue, expectations that continued to burden his niece, Benetíz. Fully employed and sexually experienced, Vallejo enjoyed permission to walk freely about town and socialize with whom he wished, privileges his niece and other unmarried ferrocarrileras had to fight to attain.

³³ Interview with Lilia Benetíz, by Elena Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972, *Private Papers of Elena Poniatowska*, Mexico City.

³⁴ Vallejo makes no mention of his domineering relationship with Benetiz. Interview with Benetiz, by Poniatowska, 1972; Interview with Vallejo, by Poniatowska, 1972.

³⁵ Interview with Vallejo, by Poniatowska, , 1972.

And Benetíz did fight her parents to attain greater liberty, but she still found herself attached to a man, moving from the care of her uncle to that of a lover. Benetíz could not be confined to her house regardless of what measures her family took. Drawn to an older man, she took the initiative and began a correspondence, exchanging love letters with him by handing them to a neighborhood woman.³⁶ In Benetíz's account of the courtship, the simple act of procuring a pen and paper turns into an act of transgression, and one with physical consequences.³⁷ When Vallejo found out, he beat her with his belt. "He didn't want me to become a failure," she explains. Punishments proved counterproductive, however. Days after she turned fifteen, Benetíz delivered a baby boy.

The grandparents tried to protect Benetíz, as well as themselves, from public recriminations by sending her to live with relatives in the small town of Espinal, Oaxaca. But once again their protective measures could not contain Benetíz. Her lover found her and took her to Chiapas, where they were married before moving to Matías Romero, Oaxaca. Benetíz describes the classic courtship ritual as if she had no voice, no desire to marry, as if she had been a numb body with no ability to act. Her portrayal suggests that she felt closed in, without options, and years later still was unable to locate her own power in this episode in her life.³⁸ Or perhaps she chose to downplay her agency for fear of being judged for having run off with an older man against her grandparents' wishes.

Her husband soon took advantage of his male privilege to try to subordinate Benetíz. Like the other male presence in Benetíz's life, Demetrio Vallejo, her husband delivered whippings to command Benetíz's obedience. In addition to the emotional and physical pain caused by the beatings, Benetíz's problems became compounded when Vallejo

³⁶ Interview with Benetiz, by Poniatowska, 1972.

³⁷ Ibid.

arrived at her house in Matías Romero. When her uncle arrived, he found her face black and blue from her husband's blows. Vallejo tried playing the role of protector, urging her to go with him. But Benetíz defiantly replied, "No, I won't go. Please leave, you better leave, I don't want him to get here and for you two to fight."³⁹

During the late 1940s, Benetíz found herself having to choose between staying with an abusive husband or striking out on her own to face the social stigmatization of being a single mother. When she eventually chose to leave her husband, she found that both men and women viewed her as tainted, damaged goods. Men did not want to marry a woman with a child. She recalls sarcastically that men wanted "a señorita that hadn't sin."⁴⁰ Even when she found love in Mexico City, marrying a man she does not care to name, her mother-in-law never accepted her because she had been previously married with a son.⁴¹ Tragically, her son contracted a severe bronchial disorder that eventually led to his premature death at the age of 17 in 1950. Benetíz was 32 years old, and about to begin life anew as a single woman. For the first time in her life, there was no male figure—no husband, uncle or child—to place limits on where she could go and with whom she could associate.

The 1950s mark a turning point in Benetíz's life story. Ironically, the death of her son, the one male figure in her life who loved her without ever beating her, seemed to open up possibilities for Benetíz's self-development. Three years after his death, she separated from her second husband. She remembers her anxiety: "I was tormented. I would tell myself, 'you can go, but what can I do'. I never studied anything, what could I

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

do? I would make the sign of the cross...I suffered through it.”⁴² Despite her disquiet, she moved to Mexico City, where for the first time she began to think of herself as a woman who worked—rather than as a daughter, niece or mother.⁴³

Meanwhile, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, Vallejo had developed a reputation as a railway leader. In his interview with Poniatowska, he portrays himself as an organic intellectual, a tireless leader for the working class, explaining that he used his ability to read difficult texts to teach co-workers about their workplace rights so that they could contest punishments enacted by supervisors. He read and learned the collective contract between railway workers and the Mexican National Railways, and studied the national labor code.⁴⁴ He even read up on rail rates and the economics of the industry to make the case that the company could afford to pay a just wage, a burning issue for the STFRM and FNM throughout the 1940s and 1950s.

During the early 1950s, Benetíz again turned to the most trusted paternal figure in her life, Demetrio Vallejo. Benetíz was new to Mexico City, recently separated from her husband, and she needed a job. Vallejo had by now made many friends in the labor movement, as he had contacts among petrol and electrical workers from his organizing days in Veracruz. He called in a favor from one of his political acquaintances in the labor movement, arranging an interview with the petrol workers’ union in Mexico City. Excited at the prospect of finding work and gaining financial independence, Benetíz took the letter of introduction that her uncle wrote for her to the petrol union local.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Interview with Vallejo, by Poniatowska, 1972; José Jorge Ramírez also stresses that he earned his reputation as a leader in part because he was able to read and explain the collective contract to his colleagues. Interview with José Ramírez, by author, February, 2004.

Once again, Benetíz ran into a man who intended to take advantage of his power as a man and as a boss. The political solidarity that the petrol union official shared with her uncle did not prevent the official from demeaning her with untoward sexual advances. “You are so beautiful,” he shamelessly noted, and invited Benetíz out for a coffee date. Benetíz had stood up to two husbands and was not about to let the union bureaucrat intimidate her, asserting “are you going to give me the job or not? Be straight with me.”⁴⁵ Before he could answer, she got up and told him she was not interested in the job.

Benetíz reflects on that day to comment on the intersection of gender and class, suggesting that poor women must rely on each other to overcome sexism and poverty. “That’s how they treat poor transient women,” Benetíz explains to Poniatowska. If male workers viewed the labor movement as progressive and saw unions as vehicles for the defense of their rights, Benetíz learned that men and women were not on equal footing in the movement. She would have to overcome everyday acts of sexism if she wanted to become a member of the petrol workers brotherhood. But Benetíz decided to reject the union official’s advances and instead lean on the women in her life. She gave up on getting a job with the union and through female friends found employment as a social worker in Mexico City.

Benetíz’s remembrances are important because they echo the memories of other ferrocarrileras who describe the effects that sexism had on their private and public lives. Women I interviewed in Matías Romero, Mexico City and Puebla share many of Benetíz’s complaints as well as many of her positive memories. They felt a close, intimate connection to the railway industry, based on familial ties. But they also

⁴⁵ Interview with Benetíz, by Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972.

remember the railway station and neighborhood as a source of entertainment, fun and pleasure.

Railway women suffered from making due with the meager paychecks that their husbands brought home without enjoying the festive atmosphere that men enjoyed at cantinas, brothels and even the workplace—at least when they arrived at work inebriated.⁴⁶ Ferrocarrileras had to figure out how to stretch every peso. Guadalupe Acosta explains that ferrocarrileras derived their common identity in part from shared sufferings. They often had no money for food and basic necessities while their husbands spent their money on mistresses.⁴⁷ These are hardly the upbeat remembrances told by ferrocarrileros, who nostalgically recall cantina culture and the independence they enjoyed riding on locomotives.

Remembering Ferrocarrileras

Guadalupe Acosta was the type of woman who might have helped Benetíz had she been old enough to help in the 1950s. Acosta was born in Pachuca, Hidalgo in 1949. She was just a child when workers chose Vallejo as their leader in 1958. Still, she fondly remembers those days as part of her family and community history.

Alegre: Who were the “ferrocarrileras”?

Acosta: the wives and those [women] who work for the FNM. Wives had to move around the country, they had deprivations, raised children without healthcare, lived in inhospitable areas, without electricity or running water, poor housing. Wives and

⁴⁶ We discuss in Chapter 1 the hyper-masculine forms of leisure that ferrocarrileros enjoyed.

⁴⁷ Interview with Guadalupe Acosta, by author, Mexico City, July 2004.

daughters sacrificed more, they were more ferrocarrileras [than women workers].⁴⁸

Contrast Acosta's memory with the how Enrique López Marquez, her friend and a former worker from Mexico City, recalls his railway experience.

López: Men had ton of women...as a ferrocarrilero, you felt powerful, lives depended on you!⁴⁹

Unlike Enrique López's comments, the portrayal of railway wives given by Acosta vividly highlights the daily burdens that women shouldered. The description of their poverty and hardship sharply contrasts with accounts given by male interviewees, in which they tell tales of excitement guiding trains, titillating tales of "conquering" women, and heroic tales of initiating strikes.⁵⁰ Lilia Benetíz, Guadalupe Acosta's mother and other women in the 1940s and 1950s did not have the option of carousing around town. Since they were excluded from the most respected jobs, such as those working on locomotives or repair shops, they could not construct romantic workplace tales; those few women who did work for the railways in the 1950s did so as cleaning personnel, office assistants or nurses.⁵¹

When the topic of children is introduced during interviews it also tends to draw markedly different responses from ferrocarrileras as compared to ferrocarrileros. When asked to discuss their children, male workers typically recall instances when daughters or sons brought them lunch, or they recount how they hoped their children would join the

⁴⁸ Ibid; Ruth Ramírez, the wife of José Jorge Ramírez, also remembers her life as having been deeply affected by the poor wages earned by her husband. She explains that they could barely get by on his income. Interview with Ruth Ramírez, by author, Puebla, March 2004.

⁴⁹ Interview with Enrique López, by author, Mexico City, May, 2004.

⁵⁰ See Chapter 3.

⁵¹ "No pueden ascender las enfermeras no tituladas," *Unificación Ferroviaria*, 28 Feb. 1950; FNM Personnel Dossier, María Cristina Cruz Zarate, Matías Romero, Box 3, *CEDIF*; FNM Personnel Dossier, Diana Cruz Orozco, Matías Romero, Box 3, *CEDIF*; Interview with Acosta, by author, Mexico City, 2004.

railways, as generations of men in their family had done.⁵² But they rarely proceed to discuss their children any further. Rosaldo García Alvarado, who worked in the yards of the station in Matías Romero, straightforwardly admits that when it came to child-rearing, “I didn’t care. I drank.”⁵³ Likewise, when asked about his role in parenting his children, José Ramírez, the former railway activist from Puebla discussed in earlier chapters, dismisses parenting as women’s work.⁵⁴ While some male workers may have been more involved in their family’s lives than García and Ramírez claim to have been, men structure their memories around their past experiences with other men, particularly men with whom they worked and socialized.⁵⁵ Since ferrocarrileros pay such scant importance to their lives as fathers and husbands, the memories of railway women and children are indispensable for understanding how railway families got by.

Like Lilia Benetíz and Guadalupe Acosta, Margarita Hernández Orozco and her mother knew what it was like to endure economic hardship and social inequities particular to railway women, and they did their best to earn money to help the family get by. Hernández’s father, who found work as a yard worker for the Mexican National Railways in the early 1900s, discovered that in the 1940s his wages were no longer sufficient to maintain the household. Hernández and her mother therefore had to figure out ways to earn money. After delivering lunch to her father, Hernández would hurry to the market to accompany her mother who sold a *cecina* (a steak dish), cheese and fish. To

⁵² See Chapter 1.

⁵³ Interview with Rosendo García Alvarado, by author, Matías Romero, Aug. 8, 2004.

⁵⁴ Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, by author, Puebla, May 2004.

⁵⁵ I interviewed former ferrocarrilero Antonio Moreno several times for over an hour each sitting. He insisted that his wife had little to say and little experience relevant to railway history. Likewise, José Jorge Ramírez, who recalls spending days and nights organizing in the late 1950s, recounts that he did not speak to his wife about the railway movement. Ruth Ramírez backs his account, but identifies as a *vallejista* nonetheless. Both Moreno and Ramírez structure their stories exclusively around the actions of men. Interview with Moreno, Mexico City, February and March, 2004; Interview with Ramírez, February, 2004.

add to the income earned by her mother, Hernández beheaded pig, which she sold to neighbors along with bread and mole she prepared. “[Women] are used to working, even if husband works. We work to help the husband.”⁵⁶

The family also depended on Hernández’s labor as a childcare provider. She remembers the burdens of living in a railway family as structured by gender inequality, which deprived her of the opportunity to study: “In those days, women didn’t study. Girls didn’t go to school. I went to school until the 4th grade, then I had to take care of my brothers.”⁵⁷ Guadalupe Acosta found herself in a similar situation when she was an adolescent, explaining that “the older sister always plays the role of mother.”⁵⁸ Clearly, railway families counted on the labor of Hernández and other daughters to provide childcare and sell goods at market.

If women endured such hardships as wives and daughters of railway men, one might inquire why they married railway men? Why would a daughter of a railway man, who lived poorly, wed a railway worker, knowing how difficult life would be? I posed this question to Hernández Orozco.

Alegre: Why did you marry a ferrocarrilero?

Hernández: Because that’s all there was. I met my husband when I went to the station to give my father food.... We never went anywhere except to give breakfast or to market. Those were the only places you would go. Once every two weeks we got permission to go to the dance. 8 pm to 12 am.⁵⁹

As a quintessential railway town, Matías Romero offered women few potential partners other than railway men. The dance that Hernández and other railway daughters

⁵⁶ Interview with Margarita Hernández Orozco, by author, Matías Romero, August 8, 2004.

⁵⁷ Ibid; Interview with Maria del Cielo Fuentes Watanabe, by author, Matías Romero, Aug. 8, 2004.

⁵⁸ Interview with Acosta, by author, Mexico City, 2004.

⁵⁹ Interview with Hernández, by author, 2004.

enjoyed attending took place at the railway station and drew mostly young ferrocarrileros. In major cities, where men who worked in industries other than the railway were abundant, young railway women still faced obstacles to courting because their families circumscribed where they could go.⁶⁰

Some, like Benetíz, openly defied their parents and courted men on the sly. Others opted for the men they met when they delivered lunch to their fathers at the station.⁶¹ Those who recall meeting their future husbands while they delivered lunch are perhaps drawing on an acceptable script to cover more adventurous courtship rituals. If it was inappropriate for young women to court men openly in public, then perhaps the memory of meeting husbands at the railway yard is an emblematic memory available to women who met their husbands on corners, in bars, at dances but want to present a socially acceptable memory of their courtship.

Lilia Benetíz and the Strikes of 1958

Women's lives consisted of much more than courtship rituals and poverty. As part of the social fabric of railway neighborhoods, women took on the social and political identity of ferrocarrilera, or rielera. In the summer of 1958, when the railway movement shut down the rails, no woman had more access to the railway leaders' everyday organizing efforts than Lilia Benetiz. She had direct and intimate access to the movement's leader, Demetio Vallejo, which enabled her to witness the political debates

⁶⁰ Interview with Acosta, Mexico City, 2004.

⁶¹ Interview with Ruth Ramírez, by author, February 2004.

among the union leaders.⁶² Although her access to male leaders was atypical, her testimony reveals that she nevertheless looked to other women in the movement for support, friendship, and political solidarity.

After turning the petrol leader down for his sexual advances during her job interview, Benetiz had taken two jobs in Mexico City, working part time as a social worker and part time in the textile industry. Her luck would change, however, when grassroots railway workers ousted their corrupt union representatives in August 1958 and elected Demetrio Vallejo as their leader. Soon after, Vallejo gave Benitez a job as a secretary for Local 15 in Mexico City. She felt like a star as workers' adoration for her uncle brought her status and respect. Vallejo for his part brought her into his inner circle of political confidants. He treated her as a comrade in arms, letting her in on organizing strategies and bringing her to gatherings of committed dissidents.⁶³

The 1958 victory over charro officials stoked a celebratory mood among workers, their families and their supporters, which Benetíz experienced first hand and recalled nostalgically in her interview with Poniatowska. Streets hosted scenes of revelry, as dissidents physically took over the avenues of Mexico City, marching in protest to sites of symbolic importance.⁶⁴ For instance, on one day in July 1958, railway activists marched from the union hall to the Monument of the Revolution, creating a link between their demands and the gains won as a result of the Revolution of 1910.⁶⁵ From the Monument, they headed to the Zócalo, flexing their strength in front of the presidential palace. Benetíz took part in these rituals of collective action, embracing the independent

⁶² Interview with Benetíz, by Poniatowska, 1972.

⁶³ Ibid.

union led by her uncle and its broad goal of fighting for a better standard of living for railway families.⁶⁶

As a STFRM activist in 1958, Benetíz rediscovered the enthusiasm for the railway that she had as a child and an adolescent when she visited the stations. No longer did her uncle circumscribe her movement for fear that she might find a lover and dishonor the family. On the contrary, the distinction between her home life and union work seemed to disappear. When the first strike wave occurred in June 1958, she worked the phones at the union hall, staying in the building day and night, transmitting the latest information to strikers who called from Chihuahua to Chiapas.⁶⁷ She had not yet received employment with the STFRM (that would take place in August), so no one could question her commitment and sacrifice as she lent her services to the railway movement.

In her interview with Poniatowska, Benetíz frames her participation in the dissident railway movement as the moment in her life story when she acquired political consciousness around issues of class. Her vocabulary indicates this transformation. Whereas in the earlier part of the transcript, she uses passive verbs and focuses mainly on how her family and husbands treated her and limited her options (“He took me”), Benetíz uses action verbs to describe her participation in the railway movement. She places herself in the narrative of the strikes as an active agent: “we met,” “we fought,” “we won.”⁶⁸ For the first time in her interview, she takes control of her own life story.

⁶⁴ Hermanos Mayo, sleeve 126509, July 1958, Hermanos Mayo Collection, *Fototeca, AGN*; Hermanos Mayo, sleeve 13393, March 1959, Hermanos Mayo Collection, *Fototeca, AGN*. “Espíritu de unidad del gremio ferrocarrilero,” *Excelsiór*, 19 July 1958.

⁶⁵ “Ordenada manifestación de ferrocarrileros,” *Excelsiór*, 20 July 1958.

⁶⁶ Interview with Benetíz, by Poniatowska, 1972.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Women play a central role in her memories of the strikes. Benetíz describes the joy that she and other women felt when workers shut down the rail in June. She points to her exchange with a woman union member. The woman told Benetiz: “Cry, Cry Cry, let your emotions out.”⁶⁹ Benetíz cried from the sheer joy of victory. The strike had been a success and Benetíz felt a part of the excitement. This excerpt is significant because it establishes that women participated in the movement, attended strikes, and leaned on each other for support. Like railway men, women risked losing their jobs while they put their bodies in harm’s way, as riot police stood ever ready during protests.

Benetíz was clearly not the only woman who supported the railway movement. There were many other women who also identified as *vallejistas*. Guadalupe Acosta’s mother, for instance, did not work for the railway, but she nevertheless supported the movement and the strikes.⁷⁰ Acosta’s mother had a lot to lose during the railway strikes. She was pregnant when workers shut down the rails in June and August 1958. Since Acosta’s father worked as a station agent in Hidalgo, the family lived at the station. Hence, by supporting the strike, Acosta’s mother and father risked losing company housing as well as wages.⁷¹

Years later, in a restaurant in Mexico City, Acosta would remember her mother and father’s combative attitude and declare: “The ferrocarril is my world, the union has a lot of fight.” Dramatically, she compared herself to women soldiers who fought in the Revolution of 1910: “all I need are the bullets.”⁷²

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Acosta’s entire family identified as *vallejista*. Ruth Ramírez, who claimed to know nothing about the railway movement, identifies as a *vallejista* because her husband and father were *vallejistas*. Interview with Acosta, by author, 2004; Interview with Ruth Ramírez, by author, 2004.

⁷¹ Interview with Acosta, 2004.

⁷² Interview with Acosta, 2004.

Mobilized Ferrocarrileras (August 1958)

Women such as Benetiz and Acosta's mother in Matías Romero were no less important to the railway movement than women in Mexico City. Margarita Hernández Orozco and Maria del Cielo Fuentes Watanabe identify as ferrocarrileras and as vallejistas. Watanabe insists, "the women supported their husbands interests and their own."⁷³ Remarkably, both recall that women in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca were said to have laid themselves across the tracks in order to prevent trains from moving in 1958.⁷⁴

Although the events described by Hernández and Watanabe may have very well occurred, they might also be an example of how the memory of women in Cárdenas, San Luis Potosí, who banded together in July 1958 to prevent strikebreakers from moving trains, was appropriated by women in Oaxaca to inform people that they too participated in the movement.⁷⁵ Whether or not women in Salina Cruz actually laid across the tracks, the story indicates that women's actions in Cárdenas influenced the way that women in Matias Romero remember the strikes. Oaxacan women want to be credited as having supported the railway movement as vigorously as their female counterparts in other cities.⁷⁶

The women of Cárdenas, not those of Salina Cruz, have been remembered by workers for their extraordinary participation in the railway movement. The event for which they are remembered involved the actions of some brave Cárdenas ferrocarrileras. On one July 1958 afternoon, the ferrocarrileras confronted rank-and-file supporters of

⁷³ Interview with Watanabe, by author, Matias Romero, July, 2004.

⁷⁴ Interview with Watanabe; Interview with Orozco.

⁷⁵ We might read Watanabe and Hernandez's memory of the event's taking place in Salina Cruz as an attempt to give the story local resonance.

charro leaders, who decided to cross the picket line to move locomotives out of the station. The local Cárdenas scabs received reinforcements from a train full of imported scab railway workers and soldiers that arrived at the Cárdenas station from the close-by city of San Luis Potosí. As news of the strikebreakers spread, railway women marched toward the station, intent on preventing scabs from moving the locomotives.⁷⁷

Federal troops occupied railway workshops and offices, and prepared to send soldiers to surround the tracks, but the ferrocarrileras and women supporters held their ground.⁷⁸ The women quickly transitioned from aid workers sympathetic to the strike to self-conscious political activists, even as the men wilted from fear of the soldiers. When one woman acquired a speaker system in order to harangue strikebreakers and rally the crowd, railway men warned the women they were not permitted to hold a rally without the government's permission. The women defiantly replied, "We don't need it; we trust in article 9 of the Constitution; we know our rights."⁷⁹

By employing shaming rituals, women urged workers operating the trains to join the strike. The most provocative instance involved a woman who directly contested the authority of her father, Florencio Ruiz de la Peña, who was one of the scabs maneuvering the train out of the station. Florencio Ruiz de la Peña's daughter called on him to step down from the train and join the protesters, pleading with him to spare his children the

⁷⁶ Interview with Watanabe, by author, Matías Romero, 2004; Interview with Hernández, by author, Matías Romero, 2004.

⁷⁷ The press printed only a blurb on the activism of railway women in Cárdenas, San Luis Potosí. See, "Desfile de Rieleras," *Excelsiôr*, 4 August 1958. The story is told in journalist's Mario Gill, *Los Ferrocarrileros*, pp. 176-179 and in Anonymous, "La participación de la mujer en la lucha ferrocarrilera (1958), Cárdenas, San Luis Potosí, Colección "La mujer en la lucha obrera", n/d/. Shaming rituals are powerful tools that women have used in various countries and historical settings to contest patriarchal authority. See, Temma Kaplan, *Taking Back the Streets: Women, Youth, and Direct Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 7 – 10.

⁷⁸ Gil, *Los Ferrocarrileros*, 177.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

indignity of having a scab for a father.⁸⁰ Five women joined her, and each pleaded with their men not to go down as traitors.

As the sense of urgency grew, the scene turned into a rally. The women soon upped the ante by taking the drastic decision of lying across the tracks in order to prevent the movement of the locomotives. By lying across the rails, the women politicized their bodies, wielding them at the company, the state machinery embodied by soldiers, and male scabs, who in at least one case was a family member. Other women soon followed. “Would the machinist dare to thrust the train over his own daughter,” they yelled. Those women who decided not to lie down threw coins and stale tortillas at the scabs operating the trains.⁸¹

Frustrated by the intransigence of the scabs, the women backed away and formed a circle around Doña Ramona, a fellow dissident. As the circle opened, Doña Ramona “faced the machinist and lifted her skirt and screamed, “put them on coward! Let’s see if then you learn to fight like the men.”⁸² Obviously, pants in this ritual serve as a metonym for masculine attributes, such as courage and toughness, which scabs lacked and the women possess. In the end, the women’s tactics to shame the scabs worked, for they pulled the train back into the station as the women cheered. The actions stand as one of the many small victories attained by ferrocarrileras and ferrocarrileros before the repression of the railway movement in 1959.

⁸⁰ Anonymous, “La participación de la mujer,” 17

⁸¹ These tactics are reminiscent of those used by the Chilean right-wing women to protest the Allende administration. During these demonstrations, women beat empty pots in an effort to shame men for not providing for their families. See, Kaplan, *Taking Back*, 48 - 49, and Margaret Power, *Right-Wing Women in Chile: Feminine Power and the Struggle Against Allende, 1964 – 1973* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2002).

⁸² “La participación de la mujer,” 19.

The Repression of 1959

The fallout of the repression created long-lasting rifts among railway workers and activists that continue until this day.⁸³ Dissident leaders were the first to suffer at the hands of the police, as soldiers in Mexico City took incorrigible strikers to Military Camp 1, a military holding station where they were held without being processed. Rank-and-file members who were not arrested had to decide whether they would continue to remain on strike or walked off the picket line and return to work. The overwhelming majority decided to go back to work within the forty-eight hour window that the company set for workers to return without getting fired.

Benetiz condemns workers who did not continue to resist. She has little empathy for these workers, even though she understands that they suffered at the hands of authorities. She told Poniatowska that although she understands that the “[army guards] mentally tortured [strikers] because they told them that if they didn’t denounce my uncle they would be physically punished,” she still holds these workers accountable for having betrayed Vallejo. Those strikers who went back to work, she explains, “didn’t have a political vision, conviction, a firm stance so they believed that by denouncing my uncle they were going to save themselves.”⁸⁴ José Jorge Ramírez agrees, confessing, “we betrayed the movement, all of us” by going back to work as Vallejo and other leaders languished at the military camp.⁸⁵

⁸³ For a detailed discussion of rifts among workers brought about by police repression, See Chapter 4.

⁸⁴ Interview with Benetiz, by Poniatowska, 1972.

⁸⁵ Interview with José Jorge Ramírez, 2004.

With Vallejo behind bars and with male leaders fearing further repression, Benetiz found herself in charge. Roles had now reversed, as she came to be the main source of protection and support of her uncle. Benetíz began by taking responsibility for informing the public about the whereabouts and condition of Vallejo. Benetíz had in fact been one of the many dissidents that the military apprehended that day, but unlike her uncle, she was permitted to leave. It is unclear why she was released.⁸⁶ Perhaps the police assumed that women did not belong to the dissident railway movement.

Like Benetíz, women in Matías Romero supported the railway movement throughout 1958 and continued to express their solidarity with dissidents after the police arrested strikers.⁸⁷ Even today, elderly railway women remember the tough, committed activist, Virginia López López, with respect and admiration for having been the most prominent vallejista in Matías Romero—male or female. López had been a friend to Vallejo, and he was rumored to have hidden at López's house when he visited in June and July 1958 to organize workers. When police arrested strikers, it was López who led women bringing bags of food late at night up into the hills at the edge of the city, where dissidents sought refuge. Hernández Orozco remembers López as a strong and able leader, explaining, "Virginia was very strong. She didn't care, she would confront any

⁸⁶ Interview with Benetiz, by Poniatowska, 1972.

⁸⁷ Workers' dossiers indicate when police arrested strikers for their participation in the strikes. The dossiers of workers from Matías Romero branch, which included those from the city of Salina Cruz, are particularly rich in regard to arrests. See Personnel Dossier, Adan Cortés Ceballos, Matías Romero, Box 3 *CEDIF*; Personnel Dossier, Ildefonso Aquino Castillo, Matías Romero, Box 3, *CEDIF*; Personnel Dossier Octavio Bonilla del Rivero, Matías Romero, Box 3, *CEDIF*; Personnel Dossier, Hector Casanova Martínez, Matías Romero, Box 4, *CEDIF*; Personnel Dossier, César Carbajal Vallejo, Matías Romero, Box 4, *CEDIF*; Personnel Dossier, Daniel Cinta Valencia, Matías Romero, Box 4, *CEDIF*;

man.”⁸⁸ When men were taken away, López and other ferrocarrileras in Matías Romero became all the more indispensable.⁸⁹

As women in Matías Romero aided their male counterparts hiding in the mountains, Benetíz gathered her bearings and headed out of the military camp in Mexico City. When Benetíz exited the grounds, a woman who had also been imprisoned and let go hurried after Benetíz with news that military officers had beaten Vallejo. Benetíz remembers, “We had barely stepped out the door [of the jail] when the woman told us, they have just roughed up Señor Vallejo, they left him for dead, dragged him away...to the hospital.”⁹⁰ Benetíz’s memory of having confronted the General in charge of the military camp, demanding an explanation, marks the moment in the transcript when she portrays as taking charge of organizing dissidents—some of whom were hiding from authorities, others who returned to work—to collect money for Vallejo’s legal fees. She would visit worksites and clandestine dissident meetings and inform vallejistas about their leader’s well being, ask them for donations and return Mexico City to let Vallejo know the latest news of the rank and file.⁹¹

For her part, Benetíz displayed political skills. She contacted the national newspapers, such as Excelsiór and Últimas Noticias, and informed them that officers had beaten Vallejo. She had luck with La Prensa, which published a bulletin that she wrote, but she found that editors at other newspapers were less welcoming. Even when reporters tried to get her story out, editors changed or omitted news of Vallejo, kowtowing to unnamed political officials:

⁸⁸ Interview with Hernández Orozco, by author, Matías Romero, 2004.

⁸⁹ Medina and Orozco describe how women sold goods and cleaned clothes to provide for the family and to feed ferrocarrileros who were hiding. Interview with Medina and Orozco, 2004.

⁹⁰ Interview with Benetíz, by Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972.

Look, senorita, it's not that we don't want to [help]; we give the [editors] the information but unfortunately they change the information or they don't publish anything because there are orders from above that nothing is to be published about the Vallejo's Movement...when they edit, the reports that we make are lost⁹²

Although Benetíz could not count on newspapers or the public to support her and the movement, she did find political solidarity among railway women. In particular, Señora Marina, a secretary employed by the FNM and a member of the railway union, stuck by Benetíz's side in March 1959 when she worked to rally support for her uncle's day in court.⁹³ Señora Marina had been a dedicated vallejist; she had joined the protests and even offered her secretarial skills to Vallejo. When Vallejo landed in jail, Señora Marina continued to resist the company and government, which led FNM to fire her without explanation when officials found out about her involvement in the movement. Despite losing her job, Señora Marina seemed to have no regrets about striking because she continued to make sacrifices for the movement by selling her T.V and encyclopedia set and vending food to raise money for Vallejo's defense.⁹⁴

In addition to Señora Marina, another woman, the wife of a ferrocarrilero who ran a boarding house, offered Benetíz a free place to stay—a risky offer considering that the government arrested strikers for social dissolution and could potentially arrest sympathizers for lending support. Using the boarding house as one of her temporary bases, Benetíz would meet Señora Marina to visit Vallejo in jail, bringing him essential items, such as food and newspapers.⁹⁵ Vallejo read newspapers during the day and used

⁹¹ Interview with Benetíz, by Poniatowska, 1972.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Benetíz does not give Señora Marina last names.

⁹⁴ Interview with Benetíz, by Poniatowska, 1972.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

them as blankets at night to keep warm.⁹⁶ He was no longer the man who could order Benetíz to stay home, avoid men and listen to her parents.

The man that Lilia Benetíz once looked to for advice and political direction now looked to her for protection. She was the logical choice for representing Vallejo while he was in jail. They enjoyed an intimate friendship, and he trusted her enough to include her in union meetings.⁹⁷ Vallejo therefore relied on his niece to take charge on the outside and organize resistance against the continued suppression of the movement. When Benetíz visited Vallejo one day, she was disturbed by his appearance, “My uncle’s face was disfigured, he looked like a monster, his entire face black and blue from punches, from the punches that they laid on him.”⁹⁸

Benetíz contacted an attorney, Licenciado Ortega Arenas, to defend her uncle against the charge of social dissolution, a law originally intended for cases of treason.⁹⁹ Ortega Arenas quickly arranged to meet Vallejo at the military camp and used his client’s notoriety to attract public attention.¹⁰⁰ Authorities sought to control the terms of the meeting, keeping the attorney and his client separated by a fence in the camp yard, but Arenas astutely used his opportunity for photographers and journalists to see the railway leader up close. Those photographers who managed to get their photographs approved by their editors served to circulate the image of a mistreated activist: “They took pictures of my uncle, and that is how the public became aware that my uncle had been beaten.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Evelyn P. Stevens, “Legality and Extra-Legality in Mexico,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 1, (Jan.1970), 1.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Benetíz, by Poniatowska, 1972.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Rather than help Vallejo's cause, however, the pictures further complicated problems for the railway leader. According to Benetíz, the police punished Vallejo for the public attention by accusing him of attacking a police captain, an offense that added more time to his sentence. The injustice exacted on her uncle left Benetíz dismayed: "In sum, they gave my uncle more time. He was beaten...well they did as much harm as they could, and still they add another charge to increase his sentence."¹⁰²

Political Prisoner

"My uncle wasn't a delinquent, he was a political prisoner."—Lilia Benetíz, 1972.

Benetíz led railway families in turning their political attention to resisting the imprisonment of railway leaders. One day, as Benetíz chanted vivas for her uncle, guards escorted Demetrio Vallejo from the military camp to the penitentiary.¹⁰³ Meanwhile, prisoners who had not been formally processed began a hunger strike. Outside the camp, Benetíz led men and women in an effort to spread word to the public about the prisoners' hunger strike. She explains, "We were in the streets, passing out propaganda, holding meetings wherever we could. The police chased us out of one place and we went to another. It was a tremendous movement to see if we could save the prisoners."¹⁰⁴ The movement crystallized when Benetíz and other railway activists formed the organization Liberation of Political Prisoners. The same energy and political conviction that sustained railway families as they mobilized for higher wages and to instill union democracy in

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Interview with Vallejo, by Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972.

1958 and 1959 now united them in support of their imprisoned leaders, friends and neighbors.

Benetíz acted aggressively. She visited stations to collect donations from workers to sustain the resistance. Station agents opened their doors, permitting Benetíz on work sites, where she ate with railway men and urged them to contribute. Her status as Vallejo's niece surely aided her in getting access to the traditionally male space of the railway yard. But she preferred to be known for her commitment to the resistance than to be distinguished as Vallejo's niece. Benetíz admits as much by making a point to indicate to Poniatowska that many workers did not know that she and Vallejo were related. Benetíz wants to be regarded for her actions, independent of her relationship to Vallejo, or any other man for that matter.

Other women too use their memory of the police crackdown on strikers to indicate women's organizing efforts. María Estel Cortes Medina, wants the record to show that "women suffered with the movement of 1958. Many of our husbands went to jail. They took men in [railway container cars], like they were going to kill them...women suffered."¹⁰⁵ Like Benetíz and other railway women in Matías Romero, Cortes found herself on the frontlines of the political battle to contest the economic policies of the company and national government.

Conclusion

Benetíz's memory underscores the importance of locating women's memories of living in railway communities in order to understand the gender structured the everyday

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

lives of railway families. The memory that these women have of living in railway communities differed precisely because they were women and had to endure gender-specific burdens. Moreover, the testimonies of these *ferrocarrileras* reveal the gendered character of historical memory. These women hold emblematic memories that differ from those railway men. While men's memories depict railway life with nostalgia, and focus on fun had on trains, in cantinas, and on picket lines, women provide a critique of railway men and their rosy depictions of belonging to a railway neighborhood and family.

The strategies used for shaming scabs demonstrate that women understood that normative gender roles could be used to advance political ends. The events at Cárdenas stand as one of the very few instances of women's actions that have been included in the history of the railway movement, even if they are presented as an aside to the masculinist narrative of combative railway men against corrupt *charros* and company officials.

Benetíz, for her part, continued to organize after the repression of the strike. Although her efforts fell short of securing Vallejo's release, grassroots challenges to the PRI continued. In 1968, students in Mexico City filled the streets in protest, demanding the release of political prisoners, including Vallejo. Armed soldiers repressed the student movement in a violent and bloody showdown that dwarfed the repressive actions taken against railway workers nine years earlier. The story of the student movement's suppression was chronicled by Poniatowska during the same time that she befriended Vallejo and Benetíz.

The intimacy between railway women as remembered by Lilia Benetíz parallels the intimacy shared by Benetíz and Poniatowska. Their intimacy is not recognized explicitly but is suggested by the familiar tone in which the journalist asks the interviewee to reveal

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Cortès Medina, by author, Matias Romero, 2004.

layers of her private life. One may wonder whether Benetíz would have divulged such details to a male interviewer, or to a woman outside the political left. Poniatowska's commitment to the major political movements of the day, as well as her status as a prominent woman intellectual, gave her credibility and access to grassroots organizers who may have been reticent to sit down with her. The journalist's visits to see Vallejo in jail, as well as her sympathy for the student movement, must have convinced Benetíz that the Poniatowska was a trustworthy chronicler.

The women of Matías Romero lacked the clout within the union, and with Poniatowska, that Benetíz enjoyed as the niece of Demetrio Vallejo. Yet they were no less involved in the railway movement. And when their husbands and fathers were arrested in March 1959, they too drew on their social and political identity as ferrocarrileras to occupy the political space vacated by ferrocarrileros. The Oaxacan ferrocarrileras banded together to provide refuge and food for ferrocarrileros who had gone underground. Clearly, they were key participants in the *comunidad ferrocarrilera*, evidence that one did not have to work for the railway companies to identify as part of the railway community. The stories of these women are crucial for understanding the construction of railway communities, the mass discontent with the PRI and the failure of the "Mexican Miracle" among railway men and women, and the vibrancy of the railway movement that organized to undo the post-war economic policies of Ávila Camacho and Alemán.

Conclusion

Between 1943 and 1959, railway activists contested the pro-business policies of Miguel Ávila Camacho and Miguel Alemán, whose administrations sought to industrialize Mexico by courting foreign investment. In order to create a friendly business environment, these presidents discouraged labor unions, which had strong links to the ruling party, from mobilizing for wage increases. The strategy proved effective during World War II, as union leaders rallied the rank and file to endure wage freezes in order to cut costs for industrial goods produced for the war. Workers sacrificed their wages as an expression of their patriotism and solidarity for the international effort against the Axis. However, when the war ended, the rank and file, particularly those in the most powerful industries, expected the government to enact pro-labor policies that workers associated with Lázaro Cárdenas. The strikes of 1958 and 1959 constituted the culmination of an over decade-long struggle among elements of railway workers against the PRI's post-war policies.

This study has demonstrated that the “Mexican Miracle” of the 1950s left working class Mexicans behind, and the decrease in their standard of living led directly to the mobilization of the working class, especially those who labored in industries that were key for the country's economy. Petrol, telegraph, and electrical workers joined teachers in large protests throughout the country, participating in a grassroots revolt against the conservative policies of presidents Manuel Ávila Camacho and Miguel Alemán. Railway workers served the role of the vanguard within the industrial working class, taking advantage of their power to shut down the rails and wreak havoc on the communications and the shipment of goods to acquire concessions from the PRI.

Contesting the PRI

A principle contribution of this study has been to closely document how the railway movement contested the hegemony of the PRI. In doing so, the rank and file pulled the curtain on the ruling party's claim that the country was entering a Golden Age, a period of rapid industrialization and unprecedented prosperity. The railway movement makes clear the disputed quality of post-war Mexico, a lesson future scholars will have to take seriously when writing on the Golden Age of Mexican history. There was little "golden" for railway workers and their families, as the hoped for prosperity continued to elude them.

Political representation, and the PRI's suppression of democratic unionism, lay at the center of workers quest for higher wages. Economic issues could not be resolved without concurrently addressing the lack of independent union leaders. Petrol and electrical workers fought to overthrow charro leaders, but it was the railway workers who successfully reclaimed their union. The replacement of charro representatives with democratically-elected leaders in 1958 constituted a major victory for labor, as well as for Mexican democracy. The most combative union was in a strategic place to contest PRI industrial policy; the election of leftist dissidents to positions of leadership in the independent STFRM assured that the PRI would face continued resistance to its pro-business policies.

The gains won by railway workers were victories. We should not disregard them as minor aberrations in a long narrative of the PRI's authoritarian rule from the 1940s to 2000. For too long, scholars have overlooked labor's resistance to the PRI's post-World

War II economic policy.¹ In addition to the brief victory that gave workers the right to vote for independent leaders, the rank and file won major victories in 1959, especially the right for family members to receive company-subsidized medical benefits and housing, just a month before the repression of the movement.

Railway Community

A second major contribution of this study is the discussion of how workers and their families constructed railway communities. A deep—if at times contested--solidarity among railway men and women enabled the formation of a dynamic resistance movement, which led ultimately to the railway strikes of 1958 and 1959. Railway neighborhoods and workplaces served as the main sites of everyday interaction that enabled the formation of a pervasive railway identity among workers, as well as their wives, daughters and sons, all of whom identified belonging to “familias ferrocarrileras”. Everyday forms of sociabilities reinforced certain ways of dress (overalls, kerchief, hat, for men), particular sights and sounds (train whistles, the bells that indicated shift changes) and places reserved for consumption (the stations, cantinas, markets) that created the mental landscape of individuals in railway families

An integral part of the community was the gendered relationships between people, the workplace, neighborhoods, the family, and the railroad. Everyone who claimed ferrocarrilero or ferrocarrilera status depended on the railway industry for subsistence.

¹ Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991); Nora Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982); Roger Hansen, *The Politics of Mexican Development* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1971); Peter Smith, *Labyrinths of Power: Political recruitment in 20th Century Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979).

Hence, ferrocarrilero and ferrocarrilera identities marked class-and-gender specific locations in relation to the railway industry. Ferrocarrileros and ferrocarrileras found themselves subjected to railway companies differently, for the logic of railway patriarchy assigned different social obligations to men and women.

Contested Gender

The railway communities were not without conflict. Women found themselves subjected to the whims of the company, social expectations that limited where they could go and what they could do, as well as the gendered privileges enjoyed by railway men, which enabled them to evade domestic duties. The difference between the manner that men and women experienced railway life forms a third major theme in this work and is a corrective to historiography of the railway industry, which figures men as the principle protagonists of railway history. Women took charge of domestic duties and endured poverty and physical abuse. In return, they expected men to provide wages to make due. Workers' meager wages directly affected women's ability to maintain the home. When the railway movement challenged the corrupt politics of charro leaders and demanded a wage increase, women embraced the movement as their own, as evidenced by the emblematic memory of women in Cárdenas, who shamed scabs who crossed the picket line.

Men forged aspects of their understanding of proper railway masculinity through their interactions on the job with each other. The homosocial space of the railways led to hyper-masculinity among workers. They challenged each other to demonstrate that they

were sufficiently strong to carry equipment and machinery; men expected other men to be able to endure falls, broken limbs and the general aches associated with manual labor. Workers who failed to exhibit strength or lacked a threshold for pain leaved themselves open to taunts or a sense that they could not be trusted to carry out their duties.

Railway men proved themselves by being responsible, hardworking and made sure to look at for their colleagues. Hence, workers shared an emotional attachment to one another because they relied on each other to make sure that they did not fall off trains, drop machinery on themselves or get caught breaking rules. They viewed the emotional connection that they built through the prism of railway masculinity. Workers who could not carry out their work duties were labeled unfit by their colleagues. In this way, they policed each other's manliness.

Ferrocarrileros exhibited their admiration or love for fellow workers by drinking with them, especially in cantinas. The cantinas provided a public space for workers to perform their heterosexuality. In a workplace such as the railways, where workers became physically and emotionally dependent on one another, it was critical for workers to assert and perform, their heterosexuality. They danced with prostitutes and discussed their mistresses at cantinas. Meanwhile, workers' wives, or in some cases many mistresses, became vulnerable to contracting venereal diseases. Workers who refused to go to cantinas feared that other workers would shun them and supervisors pass them over for promotions.

Railway communities were fraught with discord. Ferrocarrileros often settled disputes between them through force. During politically peaceful times, fights and disorder among workers may have been limited to cantinas and at the workplace. During

the railway strikes of 1958 and 1958, strikers beat of scabs. Both cases provide evidence of expressions of hyper-masculinity among ferrocarrileros. When strikers beat scabs, they drew on everyday notions about railway masculinity among the rank and file that associated physical force with manliness. In short, colleagues and neighbors ostracized those workers who did not fall in line and abide by standards of masculinity.

Origins of the Railway Movement of the 1950s

The railway movement of the 1950s was a product of failed debates between leftist STFRM leaders and FNM and PRI officials after World War II. STFRM secretary general, Luis Gómez Z. and secretary of organization, propaganda and education, Valentín Campa, were unable to persuade presidents Ávila Camacho and Alemán to modernize Mexico through state-led industrialization, which they expected would lead to higher salaries for a working class suffering from decreased real wages and rising inflation. STFRM leaders—headed by Gómez Z. and Campa—wanted to return to the populist policies of Lázaro Cárdenas. They sought greater direct government involvement in industrialization, which they hoped would result in higher wages. In short, in the early and mid-1940s railway union leaders positioned themselves in the vanguard of the movement to pressure the government to transition from an economy based on private-sector industrialization and return to Cárdenas' policies of public-sector industrialization. When the government arrested Gómez Z. and Campa, and acknowledge a group of compliant union leaders as the new leadership of the STFRM, it had become clear that the PRI had no intentions of reverting to the populist policies of the past.

The PRI clearly rejected this strategy. The cracks in union solidarity emerged from this debate. Although most members of the rank and file supported Gómez Z. and Campa, a small minority of train workers and boilermakers attempted to break from the STFRM and bargain directly with the FNM. Organized as the Fraternity of Trainmen and Brotherhood of Mexican Boilermakers, they took aim in the press at union leaders and fought with co-workers in order to contest the representational authority of the STFRM. The establishment of the Fraternity of Trainmen and Brotherhood of Mexican Boilermakers constituted an affirmation of the deep divisions among the ferrocarrilero community.

The FMTBB case enables us to show the paradox of railway community identity. Although workers were joined by a deep solidarity based on work and neighborhood experiences, disagreements could be equally profound. When these disagreements became politicized, workers fought, and in extreme cases, such as the FMTBB case, the STFRM ousted dissidents from the union, effectively excluding them from the railway community. Gómez Z. won the battle in 1945 against the FTBMB dissidents, but Gómez Z. detractors within the union, as well as their PRI supporters, would eventually take advantage of intra-union divisions to topple the pesky labor leader in 1948, the so-called *charrazo*. The PRI benefited from the *charrazo* because new leader Jesús Díaz de León did not use his position as the secretary general of the STFRM to criticize the PRI's Cold War modernization policies. As a result, railway workers paid the price because real wages declined in the 1950s.

The *charrazo* of 1948 and the movement to democratize the STFRM in 1958 indicate the profound disagreement over what it meant to be a ferrocarrilero in the

context of post-war industrialization. Workers who backed the charros threw their support to the PRI and its pro-business policies, which served to depress working-class wages. They argued that ferrocarrileros needed to make sacrifices for the good of the nation. Those who gave their support to the railway movement held that the best way to modernize the country was through state-led industrialization. They countered that the state had an obligation, dating from the Revolution, to provide fair wages, especially to ferrocarrileros because without their labor the economy would collapse. Clearly, the disputed quality of the railway community endured even during the strikes, when the few ferrocarrileros who threatened to cross the picket line faced physical reprisals.

Railway gender ideology infused fights between men at the STFRM, FNM and PRI over Cold War modernization. Union leaders charged that FNM officials, seduced by their wives and mistresses, mismanaged company funds to buy women gifts and take them on vacation. Likewise, STFRM officials emasculated FTBMB members in the union paper by claiming that their dissidence made them unable to protect their wives. In each case, the STFRM used the figure of women to discredit FNM officials and indicate that the problems of the company were due to widespread corruption. If FNM officials made wise use of company monies, the company would be able to afford to pay the rank and file higher wages.

The rank and file did not acquire the major wage increase that they desired until 1958, when the democratic union movement led by Demetrio Vallejo staged a nation-wide strike, which was a direct consequence of the 1948 charrazo. Democratic unionism received wide support, as evidenced by massive protests on the streets of the capital. In fact, the railway movement served as a vehicle for questioning the post-war

modernization policies of the PRI, which had led, by the United States Embassy's account, to the impoverishment of country's working class. Hence, railway dissidents received support from the major industrial unions as well as students. The PRI relied on charro leaders to suppress rank and file discontent with the ruling party's economic policy. The democratic railway movement consequently threatened to democratize national politics by resisting the PRI's pro-business industrialization policies. By August 1958, the independent union movement accomplished the seemingly impossible task of not only forcing charros to conduct a democratic election but of voting their dissident leader, Demetrio Vallejo, to the secretary generalship of the STFRM.

The democratic union linked workplace demands with community needs, demanding that the FNM confer free medical care and subsidized housing to railway families. Railway families' fight in 1959 for the right to medical care for workers and their dependents reveals that railway families identified with the railway industry and expected railway companies to recompense them for the hard times they endured as wives, daughters and sons throughout the 1950s. To be sure, the victory for subsidized housing demonstrated that families came to regard their very shelter as linked to the railway industry. Clearly, the benefits sought by railway families went beyond workplace concerns and encompassed issues important to family members' private lives. Although the movement was eventually repressed, free medical care and subsidized housing became permanent benefit for railway families, giving the railway movement a lasting quality, a concrete reminder to future railway workers that the movement served their interests.

Workers at private railway companies experienced considerably worse conditions than those who labored for the FNM. The effect by STFRM leaders to try to extend the medical and housing benefit gains to union members at private companies doomed the railway movement. President López Mateos, who had intervened in February 1959 to negotiate a settlement between the STFRM and FNM in which workers received a wage increase in addition to free healthcare and subsidized housing, unleashed the police and military on workers for striking against private companies in March 1959. Rank and file members, as well as dissident leaders, were ultimately fired from work and, in some cases, arrested for striking for their demands that the private firms confer the same benefits agreed to by the FNM in 1958. López Mateos was able to intervene in negotiations between the FNM and STFRM because the FNM was managed by PRI appointed officials and received government funding. The FNM's dependence on the PRI gave the president the authority to intervene in labor disputes, a right he did not enjoy with private railway firms. When the rank and file refused to understand this important difference between the FNM and the private companies, the president moved to crush the movement.

Women to the Front

Women took an active part in the railway movement from the first. Railway women had always had a stake in the railway industry, evidenced by their strongly felt identity as ferrocarrileras, or reileras. In 1958 and 1959, women identified with the movement because it promised to attain gains that would benefit them as workers,

mothers, wives and daughters. Our analysis of ferrocarrileras shows that railway women had played a central role in the drama to democratize the STFRM and to demand the PRI move away from its conservative agenda.

Women had been granted the right to vote in national elections in 1953, but there was no institution outlet for railway women to express their dissatisfaction with the railway industry, even though their livelihoods depended on it. The women had no auxiliary groups; and the compromised STFRM barely even listened to the complaints of the rank and file. Hence, women took to the streets to make clear that they expected railway companies to raise wages in 1958; in 1959, they protested to pressure the railway companies to confer medical and housing benefits to help families improve their standard of living. In short, women fought with workers to democratize the union in 1958 and faced arrest when they protested for housing and medical benefits in 1959.

The actions of Lilia Benetíz and the Oaxacan ferrocarrileros were inspired by their dire economical circumstances, which shows us how the economic policies associated with the “Mexican Miracle” negatively affected working class women. The problems faced by women were not limited to economics, however. For instance, Benetíz’s interview with Elena Poniatowska testifies to the way in which Benetíz and other ferrocarrileras suffered from their family’s worry about their sexual honor. Benetíz, for example, faced beatings from her uncle Demetrio Vallejo as well as her second husband.

Later in her life, Benetíz relationship with Vallejo provided her with the opportunity to become politically active in the male-dominated union. The access she gained into the railway union leader’s inner circle reveals an extraordinary case of a woman who walked side-by-side with railway leaders in 1959. But she was not alone among women in her

radical activism. Other ferrocarrileras joined Benetíz in protests and faced physical reprisals from police. Clearly, these women did not abide by sanctions that limited their roles to the domestic sphere.

When the police arrested strikers, taking them to military camps and, later, jails, railway women sustained the movement by sheltering dissidents in hiding, collecting money to pay for strikers' expenses and visiting jailed strikers. In fact, women never stuck to their homes, as they regularly participated in railway neighborhood life. In calmer times, they took their goods to market, delivered food to their fathers or husbands, while daughters in Matías Romero looked forward to dances, which took place at the station. Interactions on the streets brought women in men together, even if they were on unequal footing. Many married daughters married ferrcarrileros and many men married the daughters of railway colleagues. These marriages brought the railway industry into the private lives of ferrocarrileros and ferrocarrileras. When the rank and file mobilized, wives and children took to the streets as well, defending their interests as members of railway families who felt a deep emotional connection with the railway industry and who depended on railway companies to subsist. These ferrocarrileras deserve to be written into the history of the railway movement of 1958 and 1959, and remembered for their grassroots resistance to the Cold War politics of the PRI.

The Cold War

The Cold War provided the company, government and press ideological justification to condemn the actions of ferrocarrileras and ferrocarrileros. Cold War fears of

communist infiltration of the railway movement, and of working-class groups more generally, circulated in the press in the form of editorials, cartoons as well as seemingly objective reporting. Detractors of the movement effectively portrayed workers as victims of communist manipulation. When workers pressured private companies to make concessions, workers' opponents had already laid down the reasoning behind the repression of the movement and the arrest of dissidents, who were now regarded as communist instigators and, in a few cases, charged with treason for attempting to turn Mexico into a Latin American version of the Soviet Union. Although the sources make scant reference to Fidel Castro and the rebels in the Sierra Maestra, the specter of the Cuban Revolution hung like a cloud over the Cold War battle between workers and their critics.

Cold War obsession with the communist threat took center stage in the trial of Demetrio Vallejo, who was charged and convicted of the crime of "social dissolution", which could be levied on anyone who was feared to propagate "foreign" ideologies or working in support of "foreign" governments. The law was vague, imprecise, which made it easy for prosecutors to apply to dissidents. Vallejo languished in jail for over twelve years.

Precursors

The railway movement anticipated, even laid the groundwork for, the massive student protests in 1968, which contested the increasingly closed and authoritarian system over which the PRI ruled. Influenced by a global counter-culture in music, fashions and

politics, students demanded the release of political prisoners from jail, including Demetrio Vallejo.² Photos of student rallies show protestors carry pictures of Vallejo, who had continued publishing articles in newspapers condemning the PRI during his stay in jail.³

The major labor protests in the late 1950s must be viewed as an early indication of the discontent with the PRI held by the urban masses. While scholars have rightly pointed to the significance of the student movement of 1968 in calling into question the legitimacy of the PRI, especially in light of the infamous police shooting of students in Tlatelolco Square, historians have overlooked the historical antecedents to the student movement.⁴ Certainly student protestors who called for the release of jailed railway workers considered the railway movement as significant because it disrupted the political status quo of Golden Age Mexico. It clearly served as a source of inspiration for students' grassroots resistance to the PRI. These pages told the story of how ferrocarrileros and ferrocarrileras organized their own major resistance movement to the PRI's post-war conservative turn, just nine years prior to the student movement. While the pro-business politics of the PRI continued inexorably, leading ultimately to the application of NAFTA in 1994, the resistance continued in fits and spurts as well, encompassing the poor and struggling in urban and rural Mexico.

² See, Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture*.

³ The photographs of 1968 protestors carrying signs in support of Demetrio Vallejo can be found in Elena Poniatowska, *La noche de Tlatelolco: testimonios de historia oral*. Edition: 2a ed. corr. (México City: Ediciones Era, 1998); for Vallejo's prison writings, see Demetrio Vallejo, *Cartas y artículos desde la cárcel, 1960-1970* (Mexico City: Editorial Posada, 1975).

⁴ Elaine Carey, *Plaza of Sacrifices: Gender, Power, and Terror in 1968 Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture*.

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Collection of Prominent figures

Consejo Consultivo de los Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México

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"Jesús García, Railway Martyr"

JESUS GARCIA - NACUZARI DOS NOMBRES QUE SE ENLAZAN EN LA TRAGEDIA Y EN LA GLORIA



S.T.F.R.M newspaper taught its members about the history of sacrifice and deprivation endured by railway workers. Above is an image of Jesús García, the railway martyr.
Source: Unificación Ferroviaria, November 30, 1950.

"Demetrio Vallejo Milks Railway Industry"



This comic alluded to Vallejo's provincial roots by suggesting that he milked the railway industry.

Source: El Universal, February 25, 1959.

"Demetrio Vallejo as Mao Tse-tung"



This comic strip reaffirmed critics' claim that Vallejo aimed to turn Mexico into a communist state.

Source: El Universal, February 24, 1959.

"The Law"



This comic, printed two days into the February 1959 strike, suggests that the law fails to prosecute communist leaders, whose interests hurt the Mexican people.
Source: El Universal, February 27, 1959.

"Ferrocarrileras Arrested"



Photo of ferrocarrileras arrested for participating in the movement. They are pictured in a police car as they are taken to Military Camp 1, where police held Mexico City railway dissidents and supporters in March 1959.

Source: El Universal, March 31, 1959

Curriculum Vita

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