

SANTIAGO, MYRNA I. *The Ecology of Oil. Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900–1938.* [Studies in Environment and History.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 2006. Ill. Maps. xii, 411 pp. £50.00; \$85.00. DOI: 10.1017/S002085900807346X

Labour history has been looking for new foundations over the past twenty or thirty years. A tradition that looked principally at labour institutions and trade unions in industrial societies was gradually replaced by a growing interest in a social history of labour in which space was given to the individual and collective agency of what was increasingly called the working classes. This resulted in new research into different types of labour and the varying realities and contexts in which labour relations were embedded. The development that this journal has undergone itself testifies to the challenges and problems of this new approach.

The new perspective on labour has clearly been stimulated by historians working on what used to be called the non-Western or non-industrialized world, and what today is referred to, only slightly less misleadingly, as the South. They were confronted by a wide variation in labour relations and therefore criticized the often mechanical and industry-focused approach of traditional labour history. Nevertheless, there is still much work to be done in those societies where agrarian and industrial labour relations have often co-existed in specific ways. Myrna Santiago's *The Ecology of Oil* by may well become an important milestone in this respect.

Santiago meticulously describes and analyses the advent of oil exploitation in the region around the city of Veracruz on Mexico's eastern coast. She describes how the regional society based on agricultural production by many indigenous peasant families was dramatically transformed after the discovery of oil. This transformation started in a very gradual, almost hesitant way in the early years of the twentieth century. When the existence of large oil fields was proven, foreign oil companies started to buy up large tracts of lands. Much of this land was hardly used. Although the indigenous population was cheated out of most of its landed possessions, it did not encounter immediate consequences. This changed dramatically when oil exploitation gathered pace. Although indigenous leaders tried to stem the tide, they were unable to resist the financial incentives offered by the oil companies. And, if they tried to do so, they were intimidated and violently subdued. The larger, non-Indian landowners also felt the pressure of the companies, and when their position was threatened they launched a rebellion in 1914 which culminated in a favourable settlement with the oil companies.

In the process, the social makeup of the region changed dramatically, industrial wage labour becoming the most important source of income. Many men from the surrounding villages started to work in the oil industry. They were joined by large numbers of workers from other parts of Mexico. These changes occurred in a period of political turbulence caused by the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917). Santiago demonstrates how the social and economic transformation of the region was embedded in and influenced by political events in central Mexico. A surprising conclusion of the first part of her book is that the oil workers were able to take advantage of the political instability by insisting on higher wages and successfully demanding better working conditions. It is hardly surprising then that the coming of the oil industry did not generate much labour resistance in this initial period.

The pernicious consequences of the new industry did not become clear until it was too late. Santiago's description of the ecological destruction caused by the early primitive years of oil exploitation makes for horrendous reading. Chapter 3, "The Anatomy of Progress",

presents an almost biblical story of the irreversible degeneration of the regional biodiversity and of ecological disaster. It is accompanied by contemporary black-and-white photographs that graphically depict the consequences. The stories of oil blowouts, deadly river fires, and of oil slicks covering hundreds of hectares of pristine lakes tell of a massive ecological disaster. The flora and fauna suffered accordingly. Even today, forests of dead mangrove can be seen in the region, testimony to a period of savage capitalism.

In terms of labour relations, the oil industry led to evident changes. In the early years, the changes occurred mainly in the countryside. Young men were lured by the easy cash of the oil companies and started to work in exploration and drilling. When the real oil exploitation started, other Mexican workers joined them and the reality of the oil industry made itself felt. Dangerous and unhealthy conditions led to illness and accidents; discipline was increasingly forced upon the labour force by repressive means. Many workers died in gruesome circumstances. In addition, there were obvious racist policies, in which Mexican workers were always subordinate to foreign foremen. A number of oil companies even possessed company jails in which undisciplined workers were locked up. This led to intense labour conflicts in which local and immigrant workers stood side by side.

With the consolidation of the post-revolutionary government structure dominated by the post-revolutionary PRI, the nationalist state became an enduring presence in the region and an important actor in the labour conflicts. Using the influence of foreign companies such as Royal Dutch Shell as a political pretext, the labour unions increasingly pressed the state to act on their behalf. This led eventually to a radicalization of the political stance of the Mexican government and the nationalization of the oil industry in 1938 under President Lázaro Cárdenas. This confirmed the status of Mexican oil workers as a real labour aristocracy, but it could not reverse the ecological destruction caused by the industry.

Santiago's book is a great achievement, especially when one realizes that it started out as a Ph.D. dissertation. It presents a well-crafted historical case study and beautifully combines environmental, political, and socio-political perspectives. The scope of the book is impressive, covering everything from the politics of oil, to labour rights and the environment, and to gender and ethnicity. In addition, this book is very densely researched and includes a great deal of original material. It manages to combine a detailed account of the consequences of the oil industry for the indigenous population and its environment with a detailed account of the actions of organized Mexican labour. In this way, it brings together several different fields that all too often lie within different disciplines. The author's writing is lively and engaging, and there is an obvious literary and academic quality to the narrative, which allows the reader to penetrate deeply and with great sensitivity into the interrelation between human beings and the socio-political environment.

This study represents a major contribution to our understanding of early twentieth-century Mexico. Its combination of a local perspective on large-scale developments at national and global level presents a human, ethnographic, and analytical vision of Veracruz and global history. *The Ecology of Oil* offers a long-term historical analysis that explains Mexican history and opens vistas for new forms of interdisciplinary historiography. Although the history of the oil industry in Mexico has been told before, this study demonstrates its dreadful ecological and social consequences in all its elements without superimposing an anachronistic perspective. It shows how the nascent oil industry offered new opportunities for indigenous peasants, labourers, and landowners. It also leaves room

for the complexities and contradictions of history, arguing for instance that with its uprooting of Mexican society the Mexican Revolution solved the labour problems encountered by the oil companies before 1910.

Many of us will recognize late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mechanisms of labour recruitment, exploitation, and social and political repression from our own work, but this volume clearly posits itself in the line of a new social history that is both interdisciplinary and which offers multiple perspectives. Apart from its ecological viewpoint, it also offers a clear gender-sensitive approach. This book succeeds in presenting the perspectives of the different groups in their internal logic, but also as the result of the interaction with actions and perspectives of other sectors of society. In general, it presents the best the new approach to labour history has to offer. It may be hoped that it will also be read by many who do not have a direct interest in Mexican or Latin American history.

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TRIECE, MARY E. *On the Picket Line. Strategies of Working-Class Women During the Depression.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana [etc]. 2007. viii, 179 pp. \$60.00. (Paper: \$25.00.) DOI: 10.1017/S0020859008083466

Over the past few months, I have had the opportunity to read a number of books which have highlighted for me some of the key issues involved in this review of Mary Triece's new book, *On the Picket Line: Strategies of Working-Class Women during the Depression*. Some of these books have been written by non-historians applying the tools of their particular fields to questions of historical interest. The authors' success in doing this varies greatly, particularly when examined from the point of view of an historian. Several other books are recent additions to the history of the Communist Party in the 1930s. Both of these sets of books address important issues raised by Triece's book.

Mary Triece teaches in a School of Communications and uses a number of theories from the fields of communications and rhetoric in building her analysis. In this book, Triece claims to examine the question, "How did working-class women in a well-known leftist organization, the Communist Party USA, manage the paradoxes arising from gender and class discrimination during a tumultuous period in US history?" (pp. 2–3). She promises the reader that she will do this through an analysis of the rhetoric of female leaders of the CP and the discourse of "countless 'ordinary' women" (p. 10) writing in the columns of the CP publication, *Working Woman*, as well as "extra-discursive" tactics which "forced the hand of employers, owners, and landlords" (p. 6).

I was intrigued as I began reading Triece. How would she examine these issues differently from past historians? What insights would her background in communications bring to the issues addressed? These are the types of questions I always ask myself when I read historical works by non-historians. My recent reading of other works had left me particularly aware of these questions. For example, Canadian geographer Geoff Mann's recent book, *Our Daily Bread: Wages, Workers, and the Political Economy of the American West*, illustrates many of the most useful ways in which social science theories can be brought to bear on historical questions. With careful attention to the social meanings of place, Mann traces what he calls the "cultural politics of the wage" in three struggles of workers in the western United States. I found the book's portrayal of these three struggles