Mexico's labour movement in transition:  
the case of the Authentic Labour Front (FAT)  
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Introduction

In Latin America labour movements had a central role in shaping regime dynamics at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this period labour legislation in Latin America was aimed at protecting individual workers from employer abuse and arbitrariness. The intent of the legislation reflected a particular political and economic period in which expanded industrialization led to a more inclusive approach toward workers and unions. Examples include Peron in Argentina, Vargas in Brazil, and Cardenas in Mexico. Nonetheless, the state's protective attitude toward workers reflected a paternalistic rather than a democratic and rights-based state.

As Bronstein (1997) has indicated, collective rights have always been somewhat limited in Latin America. Collective rights legislation has been characterized by a high degree of state intervention in an effort to control the political radicalism and militancy of workers' organizations.

In the 1960s and 1970s, workers and union leaders suffered severe and continuous repression of repressive regimes, not only in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile) but in many Latin American countries.

After the repressive dictatorships, the democratic transitions in the 1980s greatly expanded labour's sphere of action. But in no Latin American country can we say that a liberal rights regime—with full union autonomy, free collective bargaining, and the full right to strike—took shape.

This article surveys Mexican unions’ activities in recent decades to examine links between unions, democracy and regime changes.

The central argument is that it is essential to disaggregate the labour movement in order to make sense of these links. How trade unions contributed to these changes varies greatly by sub-category of union. Some groups of union have pushed for greater democracy and equality, whereas others have defended undemocratic or unequal aspects of the status quo.

The Mexican Case

In order to understand the current situation of the workers’ movement in Mexico, it is important to understand the character of the Mexican regime and its historical development.

The 1917 Constitution and the 1931 Federal Labour Law established protections for unions and labour, and also instituted mechanisms of government control over unions.
President Lazaro Cardenas (1934-1940) consolidated the one-party rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) by building a corporatist system that included unions along with peasant organizations and other sectors, and promoting union organization within a corporatist framework. Corporatism used these organizations as transmission belts that unite the individual with the state apparatus, attempting to maintain social control over the entire population. The Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM) was formed by the pro-government labour movement in 1918, and it started a struggle against independent unions for control of the labour movement.

The Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) began in the same way in 1936, when this confederation was converted into the formal pillar of the regime. Since 1952, internal groups have disputed this supremacy. They separated from the CTM, but not from its practices, forming as the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC) and the Revolutionary Workers Confederation (COR). In order to control this proliferation of confederations and unions, in 1966 the Institutional Revolutionary Party brought them together in the Congress of Labour (CT).

This state’s ability to intervene has generally been used to stifle internal democracy. The key dividing line among Mexican unions was that between “official” and “indipendente” unions (Bensusan and Alcalde, 2000). Official unions or “charros” were those that maintained a pact with the state: they provided political support for preferential government recognition, access to patronage, and others benefits. Independent unions were those that eschewed such a pact. A third category consists of withe unions “los blancos” that represented the interests of the employer rather than the workers.

According to one estimate, in 1980 official unions made up 74 percent of unions (and 84 percent of unionized workers), with unions 14 percent, and independent unions 12 percent (de la Garza, 1993). Official and with unions were primarily part of the Labour Congress, historically integrated into the PRI organizational structure and committed to supporting the PRI’s authoritarian rule rather than pushing for democracy.

To illuminate the defects of this model of union action premised upon dependence and incorporation into one-party political structure, we will explore the challenges Mexican unions face and also the opportunities transition holds out to build a stronger and more representative labour movement.

From the late 1940s through the 1970s, Mexico, like most of the rest of Latin America, followed an economic strategy of import substitution. But Mexico’s import substitution model range aground on the debt crisis, and starting in the 1980s the country moved to a neoliberal export-oriented model featuring free trade agreements, privatization of public enterprises and partial reversal of land reform (Cook, 2007). These reforms had a dramatic impact on the economic fortunes of workers. They also affected the political climate for unions in ways that contrasted sharply with the democratic transition period. Every social indicator conditions were worse by the end of the 1990s than they were at the beginning of the decade.
This general social discontent contributed to the emergence of significant social mobilization, as new social groups began to bypass the corporatist structure in an attempt to place demands directly upon the state.

The culmination of social mobilization during the 1980s occurred when Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas was able to amalgamate widespread social discontent and attracted the support of a significant number of both popular and middle-class movements for his independent presidential candidacy in 1988. Although Cárdenas officially lost the election to Salinas de Gortari, the election fractured the power of the PRI and changed Mexican politics forever.

The protracted process of political change in Mexico has been characterized by significant strides toward more political competition and freedom, but, despite significant political changes, the liberalization of Mexico's authoritarian regime proceeded much more slowly than economic restructuring.

Legislation enacted between 1977 and 1993 permitted opposition parties to play a more prominent role in national politics, and elections (particularly at the state and local levels) became much more competitive. This important change was reinforced when the center-right National Action Party (PAN) broke the ruling party's long-standing monopoly on state governorships by winning the 1989 gubernatorial election in Baja California. The PAN later won control over the state governments in Chihuahua and Guanajuato as well.

The January 1994 revolt by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in the southern state of Chiapas and the assassination of Colosio\(^1\) in March 1994 sharply altered political expectations. Together these events created a greater degree of uncertainty within the governing political elite than at any time since Mexico's "official" party was founded in 1929.

Both the end of the PRI monopoly and the neoliberal turn have chilled government relations with unions (Bensusan and Cook, 2003).

The victory of Vicente Fox in Mexico's July 2000 presidential elections represented the culmination of a long process of political reform in Mexico.

After seven decades of monopolistic power. When he took office the following December, Vicente Fox became the first non-PRI president since the PRI was founded.

Mexico's old one-party regime has finally broken down, but Mexico's new political order comprises a series of authoritarian enclaves in which the old rules of the game still operate.

This article will explore the challenges Mexican unions face in this period and also the opportunities transition holds out to build a stronger and more representative labour movement.

In particular, we will focus our attention on an independent union: the FAT (Frente Auténtico del Trabajo).

While this paper is primarily guided by a simple commitment to historical narrative, it will focus on two analytical concepts: political opportunity structure and action repertoires.

These two concepts are from the social movement field, because the FAT has as many characteristics as a social movement organization as it does as a union organization.

\(^1\) Luis Donaldo Colosio-Murrieta was a Mexican politician and PRI presidential candidate, who was assassinated during the Mexican presidential campaign of 1994.
Attention to changing political opportunity structures directs our attention to the environment in which a social movement moves.

**Mexico's Frente Auténtico del Trabajo**

The very name of the Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT) implies a contrast with unauthentic labour organizations. From its beginning in 1960 the FAT has insisted that it would work to authentically represent the interests of workers. The FAT was born out of a group of workers in Mexico City, who, with the backing of the Social Secretariat of Mexico (SSM), formed Promoción Obrera in 1958.

The context of labour relations in the late 1950's helps us understand the meaning of the FAT's initial declaration of autonomy from any political party. During 1958 and 1959 rank and file movements appeared to challenge charro leadership. The October 18, 1960 Declaration of the Constitution of the Frente Auténtico del Trabajo read as follows:

"Conscious of our rights as workers and of our social responsibility, we signers declare a firm decision to undertake the organization of Christian unionism in Mexico. The principles that will guide our course at all times will be a)(la libertad sindical) union liberty, b) (democracia sindical) union democracy, c)(la independencia ante los partidos políticos) independence of all political parties, d)(la autonomía sindical ante los gobiernos y los patrones) autonomy from government and employers e)(la lucha constante por la elevación material y espiritual de la clase trabajadora.) the constant struggle for the material and spiritual elevation of the working class. Based on these principles we found the Frente Auténtico del Trabajo, that will unite and train unions and workers in a new central." ("25 Años de Lucha por la Democracia", 1985)

Two things stand out in this document, the commitment to autonomy and democracy which were championed by the broad struggles of the late fifties, and the influence of the Church.

The period of 1968 to 1982 was a period of tremendous transformation for both Mexico and the FAT. Beginning with the student movement of 1968, movements of political opposition within Mexico take on a more decidedly leftist orientation. During this period the FAT moved left and broke its ties to church-linked organizations.

The brutal repression of the student movement--the massacre at Tlatelolco--convinced many that to resist the Mexican state might require weapons.

The climate in which opposition to government policy on labour took place, then, was one of high stakes, frequent repression, and revolutionary passion.

The political radicalization of the late 60's, combined with an era of economic growth for workers, was the ideal political opportunity for worker's mobilization.

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2 The SSM is an outreach organization of the Catholic church created in the wake of the Revolution to circumvent the constitutional restrictions on the operations of the church in civil society.

3 Real wages for industrial workers had grown by over 40% during the 1960's, and they continued to rise from 1970 to 1976 gaining another 30% (De la Garza, 1991, p. 161; Barkin, 1997, p. 23).
Strikes for the democratization of the workplace, for shorter hours, for improved safety and a better workplace blossomed when they had barely existed before.

The 70's and early 80's were a period of worker insurgency (de la Garza, 1993).

The FAT was at the centre of those movements.

The Presidency of Lopez-Portillo (1976-1982) was one of changed political opportunity.

The economic policy of stabilizing development was gradually jettisoned.

Wages were flat from ’76 to ’78. They then went into steady decline only to fall more precipitously after 1982. Struggles continued within the workplace, but the social movement aspects of those struggles steadily faded.

In this period the FAT involved itself in many alliances with other union movements. In these efforts the FAT was more a political social movement actor than a traditional labour union.

Its goals have always focused as much on the total transformation of labour relations as on the formation of specific union locals.

FAT entered this transition period with the moderate slogan "Justicia y Democracia Sindical" (Justice and Union Democracy.) Reflecting both its movement to the left and its commitment to direct worker democracy, it ended the period with the slogan "Autogestión Proletária" (proletarian worker self-management.)

While many aspects of the neo-liberal period began in the presidency of Lopez-Portillo in 1976, President De La Madrid (1982-88) under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, made a wholesale commitment to transforming Mexican economic policy.

The government's policy of offering up Mexican workers to global investors as both cheap and docile required careful control of workers through their unions. Throughout the period official unions signed salary cap pacts, though they also complained about them. New investors were often able to sign a protection contract with a CTM union before opening their new factories. These contracts established reliable CTM control but often did nothing for workers. In this context only independent unions such as the FAT were able to openly oppose government policy.

If the 1980s brought further constraints on workplace organising, new strategic action repertoires were beginning to be explored by the FAT, approaching to the model of ‘social movement unionism’ characterized by a broader social approach, addressing an array of social needs and groups beyond those traditionally seen as belonging to trade unionism: “The FAT is not just a union, we are also a social movement, active in the workplace, in the neighbourhood and in the countryside” (Bertha Lujan, FAT).

Their 1997 convention explicitly committed the FAT to “… a program of social movement unionism intended to change not only the FAT, but also the Mexican labour movement, society and politics” (FAT, 1997).

As respect for democratic elections deepened in Mexico from 1988 onwards, the need for a democratization of the labour relations system also became important.

In this regard, in 1997, FAT, together with the Telephone Workers Union and the National Teachers Union participated in a forum called “El sindicalismo ante la nación,” where proposals were made.

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4 The practice of official unions or corrupt lawyers negotiating a union contract without the knowledge of workers.

5 Bertha Lujan. 2014. Oral interview. FAT HQ in Mex DF.
to strengthen independent labour organizations, study labour law reform, question the links between unions and political parties and present data on the deterioration of labour standards, increases in the informalization of labour markets and other issues that faced the Mexican labour movement in the first four years of NAFTA. This process culminated in November of that year with the creation of the National Union of Workers (Union Nacional de Trabajadores-UNT), as an alternative to the CTM (Confederación de Trabajadores de México).

In the period 1998-2000 FAT and UNT have had to face the profound changes that have occurred in the Mexican political scene, essentially the defeat of the PRI at the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2000. At the same time, they have had to face the campaign to privatize the oil and the electrical industry, the systematic decrease in minimum salaries and the growth of employment in the “maquilaje” sector of the northern border.

The introduction of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) created new organising opportunities in the expanding border region. FAT’s development of international linkages and organising alliances with US and Canadian unions, especially the US United Electrical Workers (UE), would prove crucial in undertaking union organisation in such a hostile climate.

Initial cross-border organising efforts began with the UE – FAT collaboration at border plants owned by General Electric and Honeywell to establish independent unions. Not surprisingly, foreign capital worked here in concert with the existing power nexus to obstruct their efforts through a variety of means – sacking activists, manipulating union plant recognition elections, a story repeated many times over in the years that followed.

Subsequently the UE – FAT approach shifted towards establishing independent workers centres in maquila towns like Juarez (CETLAC), that could be used to build a base amongst the newly arrived workforce, engage in popular education programmes, and provide a secure space (immune to management infiltration) to plan organising campaigns free of fear and intimidation (Bacon, 2005).

FAT contributed to the creation of the Mexican Action Network Confronting Free Trade (RMCLC) and to a profound debate on the impact of NAFTA and the implications that it would have on employment, salaries, labour turnover, rural-urban migration and the economic geography of the country.

Despite many defeats, the cross-border organising alliances introduced here signalled the beginnings of a genuinely new organising strategy for trade unions in an increasingly global economy.

In 2000, President Vicente Fox victory held out the hope that with the end of the PRI’s one-party-state, government control over the labour movement would end. As a candidate, Fox had signed a document put forward by the independent labour movement, in which he promised to uphold workers’ rights, including the right of workers to choose their own unions. However, once elected, just as in the past under the PRI, Fox’s new PAN government protected the labour officials, and, by and large, they supported the president’s conservative political and economic agenda.

The PRI’s loss of the 2000 has not led to the dismantling of corporatist and authoritarian unionism. In the guise of a supposed respect for “union autonomy and independence” the Partido de Acción Nacional willingly accepted and supported the charros’ control over the workers.
The charro unions have continued to serve the bourgeoisie by preventing workers from organizing genuine unions. The PAN viewed the rupture with the old union pact as an opportunity to remove unions from the electoral process. From this perspective, “union modernization” meant that unions were to stop giving financial support to the PRI (or any other party).

The subordination of unions to the agenda of the Mexican oligarchy and international capital was a key part of the PAN’s agenda and it required government collaboration in the repression of democratic participation of the workers in their unions. The preservation of the existing labour and union structures during this sexenio has been beneficial both for the PAN and for the capitalists it represents.

This alliance between the Fox government and the charros was indispensable for heading off and containing rank-and-file protests against the illegal process of privatization.

The survival of official unionism cannot be explained solely by the support of the federal government and the majority of state governments. Official unionism has lost a large number of members (because of economic restructuring, relocation, plant closings, and flexibilization of the labor force). The Central de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM), for example, lost half of its members between 1997 and 2005. Nevertheless, the ability of the old union organizations to control workers has not diminished. Union membership has decreased in the entire private sector, which is where the CTM, has maintained its hegemony.

The Mexican transition from one-party rule to electoral alternation led to a deeper fragmentation of union organizations but not to a breakdown of the fundamental structures of autocracy within unions and union federations. The few unions that were democratic continued to be so, the fundamentally corrupt and authoritarian cultures of officialist unionism persisted even in some unions that claimed to be dissident.

The same federations and formations of unions that challenged the old officialist union bloc were made up of coalitions of democratic and authoritarian unions, some of which have supported neoliberal initiatives such as the privatization of the telephone company. In addition to the disorganizing effect of the neoliberal offensive on the working class, there are key organizational and political aspects of union dissidence that help explain the inconsistency of their political opposition (La Botz, 2005).

The main dissident union federation, the Union Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT), is dominated by the Sindicato de Telefonistas de la República Mexicana (STRM). While there are different tendencies in the UNT, the dominant one is that of the neocorporatist. The actions of the leaders of the UNT are not consistent with their rhetoric about challenging the neoliberal program. This is especially clear outside the central area of the country. The UNT hasn’t a strategy for organizing the regions of high industrialization and low unionization or proposing, as did the FAT and independent unionism of the 1970s.

The fact that various leaders of the UNT continue to be elected as representatives to state legislatures or the Congress as members of the PRI, PAN or PRD is further indication of their compromised perspectives. This in itself does not disqualify them as trade unionists, but it does show their continued integration into old ways of doing things.
This electoralist/clientelist left is therefore capable of mobilizing large sectors but not of constructing a political discourse together with its social base (Alvarez Bejar, 2005). Neither the parties nor the main dissident unions are interested in attempting to create a new democratic culture either in society or the workplace that would facilitate the growth of working-class consciousness and competence. The gap between rhetoric and practice contributes to cynicism among workers. Over 90 percent of the working class that is nonunionized does not see its interests as being represented by these narrow, defensive trade-union struggles.

With the tacit support of PAN presidents Fox (2000-2006) and Calderón (2006-2012), the union movement in the private sector became even more corrupt as employers brought in ghost unions (unions unknown to the workers) and protection contracts (which provide only the legal minimums) to keep out real unions and to damp down real demands. These came to represent 80% or 90% of all labor agreements.

During Felipe Calderón’s administration, best known for its disastrous drug wars, the situation for workers became disturbingly worse, with legitimate trade union and social movement leaders facing violence, intimidation, and criminal charges on top of the intransigence and the usual collusion between the labor boards, employers, and official unions.

President Calderón introduced a labour law reform in September 2012. The new law gave management labour flexibility—part-time and temporary work, pay by the hour, probationary and training periods—and brought Mexican law in line with international standards on discrimination, sexual harassment, and flexibility for working women, while making a small concession in the area of workers’ rights by calling for the publication of collective bargaining agreements.

The independent unions that opposed the law succeeded in eliminating some of the worst provisions in terms of restrictions on freedom of association. However, the new law did not deal with protection contracts, which are perhaps the most serious problem facing Mexican unions.

Mexican unions enter the 2012 national elections deeply divided. A large section of the labor movement, most important the Congress of Labour (CT), the powerful Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), and the industrial unions, remains more or less loyal to the Institutional Revolutionary Party.

Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) won the Mexican presidential election, returning to power the party that for 71 years ruled Mexico as a one-party state. When current Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto was elected in 2012, the unions' sensed an ally. However, the party intended to pass several socioeconomic reform packages, some of which - including energy and education reform - would further erode union power and drastically reshape their respective sectors.

Factions in the National Oil Workers Union and the National Education Workers Union became increasingly vocal in their opposition to the reforms. The administration's relationship with its labour was clarified on February 2013, when National Education Workers Union leader Elba Esther Gordillo was arrested, the day after Pena Nieto signed education reform into law. The arrest effectively ended the National Education Workers Union's
opposition to education reform, leaving only the dissident and increasingly militant CNTE to protest.

Mexico's social, political and economic reforms have long been weakening the influence of labour unions on the political system. In 2014, the US State Department’s Mexico Human Rights Report concludes that: “The government did not consistently protect worker rights in practice. Its general failure to enforce labour and other laws left workers without much recourse with regard to violations of freedom of association, working conditions, or other problems”\(^6\).

Today many critical problems persist:

- the practice of “protection contracts” (collective bargaining agreements signed between an employer and an employer-dominated union, often without the knowledge of the workers)\(^7\);

- the persistence of false trade unions, or “protection unions,” remains a major challenge in Mexico and constitutes a serious abrogation of the right to freedom of association, particularly as collective bargaining agreements are concluded with these protection unions without the knowledge and consent of workers\(^8\);

- Mexico’s system of labour boards (Juntas de Conciliación y Arbitraje) has been widely criticized for inefficiency, political bias, and corruption. While nominally tripartite, in practice labor boards are controlled by the executive branch and have no autonomy\(^9\);

- limitations on trade union autonomy: the refusal of Mexican labour authorities to deny legal registration (\textit{registro}) to independent unions on formal or technical grounds is well-documented;

- limitations on the right to strike: the Mexican labour boards routinely declare strikes “non-existent,” often on narrow technical grounds. While independent unions have frequently succeeded in persuading the courts to overturn the decisions of the labour boards, this imposes significant costs and delays on the workers;

- attacks on worker rights defenders: physical violence by authorities and employers against workers who seek to defend their rights is common in Mexico. Four members of the


National Union of Mine and Metal Workers (Los Mineros) have been killed since 2006\textsuperscript{10}. No one has been charged in any of these cases. Santiago Rafael Cruz, an organizer for the Farm Labour Organizing Committee, was murdered in Monterrey on April 9, 2007\textsuperscript{11}. Violence has also been deployed against the independent Electrical Workers and Telephone Workers’ Unions and the Authentic Workers’ Front (FAT). In addition, non-governmental human rights groups that defend worker rights have been subjected to threats, surveillance and intimidation.

As a recent report highlights: “Mexico continues to be one of the most dangerous countries in the world to defend human rights and practice journalism. Attacks on defenders and journalists occur regularly, creating a worrisome environment of self-censorship and intimidation”\textsuperscript{12}.

Between 2006 and 2015, Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, CNDH) registered 380 cases of attacks against human rights defenders, including 25 cases of murder since 2010. About 40 percent of these cases were reported during the current administration of President Peña Nieto.

Conclusions

The “Authentic Labour Front” is an unusual labour organization. In spite of the fact that it is not a massive organization, it contributes to the promotion of labour rights in various regions of the country and to the education of labour leaders through its union training program (“formación sindical”). Also, it plays a significant role in the organization of workers in various economic branches.

Two questions are central to understand the capacity of FAT to survive and grow within Mexico’s corporatist system of labour representation: first, the early awareness of the importance of the international dimension in labour action and, second, its commitment to other forms of social mobilization such as the women’s movement, the cooperative sector and peasant groups.

This effort to go beyond workers’ demands enabled FAT to question the impact that the political and economic model had on the life of Mexican popular sectors.

The FAT describes itself as follows: “The Authentic Workers Front or Frente Autentico del Trabajo (FAT) is an independent federation of labor unions, worker owned cooperatives and farmworker and community organisations” (FAT website).

Within all its activities, what is noteworthy is the commitment of the FAT to reappraise its strategies and internal structures in the light of changing social and economic context.

\textsuperscript{10} ILO CFA Case No. 2694; Mexico, Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, Recomendación No.37 (2006)
\textsuperscript{11} AFL-CIO 2013 Convention, Resolution 47: Justice for Santiago Rafael Cruz, http://www.aflcio.org/About/Exec-Council/Conventions/2013/Resolutions-and-Amendments/Resolution-47-Justice-for-Santiago-Rafael-Cruz
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