

## The Life and Legacy of Ricardo Flores Magón

Gonzalo Santos, Nov. 21, 2022

A hundred years ago today, on November 21 of 1922, the life of Mexican revolutionary Ricardo Flores Magón [RFM] was extinguished at the age of 49 – assassinated, actually - while serving a 22-year sentence in a U.S. federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas. In 1918, he and his brother Enrique had been arrested, tried, and convicted, along with their close associate Librado Rivera (a Magonista revolutionary uncle of mine, it turns out), on trumped up charges under the draconian 1917 Espionage and Sedition Acts – the unconstitutional sections of which were subsequently repealed by Congress or overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Living in exile in Los Angeles at the time, they had been caught in the brutal raids of the *First Red Scare* in the United States, launched during and after World War I, which suppressed the anti-imperialist peace movement and the radical wing of the U.S. labor movement led by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The Magonistas, too, had denounced World War I as inter-imperialist and enthusiastically supported the anarcho-socialist IWW as it covered the huge wave of militant worker strikes it organized from 1905 to the 1920s from the pages of their combative newspaper *Regeneración* - founded by RFM in 1900 in Mexico City, when he was still a law student.

### I. FLORES MAGÓN'S INTERNATIONALISM.

Flores Magón and his comrades exposed for the first time to Mexican readers both in the U.S. and Mexico the appalling conditions of industrial workers in the United States at the time, made up mostly of exploited European immigrants who had no collective labor rights or social benefits, were paid pauper wages and exploited child labor and women workers even more than the men, worked 10-14 hours a day 6 to 7 days a week, etc. And it was also the first time *anyone*, on *either side* of the border, exposed and denounced the extreme exploitation of Mexican immigrants laboring in the mines, the railroads, and the fields of the U.S. southwest, and the Jim Crow racial marginalization of all settled Mexican American communities.

And keep in mind, all this agitation and solidarity to workers and ethnic communities on the U.S. side of the border was carried out by a group of exiled Mexican revolutionaries, led by RFM, whose *original project* was to overthrow a dictatorship and spark a social revolution *in Mexico* - and when it started in 1910 and raged for the next ten years, to *push it in the most radical direction*.

Flores Magón died when the Mexican Revolution ended, but his ideas lived on. His intellectual imprint in the makeup of post-revolutionary modern Mexico is everywhere. And *this is also* true of all subsequent struggles for justice and dignity fought by Mexican immigrants and Mexican American ethnic communities in the United States, from the mining, cannery, and agricultural strikes from the 1930s to the 1960s, to the Chicano Movement of 1965-75, to the combative

urban strikes of dayworker *jornaleros*, hotel & garment workers, and skyscraper janitors since the 1980s, to the modern U.S. Immigrant Rights Movement since the mid-1990s.

Flores Magón accomplished both these legacies by never deviating from his radical vision, compromising his principles, or failing to express solidarity with all struggles for social justice on *both sides of the border*.

## II. FLORES MAGÓN, JOSÉ MARTÍ, AND CARLOS MARIATEGUI.

In commemorating the centenary of RFM's entering the pantheon of revolutionary heroes, it is befitting we place and distinguish his vision in relation with that of two other great Latin American revolutionary thinkers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, José Martí and Carlos Mariategui.

José Martí, the father of Cuban independence, was also an intellectual and prolific writer who envisioned, inspired, and organized the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cuban war of independence from exile in the U.S. He was killed in action in 1895, but he bequeathed us with an expansive vision of emancipation from Spanish and U.S. imperialism not just for Cuba – finally realized in 1959 with the triumph of the Cuban Revolution - but for what he called *Nuestra América*. His vision is alive today in all efforts to unify Latin America through an anti-imperialist *Bolivarian* project of continental integration and emancipation that Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez retook in 1999 and labeled *Socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

This updated *visión martiana* swept South America during the first decade of this new century, went into remission in 2015, and has returned reinvigorated and more developed since 2021 with a string of electoral victories culminating in the return to power of Luiz Ignacio “Lula” da Silva in Brazil.

Since the advent of the neoliberal integration with the United States project launched in the 1980s by Mexico's elites, on the other hand, Mexico - the cradle of social revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century - and its combative diaspora residing in the U.S. have both remained distant from embracing this emancipatory project first articulated by Martí. But as the neoliberal integration project flounders badly in North America - especially in its social dimension of labor mobility and transnational social integration -, embrace it we must!

RFM had an equally sweeping vision of international unification and social emancipation from dictatorship, capitalism, and imperialism – uniting foremost the struggle of Mexicans in Mexico and those in its U.S. diaspora -, but he envisioned these struggles as an indispensable component of the *socialist emancipation of all workers and peoples of North America*, in alliance with *all* workers and immigrants living, building, and struggling in the United States, Mexico, and surrounding countries. In other words, what RFM was envisioning and fighting for was... *¡Nuestra Norteamérica!*

Flores Magón's revolutionary social blueprint of North American integration from the bottom up is the exact opposite of, and alternative to, the neoliberal blueprint for economic regional

integration from the top down. His transnational, multiracial, and socialist vision ties Mexico's diaspora to Mexico's future and vice-versa, and the future of both inextricably tied to the struggles of *all* North American emancipatory anti-systemic social movements.

It remains an abiding vision and a great challenge for us Mexicans on both sides of the border, as much as for all other peoples of North America to realize, but a vision which we must also embrace!

There is a third great emancipatory vision yet to be realized in our continent, that of Peruvian revolutionary Marxist thinker Carlos Mariategui (1894 - 1930). With the hindsight of writing in 1928, well aware of the fruits of Zapatismo in the Mexican Revolution, immersed in the Andean world's predominant Indigenous realities, and sufficiently aware of the theoretical debates within the highly Eurocentric currents of thought within the Communist International – or 3<sup>rd</sup> International founded by Lenin in 1919 - that tried to artificially transpose the primacy of the industrial working classes into any Latin American revolutionary project, or debated the pros and cons of various “worker-peasant” alliances, he posited the *primacy of the abiding Indigenous visions of collectivism and emancipation embedded and still present in the Americas* for any future revolutionary project. And, as we all know now, his vision was prophetic and has become indispensable for the future of not just the Americas - the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, Perú and Bolivia, Brazil and Guatemala included - but of the world!

The theoretical synthesis and revolutionary realization of these three monumental visions, along with others emanated from the historic experiences of other peoples in the continent – European descended, African descended, Asian descended, and Indigenous - will mark whether the Americas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will advance or regress, and to what degree the American hemisphere will contribute to the construction of a new post-capitalist world-system.

RFM's, Martí's, and Mariategui's legacies are all alive, but remain incomplete, as are those of many other people's great visionaries, like Malcom X and Martin Luther King in the United States. Their intertwined visions and legacies have not ended. It's up to us to embrace them all, move them forward, and combine them for the next stage of our common struggles towards our common destiny.

### III. FLORES MAGÓN - THE (SANITIZED IN VAIN) PRECURSOR OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION.

Back to 1918, when RFM was arrested for the last time. Venustiano Carranza, the “supreme leader of the revolution” – in fact a canny representative of the national bourgeoisie going back to Porfirio Díaz time, when he had served as Governor of Coahuila - had by then taken control of the revolutionary process, after his army defeated Pancho Villa's in 1915 and Villa became a fugitive (after a truce, he was ambushed and killed in 1923).

Carranza had presided over the writing and promulgation of the 1917 Constitution, which made vital agrarian concessions to the Zapatistas and incorporated many of the social justice ideas first proclaimed by RFM. Zapata had kept fighting nevertheless, and two years later (1919) he

would be ambushed and killed by the Carrancistas, effectively ending the social revolution in Mexico. What happened subsequently can be characterized as intra-mural power struggles among the triumphant Carrancistas – Carranza himself would be overthrown, ambushed, and killed by Álvaro Obregón in 1920 – until the “revolutionary family” settled down and agreed to building a hegemonic single-party system with 6-year presidential terms (no reelection) in 1929 that ruled Mexico for 70 years, until 2001.

But in 1918, RFM and his comrades found themselves not just in permanent exile but jailed, too. They were still feared for their revolutionary ideas on both sides of the border. All previous Mexican regimes, from the Porfirio Díaz regime through the Madero, Huerta, and Carranza regimes, colluded with and pressured the U.S. government to jail – even kill – these Mexican Magonista revolutionaries, who had initially fled into exile to Laredo, Texas, in 1904 to avoid persecution. Soon they had to flee again to St. Louis, Missouri, to elude assassination by Díaz agents.

It was there that in 1906 RFM founded the Partido Liberal Mexicano, which he presided until his death. That year RFM and his comrades issued a manifesto calling for an armed revolution against the Díaz regime – the first such call - and for the radical transformation of Mexico. They inspired and supported, through the fiery pages of *Regeneración*, the 1906 copper miners’ strike in Cananea, Sonora, and the 1907 textile strike in Río Blanco, Veracruz – both brutally repressed by the Díaz regime (aided by Arizona militias and hired American vigilantes in Cananea). No wonder Díaz put a \$20,000 bounty on RFM’s capture – a fortune then!

Then again, in 1911, after Díaz resigned and departed and Francisco Madero and his Partido Antireeleccionista were democratically elected to power, the Magonistas were jailed for organizing and abetting a few armed incursions into northern Mexico, with the aim to liberate territories near the U.S. border and create communal-agrarian societies like those the Zapatistas were already establishing further south in Morelos.

For Flores Magón, as revolutionary peasant leader Emiliano Zapata, refused to disarm and join Madero, and instead demanded his regime first deliver social justice to Mexico’s vast dispossessed peasantry by restoring to them the communal lands they had lost to the voracious and vast haciendas backed by the Díaz regime.

It is not well known, but the very famous Zapatista slogans “*Tierra y Libertad*” and “*La Tierra es de Quién la Trabaja*” were first enunciated and proclaimed in *Regeneración* by Flores Magón and Librado Rivera in their 1911 manifesto, inspiring Emiliano Zapata to incorporate them months later into his historic Plan de Ayala. Zapata, so armed with a well-defined agrarian cause, went on to become the greatest, most authentic revolutionary leader of the Mexican Revolution (the other one is Pancho Villa, who initially aligned with Madero, to Flores Magon’s chagrin, and never quite produced a coherent plan of his own).

Zapata and Zapatismo are alive today in Chiapas and throughout Mexico's continuing rural struggles for Indigenous and peasant rights. The original Magonista/Zapatista slogans continue to guide and inspire their struggle.

By the way, when the Zapatistas named one of their Autonomous Municipalities "Ricardo Flores Magón" in 1998 and unveiled a beautiful mural with the likeness of RFM and Emiliano Zapata, the Mexican army showed up the very next day and machine gunned the mural. The Mexican government tried to kill him off again, unsuccessfully. Today, under the "Government of the 4<sup>th</sup> Transformation" led by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, 2022 has been officially designated "Year of Ricardo Flores Magón," though the armed but peaceful Zapatistas in their liberated territory have yet to hear from AMLO.

RFM himself is probably laughing off both disingenuous gestures from his grave – one to destroy him, the other to coopt him – just as he probably did regarding the numerous other "official" distinctions bestowed on him in the PRI era, as the leaders of the country he so loved continued to betray his revolutionary vision (his name is emblazed in gold in Congress since 1993, the year after it abolished the ejido's communal inalienable structure, and the year it approved the neoliberal NAFTA treaty; he is buried in the *Rotonda de las Personas Ilustres* since 1945; and there are now coins minted with his face).

So, there is an official, sanitized RFM, just as there are official, sanitized Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. *¡Las carcajadas que se han de estar echando desde el más allá!* Lenin, who was mummified and is still displayed in a crystal coffin in Red Square, is not amused. Perhaps this is why Fidel asked to be interned in a granite rock with only the word "Fidel," and forbade his name and likeness from any public display!

Back to RFM's role in the Mexican Revolution. At first in 1909-1910, Madero went his way seeking only a political revolution and RFM went his way calling for social revolution. After Madero's assassination in 1913 by a vile, U.S.-orchestrated, military coup d'état, the Magonistas joined hands with Zapata and his Ejército Libertador del Sur, Pancho Villa and his División del Norte, and Venustiano Carranza and his Ejército Constitucionalista, to bring down the hated Victoriano Huerta dictatorship.

After they succeeded in 1914, though, the urban-bourgeois forces tried to impose Carranza's leadership upon the others in a failed convention. It backfired, the convention stripped Carranza of power, which Carranza did not recognize, and the revolution raged on for another 3 years.

By the time a Constituent Congress was formed in 1917, with a chasten Carranza back in power and tasked with writing a constitution that would accommodate everyone's demands up to a point, the seminal ideas Ricardo Flores Magón had planted since 1906 finally came into fruition. Many of the key demands for social justice first articulated by the Magonistas in 1906 and 1911 and embraced by the organized workers' movement centered around La Casa del Obrero Mundial and by the agrarian Zapatistas, were incorporated and codified into Mexico's supreme

law. Mexico entered into a prolonged period of social peace, only ruptured by the church-led Cristero Revolt (1926-29), which sought to accommodate the church's interests to the new secular social compact. It too was accommodated with a *modus vivendi* that left the Constitution intact but unenforced on sensitive issues like the prohibition of even private religious education. Mexico's social peace would hold despite various labor and student strikes and state repressions of rural and urban guerrillas in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, until the 1994 Zapatista insurrection in Chiapas and the proliferation of criminal cartels in the 2000s.

#### IV. RICARDO FLORES MAGÓN AND LENIN: WHY ONE WON AND THE OTHER DIDN'T.

Ricardo Flores Magón was born in the state of Oaxaca into a republican-liberal family with deep Indigenous collectivist traditions. His Zapotec father, Teodoro Flores, had fought the American invaders in the 1840s, the clerical forces that opposed fellow Zapotec Benito Juárez's liberal reforms in the 1850s, and the French invaders in the 1860s. When his mother Margarita Magón, who was on her death bed in 1892, received news that her 19-year-old son Ricardo and another brother had been arrested in Mexico City - where she had sent them to get an education - for protesting the third reelection of Porfirio Díaz, and an Díaz emissary appeared at her house to propose their release if they pledged to stay out of trouble; she replied: "Tell General Díaz that I would rather die without seeing my sons, and what's more, I would prefer to see them hanging from a tree or a tall pole than have them retract or repent for anything that they have done against you."

Mexico was full of such families with proud revolutionary and Indigenous roots, and by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century young "liberals" rose in protest against what they considered was an illegitimate and authoritarian Díaz dictatorship, which had betrayed all liberal ideals espoused by Benito Juárez, surrendered the nation's wealth to foreign capital, and denied social justice to Mexico's vast rural, dispossessed, landless peasant populations, which had been forced into abject debt peonage within the rich haciendas.

By 1900, at the age of 27, RFM founded *Regeneración*, which would go on to become the most combative newspaper in the decade prior to and during the ten years of the Mexican Revolution. It has been compared with its contemporary *Izkra* in Russia, founded the same year by Lenin. RFM was unquestionably the Mexican Lenin as far as agitating for revolution through the printed word, though he failed to lead the actual revolution to victory, as Lenin did. This has nothing to do with either the brilliance, commitment, or ability of either revolutionary leader.

The question of why Lenin and his Bolsheviks succeeded in sparking and winning a socialist revolution in Russia, while the equally visionary radical RFM and his Magonistas did not is a complicated question, but a plausible dual explanation is found in Marx's critique of anarchism as a revolutionary ideology incapable of taking and holding power for long, given the strength of the bourgeois state(s) to destroy the revolution, as had been demonstrated in the bloody suppression of the 1871 popular insurrection in France and its short-lived Paris Commune; and Lenin's own theory of revolution in geographic stages, which posited that socialist revolution

would first occur in the advanced capitalist world's "weakest link" – which he identified as Russia – then spread to the stronger capitalist states and also to the colonial world.

Mexico, the Leninist argument would go, was not that advanced in its incipient capitalist development. The accelerated penetration of foreign capital during the Díaz period, though significant in the development of railroads and mining, had not yet reached "critical mass" of establishing large industrial urban bases, like those in Russia, to even make it into a "weak link" category. It was still too "underdeveloped" and lacking an industrial proletariat, while the peasantry alone – in Lenin's view – would never be up to the task of socialist revolution. There was the added factor that the neighboring U.S. capitalist colossus was already too powerful and accustomed to intervening in the region to permit any revolutionary transition to socialism next door – much less in its own home turf. Well, neither the socialist revolutionaries in the U.S. of the IWW and Socialist Party, nor the Magonistas cooped up in various U.S. cities, agreed, and went on trying to carry out socialist revolution in both the U.S. and Mexico. But Lenin was right.

It was hard enough for Mexico to get as far as it got in its amazing peasant-led social revolution, even if it was hijacked by the emerging national bourgeoisie, willing to make some concession to the "dangerous classes" – the tiny but combative urban working classes and the indomitable peasantry. So, this failure to go further than it did, did not happen for lack of trying or lack of revolutionary programs and advanced ideas, such as those that the Magonistas relentlessly championed. Location in the world hierarchy of economic and political power, as Lenin pointed out, matters after all.

A corollary of this is, by the way, that the Cuban Socialist Revolution – in case anyone was wondering why *it* succeeded - would have never triumphed against the North American colossus – by then the global hegemon of the entire world-system - without a strong Soviet camp willing to back it, even at the risk of nuclear war. Mexico in 1910-20 had no one to back it.

## V FLORES MAGÓN'S THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND INTELLECTUAL LEGACY

*Regeneración*, the combative newspaper RFM directed, always published one step ahead of the U.S. and Mexican censors, was amazingly ahead of its time. As mentioned before, for the first time someone covered the struggles of workers on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, including not just the struggles of Mexican migrants, the discriminated ethnic Mexican-American communities on the U.S. side, and the struggles of workers and peasants in Mexico, it also covered and connected these struggles with the labor struggles of European migrants and the U.S. labor movement, as well as far away revolutions like the Russian Revolution.

*Regeneración* introduced and widely disseminated for the first time among Mexicans in Mexico, Mexican immigrants, and Mexican Americans the revolutionary anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist ideas of nineteenth-century European anarchist and Marxist thinkers such as Mikhail Bakunin, Joseph Proudhon, Peter Kropotkin, Élisée Reclus, Max Stirner, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels.

What RFM did, his main theoretical contribution, was to combine European anarchist/Marxist thinking of that time with the Indigenous collectivist and communal traditions of Mexico, producing a potent revolutionary ideology for the Mexican peasantry. The influence this would have on subsequent generations of social activists in Mexico and the Mexican American/Chicano/Latino diasporas in the U.S. is immeasurable.

The “communal-anarchist” manifestos RFM and his comrades issued in 1904, 1911, and 1918 contained the germ of the programs subsequent labor and social movements fought for until they were partially enshrined in the 1917 Mexican Constitution and in U.S. New Deal laws – such as the calls for the 8-hour work day, the right to unions and collective bargaining, the ban on child labor and debt peonage, the communal distribution of the land to the peasants and Indigenous communities, a minimum wage, abolishment of all large hacienda estates (latifundia), the nation’s ownership of all mineral wealth under its soil, universal and secular public education, race and gender equality and anti-discrimination laws, and the enjoyment of full, unfettered social rights by all migrants in North America. This latter demand remains glaringly and painfully unfulfilled.

*Regeneración* was internationalist in perspective, historically and theoretically informed, and uncompromisingly engaged in the struggles of the day – an exemplary template for all anti-systemic social movements then, today, and tomorrow.

Apart from many people not knowing about the Magonistas intellectual contribution to Zapatismo, it is also not well-known that radical feminist and socialist women similarly participated as leaders of the revolutionary Magonista movement, both in Mexico and the United States, and were instrumental in shaping its vision and program of action from its earliest period in the liberal clubs in Mexico to the Magonista clubs spread in the U.S. southwest which, by 1911, had articulated an in-depth critique of the oppression of women under capitalism.

Mujeres Magonistas participated in many of the labor strikes and armed insurrections, too, resulting in many being jailed, beaten, and even killed for their efforts - for instance Concepción Valdés, sisters Otilia and Eulalia Martínez Núñez, Josefa Arjona de Pinelo, and Josefa Tolentino. RFM’s own longstanding partner, María Talavera Broussé (1867–1946), was a Mexican immigrant from Zacatecas residing in Los Angeles who joined the PLM in 1907 and participated in many militant activities. After RFM’s death she returned to Mexico and faced many hardships as she desperately sought to preserve the archives of the PLM and RFM from police confiscation.

In summation, RFM, his brothers Enrique and Jesús, and his closest compañeros y compañeras gathered around the Partido Liberal Mexicano and *Regeneración*, left behind a legacy of uncompromising commitment to revolutionary change, to theoretical and ideological clarity, to an unswerving internationalist stand of working-class solidarity across borders, to defending all Indigenous forms of autonomous communal living and environmental sustainability, and to championing all struggles for social justice - across all nationalities, races and genders.



The world today – especially North America - needs two, three, more Ricardo Flores Magón.

¡Compañero Ricardo Flores Magón, presente!