
LABOR AUTONOMY

and the

STATE in

LATIN AMERICA

EDITED BY

Edward C. Epstein

Labor Autonomy and the State in Latin America

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To Tessa and Rosalyn,
the women in my life

Contents

1	A Historical Introduction <i>Edward C. Epstein</i>	page 1
2	Labor Populism and Hegemonic Crisis in Argentina <i>Edward C. Epstein</i>	13
3	Trade Unions in Brazil: A Search for Autonomy and Organization <i>Maria Helena Moreira Alves</i>	39
4	Trade Unionism and the State Under the Chilean Military Regime <i>Jaime Ruiz-Tagle</i>	73
5	Trade Unions and Labor Policy in Colombia, 1974–1987 <i>Rocío Londoño Botero</i>	101
6	The State and the Unions in Cuba Since 1959 <i>Linda Fuller</i>	133
7	Labor and Politics: The Mexican Paradox <i>Francisco Zapata</i>	173
8	Political Transition and the Peruvian Labor Movement, 1968–1985 <i>Nigel Haworth</i>	195
9	The Uruguayan Labor Movement in the Post-Authoritarian Period <i>Martín Gargiulo</i>	219
10	Political Control of Organized Labor in a Semi-Consociational Democracy: The Case of Venezuela. <i>Charles L. Davis and Kenneth M. Coleman</i>	247
11	Conclusion: The Question of Labor Autonomy <i>Edward C. Epstein</i>	275
	Contributors	291
	Index	293

A Historical Introduction

Edward C. Epstein

The focus of the present volume is an examination of the contemporary relationship of organized labor and the state in the nine most urbanized Latin American countries – Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Specifically, the degree of political autonomy attainable by the trade unions and, with it, the possibility of meaningful political participation for most of the urban work force are explored.

With the growth of unions in the region near the beginning of the twentieth century, workers' efforts to use their collective numbers to make up for individual weakness vis-à-vis their employers aroused great concern. The common preoccupation of Latin American conservatives has been with factors such as the effect of unrestrained wage claims on the economy and fears of the supposed radicalism of labor movements headed first by Anarchists and Anarcho-Syndicalists and later by Communists and Socialists. Others of a less status quo inclination saw the possibility of converting the existing unions into a base for a middle-class dominated populist political coalition capable of inducing the traditional elites to share power. Under either of these two scenarios, influential political groups saw an autonomous labor movement as undesirable. Regardless of their different upper or middle class origins, such groups would look to the state as an instrument to be used to control labor, given the state's access to the means of coercion.¹

The centralized state has long played a significant role in overseeing economic growth and political order throughout Latin America.² With the rise of national labor movements, those controlling the state in each country responded to labor's increasing presence with the passage of legislation governing various aspects of trade union activity. Typical action included the promulgation of (1) regulations concerning the type of worker eligible for membership and the minimum number needed to form officially recognized unions, (2) obligations to submit detailed financial records to regular government scrutiny, (3) conditions under

which internal elections might be held and those eligible to compete as officers, (4) rules for engaging in collective bargaining with management, (5) minimum time limits for engaging in government-supervised conciliation of differences, (6) cases where union-management differences had to be submitted to binding arbitration, and – last, but obviously not least – (7) the requirements needed to constitute a legal strike. The failure to follow any of these regulations could be legal grounds for overturning union elections, suspension or cancellation of official union recognition (required for collective bargaining rights), or the illegalization of a strike. In the instance of a strike being officially proclaimed illegal, those participating usually lost whatever job protections they had and were subject to the possibility of immediate dismissal without right of appeal or compensation. Although state rules and regulations could be justified as needed to maintain order, all had the common effect of limiting trade union autonomy.

The restrictions placed on union activity not only meant that total autonomy was virtually impossible, but also that labor would have to contend with opposition from state and management alike if collective goals were to be achieved. In view of the thoroughly politicized nature of the state, mandatory contact between trade unions and state administrators meant that the labor movement would be obliged to become political. The advocacy of a non-political stance meant ignoring the structural realities with which labor had to deal.

The nine countries examined in the present volume serve to illustrate the above generalizations about the state's role in seeking to control organized labor. What follows in this introductory chapter stresses the role of political parties as a possible mediating presence between the unions and the state. The discussion is organized into two time periods: (1) the years from the end of Anarchist predominance to the late 1950s/early 1960s and (2) the more contemporary years.³ During the second period, countries can be divided into cases where (a) labor-oriented parties have been banned by an exclusionary military; (b) those in which they have been supplanted by a Marxist state; and (c) those where such parties exist within the confines of what had been populist regimes, but now increasingly subject to the pressures associated with economic austerity.

THE EARLY PERIOD: PARTY LINAGES TO THE STATE

Over time, Anarchist (or similar leaning) union leaders who rejected partisan ties for labor as too compromising were increasingly replaced by those who argued that linkages with appropriate political parties were

needed if labor was to survive the seemingly hostile attentions of the state.⁴ The question was which party-affiliated group or groups would dominate. Typically, the pattern that emerged was one of a highly divisive partisan struggle between Communists and Socialists on the political left and a variety of more centrist populists, not to mention conflicts among themselves. Where populists could count on strong support from an anti-Marxist state, they were able to supplant their rivals, unifying most of the labor movement under their control. Such access to the state provided not only the coercion to intimidate opposing groups, but also the equally important economic largess upon which all populist leaders relied to solidify rank-and-file loyalty. Interestingly, cases of a state-Marxist alliance could also occur, although they were infrequent. Regardless of which party group gained official support, such labor leaders were aware that it was dependent on the continued good will of those dominating the state apparatus and on these benefactors being able to remain in power.

Cases of Exclusive Populist Party Control: Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico

In Argentina, the 1943–1945 period saw the populist supporters of military man Juan Perón use state power to oust Socialist and Communist unionists from control of the *Confederación General de Trabajo*, or CGT, the major labor organization since 1930. Subsequently, union support was a major factor in Perón's election victories in 1946 and 1952. After Perón's ouster during the 1955 coup, anti-Peronists alternated hostile acts like the intervention of the CGT, the arrest of its Peronist leaders, and support for non-Peronist unionists with efforts to win the cooperation of a new generation of Peronists through the return of the CGT and other kinds of official favoritism. Ultimately, neither repression nor cooptation would be able to seriously undermine the basic loyalty of the majority of workers to the Peronist cause.

The Brazilian case under populist leader Getulio Vargas is different due to his preference during the authoritarian *Estado Novo* period to use direct bureaucratic control over labor rather than work through a political party intermediary. Only with redemocratization in 1944–1945 and the emergence of the Brazilian Labor Party as one of the two pro-Vargas electoral vehicles would workers find a direct party link to the state. Nevertheless, with the exception of brief periods at the beginning and at the end of the 1946–1964 Republic when Marxist-influenced national labor confederations were allowed to coexist (although technically illegal), the state union structure set up under the old dictatorship prevented any real worker political input independent of official control.

In Mexico, the state has exercised a similar near monopoly over the unions through a sequence of alliances between major labor confeder-

ations and the official ruling party since the Revolution. The dominant labor body remains the *Confederación de Trabajadores de México*, or CTM, first organized by populist President Lázaro Cárdenas in 1936 and incorporated as the official labor sector in his 1938 party reorganization. Purged of dissident leftist elements in the years soon after World War II, the CTM leadership became a conservative bulwark of the regime.

Alternating or Shared Party Control: Colombia, Cuba, Peru, and Venezuela

In Colombia, the competition between the two traditional parties for control of the state had major implications for organized labor. Under the Liberals, and especially during the two terms of reformist President Alfonso López (1934–1938 and 1942–1945), the Liberal and Communist-controlled *Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia*, or CTC, held sway over a largely united labor movement. With the Conservatives in power after 1946 and with the increase of partisan violence, the new Church and Conservative-oriented *Unión de Trabajadores de Colombia* (UTC) gradually replaced the much more militant CTC. Only after the attempt by military populist Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953–1957) to rule independently of both Liberals and Conservatives – including the creation of his own labor group – would the two traditional parties agree to the 1958 National Front power-sharing agreement which was to run for 16 years. During this period the CTC and the UTC could also coexist, especially once the Liberals expelled the Communists from their more moderate confederation in 1960. The Communists formed their own separate labor group in 1964, the *Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores de Colombia*, or CSTC.

The Cuban case reflected the competition between civilian populist Ramón Grau and military man Fulgencio Batista to run the country. Having ousted Grau's 1933 provisional government, Batista eventually formed an alliance with the Communists, exchanging wage increases and legal recognition of the then Communist-dominated *Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba* (CTC) for union votes and labor peace during his 1940–1944 presidency. With Grau's 1944 *Auténtico* Party election victory, the Communists sought to negotiate an alliance with the new president. But the Cold War and the 1946–1947 strife in the CTC between Communists and Auténticos led Grau to turn against the Communists, ousting them from the union leadership. Opportunistically, many of the new CTC leaders would end up supporting Batista after his 1952 coup and during his dictatorship.

Peruvian labor in the late 1920s was similarly divided between Communists and anti-Communists. The 1930 coup headed by Luis Sánchez Cerro and the outlawing of the Communist *Confederación General de Trabajadores del Perú* (CGTP), the disputed 1931 elections which anti-Communist populist Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre of the newly

organized *Aprista* Party supposedly lost to Sánchez Cerro, Aprista violence including the assassination of the president, and the outlawing of the Apristas all set the stage for the rest of the decade during which labor operated illegally. Although the Apristas and the Communists jointly founded a new labor group in 1944, the *Confederación de Trabajadores del Perú* (CTP), the Apristas took advantage of their links to the government of José Bustamante (elected in 1945) to seize full control a year later. The Aprista CTP was forced underground after the 1948 coup and the subsequent dictatorship of Manuel Odría. The CTP, however, was revived with the return to democracy in 1956. Though still dominant during the 1960s, the Aprista CTP encountered increasing competition from the Communists who benefited from worker dissatisfaction with Haya de la Torre's more visibly conservative politics. In 1968 the Communists revived the CGTP as a rival to the CTP.

In the case of Venezuelan labor, the initial advantage of the Communists (who had been actively involved since the 1936–1937 strikes) was negated by government repression. With the collapse of the 1944 Communist attempt to construct a national labor organization in cooperation with the populist *Acción Democrática* (AD) and the outlawing of the Communist unions, AD unionists gained a predominance that was to remain intact thereafter. AD monopolized the new *Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela* (CTV), founded in 1947, during the party's three-year rule during Venezuela's first democratic experience. Both AD and Communist labor leaders were persecuted by the 1948–1958 Marcos Pérez Jiménez dictatorship which set up its own labor confederation in 1954. As a result of a coalition effort involving Venezuela's major political parties, democracy was restored in 1958. Two formal pacts between the parties and labor and business placed limits on the social struggle that had undermined the previous democracy and guaranteed power sharing. With the expulsion of the Communists from the unions at the end of 1961 because of their participation in the Marxist insurrection, the remaining parties continued to share power in the CTV. Organized labor's unity was incomplete, however, owing to the simultaneous participation of Venezuela's second most important political party, the Social Christian COPEI, in a second labor confederation, the *Confederación de Sindicatos Autónomos de Venezuela* (CEDESA), it had founded in 1947.

Marxist-Dominated Labor: Chile and Uruguay

In Chile, the Marxists have always held majority control of the labor movement except when facing repression from conservative governments. The Communist-dominated *Federación Obrera de Chile* (FOCH) was the major labor organization from the time of its emergence as a radical group in 1917 and the imposition of the 1927–1931 Carlos Ibáñez

populist dictatorship. Repressing the FOCH and other labor groups, as well as the Communist Party, in 1929 Ibáñez set up his own short-lived labor group. In the early 1930s, the FOCH reemerged and in 1936 joined with the Socialist Party's newly created confederation to form the Popular Front-inspired *Confederación de Trabajadores de Chile*, or CTCH. When the 1946–1952 Gabriel González Videla government turned sharply to the right during the Cold War, the CTCH split into separate Communist and Socialist wings. The organization was weakened further when the Communist part was suppressed as part of the 1948 Law for the Permanent Defense of Democracy. In 1953, a more broadly-based organization, the *Central Única de Trabajadores* or CUT was constituted, uniting the Socialists, the still illegal Communists, Catholic groups, and, for a time, even the Anarchists. Despite the efforts of conservative Christian Democrats to form a rival confederation to oppose the Marxist-controlled CUT, that ideologically divided body would remain the principal labor group for the next 20 years.

A similar case of Marxist hegemony existed in the Uruguayan labor movement. Because of the Russian Revolution, the then dominant Anarchists divided, with Anarcho-Syndicalists joining the Communists in 1923 in the *Unión Sindical del Uruguay* (USU). The Communists, in turn, broke off in 1928, forming the *Confederación General de Trabajadores del Uruguay* (CGTU) a year later. While there was some anti-union repression after the 1933 coup of Gabriel Terra, the existing labor organizations were allowed to continue. In the anti-Nazi atmosphere of World War II, a more broadly based body including Socialists, Anarcho-Syndicalists, and others joined with the Communists to form the *Unión General de Trabajadores*, or UGT. Resentful of Communist control, in 1946 the non-Communists formed a separate group within the UGT and in 1951 created a completely independent body, the Socialist-led *Confederación Sindical del Uruguay* (CSU). Benefiting from the prestige enjoyed by the Cuban Revolution, the Communists sought to reconstitute a single national labor confederation; their efforts were increasingly successful after 1964 with the creation and growth of the *Convención Nacional de Trabajadores*, or CNT.

RECENT CHANGES

In certain countries, the increasingly class conscious behavior of the labor movement and its political allies helped to precipitate the establishment of a new type of authoritarian order between 1964 and 1973. Unlike the earlier populist authoritarianism of men like Perón in Argentina, Vargas in Brazil, Ibáñez in Chile, Rojas Pinilla in Colombia, Batista in Cuba, and Cardénas in Mexico (or of a Juan Velasco still to come in

Peru), the new bureaucratic authoritarianism envisioned no political role for organized labor. The old politics of exchanging better worker income for political support now came to be a thing of the past. Instead, Marxist and populist political parties were suppressed or suspended, trade unions were placed under firm government control, and the right to strike was severely limited.⁵ In the cases of bureaucratic authoritarianism discussed in the country chapters – Argentina from 1966 to 1973 and again from 1976 to 1983, Brazil between 1964 and 1985, Chile from 1973 to the present, and Uruguay between 1973 and 1985 – a negative income redistribution favoring the wealthy was used to lower inflation and to increase private investment. With the exception of Uruguay, the forceful state efforts to produce a non-political trade unionism acceptant of official economic policies eventually failed.

The State and the New Authoritarianism: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay

In Argentina, the series of CGT-sponsored general strikes which followed the 1969 urban rioting in Córdoba and other interior cities helped to further undermine the 1966–1971 Onganía and Levingston military governments and to promote the 1973 elections which led to the return of Peronism after almost 18 years. With Perón's death in 1974, the widening divisions within Peronism led to new labor unrest and the suppression of the CGT at the time of the 1976 coup. While labor militancy from 1981 was a factor in hastening the end of the most recent military regime, domestic economic problems and the catastrophic Malvinas/Falklands adventure were more central. Under the current democracy, a reconstituted but internally divided CGT would lead Peronist opposition to the post-1983 Raúl Alfonsín Radical Party government.

In Brazil, the gradual political opening after 1974 made the emergence in 1978 of an independent union movement parallel to the official labor structure politically possible for the first time since the repression of the Marxist unions at the beginning of the military dictatorship. Having organized the strikes of the late 1970s as a means of regaining earlier wage losses and improving job stability, the metalworkers of the ABC industrial suburbs of São Paulo served as the base for the openly Marxist Workers Party and the 1983 national union confederation, the *Central Unica dos Trabalhadores*, or CUT. A rival national group founded shortly afterwards by more moderate workers took the name of the *Central Geral dos Trabalhadores* (CGT) in 1986. One of the areas of contention in the 1987–1988 Constitutional Convention has been how much of the repressive Estado Novo era labor laws would be retained under the more democratic New Republic introduced in 1985 to replace direct military rule.

In Chile, union opposition to the anti-Marxist military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet became a serious factor only with the mass political protests of 1983–1986 following in the wake of the 1982 economic crisis. Responding to an initiative sponsored by the copper workers, rival Christian Democratic and leftist groups that had organized separately in the 1970s united in June 1983, forming a single umbrella organization, the *Comando Nacional de Trabajadores* (CNT), the first unitary labor body since the CUT was banned at the time of the 1973 coup. The new organization sponsored the general strikes of mid-1983 and end-1984 as well as coordinating labor participation in what began as monthly demonstrations against the Pinochet government.

With no national labor body after the suppression of the Uruguayan CNT in 1973, unions there had little political visibility prior to the beginning of the gradual return to democracy that followed the popular rejection of the military's proposed constitution in the 1980 plebiscite. Groups similar in ideology to those that had run the old CNT in 1982 organized the *Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores*, or PIT, as a replacement. In 1984, the organization's name was amended to PIT-CNT. Efforts by the Communists to dominate the 1985 CNT congress led to a walkout of extreme leftists, almost splitting the organization. Given the prior low level of wages under the military regime, a high level of strike activity during the democratic government of Colorado President Julio Sanguinetti has been used to push wages up, especially in the public sector where wages have remained low.

The Marxist State and Organized Labor: Cuba

The 1959 triumph of the Cuban Revolution led to the subordination of the CTC to the new Marxist state. Union leaders that Fidel Castro judged to be non-supportive of the leftward course taken by the government were systematically purged. Throughout the 1960s, the role of organized labor was seen as encouraging worker economic production in return for the job security and extensive social services provided by the state. The high absenteeism and the low productivity evident by the latter part of the decade led to official efforts in the early 1970s to rejuvenate the decaying union structure by expanding labor's policy responsibilities. Workers have been encouraged to actively participate in production assemblies where they have the opportunity to critique local management; CTC leaders, in turn, were permitted to regularly attend meetings of the national government's ministerial and state committee management councils and are officially represented on the top-level Council of Ministers (and on its executive committee) which coordinates all Cuban economic activity. While not insignificant, labor's policy input is limited to what the major Communist Party leaders are willing to permit.

Labor and the Populist State Under Economic Stress: Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela

Recent economic difficulties in Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela have produced noticeable tension in the relations between labor movements and states which in the past have been prone to populist styles of politics. The increasing economic constraints on government spending forced by austerity have meant that economic resources once directed to favored trade union leaders and their clientele are less available; instead, governments feel themselves compelled to call for sacrifices and patience from their supporters. Needless to say, such requests were not well received by trade unionists.

In Colombia, the initial links between the Liberals and Conservatives and the two major labor confederations, the CTC and the UTC respectively, began to weaken in the late 1960s under the National Front. By the 1970s, an increasing number of independent unions under leftist leadership were joining with the Communist CSTC and, to some extent, the UTC in strikes meant to provide wages commensurate with rising inflation. The joint participation (for the first time) of most of the labor movement in the 1977 *Paro Cívico*, or civic strike, caused great distress to the government and its conservative allies in business and the military.⁶ With the high unemployment of the early 1980s, the now smaller labor movement witnessed both a surge in the number of the independent unions and their subsequent merger along with certain defectors from the UTC and CTC in late 1986 with the CSTC to form a single majoritarian labor group, the *Central Unitaria de Trabajadores* (CUT), controlled by the Marxists.

In Mexico, the semi-official CTM has continued its labor dominance, presiding over the 1966 creation of the *Congreso del Trabajo*, or CT, the umbrella group which now links the overwhelming majority of the labor movement made up by various pro-government union confederations. Unlike Colombia, the growth of a small number of leftist independent unions in Mexico during the 1970s was contained, leading to little direct challenge to state authority. The worsening economic crisis of the 1980s has seen the CTM join with the government in various solidarity pacts, exchanging severe wage controls for efforts to limit joblessness among the regularly employed workers from whom the unions draw their membership.

The Peruvian case has been one characterized by political confrontation. Under the populist government of General Velasco (1968–1975), the Communist CGTP rapidly outpaced a declining Aprista CTP in size. While innovative, the military's effort to defuse class conflict through the creation of profit-sharing worker communities and cooperatives led to relatively little increased popularity for the regime. Similarly, the 1972 creation of the official *Confederación de Trabajadores de la Revolución Peruana* (CTRP) generated little support and failed to supplant the various

party-linked labor groups. The serious economic decline beginning in the mid-1970s led not only to Velasco's replacement by more traditional military officers, but also to record strike activity and, ultimately, the restoration of democracy in 1980. If sharply divided in the late 1970s owing to differing responses to the military, the various forces of the labor left joined together in the early 1980s to oppose Fernando Belaúnde's government which was blamed for heightened unemployment and rapidly sinking wages. By 1985, an expanded Marxist CGTP was once again contesting for control of the labor movement with an Aprista CTP strengthened by its ties to the successful presidential bid of Alan García.

The links of Venezuelan labor to the democratic regime have rested on the ability of the oil-based economy to generate the jobs, wages, and benefits to satisfy most of the work force. During the years of the oil bonanza, strikes were few in number. Alternating in control of the government, the centrist AD and COPEI parties used state resources to reinforce their partisans in the labor movement and in the dominant, AD-controlled CTV. With increased inflation from 1979, the weakening of world oil prices after 1981, and the emergence of a foreign debt crisis, wages began to deteriorate significantly. In response to worker discontent and anti-government protests organized by the weak labor left, the CTV has urged the government to strengthen the price regulatory commission set up in 1982 and to consider the state control of both prices and wages. Such steps mark the first hesitant efforts of organized labor to take a more directly political stand on issues where its interests diverge from existing government policy.

THE PRESENT VOLUME

The sketches provided here of labor relations in the nine countries under study are greatly amplified in the chapters making up the body of this volume. While reference is made to the initial period of populist and Marxist involvement in the unions, major stress is on the more contemporary time-frame. Focusing on the common theme of the struggle over labor autonomy, the contributing authors try to explain the resulting differences in terms of factors like the ability and willingness of state elites to use compelling force, the extent of ideological commitment and party linkages of the labor leadership, and the degree of structural unity achieved in any particular national labor movement. These same themes are again addressed in the conclusion where particular patterns of greater or lesser autonomy among the case countries are discussed in a comparative framework.