

Flores Magon and the Mexican Liberal Party

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Ricardo Flores Magon has been described as one of the intellectual precursors of the Mexican revolution. He is little known outside Mexico, and even within anarchist circles and texts his name is little encountered — apart from the pioneering study on him edited by David Poole (1977). But Flores Magon was an important and influential anarchist whose writings and activities had a crucial impact on the Mexican revolution. The Mexican Liberal Party, headed by Flores Magon, was closely implicated in the industrial strikes at Cananea and Orizaba.

Flores Magon was born on September 16, 1874, in San Antonio Eloxochitlan in the state of Oaxaca. His father was a Zapotec Indian and a firm believer in the communal ownership of land; his mother a mestiza. While still young his family moved to Mexico City where Ricardo and his two brothers Jesus and Enrique attended school. It was while at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria that Flores Magon took part in his first protest against the Diaz dictatorship. He was charged with sedition and sentenced to five months imprisonment. The following year, 1893, he joined the staff of an opposition newspaper, *El Democrata*. But within a few months the paper was banned by the government and its staff arrested: Flores Magon was lucky to escape. In 1895 he qualified as a lawyer, but he decided not to practice law but instead to devote himself to political activities and to the struggle against the hated Diaz regime. Having become acquainted with the writings of Row, Malatesta and Kropotkin, Flores Magon, together with his brother Jesus, founded the newspaper *Regeneracion*, the first issue appearing in August 1900. Initially a law journal, *Regeneracion*, by the end of the year, had become much more radical, openly attacking the Diaz government.

In February 1901 Flores Magon attended the first congress of Liberal Clubs, held at San Luis Potosi, and it was there that he first met Librado Rivera. On the initiative of Camillo Arriaga, whose father owned one of the largest silver mines in the area, Liberal Clubs had been formed throughout Mexico. Arriaga was a mining engineer and a former senator who had been dismissed by Diaz. The aim of these clubs was specifically to combat the growing significance of the clergy in this country. But while other delegates at the congress were content to spell out their anti-clericalism, Flores Magon made his first open attack on the Diaz dictatorship. He denounced the government as a “den of thieves.” It wasn’t long before the government responded, for in May he was arrested along with his brother Jesus and sentenced to twelve months of imprisonment for “insulting the president.” The Liberal Clubs too were broken up by the police and their members imprisoned. His younger brother Enrique however, continued to publish *Regeneracion*, Ricardo managing to smuggle articles he had written in prison to him. It was printed clandestinely. On his release from prison in April 1902 Flores Magon took over an anti-Diaz and satirical weekly, *El Hijo del Ahui-zote*. But this popular paper was also soon suppressed by the government and Magon was again arrested — along

with Librado and his brother Enrique — this time for “ridiculing public officials.” He was to spend a further five months in Belem prison. In June 1903 the supreme court of Mexico passed an edict forbidding the publication of any article written by Flores Magon. Realizing that it was no longer practical to stay in Mexico amid the mounting repression, at the end of 1903 Flores Magon left Mexico to seek refuge in the United States, where many liberals had already fled. In exile he was joined by a handful of close comrades; Enrique, Librado Rivera, Juan Sarabia, and Antonio I. Villarreal. By this time his elder brother Jesus had given up the anti-Diaz struggle and had gone to Mexico to open up a law office.

After working some months as a laborer in order to raise funds, Flores Magon was able to resume the publication of *Regeneracion*. This was in November, 1904. Three months later he moved from San Antonio to St. Louis, Missouri, continuing to publish the weekly newspaper with the help of Librado Rivera. In September, 1905, along with Sarabia, Villarreal, Rivera and his brother Enrique, Magon formed the *Junta Organizadora del Partido Liberal Mexicano* — the group motto being “reform, liberty, and justice.” While in St. Louis Magon and his associates established close links with the Western Federation of Miners, the organizers of the Industrial Workers of the World, and such anarchists as Emma Goldman and Florencio Bazarra, the latter being a former comrade of Malatesta. Flores Magon attended the lectures of Goldman and the two anarchists became firm friends. Copies of *Regeneracion* were posted by the group to Mexico and they travelled from hand to hand within the Republic. Even Zapata is said to have been influenced by it. The Liberal Party of Mexico was less of a political party than a coordinating center for radical activists, and it remained as such until 1918 when it was disbanded owing to the imprisonment of Mores Magon and Rivera.

But within a month of the founding of the party, Flores Magon and his comrades were again being harassed — this time by Pinkerton detectives who raided the offices of *Regeneracion* and took the presses and office equipment. Flores Magon and Juan Sarabia were arrested. Released on bail and fearing that the United States government would extradite them to Mexico, they decided to flee to Toronto, Canada. A reward of \$20,000 was offered for the capture of Flores Magon. While he was in Canada the program of the Mexican Liberal Party was published in July 1906.

Although somewhat reformist in tone, for its time this program was extremely radical, and indeed went much further than the Mexican constitution of 1917. Drawn up by the extreme left wing of Mexican liberalism, it represented, as Gilly writes, “a milestone in Ricardo Flores Magon’s evolution towards anarchism and an understanding of the need for an armed social revolution to expropriate the capitalists and big landowners” (1983: 57).

Among its many clauses the program included: the abolition of the death penalty, the suppression of compulsory military service, complete secular education for children, a maximum working day of eight hours, a ban on child labor, cancellation of all peon-debt to the landowners, the restitution of communal lands to the villages and the protection of the Indian peoples (Flores Magon 1977).

In September that same year Flores Magon moved secretly to El Paso and began to organize armed uprisings against the Diaz government. The first of these took place in the town of Jimenez, Coahuila, when a group of thirty liberals took control of the main plaza before being forced to withdraw by federal forces. Four days later three hundred liberals attacked Acayucan Veracruz, but again were forced to withdraw through lack of arms. Several other small-scale actions took place in the north of the country. By this time the PLM had forty-four clandestine guerrilla units, comprised mainly of working class volunteers, and Liberal Clubs were active throughout Mexico. And, as we have noted, there was widespread labor unrest throughout the country. The circulation of *Regeneracion* within Mexico, though underground, was reckoned to be between 20,000 and 30,000 copies. Both Diaz and the American state department were alarmed at these events and the American Ambassador to Mexico wrote to the department that the PLM “worried” Diaz, “harmed United States” business interests and advocated “anarchism” (Cockcroft 1968:137). The uprisings and strikes shook Diaz. The people who had been silent for so long were now beginning to speak for themselves. He began the systematic repression of liberal and working class organizations throughout the country. The United States authorities did the same and began the hunt for Flores Magon and his associates. After narrowly avoiding arrest several times, Flores Magon finally settled in Los Angeles in the spring of 1907, to be joined by Antonio I. Villarreal and Lib-rado Rivera. In June, working clandestinely, they brought out the first issue of *Revolucion*. In August the three men were arrested without warrant by “detectives” of the Furlong Detective Agency who were employed by the Diaz dictatorship and whose sole aim was the tracking down of PLM activists. They were placed on trial the following month and were eventually found guilty of violating the neutrality laws and sentenced to be deported to Arizona where the alleged offense was supposed to have taken place. While in prison Flores Magon smuggled out plans for a second uprising and in June 1908 insurrections by PLM groups occurred in the states of Baja California, Coahuila and Chihuahua, ut as in 1906 the revolt failed and was followed by the usual repression. At this time Flores Magon, Villarreal and Rivera were still in jail in Los Angeles, but they also managed to smuggle out a “Manifesto to the American People,” explaining their objectives and the reason for their persecution by the American authorities. It was published in *Mother Earth* in February 1908:

“What do we want? The program of the Liberal Party issued on the first of July of the year 1906 is the sum and substance of our aims and aspirations... We want bread for all. We consider it absurd that a few people should possess the earth, and the many not have a place to lay down their heads for rest. We want, then, that the land be accessible to all, just the same as the air, the light, the warm sun rays are there for all creatures on earth. We consider it absurd that those who neither toil nor produce should enjoy all at the expense ‘of those who till and toil and have a life of misery...

We think that political liberty is a beautiful lie so long as it has not for its basis economic liberty and towards the conquest of that liberty our steps are directed... We demand that the proletariat of Mexico organize and by doing so enable itself to take part in the tremendous struggle that alone will liberate the proletariat of this world, the struggle which someday – maybe in the near future-will place all the goods of this earth within the reach and power of all human beings” (Flores Magon 1977:16).

It was evident that within the PLM only Flores Magon, his brother Enrique and Librado Rivera fully endorsed anarchism; Juan Sarabia, Antonio I. Villar-real and Camillo Arriago being essentially liberals. Villarreal later became a stalwart of the constitutionalists. Although describing himself as a liberal, Flores Magon was fully aware that his own basic philosophy and political credo was anarchist. In a letter to his brother and Praxedis Guerrero written from prison in 1908, he wrote:

”...If we had called ourselves anarchists from the start, no one, or at best a few, would have listened to us. Without calling ourselves anarchists we have fired the peoples’ minds with hatred against the owner class and the government caste.

No liberal party in the world has the anti-capitalist tendencies of we who are about to begin a revolution in Mexico and we would not have been able to achieve this had we merely called ourselves socialists instead of anarchists. Thus everything is a question of tactics.

We must give lands to people during the course of the revolution; thus they will not be deceived. We must also give them possession of the factories, mines, etc. In order not to have everybody against us, we should continue to call ourselves liberals during the course of the revolution, and will in reality continue propagating anarchy and executing anarchist acts” (Flores Magon 1977:17).

Whereas the Bolsheviks in the Russian revolution proclaimed: “All Power to the Soviets” and land for the peasants in order to obtain working class support, only to institute state capitalism and a one-party dictatorship, Flores Magon proclaimed liberalism but was intent on establishing libertarian socialism.

On their release from prison in Arizona, where they had served an eighteen month sentence, Magon, Rivera and Villarreal returned to Los Angeles, arriving there in August 1910. they immediately began making plans for a third armed uprising. Already peasant discontent had manifested itself, for in May around 1500 armed peons had taken the town of Valladolid, Yucatan, and had held it for four days, before being overwhelmed by the federal army. The following month several other uprisings occurred, all in the name of the PLM. In October 1910 the motto of the party was changed to “Tierra y Liber-tad” – land and liberty. As Magon declared in an editorial in *Regeneracion*: “The Land! shouted Row, the Land! shouted Ferrer, the Land! shouts the Mexican revolution.” In the following month a liberal landowner from Oa-huila, Francisco Madero, called on Mexicans to rise up in arms against the hated dictator, this is seen by many historians as the signal which heralded the beginning of the Mexican revolution. From the outset Flores Magon realized the kind of political revolution that Madero envisaged was a limited one. As he wrote:

”...Governments have to protect the right of property above all other rights. Do not expect then, that Madero will attack the right of property in favor of the proletariat. Open your eyes. Remember a phrase, simple and true and as truth indestructible, the emancipation of the workers must be the work of the workers themselves” (*Regeneracion*, December 10, 1910).

In a circular sent out by the PLM to all its members a month before, the party made it clear that it wanted no pact or alliance with the supporters of Madero. The Liberal Party, it argued, “wants political and economic freedom by handing over the land to the people, the raising of salaries and the lowering of hours of work, and stopping the influence of the Church in government and the family. The anti-electionist party (of Madero) wants only political freedom leaving the land to the capitalists, the workers as beasts of burden, and the clergy to continue to brutalize the people” (Flores Magon 1977: 18).

Magon was convinced that a political revolution alone was a sham, and would bring nothing but another tyrant. Putting an end to the despotism of Porfirio Diaz was insufficient; a social revolution also had to be instigated. He wrote:

“Political liberty requires as an adjunct another liberty to be effective, and that is economic liberty. The rich enjoy economic liberty as well and for that reason, in reality, they alone are benefit-*ted* by political liberty” (Regeneracion, December 24, 1910).

It was then with sadness that Flores Magon learned that both Villarreal and Juan Sarabia had deserted the PLM and joined the supporters of Madero. He was equally saddened to learn of the death of Praxedis Guerrero. A poet and anarchist, only in his late twenties, Guerrero had been mainly responsible for directing the armed insurrection. But in December 1910, while leading a group of liberals in an attempt to take the town of Janos in the state of Chihuahua, Guerrero was killed (Poole 1978).

In the early part of 1911 PLM forces were particularly active especially in the northern states of Baja California and Sonora. But in May 1911 events took a different turn when a peace treaty was signed between Diaz and Madero. With Diaz’s resignation on May 25th the revolution as far as Madero was concerned was over. But for Magon the revolution was just beginning. Inevitably a struggle ensued between the PLM and the Maderist forces. The situation was clearly outlined in a letter that Magon wrote to E. E. Kirk that month:

”...The Mexican Liberal Party has no compromise to make with either Diaz or Madero. The proposed peace treaty between Diaz and Madero will not stop the revolutionary activity of the Liberals, nor the activity of the other revolutionary forces independent of Madero... Madero is not the revolution. Madero is simply a leader of forces at present under his command.

The Mexican Liberal Party has armed forces in all the states of the Mexican republic, and has the northern portion of Lower California in complete control.

The revolution of the Mexican Liberal Party is not a political but a true economic revolution” (Flores Magon 1977: 21).

Madero sent Juan Sarabia and Flores Magon’s elder brother Jesus to Los Angeles hoping to induce the anarchist to call off the armed insurrections. But Flores Magon refused. Only when the social revolution was complete and the peasants and urban workers had control of the means of production would he give up the struggle.

Almost immediately Madero launched a campaign against the PLM forces within Mexico. At the end of June Madero’s forces in Sonora captured and shot 28 PLM partisans, and soon afterwards the federal army was sent to Baja California to put down the revolutionary movement there. Because the Magonistas

advocated the destruction of private property Madero is said to have distrusted and detested these social revolutionaries (Ruiz 1980: 144). Many members of the PLM throughout the country were being jailed in 1911 by the successor of Diaz.

In April 1911 the leading figures of the PLM still in exile in Los Angeles — Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magon, Antonio de P. Araujo, Anselmo L. Figueroa and Librado Rivera — issued a “Manifesto to the Workers of the World.” It explained that the people of Mexico, under the banner of the Red Flag, had for four months been in open rebellion against their oppressors. And taking part in the insurrection in support of the people are “those who know that the emancipation of the workers ought to be accomplished by the workers themselves, those convinced of direct action, those who deny the ‘sacred’ right of property, those who do not take up arms for the purpose of raising any master to power, but to destroy the chains of wage slavery.” Such revolutionists were represented by the Mexican Liberal Party group. They were not engaged in struggle merely “to destroy the dictator Porfirio Diaz in order to put in his place a new tyrant. The Mexican Liberal Party is taking part in the actual insurrection with the deliberate and firm purpose of expropriating the land and the means of production and handing them over to the people, that is, to each and every one of the inhabitants of Mexico, without distinction of sex.”

The Manifesto repudiates the party of Madero, a millionaire who has seen his fabulous fortune grow with the sweat and tears of the peons of his haciendas. His party is a purely political and conservative party, interested only in establishing a bourgeois republic and protecting private property. It calls for political and material support for the social revolution in Mexico.

In September 1911 a second manifesto was published by the same organizing group, and it might be useful to quote a few extracts as it gives a cogent outline of the libertarian socialist tendency of the PLM.

“But for the principle of private property there would be no reason for government, which is needed solely to keep the disinherited from going to extremes in their complaints or rebellions against those who have got into their possession the social wealth. Nor would there be any reason for the church, whose sole exclusive object is to strangle in the human being the innate spirit of revolt against oppression and exploitation, by the preaching of patience, of resignation and of humility... Capital, Authority, the Church — there you have the somber trinity that makes of this beautiful earth a paradise for those who, by cunning, violence and crime, have been successful in gathering into their clutches the product of the toiler’s sweat, of the blood, of the tears and sacrifices of generations of workers; but a hell for those who,

with muscle and intelligence, till the soil, set the machinery in motion, build the houses, and transport the products. Thus humanity remains divided into two classes whose interests are diametrically opposed — the capitalist class and the working class...

Mexicans! The Mexican Liberal Party recognizes that every human being by the very fact of his coming into life, has a right to enjoy each and every one of the advantages modern civilization offers, because those advantages are the product of the efforts and sacrifices of the working class from all time...

Expropriation must be pursued to the end, at all costs, while this grand movement lasts... Expropriation must not be limited to taking possession of the land and the implements of agriculture alone. There must be a resolute taking possession of all the industries by those working in them, who should bring it about similarly that the lands the mines, the factories, the workshops, the foundries... shall be in the power of each and every one of the inhabitants, without distinction of sex...

Liberty and well-being are within our grasp. The same effort and the same sacrifices that are required to raise power to a governor — say a tyrant — will achieve the expropriation of the fortunes the rich keep from you. It is for you, then, to choose. Either a new governor — that is to say, a new yoke — or life-redeeming expropriation and the abolition of all imposition, be that imposition religious, political or of any other kind. Land and Liberty!" (Flores Magon 1977: 97–103).

In that same month — September 1911- — responding to the criticism of former colleagues that Mexico was ill-prepared for either anarchism or socialism, Flores Magon was to write that the Mexican people instinctively hated authority and the bourgeoisie and that mutual aid and communal property was the rule among Indian communities in Mexico, until the “political and money bandits impudently robbed people of lands, forest, everything” (Regeneration, September 2, 1911).

By the end of 1911 the PLM were in open opposition against Madero, who in October had become president. The following month Emiliano Zapata also rebelled against Madero and in November issued his plan for Ayala. Zapata adopted the slogan of the PLM “Land and Liberty” and many of his ideas were clearly derived from Flores Magon. Of all the revolutionary groups within Mexico it was only the Zapatistas with whom the PLM had any connection. As Enrique Magon put it:

”...These Agrarians (Zapatistas) and the Liberals work together owing to the fact that the former are direct actionists, although they still

think a government is needed. They too, as the Liberals, have burned to ashes the private property deeds as well as all official records; have thrown down that marked private properties... So Liberals and Agrarians work together in conjunction and good harmony” (quoted in Poole 1977: 83).

Although Zapata was an agrarian socialist, he was not as we shall see, an anarchist.

In June 1912 Flores Magon and three of his associates were again arrested for alleged violation of the neutrality laws. They were sentenced to twenty-three months imprisonment. When the sentences were known there was a mass demonstration outside the courtroom. It was broken up by the police who made several arrests. While the PLM group were imprisoned, *Regeneracion* continued publication, edited by such people as Antonio de P. Araujo, Alberto Tellez, Teodoro Gaitan and the English anarchist W.C. Owen. While Magon was in McNeil Island Prison land expropriations continued to take place in Mexico.

On his release from prison in January 1914 Flores Magon again threw himself into the struggle. His brother Enrique and Librado were also freed from the McNeil Island Prison. For a while the junta of the PLM lived in a commune on a small farm on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Towards the end of the year the publication of *Regeneracion* had to be suspended because of lack of funds. In February 1916 Flores Magon and his brother were again arrested — this time accused by the United States’ Postal authorities of sending material through the post that incited “murder, arson and treason.” They were released on bail, put up by Berkman and Goldman. By this time Madero had been assassinated, and another wealthy *acendado*, Venustiano Carranza, had become president of Mexico. The publication of *Regeneracion* was resumed in 1916 and Flores Magon wrote scathing articles criticizing the Carranza regime, particularly its use of the urban workers, the “Red Battalions” to crush the Zapatistas. Flores Magon appealed to the workers:

“By taking arms against the workers of the fields,” he wrote, “you have taken arms against your own interests, because the interests of the exploited are the same whether they use the plough or the hammer. You have shot down your class brothers, the Zapatistas and the anarchists of the Mexican Liberal Party with impunity, but in this way you have strengthened the enemy, the bourgeoisie” (Flores Magon 1977: 27).

Despite increasing ill health, for he suffered from diabetes and failing eyesight, Flores Magon continued to address meetings and with the help of Enrique and Librado to keep *Regeneracion* going on an intermittent basis — in spite of the repression. In March 1918, together with Librado, he published a manifesto to the

Anarchists and Workers of the World suggesting that the demise of the “old society” was at hand, and encouraging everyone to fan the flames of discontent that had been lit by tyranny. Charged with violating the Espionage Laws Flores Magon and Librado Rivera were again arrested in March 1918. Magon was given a savage sentence of twenty-two years imprisonment. After a period in McNeil Island Prison, He was sent to Leavenworth Prison in Kansas. His health rapidly deteriorated due to a lack of proper medical attention. In 1920 he was offered a pension by the Mexican government but this he declined. Two years later with the founding of the anarcho-syndicalist Confederacion General de Trabajadores (CGT) a campaign was launched in Mexico calling for the release of Flores Magon and Rivera, and the boycotting of US goods. But the action came too late, for Flores was found dead in his cell on November 22, 1922. It was alleged that he died of a heart attack, but according to Librado Rivera he had been murdered by the prison authorities. He was forty-eight. Workers from the Confederation of Railway Societies transported his body back to Mexico. At every town where the cortege stopped, thousands of workers gathered to pay their respects, waving black and red flags. In Mexico City around ten thousand workers attended Flores Magon’s funeral. For years his brother Jesus, who became a prominent lawyer and a member of Madero’s government, had tried to persuade him to give up politics and return to Mexico, but Flores Magon always remained fanatically loyal to the anarchist cause.

The following year his brother Enrique and Librado Rivera were released from prison (Poole 1977: 83). Rivera settled in Mexico and continued to spread anarchist propaganda, editing the anarchist periodical *Sagitario*. He was imprisoned several times and was killed in an automobile accident in 1932. For more than twenty years he had been a close friend and colleague of Flores Magon...

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