Immigrant Entrepreneurs, Bread, and Class
Negotiation in Postrevolutionary Mexico City

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Spanish bakery owners in Mexico City acted as middlemen in the postrevolutionary regime’s food and labor policies, despite their association with colonialism and the Porfirián order. Lacking leverage to control unilaterally bread production and the combative bakery workforce, the state relied on the mostly Basque owners to keep the city fed and worker radicalism in check. In exchange, officials broke strikes and later, when the bakers’ union and owners negotiated a labor contract, persecuted Mexican small producers. The bakery struggles underscore how the negotiations between the state, labor, and capital sustained monopolies and created “formal” markets.

Los dueños españoles de panaderías en la Ciudad de México actuaron como intermediarios de los regímenes postrevolucionarios en cuanto a las políticas de trabajo y alimentación, a pesar de su asociación con el colonialismo y el orden del porfiriato. Al carecer del poder para controlar unilateralmente la producción del pan y el personal combativo de las panaderías, el Estado confió en los dueños, que en su mayoría eran vascos, para mantener la ciudad alimentada y el radicalismo de los trabajadores bajo control. En intercambio, los funcionarios rompieron huelgas y más tarde, cuando el sindicato de panaderos y los dueños negociaron un contrato de trabajo, persiguieron a los pequeños productores mexicanos. Las luchas de las panaderías subrayan cómo las negociaciones entre el estado, el trabajo y el capital sostuvieron monopolios y crearon mercados “formales”.

Key words: Immigration, Basques, Mexico City, Bakeries, Bread, Food, Labor, Revolution, State Formation, Markets, Cardenismo.

Palabras clave: Inmigración, vascos, Ciudad de México, panaderías, pan, alimentos, trabajo, Revolución, Formación del Estado, mercados, cardenismo.

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In the first panel of a mural painted in the Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market, a few blocks from the central plaza in Mexico City, porcine capitalists sit around a table counting gold coins. The second panel shows skeletal workers in tattered overalls; behind them smoke billows from sacks of burning grain. In the final panel, indigenous peons load trucks with the same sacks—Mexico’s agricultural bounty, soon to become ashes and gold. The caption reads, “The capitalists destroy grains to raise prices while workers and peasants die of hunger. Let us destroy the capitalist system and eliminate the exploiters.” Wealth and hunger, the mural suggests, are two sides of the same coin.

Painted in 1937, soon after the market was built, the mural is representative of the anti-speculation media campaigns launched by the government after the end of the Mexican Revolution in 1920. The campaigns accused a variety of merchants of hoarding, but they especially targeted bakery owners, who also controlled the wheat trade and the flourmills. Through the lens of propaganda at least, these were apt villains. The almost universal distrust of bakers, long accused ofadulterating flour and skimping on weight, was compounded in Mexico by the country’s particular history of colonization because the majority of bakery owners in the capital were Spaniards—mostly Basque immigrants from the province of Navarre. What’s more, the Spaniards had established their dominance in the bread industry during Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorship (1876–1910); his preferential treatment of foreign capitalists had generated much of the ire behind the outburst of the Revolution in 1910. In addition to the burden of distant and recent history, the bakery owners were something of the metaphorical “Jew” in Mexican popular imagination. Endogamous, frugal, and culturally and socially separate, they allegedly fed on the populace as they sold it bread.


Ironically, the mural could appear as a denunciation not only of a capitalist cabal, but also of the Revolution’s shortcomings. Twenty years after the fighting had ended and a new constitution had mandated a decent quality of life for workers and the prohibition of monopolies, the continuation of hunger and exploitation by a handful of Spaniards would seem to confirm assertions from revisionist scholarship that the Revolution had little impact on the structural aspects of social life in Mexico.4 Worse still, as this article demonstrates, the Spanish bakery owners managed to thrive through the aftermath of Revolution, not despite the better intentions of the government, but rather because they were key allies of successive administrations in the contentious 1920s and 1930s. Not surprisingly, though, the actual relationships among the bakery owners, authorities, and workers were much more complex than the mural indicates. On the one hand, the bakery owners fulfilled a vital material function, controlling the flow of wheat into the city and its subsequent transformation into flour and bread. Officials before and after the Revolution relied on them to fulfill what was widely considered a public service for all social classes, especially proletarian families. On the other hand, they collectively employed some 3,000 Mexican bakers—one the city’s largest and most combative workforces.

The role played by the bakery owners thus involved, one, the material needs of the city and, two, the class struggles that dominated urban politics after the Revolution. This article analyzes the place of Spanish bakery owners in the labor negotiations in Mexico City during two distinct stages. During the first stage (1919 to 1928), the bakery owners rejected worker demands and relied on the police force to keep strikers from stopping production. This official support for owners was certainly part of a broader effort by the administrations during the 1920s to constrain worker radicalism, as revisionists have pointed out; but it was also the consequence of a government anxious to ensure some of a restive working class’s basic needs. In the second stage (1929 to 1940), however, a shift in the array of forces led the government to pressure owners for negotiations, again to ensure the bread supply. This, in turn, produced an alliance among organized bakery workers, the Spanish bakery owners, and state officials against Mexican small producers and petty retail-
ers. Indeed, at the same time that public coffers were financing art that denounced hunger profiteers, inspectors were confiscating bread and roughing up vendors from the very same Abelardo L. Rodríguez Market. 5

These configurations around class and food differ sharply from other cases of foreign involvement in the Mexican economy and social relations. Following Friedrich Katz and John Hart, Michael J. Gonzales argues that “foreign enterprise was a key cause of regional discontent and a target for reform” after the Revolution. 6 Revolutionary leaders backed the demands of Mexican workers against their North American bosses in order to reverse the preferential treatment the latter had received under Porfirio Díaz and thus to “increase the power of the state.” 7 Alicia Gojman de Backal likewise shows how ultranationalist groups drew on state support in the early 1930s to rout European Jews from public markets in Mexico City. 8 In the case of the bakeries, by contrast, the state supported the interests of Spanish employers in order to build its authority in the capital. In the first stage, this occurred at the expense of the striking bakers, whose attempts to paralyze the bread supply threatened to jeopardize state legitimacy. This cross-class alliance in the second stage, in turn, was not a result of state cooptation of labor, as Eduardo Ruiz, Mario Anguiano, and others have argued, but rather the product of negotiation between contending forces. 9 Indeed, as Mary Kay Vaughn and Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent have shown, negotiation and compromise was the only option for the long term since no single group was able to impose its will on the others. 10 In this sense, although in the 1920s there was a great distance between the radicalism of popular Revolution and the reformism (or even the reactionary conservatism) of the national leaders, after 1930 these strands found an unexpected though precarious confluence of in-

9. Anguiano, El estado y la política obrera del cardenismo; Ruiz, Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries, Mexico 1911–1923.
terest. This was not a bloodless alliance; rather, organized workers and Spanish employers passed on the cost of their reconciliation to small producers who were subsequently excluded from the “formal market.”

Understanding how the Spanish bakery owners appeared simultaneously as hunger profiteers and de facto allies of workers and officials requires an examination of their place in the Mexican economy. As Jürgen Buchenau points out, Mexico had little to offer to immigrant urban workers for, unlike the United States or Argentina, it already had abundant native labor. The few immigrants were, therefore, elite and middle-class and endeavored to create rather closed colonias or immigrant communities. “The prosperous Europeans and U.S. citizens who did come seldom blended in.”11 Spanish bakery owners, whose shops were found throughout the city, were all the more conspicuous. Editorial cartoonists frequently drew them with the wool berets and sweater vests typical of northern Spain, unshaven and sweaty, chomping on cigars behind the counter, and critics denounced their supposed “Judaic behavior,” by which they meant the Spaniards’ “special talent for bribery, scant sense of commercial ethics, and unhealthy frugality.”12

Beyond anti-Semitism, however, the analogy helps explain how the bakery owners continued to prosper in apparently adverse conditions after the Revolution. Spanish immigrants fulfilled key functions in the broader Mexican economy as “minority middlemen” or “immigrant entrepreneurs,” a role classically held in European history (and imagination) by Jewish businessmen. As ethnic or religious outsiders subject to hostility or distrust, immigrant entrepreneurs tend to concentrate in lines that are undesirable for local elites and inaccessible for local poor but that provide vital services between both. In Edna Bonacich’s formulation, Jewish moneylenders filled this “status gap,” much like Indian merchants in colonial Africa and Korean grocers in Los Angeles.13 Unlike the immigrants in Mexico, however, who were actually Jewish, the Spanish bakery owners were able to form a monopoly that deeply ensconced it-


self into the daily life of the city and into the dynamics of state formation. The bakery owners first fulfilled their middlemen function when the postrevolutionary regime relied on them to keep the population fed, an imperative that repeatedly trumped the bakery workers’ demands. Second, the state relied on the Spaniards in order to negotiate with organized labor and incorporate workers into a tractable organizational framework that would bolster state authority.

This is what allowed the bakery owners to maintain their position despite mistrust of bakeries, waves of Hispanophobia, and a more generalized hostility toward foreign capitalists. Although official rhetoric and popular imagination, reflected in the mural at the Abelardo Rodríguez Market, tended to highlight the foreign food merchants’ quality as “outiders,” and even parasites, the Spanish bakery owners were, in fact, essential figures in the material and political foundation of Mexico City. The notion of outsiders is likewise pivotal in recent historiography on immigrants in Mexico. On the one hand, scholars have emphasized the vulnerability of groups such as Chinese or Jewish immigrants to xenophobic attacks; on the other hand, scholars have taken the quality of outsiders as a measure of strength, particularly of Spaniards, who purportedly built up enterprises independent of state support. The struggles around bread production suggest scholars would do well to place more attention on the relative political importance that sprang from the material functions that different immigrant groups performed. This, in turn, would shift the view from “outiders” to “insiders”—contenders in the scrappy world of labor, commerce, and politics.

**Basque Immigrant Entrepreneurs**

In the late-nineteenth century, Spanish immigrants came to dominate banking, retail, and manufacturing—sectors the Mexican elite regarded as demeaning or excessively risky. The first wave of Spanish immigration arrived soon after Porfirio Díaz seized power and began his thirty-five-year dictatorship. The impact of bakeries was immediate. An 1877 survey counted 68 bakeries that employed a total of 865 workers. By


15. Emiliano Busto, *Estadística de la República Mexicana. Estado que guardan la agricultura, industria, minería y comercio. Resúmen y análisis de los informes rendi-
1898, bakery workers had increased threefold to 2,538; assuming the same ratio of workers to bakeries (12 to 1), there were some 200 shops. An 1895 list of donors to the war effort in Cuba—as trustworthy an indicator as any for the time—shows 130 Spanish bakery owners in Mexico City; seventy-three of these were Basques from the province of Navarre. The growth of bakeries coincided with that of the Spanish immigrant population and far exceeded the city’s general population growth, which increased by a factor of 1.5, from 327,500 in 1887 to 476,000 in 1900.

Although commonly referred to as panaderos (bakers), these new owners were actually businessmen: They touched flour only by accident. Even the poorer Spaniards employed in bakeries stayed clear from the amasijo, or kneading room, unless they were overseers. They commonly took their place as clerks behind the counter. The breadmaking itself was carried out entirely by Mexican laborers, whom I refer to here as either “bakers” or “bakery workers.” Therefore, what these Spaniards transported to Mexico was not a particular bread tradition. Although urban Mexicans, rich and poor, clearly began to eat more of it, bread had already been prominent in Mexican foodways since the Conquest.

Rather, the immigrants brought tightly woven entrepreneurial networks based on family and regional identity that allowed them to integrate wheat, flour, and bread into a cohesive complex.

The forging of this complex occurred through a long chain of immigrants, mostly from the Basque-speaking Baztán Valley in Navarre, the first of whom appears to have been Pedro Albaitero. Albaitero arrived around 1855, decades before the first wave of immigrants, and married ten years

do a la Secretaría de hacienda por los agricultores, mineros, industriales y comerciantes de la república y los agentes de México en el exterior, en respuesta a las circulares de 1o. de agosto de 1877, 3 vols., vol. 1 (México: Impr. de I. Cumplido, 1880).


later into a Mexican provincial elite family.\textsuperscript{20} The dowry was likely key to the initial establishment of Albaitero's bakeries, but his subsequent expansion relied on fellow immigrants rather than on his in-laws. He formed a partnership with fellow Baztanese José Arrache—who married into the same Mexican family in 1874—and then brought over several nephews.\textsuperscript{21} One of these, Juan Irigoyen, married Albaitero’s daughter and established himself as a major planter and miller in the Bajío, the fertile crescent-shaped region northwest of Mexico City. Together with his brothers, Irigoyen came to control much of the wheat supply to the capital.\textsuperscript{22}

Albaitero and Arrache’s key innovation was to insert flourmills inside the city, farther from the wheat fields but closer to the bakeries. New steam-powered machinery liberated mills from the streams that flowed into the central basin and shifted the center of gravity from rural estates to urban manufacturing, giving the bread industry new stability and greatly enhancing the influence of mill-bakery owners over the food supply and the politics of provisioning. They established the mill “La Florida” in 1887 to supply their several bakeries. With this privileged access to raw materials and to the urban market, the next year Albaitero and Arrache established Mexico’s first mechanized bakery, “La Gran Panadería de Los Gallos.”\textsuperscript{23}

Their success opened the way to another group of Baztanese bakery owners, led by Braulio Iriarte, who closely followed Albaitero’s path. Iriarte arrived to Mexico in 1877 and began distributing bread at Albaitero’s bakeries.\textsuperscript{24} By 1890, he had bought “El Factor,” one of Mexico


\textsuperscript{23} “La fabricación de pan con maquinaria,” \textit{Diario del Hogar} 12/10/1889.

\textsuperscript{24} Carlos Herrero, \textit{Braulio Iriarte. De la tabona al holding internacional cervecero}, Cuadernos de Historia Empresarial (México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana
City’s oldest and most prestigious bakeries; less than a decade later, he had “several branches” in which, according to a contemporary tourist guide, “bread production has reached the progress of the great capital cities of the world.” He also married into a Mexican family and then brought over nephews and countrymen and integrated them into his businesses. His daughter married Andrés Barberena, who arrived in Mexico around 1900 and started out as manager of the downtown bakery, “La Vasconia,” before taking over the bakeries on San Juan de Letrán Street and “El Factor.” Iriarte opened the city’s second urban flourmill, “El Eúskaro,” in 1903, where Barberena became manager. Iriarte then brought over two nephews, Segundo Minondo and Agustín Jáuregui. Minondo ran some of Iriate’s bakeries; Jáuregui married another of his daughters and took over the bakery on Santa María la Redonda Street. More of Iriarte’s nephews followed and established a flourmill in Toluca, the agricultural and industrial zone west of Mexico City. In 1912, together with the Leonese immigrant, Pablo Díez, Iriarte founded Mexico’s first industrial yeast factory, “Leviatán y Flor.” He then led a group of Baztanese bakery owners in opening the “Modelo Brewery” in 1925. When he established a new, expanded “El Eúskaro” mill in 1929, he was grinding most of Mexico’s wheat. The dominance of the Baztanese mill and bakeries owners, then, was infused with deep links to family and regional identity.

Compared to the industrialized factories of the period, most bakeries, even the Spaniards’, were of modest dimensions and technologically rudimentary. Of a sampling of 128 bakeries listed in a 1922 census by the De-
partment of Labor, bakeries averaged 10 manual laborers: The largest had 20 and up to 35, presumably divided into 2 shifts, whereas the smallest had only 2 and 3. Of the manual laborers the survey counted, 1,304 were men, 44 were women (25 of whom worked in a single bakery), and 213 were children. Fifty percent of the women were single, as were 65 percent of the men. Forty percent of the men and 26 percent of the women laborers were illiterate. The bakeries also usually employed 3 to 5 clerks, usually recent immigrants from the owner’s hometown.33

The vast majority of shops had no or little machinery.34 Some inventive owners attempted to mechanize the production of bolillos, the commonly consumed salted rolls. Catalán immigrant Juan Servitje, father of the founder of Bimbo Bread, the Mexican transnational giant founded in 1945, owned the “El Molino” bakery downtown. In the 1920s, he designed a mechanical bolillo maker and sold it to Braulio Iriate for $30,000 gold pesos. Nonetheless, as his wife Josefina Sendraremembers, “The bakers never accepted the machines, which were discarded and forgotten.”35 A machine that put out bread all day long was of very little use when consumers only went to bakeries early in the morning and in the evening and wanted their bread warm and fresh before it turned hard.36 Thus, among the 238 registered bakeries in Mexico City in 1935, there were 265 manual dough-cutting machines and 155 dough mixers, but only 35 frosting mixers, 2 mechanical sifters, 4 refrigerators, and 15 “other” machines.37

A few wealthy Mexican bakery owners found a profitable place within this complex. Pedro Laguna, for instance, was a congressman who owned three bakeries and, together with Spanish immigrant Eugenio Jubién, “La Esperanza” flourmill.38 Most Mexican owners, however, com-

34. “Fábricas de pan y bizcochos”; “Estudio de las condiciones higiénicas de la industria del pan en la ciudad de México,” Boletín Mensual del Departamento del Trabajo (1922).
36. The bakery trade publication noted that, “Bolillos should be consumed shortly after being removed from the oven since they do not stay fresh, nor are they easily transported. It is therefore unlikely that the structure of bakeries will undergo any significant modification in the near future since the nature of the product makes the industrialization of production very difficult.” “La panadería será siempre un artesano,” Pan, 6/15/1968, 29.
plained bitterly of the “terrible monopoly” formed by the “Iberian poten
tate and a few Hispanized Mexicans” who tightly controlled the flow of raw materials and bread retail. 39 Like the Spaniards, most of these Mexican owners were not bakers, but businessmen who owned centrally located shops. In 1926, they complained that “Most of the bakeries are in the hands of Spaniards, represented by the TRUST formed around the Eúskaro flourmill that controls everything from the fields where wheat is sewn to the bakeries where the bread is sold. Their greed is so enor-
mos that they want to ruin our small shops.” 40 Despite these protests, these owners had little leverage with which to challenge the “Spanish monopoly” because they depended on the Basques for flour and other raw materials.

On the fringes of the Spanish monopoly were petty producers who baked from small, domestic ovens. Lacking resources to set up a retail annex, these small producers sold in plazas, from market stands, and through small, neighborhood grocery stores known as tendejones, which sold bread in addition to cheese, candles, cigarettes, and other sundry goods. 41 These shops were especially important in the poor neighborhoods away from commercial centers. As one tendejón owner noted, “The very setting of this area makes it hard for people to purchase goods in established bakeries.” Furthermore, he pointed out, “Most of the area’s in-
habitants have open credit with the local tendejones, which allows them to buy bread there rather than in the bakeries because most people lack available cash.” 42 These small producers, and the petty retailers who sold their bread, moved from obscurity to the center of the bakery struggle only after unionized workers at the dominant bakeries achieved significant gains, which, as we shall see, led the Spanish owners and state officials to regard the small shops in a new light.

**The Decade of Strikes**

Such was the panorama of the bread industry at the end of the armed phase of the Revolution: A core of Spanish immigrants led by Navarrese Basques had managed to sustain ownership of the better part of bak-


41. Also spelled tendajones and known as misceláneas and abarroterías. 

eries and flourmills since the late nineteenth century. Ten or so Mexican businessmen, who also owned centrally located bakeries, often expressed their resentment toward the so-called Spanish monopoly but, lacking independent access to raw materials, were unable to free themselves of the Spaniards’ dominance. Finally, several small producers, whose numbers and characteristics are difficult to determine, operated on the margin of the dominant bakeries, relying on a workforce consisting of family members. As for labor, bakery workers were overwhelmingly young men with little or no formal education. In the majority Spanish-owned bakeries, a sharp ethnic and class split existed between the workroom and the retail section, and production relied on the drudgery and artisan dexterity of poorly remunerated Mexican workers. Not surprisingly, labor-capital conflicts emerged first in these Spanish-owned bakeries and, in turn, set into motion struggles that redefined the bread industry and, even more broadly, government intervention in the economy.

Between 1919 and 1928, bakery workers staged five general strikes. The demands they made—eight-hour shifts, compensation for injuries, higher wages, and a labor contract to homogenize working conditions in all Mexico City bakeries—remained fairly consistent. These were demands that the Constitution of 1917 had already codified as worker rights. Nonetheless, owners consistently rejected them and strikes broke out and followed a clear pattern. At the beginning of the nightshift at 6:00 PM, strikers marched through the city center, stopping at the bakeries that did not observe the strike or hired replacements, charged inside, roughing up the nonunion bakers and damaging machinery and furniture. But the violence and the effect of the strikes, in general, were limited by the “veritable military posts” that protected the replacement workers inside. At least once, police fired directly into a crowd of striking bakers, wounding a handful. The chief of police argued that the gendarmes were not breaking the union’s strike, but rather defending the nonunion workers’ (obreros libres) “indisputable right to work.” Bakers, he added, could carry out “protest movements,” but the police would “repress all scandals.” He called on the bakers to form “commissions of individuals

44. “Los panaderos no han vuelto a las tahonas,” El Universal 1/19/1922.
46. “Los panaderos no han vuelto a las tahonas,” El Universal 1/19/1922.
to enter into bakeries and invite the nonunion workers to cease their labors, but leave them in peace if they do not accept the invitation. 48

Owners asserted that the workers’ demands—indeed, the constitutional mandates—would have hindered bakeries from fulfilling their basic function of providing bread. They argued that eight-hour day shifts and seven-hour nightshifts were incompatible with the volume bakeries had to produce. 49 The government agreed. An official from the Conciliation and Arbitration Board said he would study the possibility of eight-hour shifts in bakeries, but that the nature of bread production made them impractical. “Although bakers remain in workrooms twelve hours or more a day, they do not work continuously, but with intervals of idle time.” 50 Owners similarly rejected the union’s proposed ban on nightshifts. Bakeries did most business in the early morning when consumers demanded fresh bread for breakfast. Without nightshifts, they pointed out, customers would have to gnaw on hard bolillos and dried up conchas baked the day before or else forgo their morning bread. 51

Given the absence of chemical preservatives, their defense of nightshifts was fairly solid. The rejection of fixed shifts, however, was related less to the need to produce a minimum volume of bread than to the structural limitations on bakery profits. Bread prices were fairly inflexible, pegged informally to the wages of the working class. Anxious to keep the proletariat reasonably well fed, government officials appear to have established a tacit agreement to restrain striking workers as long as bakeries kept their prices low. As a result, profits came from keeping labor and infrastructure expenses to a minimum. Keeping capital expenses low also sprang from the functioning of chain migration. Bakeries remained as small production units dispersed throughout the city in order to facilitate the movement of immigrants from clerks to owners. Concentration and mechanization of production would have hindered the social mobility that predated the immigrants’ ethnic solidarity by raising the economic barriers to proprietorship. With few exceptions, then, owners resisted investing in machinery. As a result, in order to compensate for the higher wages and shorter shifts that the bakers demanded, owners would have had to accept lower profits.

This did not keep owners from threatening workers with obsolescence. “Almost all bakeries,” they threatened, were “ordering machinery from the United States.” “Bakeries will only need three workers at

48. “Los panaderos no han vuelto a las tahonas,” El Universal 1/19/1922.
most, instead of twenty or thirty.” The massive firings were to begin in a month. José Arrache and his partner, fellow Navarrese Florencio Córdoba, claimed they had imported American machines precisely in order to “avoid the recent difficulties created by the demands of some amasijo workers.” They announced the imminent dismissal of eighteen bakers. This threat, however, was a bluff: Six years later, their Recabado Street bakery employed at least thirty-five workers, far more than most.

This model of entrepreneurial expansion kept bakery production archaic, but it granted the Spanish owners an extraordinary coherence with which to resist their bakers’ demands and defend their source of profits. The strikes only seemed to strengthen their family ties and ethnic and regional identity. Iriarte’s relatives and associates moved to increase their collective authority over their workers by establishing the Union of Bakery Proprietors of Mexico City in 1924. The union created a fund to help owners endure strikes and to encourage disciplined unity. Associates pledged to close their shops collectively as soon as workers seized any single bakery. They would also refuse to negotiate until workers withdrew. Alternately, any owner who negotiated individually with the union forfeited his access to the fund. This solidarity extended beyond business into banquets and charity events at the Centro Vasco and the Casino Español, where the bakery owners figured prominently.

In addition to this internal unity, owners enjoyed high political connections that sprang from their control over the subsistence of the city and their role as middlemen. In this sense, the message of the Union of Bakery Proprietors was as much an admonition to associates as it was to local authorities. Attacks on owners’ property and authority would jeopardize the bread supply for the entire city, which could then have disastrous consequences for the government. Whether effected by workers or owners, the closure of bakeries disrupted the food supply beyond bakeries. During strikes, “more than a few homes had to eat tortillas,”

56. “Los tranviarios decretaron un paro parcial para hoy en apoyo de los panaderos,” El Universal 1/20/1922.
which invariably led maize merchants and tortilla sellers to raise prices.\(^{57}\) As a result, the poorest families who ate the least bread suffered the most. The political elite were keenly aware of the importance of ensuring the bread supply and forged close relations with the owners and grain traders. Alvaro Obregón, for instance, exchanged chummy letters with Pedro Albaitero’s nephew Pedro Irigoyen over wheat imports and barbecues on his ranch; later Obregón gave Irigoyen an important post in the Secretary of Agriculture.\(^{58}\)

As much as the politics of bakery labor derived from the place of bakeries in the city, the government’s resolve to break the strikes was also a response to its relationship with organized labor in general. In 1921, the bakers cofounded the anarcho-syndicalist *Confederación General de Trabajadores* (CGT), which formed in opposition to the reformist quasi-official *Confederación Regional de Obreros de México* (CROM).\(^{59}\) As ties increased between the CROM and the regime, so did the repression against the CGT unions.\(^{60}\) That the strikers jeopardized the food supply and opposed the CROM gave the government little inclination to support them. The most expedient way to deal with the “bread question” and, at the same time, with dissident labor organizations, was to put down the strikes.

Nonetheless, this strategy had weaknesses that eventually led officials to pressure owners to negotiate. The regime had little interest in furthering the cause of independent anarcho-syndicalism, but it based its legitimacy, rhetorically at least, on the vindication of the lower classes.

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The spectacle of protecting owners—Spaniards no less—from workers who demanded their constitutional rights threatened to undermine this legitimacy. The bakers' union seized upon this weakness to put into doubt the revolutionary character of the government's actions. The "bread industry is in the hands of a foreign monopoly that exploits the sons of Mexico."  

Furthermore, the May 1928 strike showed the bakers' ability to paralyze the bread supply. By the late 1920s, there were more than 200 bakeries in Mexico City; almost all of their workers belonged to the CGT. During the four-day strike, bread was so precious that the presence of it was a sign of treachery. Four striking bakers were at a downtown cantina when they saw a man walk by with a "sack of bread." When they tried to take it, the man stabbed one of the bakers, killing him and running off with the bread.  

The government had to mobilize considerable resources and energy to defend bakeries. The political costs of this rose in tandem with bakers' ability to paralyze production.  

The government's strategy of strikebreaking also weakened along with the waning of the CROM. Extravagant and corrupt, CROMista leadership became a political liability for Obregón. The final break came in July 1928, shortly after the end of the bakers' strike. As Obregón was preparing to assume a second term as president, a Catholic militant angered by official anticlericalism killed him. Obregonistas, suspecting that CROMista leader Luis Morones was behind the assassination, pushed outgoing president Plutarco Elías Calles to remove CROMistas from the administration. Emilio Portes Gil, the interim president following Obregón's death, then pressured unions to leave the CROM and gave considerable support to the CGT.  

This shift in state patronage certainly helped the bakers. After the May 1928 strike, owners and unionists signed a contract that standard-

ized wages, set the workday at eight hours, and recognized the union as the representative of workers. The CGT, however, did not prosper in the new configuration. Internal conflicts over objectives and strategies had led to an early split; a decade of battles with police and the CROM further diminished its numbers and strength. State sponsorship discredited what little remained of its former vigor. The bakers’ union, along with others, left the CGT shortly after signing the labor contract in mid-1928 and reconstituted itself as an independent organization. Now, instead of attempting to concentrate workers into a state-supported labor hub, the state encouraged unions to atomize. In order to retain a degree of control over the labor movement, authorities relied on owners to negotiate with individual unions.

**From Class Struggle to Partnership**

After government officials and employers shifted from strike breaking to negotiating, their challenge was how to improve working conditions for bakers and thus prevent strikes from disrupting the bread supply—without causing a rise in the price of bread that would erode the spending power of other workers. Put another way, officials found themselves, as “arbiters” of class equilibrium, bound to convince owners to pay workers more and, at the same time, prevent them from raising prices without driving them out of business or pushing them into political opposition. The Spanish bakery owners continued to play the middleman role in the provisioning of bread; now they were also intermediaries between the state and workers.

In January 1929, six months after the union and owners signed the contract, the federal government promulgated a series of bakery regulations contained in a *reglamento*. The reglamento and the contract were separate and distinct documents. Wheras the latter defined the wages, workday, benefits, hiring policies, and other accords that pertained to unionized bakeries, the former governed all bakeries in the capital, regardless of unionization. Indeed, nothing in the reglamento explicitly linked it to unionization or the working conditions defined in the labor contract. Its ostensive objectives were to ensure hygienic, inexpensive bread and, ironically, to prevent the formation of monopolies. Nonetheless, the practical function of the reglamento was to create conditions that would allow the owners and union workers to comply with the contract. To accomplish this, it sought to eliminate nonunion bakeries’ access to the market. Because the vast majority of the unionized shops belonged to the Spaniards, this was tantamount to formalizing the ethnic monopoly.

The reglamento mandated that bakeries fulfill several new requirements in order to obtain a license. Bakeries had to meet the health code and be easily visible to inspectors. Their fábricas (production areas) had to open directly onto the street and display a sign no smaller than a square meter on the outside. In order to professionalize bread production and ensure hygienic conditions, the new laws ordered that fábricas could not be located “within tenements or apartments, but only in buildings that are not directly connected with residences.” Expendios (retail outlets) could only sell bread from licensed fábricas; the same applied to street vendors and small neighborhood grocery stores.67

Two other provisions placed more explicit restrictions on the market and generated the greatest controversies. The first limited the spatial distribution of bakeries by imposing a minimum of 500 meters between fábricas and 300 meters between expendios. The second introduced price fixing, which had not been applied to bakeries since independence.68 The price was set at 5 cents for 2 pieces of bread with a total weight of 160 grams. Finally, the reglamento established a comisión mixta, a task force that included owners, unionists, and government officials who were to advise the city government on “prices, weight, quality, and other circumstances pertaining to bread.” The new laws did not confer the commission any enforcement authority; however, the members delegated inspectors—unionist bakers—to collaborate with police and health inspectors in the search for violators.69

Although the reglamento focused on hygiene, infrastructure, and licensing, it was aimed specifically at the nonunionized small bakeries. Some of their operators were long-time residents who had established modest workshops before the 1920s; others were village bakers who had recently arrived along with the waves of rural migrants uprooted by the Revolution.70 Some had worked as scabs during the strikes. Displaced by the union contracts, these self-described “simple workers emancipated from the tyranny of foreign capitalists” set up their own bakeries.71 The violent encounters with strikers in previous years likely made them adverse to unions; furthermore, the constitution established their right not to unionize. More importantly, like the rest of the small

70. Oral interviews with Pascual Cortés Cruz, 14 July 2005, Mexico City; and Agustín Moreno, 3 August 2005, Mexico City.
71. “Los vendedores de pan barato, perseguidos,” La Prensa 1/19/1935.
producers, their shops hired few workers from outside their family-based workforce.

Although some of these small bakeries were clandestine affairs—brick and adobe ovens hidden in tenement basements and patios—many were legally licensed. The dominant bakery owners portrayed them all as filthy and diseased sites of moral depravation; however, what distinguished the small producers was not legality per se. Indeed, few bakeries were entirely legal; inspection reports show that few of the major bakeries met the health code. Records of municipal fines show that owners of licensed bakeries also ran clandestine ones; fines from these transgressions were another business expense. The defining characteristic of the small producers, in addition to their size and their nationality, was the fact that they did not employ union labor and, therefore, did not have to comply with the obligations of the labor contract.

Ironically, the reglamento protected the dominant unionized bakeries tacitly, through language that appeared to defend the small producers. Authorities claimed the distance requirements and the minimum prices kept predatory competitors from establishing shops next door to small bakeries and driving them out of business by dumping cheap bread. In practice, however, the distance requirements guaranteed—indeed, codified—the dominance of the bakeries already located in the central neighborhoods. Similarly, the reglamento’s prohibition of “persons or associations that effectuate any combination that could constitute improper competition” did not refer to the simultaneous ownership of wheat fields, mills, yeast factories, and bakeries, but rather to the small producers’ strategy of selling cheaper bread. Whereas officials purported that price ceilings, in turn, would ensure working-class families’ access to bread, enforcement focused almost exclusively on shops where bread cost less or weighed more. No evidence of punishment exists for underweight bread or for other violations by dominant bak-


73. Inspectors in 1925 declared that of twenty-two bakeries inspected, “all but three are in miserable sanitary conditions; they called for the immediate closure of five.” “Informe de inspección de panaderías,” Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Salubridad (henceforth AHSS), Fondo Salubridad Pública, Sección Servicio Jurídico, caja 4, exp. 8 10/17/1925; “Reglamento de higiene a que quedan sujetas las panaderías, bizcocherías y pastelería a las condiciones siguientes,” AHSS, Fondo Salubridad Pública, Sección Servicios Jurídicos, caja 4, exp. 8 6/16/1925.

eries that, for instance, had upstairs dormitories for employees and amasijos located in basements where they could not open directly onto the street. 75

Soon after the promulgation of the reglamento, the health department declared it would close bakeries that did not comply with the health code in a week. Inspectors closed the shop of one small producer who then turned to the courts. According to him, the health department was responding to “maneuvers by the large bakery owners who want to control [the industry]. The small establishments are closed without appeal even if they comply with the dispositions of the health department.” 76

The court agreed. It granted an injunction against the closures and ruled that the distance requirements violated Article 28 of the Constitution of 1917, which prohibited “any act or measure that stifles or endeavors to stifle free competition of any production, industry, trade or public service.” 77 Consequently, President Abelardo L. Rodríguez eliminated the distance requirements, acknowledging they had “exclusively favored a reduced number of people.” 78 The city governor likewise conceded that the distances “protected the monopoly.” He stressed that the modification to the reglamento proved the government “had set out energetically to destroy the monopoly.” 79

Given President Rodríguez’s rhetoric, that he assented to the fiercely worded mural painted in his namesake market is not surprising. Yet, the court also ruled that the minimum prices were “absurd.” The judges declared that “beyond the interests of one group, it is in the true public interest that bread be sold as cheaply as possible.” One magistrate asked rhetorically, “Are we really going to prosecute people for selling cheap bread?” 80 On this point, however, the president and the local government were firm. They argued that the minimum prices would remain since they protected small producers from “ruinous competition” masked by an “apparent benefit of the public.” 81

Policing the “Formal Market”

The reglamento was largely successful in its primary objectives of ensuring the bread supply and containing labor strife. There were only three strikes in the 1930s, the last major ones bakeries experienced. Nonetheless, these strikes and other minor conflicts drove enforcement of the ordinances. As the annual expiration date of the contract approached, union leaders invariably presented new demands and accused owners of neglecting their obligations. Each time, owners refused, arguing that they were barely breaking even. Usually negotiations led to changes in the reglamento; waves of persecution against the small producers and petty retailers invariably followed. In the few cases when negotiations failed, strikes broke out, negotiations resumed, and the owners and the union signed a new contract and renewed the reglamento.

For instance, in September 1932 the union demanded payment based on a percentage of the daily value of production rather than fixed wages. Owners and the union disagreed over percentages. Owners proposed paying workers $1.00 for every $1.44 of bread; workers asked for $1.00 for every $1.20 of bread. “Pronta solución del conflicto del pan,” La Prensa 9/6/1932. But no agreement was reached and the union declared a strike that shut down the major bakeries for five days. Negotiations brought a new contract and then a new reglamento. The contract granted workers 15, 16, or 17 percent of the production profits, based on the degree of mechanization (the more rudimentary the shop, the more the workers earned). Owners agreed to pay workers on four national holidays and four yearly vacation days. Five percent of workers’ salaries plus 5 percent of daily profits was to go toward a “workers’ saving account.” Owners were also to pay eight cents per worker per day for a medical fund.


83. Owners proposed paying workers $1.00 for every $1.44 of bread; workers asked for $1.00 for every $1.20 of bread. “Pronta solución del conflicto del pan,” La Prensa 9/6/1932.


87. “La decisión sobre el pan,” El Universal 9/23/1932; “Se ahonda el conflicto de los panaderos por el laudo que se dictó,” Excélsior 9/23/1932; “Texto del laudo pronunciado en el conflicto de la industria del pan entre obreros y patrones,” El Nacional 9/22,
In exchange for these concessions, the government reinstated the distance limitations that President Rodríguez had repealed the year before.88 If there had been any doubts about the underlying function of the reglamento, this action dispelled them. This decision restored the key instrument to attack the small producers, who immediately complained of an “unbearable situation,” of inspectors from the comisión mixta confiscating bread, issuing heavy fines, and even throwing them in jail.89 In order to restrict the small producers’ access to consumers, inspectors also pursued the tendejones. This was especially bad for the small retailers. First, the dominant owners stopped selling them bread; then inspectors fined them for selling bread from the small producers.90 Small producers and tendejón operators wrote directly to the president, protesting that “this law has only benefited the large business owners and damaged the small ones.” They pleaded with him “to intervene on behalf of small commerce in order to end the effects of the decree.”91 Another accused the city government of supporting “the large bread industrialists who are ruining the tendejones by prohibiting the free sale of bread.”92

As the contract expired the next year, the owners and the union exchanged threatening comments in the press. Owners argued that high wages were forcing them to close.93 The union responded that owners amassed huge fortunes, “despite the primitive, colonial administration that constitutes the foundation of the city’s bread industry.”94 If their profits allowed them to “vacation so often in old Europe,” surely they could pay “fair wages.”95 Before this volley grew into a strike, a new contract and reglamento appeared in October 1933. The reglamento changed the price,

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89. Gabriel Pacheco, José Baltazar, and Víctor Díaz to Abelardo L. Rodríguez, México, D.F., 9/22/1932, AGN Presidentes, ALR, caja 202, exp. 561.8/5; Marcelino Feria to Abelardo L. Rodríguez, México, D.F., 11/21/1932, AGN Presidentes, ALR, caja 202, exp. 561.8/5; Sebastián Moreno to Abelardo L. Rodríguez, México, D.F., 11/21/1932, AGN Presidentes, ALR, caja 202, exp. 561.8/5.
91. José T. Orrico to Abelardo L. Rodríguez, México, D.F., 1/30/1933, AGN Presidentes, ALR, caja 202, exp. 561.8/5.
92. José T. Orrico and Ramón L. Sánchez to Abelardo L. Rodríguez, México, D.F., 6/2/1933, AGN Presidentes, ALR, caja 202, exp. 561.8/5.
or, more precisely, the weight of bread. Two pieces still cost 5 cents, but their total weight fell from 160 to 110 total grams. 96 This shift gave owners a greater profit margin that, in turn, allowed them to meet the workers’ demands, without, perhaps, having to forego their trips to Europe.

The small producers, who formed the National Union of Small Bread Producers (Unión Nacional de Pequeños Industriales del Pan), defiantly announced their offer to sell three pieces of bread for five cents. 97 Again, they complained of a “brutal offensive” in which police “broke down bakery doors and arrested poor peddlers.” One small producer wrote to the president saying, “It is inexplicable that small bakers are imprisoned and mistreated when they sell inexpensive bread in order to alleviate the hunger of the people.” 98 The comisión mixta confiscated so much bread from the small bakeries and market stalls that the small producers said they were “being destroyed.” 99 Another complained, “The legal office of the city government harasses us with excessive fines because it is in connivance with the monopolists.” 100

Although it was exceedingly clear that the comisión mixta was pursuing small producers and petty retailers in favor of the dominant bakeries, the government continued to insist that the reglamento served the general public’s wellbeing. The city governor declared, “Although it is true that consumers, particularly in the poor neighborhoods, are accustomed to buying three pieces of bread for five cents, it is in the false belief that they are receiving greater quantity for the same price. In reality, they acquire the same or less total weight of bread that is undoubtedly of inferior quality. They must realize that it is more advantageous to buy higher quality and weightier bread than a larger number of pieces.” 101 Furthermore, “prohibiting the sale of such bread is imminently revolutionary” because lighter pieces of bread meant less drudgery for bakers. 102 That is, consumers, “especially in poor neigh-

97. Aarón Sáenz to Sebastián Moreno, México, D.F., 10/30/1933, AGN Presidentes, ALG, caja 202, exp. 561.8/5.
98. Sebastián Moreno and Alfredo Toricesto to Abelardo L. Rodríguez, México, D.F., 10/20/1933, AGN Presidentes, ALR, caja 202, exp. 561.8/5.
101. “Acuerdo por el cual se fija el precio y el peso del pan en el Distrito Federal,” Diario Oficial 10/13/1933.
borhoods,” so easily duped by simple prestidigitation, could feel satisfied knowing that their ever-smaller bolillos were emblems of revolutionary justice.

The city government declared it would not issue any new licenses to retail outlets that were not part of established bakeries, regardless of their location. In theory, peddlers and tendejón owners who had already received licenses could continue.103 Many, however, complained that city officials refused to renew their permit.104 A widow who ran a tendejón in Plaza Garibaldi wrote the city government to ask, “Is it possible that such a decision has been made, which will damage us poor people who lack fábricas and only subsist thanks to our bread sales?”105 When the small producers wrote to the government requesting that the minimum prices be canceled, authorities responded that their request was impossible “because the objective of the restrictions on the free sale of bread is to prevent illicit competition and the formation of monopolies.”106 Authorities continued to justify their defense of the Spanish monopoly by insisting they were actually fighting monopolies.

The situation continued throughout the 1930s, despite important political changes in the federal government, the organization of the labor movement, and the bakers’ union itself. Lázaro Cárdenas assumed the presidency in 1934 and instituted a project to once again centralize workers into a single quasi-official labor hub, the Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM).107 He called on independent unions such as the bakers to join the “unification of the proletariat.” The leader of the bakers’ union, Genaro Gómez, opposed joining, but in November 1935, a pro-CTM faction within the union managed to expel Gómez, accusing him of being a Trotskyite thief.108 Police and armed CTMistas seized the headquarters, and Gómez fled with $14,000 of the union’s

funds, refused to reveal the combination to the safe that held the rest, and set up another union down the street. Leaders from the pro-CTM faction, however, declared a strike in April 1936 and won a new contract signed by owners and themselves. Although the strike appears to have been a maneuver of factional rivalry, a revised reglamento soon came out all the same, announcing no new retail licenses would be issued. In July 1937, the bakers' union officially joined the CTM in a ceremony in the Palace of Fine Arts. CTM national leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano declared, “The entire proletariat of Mexico should imitate the spirit of cohesion that is taking place among the bakers.” In December, the bakery owners met with the pro-CTM faction at the city government palace to sign an agreement in which they acknowledged it as the exclusive representative of the union bakers. But just before they signed the agreement, Gómez and his bakers burst in and began brawling. Gómez and his son were stabbed before police and firemen broke up the fight. Days later, a defeated Gómez agreed to join the “unification” under the CTM.

Within these changes in state-labor relations, the basic array of forces and dynamics remained the same, but became more intense. The now-CTM bakers’ union declared another strike in January 1938 when owners refused its demand for higher wages. The usual violence against nonunion bakeries ensued, with strikers breaking the counters, throwing dough onto the floor, damaging machines, and beating the workers inside. At one bakery, they drenched the owner in cold water; at another, they scattered the long line of customers. The police arrived at another bakery, not to protect the workers inside, but rather to convince them to stop working. Strikers closed the highways that entered the city in order to keep out bread from outlying towns. When they found a man


walking down the street with a basket of bread, they gave him a pummeling and took the bread. This went on for five days until owners agreed to a new contract with increased wages.

A week later, a revised reglamento lowered the weight of bread from 110 to 75 grams. Inspectors from the comisión mixta closed more small bakeries and confiscated bread. The small producers claimed the comisión mixta closed twelve bakeries one day and ten a week later. The next week they protested the closure of ten more. A large crowd of neighbors gathered in front of one small bakery to protest. Customers were also indignant about the decreasing size of the bread on the shelves at the Spanish-owned bakeries. The pieces were of “such miniscule proportions that they could only throw them back.” Inspectors also patrolled the markets, looking for canasteros, or vendors who sold from baskets (canastas). They took “nearly forty” to jail. When one canastero defended his mother’s basket of bread, an inspector shot his pistol into the air; other vendors then grabbed him and hit him with his own pistol. The police rushed in and arrested the first canastero.

The chief of the Conciliation and Arbitration Board applauded the cooperation among government officials, unionists, and owners “to combat the nefarious clandestine bakeries” including the “so-called small producers who have adopted a posture of open rebellion.” Whereas authorities previously had denied the actual effects and purpose of the reglamento, they now emphasized the alliance of the state, the union, and owners against the threat that the small producers represented toward the Revolution’s achievements. In January 1939, after another day of conflict between small producers and the comisión mixta, announc-

ers on the weekly government radio broadcast, “La Hora Nacional,” denounced the “illegal competition” and the “reactionary agitation” of the small bakery owners. 126

Nonetheless, as the persecution of small producers intensified, and the bread became even lighter, it became increasingly difficult for the government to justify its bread policy. Officials argued that the assaults on the small producers benefited organized workers, but they avoided commenting on the Spanish owners. The small producers insisted precisely on this contradiction in order to question the government’s commitment to the Revolution. “It is not true that the Revolution protects the proletariat,” they exclaimed. “The authorities are supporting the capitalists who victimize the proletarians. The district government has used the reglamento to favor the tyranny of foreign capitalists, covering up the existence of monopolies.” 127 This argument was likely compelling to customers when the weight of bread decreased even further. The weight of bolillos oscillated between forty and eighty grams. 128 “Since colonial times, the bread industry has been the exclusive economic activity of the dominant caste. The Mexican people eat scraps of stale bread because they are still a humiliated and vanquished race that pays a bitter tribute of hunger and deprivation.” 129 Why, commentators asked, was the government going to such lengths to support the Spanish monopoly?

Advisors to President Lázaro Cárdenas warned that the bakery struggle made the government vulnerable to criticism from the right. “The Reaction,” a report noted, “takes any disruption caused by the revolutionary efforts and uses it against the government.” The bread conflicts were especially damaging because “a large number of people of limited economic possibilities, canasteros and small producers, have had to be eliminated.” This was particularly embarrassing since the “large producers” protected by the reglamento made bread whose “weight and quality have diminished in an alarming fashion [. . .] for the simple reason that they are not willing to lower their profits, accustomed as they are to an anachronistic system that has yielded them enormous riches.” The report urged the president to find employment for the small producers in state-sponsored cooperatives, where they would “make toys


or any other objects that there is a market for.” Otherwise, they might join the forces of “Reaction.”

By the late 1930s, fears of the “Reaction” indeed weighed upon Cárdenas. As the president reached the end of his term, conservative opposition arose from his support for organized labor, his implementation of “socialist education,” extensive land reform, and anticlericalism. His concerns were compounded by events in Europe, where Fascists had taken over in Spain, Italy, and Germany. The same advisor brought this point home, reminding the president, “In other countries, it is among such groups of small producers that Fascism has recruited its infantry.” This political pressure, added to the street violence against small producers and the growing discontent among consumers, explain a sharp change in the government’s rhetoric on the “bread question.” In April 1939, on the heels of another wave of violence against small producers, the city governor canceled the comisión mixta, arguing that “it has damaged the collective interest and strengthened, through new forms, the old monopolistic tendency.” In his declaration, the governor expressed what had been obvious for the last ten years:

The strongest industrialists declared they would accept the benefits the union demands, but only as long as the district government dictates a reglamento that would allow the comisión mixta to retain absolute powers over everything that pertains to the production and sale of bread. In other words, the large bread producers are willing to improve the conditions of their workers if, in exchange, the government gives a legal form to their monopoly and, furthermore, delegates to them sufficient authority to persecute and exterminate their competitors.

Owners expressed their indignation in an open letter to Cárdenas. “Our blood has been offered in futile defense; it is unjust that now we are made to appear like exploiters of a people we respect and love.” They need not have been quite so concerned, for the distance require-


ments and price fixing remained. These regulations continued to bolster their monopoly that now enjoyed further protection by the state and unionized workers.

**Conclusion**

The Spanish bakery owners who became deeply entrenched in the everyday subsistence of Mexico City during the old regime appear to have kept the bakers from achieving the rights promised by the Revolution. During the 1920s, at least, when owners refused union demands and resisted strikes, this was indeed the case. What’s more, to the degree that their recalcitrance rested on government support, the bakery owners represented more than the bread industry; the invariable arrival of strike-breaking police highlights the post-revolutionary regime’s broader reluctance to comply with the mandates of the Constitution of 1917. Faced with opposing demands of workers, owners, and consumers, the state opted to sustain the interests of the latter two groups at the cost of the first. Between the immovable weight of the barons of wheat, flour, and bread, on the one hand, and the imperious need to keep the city’s masses fed, on the other, sacrificing bakers’ rights appeared to be the most feasible option.

After 1928, as the array of political actors shifted and the bakers’ leverage increased, authorities and employers began to negotiate. Subsequently, the government’s bind was (1) how to satisfy bakery workers’ demands without (2) causing a rise in the price of bread or (3) pushing owners toward political opposition. The most expedient resolution was to shave ounces from consumers’ bread and restrict the rights of small producers. The major owners demanded the restriction, if not the total elimination, of small producers in exchange for their concessions to union workers. The state then took up the awkward role of sanctioning and carrying out the persecution of Mexican businesses that sold cheap bread. Finally, unionized workers—no greater fans of free-market competition than their employers—equally restricted the small producers who jeopardized their leverage by selling bread during strikes and, more broadly, threatened to erode the conditions that undergirded their labor contract.

To be sure, this confluence of interest made for a volatile alliance. Conflicts between owners and workers climaxed in August 1938 when Leandro Uzcanga, the leader of the baker’s union, shot and killed a Spanish owner inside the Conciliation and Arbitration Board.135 Indeed, the

attacks on small bakeries were a consequence of both the agreements between unions and owners, embodied in the reglamento, as well as the continued antagonism manifested during the strikes. The most naked violence against small producers occurred during the strikes when unionists roughed up their nonunion rivals. The duller but no less destructive violence against the small producers came with the resolutions, when inspectors closed their shops and confiscated their bread.

That the vendors at the Abelardo L. Rodriguez Market were among the retailers who suffered the effects of the reglamento gives its mural a poignant irony. Yet, this alignment of forces fulfilled key exigencies in the realpolitik of production, consumption, and state formation. If the state had not supported the dominant bakery owners, the latter would have likely refused to accede to union demands. This would have left bakery workers in substandard conditions and strikes would have continued to disrupt the food supply. Shortages, in turn, rippling down from bakeries to tortilla stands in the market, would have compromised the state’s claim to be the provider of the urban proletariat. On the other hand, had owners adhered to the contract without the restrictions established in the reglamento, small producers could have eroded their dominance. The union would have fallen with them, and the state would have lost a crucial constituent. Instead, organized workers achieved undeniable gains, the state could tout the “unification of the proletariat,” and the population continued to have access to inexpensive bread (albeit of unpredictable size and quality). Yet, it was the Mexican small producers and retailers, not the Spanish owners—the supposed historical enemies of the Mexican proletariat—who footed the bill.