Las Rieleras

Gender, Politics, and Power in the Mexican Railway Movement, 1958–1959

Robert F. Alegre

During the 1950s, Mexican railway women, known popularly as rieleras, joined their male counterparts to stage the most militant series of strikes of the postwar era. This study contests a large body of popular and scholarly literature which focuses exclusively on men in the making of the railway movement. Combining oral histories with union and company documents, the author traces how gender notions at work and in the community subordinated women to men, a process which nevertheless helped produce an identity for women based on the railway industry. Women did not challenge the patriarchal order but rather made use of it during the railway movement to mobilize in defense of their own interests as rieleras. These findings suggest that historians must look beyond the electoral arena, as well as beyond the archive, to capture working-class women’s participation in postwar politics.

In 1958 and 1959 discontent erupted onto the surface of Mexican politics, when the dissident members of the Mexican Railroad Workers’ Union (hereafter, STFRM) staged a series of strikes against the Ferrocarriles Nacionales de Mexico (hereafter, FNM). Led by Demetrio Vallejo, railroad workers went on strike three times during those two years, demanding not only higher wages but the ouster of pro-company union representatives, known disparagingly as charros. After President Ruiz Cortines (1952–1958) negotiated a wage hike in July and the removal of charro leaders in August, the newly elected government of Adolfo López Mateos (1958–1964) crushed the third strike by calling in the military and police on March 26, 1959. From the beginning, women played a vital role in the movement, a fact largely ignored by the press at the time and scholars since.

Women place themselves—and their hardships—at the center of their memory of the railway movement. María Estel Cortés Medina, who continues to live in the railway town of Matías Romero, Oaxaca, wants the record to show that “women suffered with the movement of 1958. Many of our husbands went to jail. They took men in [railway container cars], like they were going to kill them . . . women suffered.” Cortés and other militant women like her were on the frontlines of the political battle against the policies of the company and national government, but until now they have been absent from history.

I give railway women, known as rieleras a narrative place in the history of the industry by writing them into the story of the strikes. I argue that women made economic and political demands based on their identity as rieleras, a subjectivity based on women’s economic dependence on the railway industry along with their everyday interactions with their neighbors and friends. I furthermore show how women’s experiences as subordinates to men constituted a form of intraclass and intracommunity domination—in a word, a form of railway patriarchy. Nevertheless, rieleras did not challenge railway patriarchy during the strike. Instead they made use of it to confront charros and scabs in defense of the movement.

The historiography, as well as popular railway literature, has placed men as the exclusive protagonists of the strikes and of the railway industry more generally. Even the Centro de Documentación e Investigación Ferroviarias (CEDIF), the national railway archive, houses little material on female railway workers, to say nothing of workers’ wives. The erasure of women from the record was a consequence of historians’ and archivists’ focus on the site of production, particularly the rail yard and locomotives, where men were the main protagonists. The result has been a canon of managerial and union histories that focus on male bureaucrats. I discredit the railway canon’s exclusive focus on men by showing that women were vital to railway neighborhood life and to the railway movement of the late 1950s.

The failure to document rieleras postwar activism is in part a consequence of historians’ depiction of women as a conservative force in Mexican political history. As John D. French explains, “female activism in Mexico was . . . likely to be identified with piety, anti-bolshevism . . . and the defense of traditional gender roles.” This caricature helped explain why women did not gain suffrage rights until 1953. In 1994, a collection of essays edited by historians Heather Fowler-Salamini and Mary Kay Vaughan presented a much more complex portrayal of rural women’s political participation. Fowler-Salamini and Vaughan encouraged us to investigate how “during the Revolution and its aftermath, [social and ideological processes] widened women’s spaces [and] subtly altered the patriarchal norms governing women’s behavior,” a task assumed by Jocelyn Olcott in Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico. Through a study of women’s activism at the local, regional, and national levels, Olcott expands the sphere of women’s political participation in the early part of the twentieth century, debunking the caricature of Mexican women as reflexively conservative. Olcott looks beyond the narrow issue of suffrage, for women “inhabited citizenship less as a collection of specific laws than as a set of social, cultural and political practices.” Women activists “recod[ed] the cultural meanings of women’s labor and community involvement, reframing them as . . . public, civic duties that demonstrated their political capabilities.” Rieleras practiced
revolutionary citizenship in precisely this manner. When they took to the streets they inhabited a public, political persona in defense of a civic good: the railway family.

In 1958 and 1959, railway men and women rebelled against the Institutional Revolutionary Party’s (PRI) postwar practice of co-opting labor officials. Beginning in 1948, pro-government union leaders in industries key to economic development accepted declining real wages for workers. Declining wages hit railroad workers by surprise because they considered themselves to be an elite group among the working class due to the railroads’ position in the national economy. When populist president Lázaro Cárdenas nationalized the FNM in 1937 and put the STFRM in charge of managing the railroads in 1938, he helped elevate rieleros and reileras’ already heightened nationalism, which was rooted in their participation in the Revolution of 1910. As a result, railway men and women associated the railways, their labor, and their families with the national good. By striking, they expressed their profound resentment toward the PRI’s postwar practice of putting business before labor, a policy that continued throughout the PRI’s uninterrupted rule, which ended with its loss of the presidency in 2000. This article captures railway men and women’s efforts at reestablishing the power of the working class in post-Revolutionary Mexico.

Rieleras and rieleros distinguished themselves among the working class by crafting a strong community identity based on their gendered workplace and neighborhood experiences. The lowliest track repairmen to the most skilled conductor came to regard themselves as extraordinarily masculine due to their knowledge of the work process and the strenuousness of their work. The state, through the FNM, created respectable heterosexual leisure spaces, such as sports fields and dances, where men affirmed their masculinity by competing with one another for women’s attention. Outside of respectable venues, drinking, fighting, and philandering became rituals that constructed masculine selves. While much has been written on Latin American masculinities, what made railway masculinity distinct lies in how workers associated their manliness with the specific world of the workplace, their position in the economy, and their exalted place in national culture and history. In short, they came to associate their masculinity with their mastering of a mobile industrial experience critical to national development and international capitalism.

Roots of Discontent

During the strikes, railway families voiced their deep disappointment with the PRI’s postwar modernization program. The economic policies
initiated by President Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946–1952), and followed by Presidents Ruiz Cortines and López Mateos, required workers to consent to falling wages in order to foment industrialization and promote national unity during World War II and the early Cold War years. The national government, which managed the FNM, demanded railway workers to accept lower wages to keep shipping rates down, which would aid industrialization. The railroad and its workers were thus at the center of the government’s industrialization program. These policies led to economic growth, leading observers to declare Mexico an “economic miracle,” but they did so at the expense of the economic well being of railway families.

Real wages markedly declined in 1939 and remained low throughout the 1940s and 1950s, leading to a greater income disparity between the working class and the affluent. Historians Jeffrey Bortz and Marcos Agúila explain, “Real wages fell sharply in 1939, reached a low point in 1946, remained exceedingly low until 1952, and did not recover their 1939 level until 1968.” Not everyone suffered during this period, however. The economist Clark Reynolds explains that between 1950 and 1957 the top-twenty percent of the population became more affluent as their working-class counterparts endured falling wages. The process of transferring wealth from the working class to the upper classes directly impacted rank-and-file workers at the FNM, for they saw their wages decline by almost forty percent. A study conducted by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development in collaboration with economists at the Banco de Mexico and the Nacional Financiera underscored what railway workers already knew: “industrial and commercial profits . . . increased far more than wages and salaries, and most of the consumption during the period was enjoyed by only a small part of the population.”

Formed in 1933, the STFRM constituted one of the strongest unions in the country, with the exclusive right to represent railway workers. The union gained a great deal of leveraging power due to the industry’s role in the economy. One scholar has gone so far as to argue that the union’s support of Lázaro Cárdenas administration (1934–1940) enabled the PRI to become the dominant national party. Considering the power of the STFRM, it became critical for President Alemán to de-radicalize union leaders to prevent a backlash against his policy of freezing wages.

In 1948, the Alemán administration helped orchestrate the ouster of democratically elected STFRM secretary general Luis Gómez Z. and Valentín Campa, the union’s Secretary of Education, by accusing them of absconding with union monies. Vocal critics of Alemán’s pro-business modernization program, Gómez Z. and Campa were arrested by the military on orders from the government. The union coup became known as the charrazo, tak-
ing its name from the new STFRM secretary general, Jesús Díaz de León, who enjoyed dressing up as a cowboy, or a charro. The removal of militant leaders from the STFRM became a model for state-labor relations, as collaborationist officials soon came to head a number of the most combative industrial unions. From 1948 onward, critics have taken to calling corrupt union officials charros.

From 1948 to 1958, the STFRM suppressed workers’ demands for wage hikes in order to keep rates on cargo low and thereby help strategic industries, such as mining, which were critical for industrialization. As it became clear that charros were unwilling to challenge the PRI, a grassroots movement to oust them slowly emerged. In 1958, Demetrio Vallejo, a telegraph worker from Mogoñe, Oaxaca, appeared as the leader of workers who were tired of charro acquiescence to presidential and FNM management policy imperatives. Vallejo seemed an unlikely candidate to lead the rank-and-file. Unlike previous independent STFRM leaders, he did not make his home in the capital or any of the country’s other large cities. While Vallejo did seem to enjoy the esteem of workers in the southeast for serving as a local union representative in the early 1950s, word of Vallejo did not seem to reach the rank-and-file in other parts of the country until 1958, when he visited stations throughout the country to denounce charrismo.

Railway men like Vallejo became exposed to Marxism through the Mexican Communist Party (PCM), which began recruiting ferrocarrileros in the 1920s by defending them against firings and advocating for a national railway union. The party was particularly strong in railway cities, such as Matías Romero, and among machinists and telegraph operators, such as Vallejo. By the 1950s, factional disputes within the PCM led to the creation of the Partido Obrero-Campesino Mexicano (POC), which included Valentín Campa. Because the POC succeeded in organizing male railway leaders, the PCM reached out to rieleras. Although the PCM failed to organize rieleras in significant numbers, it nevertheless offered them courses in sewing, weaving, and reading as a way to gain influence among railway families. When discontent became generalized in the late 1950s, rieleras helped execute the largest strikes in post-Revolutionary history.

Unpacking Railway Patriarchy

Of the over 80,000 workers the STFRM represented in 1958, very few were women. Those who worked for the industry were employed primarily as nurses and secretaries, but we do not know how many they numbered. A deal struck in 1948 between the STFRM and the FNM, which restricted the number of women employed by the company, surely went far in making
the railway industry the domain of men. Most important, women were not hired to work on locomotives or in repair yards. By excluding women from the most prestigious and best-paying jobs, union and company officials served to define railway work as masculine. In short, the occupational hierarchy as defined by the company and union formed the basis of railway patriarchy.

Railway patriarchy drew on long-standing notions of male privilege. Steve J. Stern’s conception of colonial Mexican patriarchy as “a system of social relations and cultural values” which conferred authority to men over women’s sexuality and labor provides insights into unpacking railway gender ideology. The company and union’s practice of excluding women from work established the supremacy of male labor as a cultural value among familias ferrocarrileras. Thus, the importance of male labor came to define relations between rieleros and rieleras at home and within their neighborhoods. Differences in life experiences between rieleros and rieleras were thus rooted in a workplace practice that valued the exclusion of women as a cultural imperative.

As in the colonial case, the family served as the primary metaphor for ordering relationships. Just as colonial patriarchy structured relationships among men, with elder males receiving a greater share of social and symbolic power, the collective contract between the STFRM and the FNM stipulated that workers moved up the occupational hierarchy on the basis of seniority and skills. The result was a workplace environment that replicated the power structure in the idealized traditional family, with elder males supervising juniors. The intimacy among workers became heightened for many men who were actual kin—father and sons, uncles and nephews who toiled together. For them, the workplace hierarchy paralleled and reinforced the power structure within their families.

The most esteemed men were the conductors, firemen, and machinists, known as trenistas. They enjoyed the most on-the-job independence because they spent their days on locomotives unsupervised. They received the respect and admiration of fellow workers and community members because of the knowledge and training it took to become a trenista. As the primary caretakers of locomotives, they were indispensable to the industry. Their independence made their job all the more coveted, serving as the masculine ideal for all workers. The union and railway company’s de facto exclusion of women from these positions of authority reflects a broader institutionalization of patriarchy in the industry that played out in informal relations between men and women. In turn, women’s exclusion from official leadership positions explains, in part, their absence from accounts of the movement.
Yard workers, track repairmen, and *trenistas* pointed to the perilous quality of railway labor as evidence of their heightened masculinity. To be considered a proper railway man, they had to prove themselves every day on the job by moving steel tracks, muddying themselves with grease, and by enduring injuries. To be sure, injuries were commonplace for all workers; yard workers reported losing limbs as a result of unwieldy tracks slipping from a colleagues’ grasp, and it was not uncommon for trainmen to fall off moving locomotives.\(^{23}\) FNM statistics on accidents give us a sense of the danger these men faced. For example, there were over 1400 train accidents in 1957, leaving 159 dead and 8,121 injured, including passengers. Over forty workers tragically died on the job every year between 1951 and 1957.\(^{24}\)

These everyday hazards became emblazoned on workers’ clothes in the form of stains. Miko Viya, a former worker from Puebla, explains that workers derived pride from their oil-stained clothes and enjoyed when people referred to their dirty uniforms. “We had respect for the trade, and pride in being a ferrocarrilero, people would call us *chorreados* [soaked], because when we worked [our clothes] were drenched in oil,” he explains.\(^{25}\) The oil-soaked overalls provided evidence that railway workers performed physically intense work.

Photographs of workers from the 1950s affirm the performative quality of railway dress and gestures, as they present trainmen with rolled up sleeves and exposed muscle, sneering at the camera.\(^{26}\) This aspect of railway masculinity became clear to me one day as I prepared to sit at the table of a former yard worker, Geraldo Niño Mendes. Pointing to a photograph of himself with former colleagues standing in front of a locomotive, he asked me to take a good look at his arms. Work made him strong, a real *cabron*, he explained.\(^{27}\) The enormous physical exertion required for yard work led Niño Mendes and his coworkers to think of themselves as stronger, tougher, and more courageous than the average man.

*Rielero* masculinity can be fruitfully compared to the culture of manhood created by Chilean copper miners. Both Chilean miners and Mexican railroad workers positioned themselves as the radical vanguard among the working class, with a history of participating in national politics through each country’s Communist Party. Both groups labored for industries considered key for development and consequently created work and community identities that emphasized their role in their nation’s prosperity. In addition, *rieleros* and miners “celebrated the pure physicality of their work and the risk and danger of their struggle in an environment that constantly threatened their lives.”\(^{28}\) Finally, differences in life experiences between men and women in each case were rooted in workplace cultures that excluded women, thereby conferring social and economic power to men.
The railroads, however, differed in important ways from the mines, and these differences greatly affected the form of railway masculinity. First, rieleros enjoyed a remarkable degree of physical mobility. Trenistas exercised a great deal of autonomy while on locomotives, and even the lowly track repairman was often sent to remote locations, miles away from supervisors. Their masculine power and pride was based in part on their knowledge of the labor process, which enabled them to work independently and, during times of labor strife, to shut down the workplace by striking. Moreover, rieleros literally wrestled with steel tracks and moving locomotives—which required a form of expertise and strength unknown to workers in other industries. The symbolic power conferred exclusively to men by segregating the work process on the basis of gender enabled the STFRM to politicize masculinity, casting the rielero as an eager soldier in class war.29

The Practice of Community

Railway community life reached beyond the site of production, however, as interactions at work and in neighborhoods constituted the social material of “community” for railway men and women. The street served as the informal space where individuals associated with the industry came to see themselves as part of a broader local and national railway community. Railway neighborhoods came to be defined as the streets bordering or near tracks, yards, or stations, where railway families lived. In large cities and remote villages, these neighborhoods functioned as primary locations for the practice of a distinct railway identity. Through their actions on streets, men and women communicated to others that they had a stake in the railway industry and in the union—as an employee or as a family member. If the neighborhood, as sociologist Michel de Certeau has claimed, is a unique social space where a dweller comes to be recognized by others by sharing everyday public practices such as gossiping or going to the store, then railway neighborhoods did more than simply serve as sites for commercial exchange and recreation—they enabled individuals to see themselves as part of a greater whole, a collective.30

The neighborhood, according to de Certeau, is a practice: people transform space for particular social purposes, making it distinct from other spaces in a city. For Geraldo Niño Mendez and Carlos Salazar Ramírez, the distinction between railway neighborhoods and other city spaces was obvious. Both former railway men remember with nostalgia the joy of living near the railway station and watching workers and their friends walk home; their children ran through the streets and became friends while business establishments catered to the needs of railway families.31
The very dynamic between workplaces and neighborhoods gave the latter its particular feel, which distinguished it from other spaces. In Mexico City, where the FNM granted workers land and even constructed housing, the connection between the industry and surrounding streets was particularly intimate. Most railway families in the capital lived in Colonia Guerrero, which had housed artisans and working class folks from its construction during the Porfiriato. Colonia Guerrero was home to Buenavista Station—the principle railway station in the capital—as well as Nonoalco, the main rail yard in the city, where faulty equipment was sent to repair. Hotels and bars lined the streets around Buenavista, catering to workers spending the night or having a drink before their next shift.

Matías Romero’s downtown, as well as the streets bordering the railway station in Puebla, also catered to rieleros. Men could be seen exiting or entering work in throngs, shortly after the morning whistle signaled the end of the late shift and the beginning of the day. Workers clad in oil-stained overalls could be seen receiving their lunch, handed to them by a daughter or son. At night drunken rieleros could be witnessed staggering out of watering holes, while trains arrived at the station. These spectacles aided in “the production of [a] territorially bounded form of social solidarity” based on the railway industry, creating the social textures and affective bonds of railway neighborhoods. In larger cities, the physical space of the railway neighborhood also provided cover for workers’ excessive drinking and for the long-established practice of cavorting with prostitutes, a pastime fondly remembered by many men. Male workers bonded in cabarets and cantinas that lined the streets near stations in Puebla and Mexico City. Guadalupe Monroy, a former Puebla trainman, remembers that hired women were rumored to charge railway men a little extra because men’s dirty uniforms stained their dresses. Monroy’s recollection of “a little girlfriend” that he had in one of the city’s cabarets is a memory fragment that draws on a broader motif of promiscuity found in interviews with former rieleros.

Everyday displays of male heterosexual desire in cantinas structured relations among men. Although women were present at these establishments as servers and sex workers, rieleros remember cantinas as masculine spaces, where workers traded stories of sexual conquest and performed their heterosexuality by dancing and leaving with women. Even workers who did not want to partake in cantina culture felt compelled to do so in order to avoid being taunted or shunned by colleagues. Niño Mendes felt that he had to drink tequila with his supervisor in order to “be one of the boys” and get a promotion. “It was terrible,” he recalls, “because I don’t like to drink. I’ve never been drawn to it.” The experience must have been no less agonizing for the reputedly gay worker who was pressured to dance with women, to the amusement of snickering colleagues.
Some men brought cantina culture to the workplace, bragging of drinking with supervisors while on the job. Ferrocarrileros who did not drink would have their masculinity questioned and have difficulty bonding with supervisors, which could affect the possibility of promotion. An invitation to the cantina was nevertheless a gender privilege, for wives and women employed as office workers or nurses found themselves excluded. The association of drinking with masculinity extends beyond Mexico, as anthropologist David Gilmore observed in his study on men on Truk Island, “drinking is the lubricant of the masculine pose . . . an important signal of intent to uphold a manly reputation, and thus a warning,” an observation no less relevant to reileros. In short, heterosexuality was performed—and enforced—through rituals of collective inebriation unavailable to women.

Rieleras were no less likely to be found on the streets during the day. Although the idealized rielera was married, monogamous, and dedicated to domestic duties, these duties often brought them out in public as they visited stations to deliver their father’s food or went to market to buy groceries. Women married to the lowliest workers laundered clothes for extra income. At market and on streets, these women socialized and came to think of themselves as belonging to a distinct group. Fifty years later, widowed rieleras gather on each other’s porches in the railway town of Matías Romero, basing their continued friendship on these everyday acts of conviviality.

The FNM did its part to produce a rielera subjectivity. It sponsored a girl’s basketball team, “Las Rieleras,” whose accomplishments were regularly touted in the company magazine, “Revista Ferronales.” The company also created heterosexual leisure spaces in Matías Romero by holding dances every Saturday. María Orozco fondly recalls the dances she attended in a park adjacent to the station as festive, community affairs. “Ferrocarrileros went to the park to dance marimba,” Orozco explains, “[and] in February, they gathered for Fiesta de San Matías. The women wore tehuano outfits and the men arrived on horseback.” The importance that these dances had for women as a venue for socializing outside the boundaries of their houses can be appreciated by the fact that nearly all women I interviewed remember the dances while no men in Matías Romero mentioned them. Adolescent boys, on the contrary, did not have to look forward to dances to have permission to walk at night in town or flirt with women. Everyday double standards clearly resulted in contrasting experience—and memories—for women and men. Dances, informal gatherings while delivering lunch, and other forms of socializing nevertheless connected rieleras with one another. Most importantly, socializing, dances, and shared deprivations created the affective bonds that sustained women’s mobilizations during the strikes.
Rieleras in Matías Romero compensated for their husbands’ meager income by selling goods at market and by washing laundry. Indeed, Guadalupe Acosta, the daughter of a station agent, believes that ferrocarrileras derived their common identity in part from shared sufferings. Her mother and the ferrocarrileras she knew often had no money for food and basic necessities while their husbands spent their money on mistresses. When asked why they and other women took to the streets in 1958 and 1959, rieleras explain that they felt invested in the movement’s goals of attaining higher wages for the rank and file, as well as subsidized housing and free medical care for families.

Gendering the Railway Script

Elena Poniatowska, the prominent Mexican novelist, journalist, and chronicler, interviewed Demetrio Vallejo’s niece and railway activist Lilia Benítez in the earlier 1970s. The interview reveals the connection between rieleras’ experiences and their participation in the railway movement. It indicates that Benítez and women like her affirmed community gender norms by supporting a male-led movement with no demands specific to women’s empowerment, on or off the job. But at the same time they transgressed norms by consciously appropriating the combative posture associated with masculinity. Hence, like the militant women cigar makers in Tampa, Florida studied by historian Nancy Hewitt, railway “women’s family roles could converge to support a radical vision of class and community.” Their activism nevertheless failed to establish an “autonomous female voice”, indicating “the limits of this nexus for a fully egalitarian sexual relations within the working class.”

By sharing her story with Poniatowska, Benítez served as what sociologist Elizabeth Jelin has called a memory entrepreneur, a social agent “who seek[s] social recognition and political legitimacy of one (their own) interpretation or narrative of the past.” Jelin’s category of memory entrepreneur is useful because it calls attention to the social and political act of memory. By singling out Benítez, Poniatowska is as much a participant in the construction of memory as the interviewee. Benítez and Poniatowska team up to intervene in the popular and scholarly literature of the railway movement that has silenced rieleras. By introducing us to other rieleras in the course of the narrative, they establish the social and political legitimacy of railway women.

In his oral history of Doña María Roldán, a union activist in a meatpacking industry in Berisso, Argentina, historian Daniel James suggests that by listening to the narrative strategies employed by the subject we can
discern motifs that serve to execute a narrative goal. Roldán and Benítez both construct what James’ signals as epic narratives, which embody “suprahistorical and communal [values]—respect, harmony, justice and happiness.” Benítez’s epic highlights the value of railway community solidarity and the justice attained by the movement. While Roldán finds her hero in Juan Perón, the legendary Argentine populist, Benítez enshrines Vallejo as a flawless leader of the working class.

Benítez portrays herself as a union and community activist, an experience that made her unique among rieleras. To achieve this narrative goal, she contrasts moments of subjugation during her childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood with the relative independence she achieved after the dissolution of her marriage and death of her son. By underscoring her early subjugation, she foregrounds the development of her political consciousness during the railway movement.

Lilia Benítez was born in 1918 in Mogoñé, Oaxaca in her grandparents’ house, which was also home to her uncle, Demetrio Vallejo. Their families bridged rural and industrial worlds, as well as indigenous and mestizo cultures. Vallejo’s father worked on the rails but maintained a parcel of land in the countryside, where he farmed corn on the weekend for extra income. He and Benítez’s father, a ferrocarilero himself, married Zapotec sisters. Their mothers spoke Zapotec, not Spanish. Benítez does not remember her father, who died of lung disease. When he died, her mother panicked, leaving Benítez to live with her grandparents and her Uncle Demetrio, with whom she developed a strong bond.

From a very young age, Benítez found herself limited by the social regulations established by railway patriarchy. Unlike Vallejo, who from adolescence moved about town and frequented the station without supervision, Benítez was permitted to visit the station only with Vallejo’s permission. The two became close as he introduced her to the jokes, knowledge, and habits that distinguished rieleros as a group. In doing so, Vallejo introduced Benítez to the masculine world of the workplace; experiences she would recall as having contributed to her wanting to join the movement of the late 1950s.

Like other women, Benítez points to the experience of going to the station as an adventurous departure from her home life, even if her uncle Vallejo normally accompanied her. “When I heard the train whistles,” she recalls, “I would run. I ran and ran so that my mom wouldn’t ask, ‘Lilia, Lilia, where are you going?’ I would already be gone, running to the station to be with [Vallejo].” Going to the station enabled her to develop a public persona. “I always liked to go to the station. Everyone in Mogoñé knew me. I have a great devotion for the railways,” she recalls. Nevertheless, her adventures around town, the station and rail yards depended on the
sanction of her uncle Demetrio. He provided cover for her playful escapades away from home.

The contours of patriarchy continued to impact Benítez when she married in the late 1940s. When her husband delivered whippings to command her obedience, Benítez experienced patriarchy as violence. The emotional and physical pain caused by the beatings became exacerbated one day when Vallejo arrived at her house in Matías Romero. Finding her face black and blue from her husband’s blows, Vallejo played the role of protector, urging her to go with him. But Benítez defiantly replied, “No, I won’t go. Please leave, you better leave, I don’t want him to get here and for you two to fight.” She was hardly unique in having become reduced to an object fought over by men, a scenario scholars have identified as a ritual for constructing masculinities.

During the late 1940s, Benítez found herself having to choose between staying with an abusive husband or striking out on her own to face the stigmatization of being a single mother. When she eventually chose to leave her husband, she found that both men and women viewed her as tainted due to her status as a single woman with a child. Men wanted “a señorita who hadn’t sin[ned].” It was not until her son’s death from a severe bronchial disorder at the age of seventeen that she could strike out on her own. She was thirty-two years old and about to begin life anew as a childless single woman. For the first time in her life, there was no male figure—no husband, uncle, or child—to place limits on where she could go and with whom she could associate.

At this moment in the transcript, Benítez differentiates herself from the common rielera, who presumably remains dependent on her husband’s wages. Independence brought a newfound anxiety over her ability to make her way in life. “I was tormented. I would tell myself, ‘you can go, but what can I do’. I never studied anything, what could I do? I would make the sign of the cross . . . I suffered through it.” Despite her disquiet, she moved to Mexico City, where, for the first time, she began to think of herself as an independent, working woman. Needing a job, she turned to the most trusted paternal figure in her life, Demetrio Vallejo. Vallejo had by now many friends in the labor movement, especially among petrol and electrical workers from his organizing days in Veracruz. He drew on these contacts to arrange an interview for Benítez with a friend at the petrol workers’ union in Mexico City. There is clearly a tension in the transcript between Benítez’s portrayal of herself as newly independent and her continued reliance on a male figure (Vallejo) for protection.

The petrol official, like so many men in Benítez’s life, took advantage of his male privilege to subjugate her, but this time Benítez stands up for herself. Despite the solidarity that the petrol union official shared with
her uncle, he demeaned Benítez with untoward sexual advances. “You are so beautiful,” he shamelessly noted, and invited her out for a coffee date. Benítez takes pride in having stood up to the union bureaucrat that day. “Are you going to give me the job or not?,” she pressed him, “Be straight with me.” Before he could answer, she got up and told him she was not interested in the job. Benítez highlights her defiance to mark a transition in her life story. She is no longer a passive victim of male abuse. From this point on, she frames herself as an active agent in the railway movement.

Benítez reflects on that day to comment on the intersection of gender and class, suggesting that poor women must rely on each other to overcome sexism and poverty. “That’s how they treat poor transient women,” she explained to Poniatowska. If male workers viewed the labor movement as progressive and saw unions as vehicles for the defense of their rights, Benítez learned that men and women were not on equal footing in the movement. Benítez was able to defy the petrol union leader because she had the backing of Demetrio Vallejo, who would later get her a job with the STFRM. Other poor women were not as fortunate.

Unlike Doña María Roldán, whose “fundamental register . . . is collective and class oriented,” Benítez is attuned to gender’s effect on class experience. This distinguishes her from other rieleras, who more often mobilized in support of their husband or father. Although she did not get the job with the petrol union, Benítez nevertheless became entrenched in the world of labor activism when Vallejo became head of the STFRM. In August 1958, grassroots workers ousted their corrupt union representatives and elected Demetrio Vallejo as their leader. It was a remarkable turn of events, for the PRI had relied on charro leaders to stifle rank and file dissent since 1948. The election had a direct effect on Benítez and her development as an activist; Vallejo gave her a job as a secretary for Local 15 in Mexico City and she quickly joined his inner circle of political confidants. Workers’ adoration of her uncle brought her status and respect. She was now a member of the union and part of the struggle against the PRI’s industrial policies and the charros who acquiesced to them. When the first strike wave occurred in June 1958, she worked the phones at the union hall, staying in the building day and night, transmitting the latest information to strikers who called from as far away as Chihuahua.

Benítez frames her participation in the dissident railway movement as the moment in which she acquired political consciousness around issues of class. Her vocabulary indicates this transformation. Whereas in the earlier part of the interview, she uses passive verbs and focuses mainly on how her family and husbands treated her and limited her options (“He took me,” for example), Benítez uses action verbs to describe her participation in the railway movement. She places herself in the narrative of the strikes as an
active agent: “we met,” “we fought,” “we won.” For the first time in her interview, she takes control of her own life story.

**The Politics of Shame, August 1958**

Women from the south and north of the country were no less important to the railway movement as Benítez and other women in Mexico City, a fact not lost on Demetrio Vallejo. Women in the capital agitated under the banner of the Feminine Railway Movement; and in a sign of feminine solidarity, women teachers joined them in their protests. Undercover police reported that Vallejo stressed to men the need for rielera support in order for the strikes to succeed. In January 1959, he ordered representatives to offer money to rieleras in Monterrey, whose husband’s wages had been docked for striking. Moreover, he sent a general call to local union leaders to reach out to women.

Women did not need instructions from leaders in Mexico City to join the movement. In fact, railway men and women widely remember an event involving a group of militant rieleras in Cárdenas, San Luis Potosí. On one July afternoon in 1958, ferrocarrileras confronted rank-and-file supporters of charros who decided to cross the picket line and move locomotives out of the station. The local Cárdenas strikebreakers received reinforcements of soldiers and scabs from the neighboring city of San Luis Potosí. As news of the strikebreakers spread, rieleras marched toward the station, intent on preventing scabs from moving the locomotives.

Federal troops occupied railway workshops and offices, and prepared to send soldiers to surround the tracks. But the ferrocarrileras and women supporters held their ground. The women quickly transitioned from aid workers sympathetic to the strike to combative activists, even as the men were said to have wilted from fear of the soldiers. When one woman acquired a speaker system to harangue strikebreakers and rally the crowd, men warned the women they were not permitted to hold a rally without the government’s permission. The women defiantly replied, “We don’t need it; we trust in article 9 of the Constitution; we know our rights.”

By employing shaming rituals, women urged workers operating the trains to join the strike. The most provocative instance involved a woman who directly contested the authority of her father, Florencio Ruíz de la Peña, one of the scabs maneuvering the train out of the station. Ruíz de la Peña’s daughter called on him to step down from the train, join the protesters and spare his children the indignity of having a scab for a father. Five women joined her, and each warned their men not to go down as traitors.

As the sense of urgency grew, the scene turned into a rally. The women raised the stakes by lying across the tracks to prevent the movement of the
locomotives. In so doing, women politicized their bodies, wielding them at the company and the state, embodied by soldiers. “Would the machinist dare to thrust the train over his own daughter,” they yelled. Those women who decided not to lie down threw coins and stale tortillas at the scabs operating the trains.

Frustrated by the intransigence of the scabs, the women backed away and formed a circle around Doña Ramona, a fellow dissident. As the circle opened, Doña Ramona faced the machinist and lifted her skirt and screamed, “Put them on coward! Let’s see if then you learn to fight like the men.” Pants in this ritual quite clearly serve as a metonym for masculine attributes, such as courage and toughness, which, according to the activists, scabs lacked and the women possessed. In the end, the women's shaming tactics worked, for scabs pulled the train back into the station as the women cheered. The action stands as one of the many small victories attained by ferrocarrileras and ferrocarrileros before the repression of the railway movement in 1959.

“Shaming rituals are a means of fighting back and nonviolently undermining the legitimacy of the authorities,” argues Temma Kaplan, a long-time scholar of women’s movements. When women use shaming rituals to single out the incompetence, corruption, or general failures of male authority figures, they guard and reinforce norms and expectations placed on men by society. Rieleras resorted to shaming rituals to remind men that they had an ethical responsibility to protect their wives and families by fighting for higher wages. In such cases, women took on normative masculine attributes, such as courage and toughness. By claiming that those who took sides with the company were “without pants,” women questioned workers’ masculinity. Like their male counterparts, they took active roles, put themselves in harm’s way and challenged men in power to behave like “men.” The aggressive behavior of the ferrocarrileras during the strikes has made such an impact on railway workers’ collective psyche that it is not uncommon for interviewees to comment that ferrocarrileras “had more pants than some of the men.”

The story of the women from Cárdenas is an example of what historian Steve J. Stern has called emblematic memories, frameworks that “purport to capture an essential truth,” serving as an “anchor that organizes and enhances the meaning of personal experience and knowledge.” By relating the tale, interviewees produce knowledge of women’s involvement in the railway movement, an “essential truth” not found in official accounts of the strikes. The episode has since become a point of pride for rieleras and has served as a grassroots alternative narrative that punctures the official, masculinist story of the strikes.
The Repression, 1959

In the winter of 1959, railway men and women welcomed the newly-elected President Adolfo López Mateos with an immediate demand that he order the FNM to raise wages by 16.66 percent above the 215 peso wage hike workers had received in July 1958. Their demands included 52,500,000 pesos a year for medicine and medical attention for workers and their families, a savings plan, and 60,000 units of company housing for all workers or five pesos a day for rent. When the President conceded, the reputation of independent leaders increased, and railway families came to regard dissidents as an obvious improvement over the debunked charros. Their enthusiasm, however, went too far when the Vallejo and the STFRM went on strike in February 1959 to pressure private railway companies to confer the same benefits that the President ordered the FNM to deliver. When workers struck in February, the President, PRI officials, and newspapers turned against railway families, leading the government to arrest striking workers, including Demetrio Vallejo.

The fallout of the repression created long-lasting rifts among activists. As demonstrated by US Department of State documents, leaders were the first to suffer at the hands of the police. Soldiers in Mexico City took strikers to Military Camp 1, a military holding station, where they were held without being processed. Dissidents who were not arrested had to decide whether to remain on strike or to return to work. The overwhelming majority decided to go back to work within the forty-eight hour grace period set by the company. Those who remained on strike were fired.

Benítez has little empathy for men who returned to work, even though she understands that they suffered at the hands of authorities. She explains to Poniatowska that the “[Army guards] mentally tortured [strikers], they told them that if they didn’t denounce my uncle they would be physically punished.” But those strikers who went back to work “didn’t have . . . conviction . . . they believed that by denouncing my uncle they were going to save themselves.” José Jorge Ramírez, a former railway leader in Puebla confesses, “We betrayed the movement, all of us,” by going back to work while Vallejo and other leaders remained imprisoned.

With Vallejo behind bars and with male leaders fearing further repression, Benítez found herself in charge. She had in fact been one of the many dissidents that the military apprehended that day, but, unlike her uncle and other male activists, she was permitted to leave. It is unclear why she was released. Perhaps the police assumed that women did not belong or were of little importance to the movement. In any case, she came to be Vallejo’s main source of protection and support while he was in jail, taking responsibility for informing workers about her uncle’s plans for the movement. Roles had been reversed, with Benítez now playing the role of protector.
Benítez and a number of women in Matías Romero continued to express their solidarity with the movement after the police arrested strikers. Even today, elderly railway women remember the tough, committed activist Virginia López López with respect and admiration for having been the most prominent activist in Matías Romero—male or female. López had been a friend to Vallejo, and was rumored to have hidden him at her house when he visited in June and July 1958 to organize workers. When police arrested strikers, López and other women brought food to men hiding in the hills at the edge of the city. Hernández Orozco remembers López as a strong and able leader as any rielero: “Virginia was very strong. She didn’t care, she would confront any man.” When men were taken away, López and other ferrocarrileras in Matías Romero became all the more indispensable.

As women in Matías Romero aided their male counterparts hiding in the mountains, Benítez gathered her bearings and headed out of the military camp in Mexico City. When she exited the grounds, a woman recently released from prison informed her that soldiers had beaten Vallejo, a claim supported by US Embassy reports. Benítez remembers, “We had barely stepped out the door [of the jail] when the woman told us, they have just roughed up Señor Vallejo, they left him for dead, dragged him away . . . to the hospital.” Benetíz’s memory of having confronted the General in charge of the military camp marks the moment in the interview when she first portrays herself as a leader. She soon collected money for Vallejo’s legal fees from men who had returned to work, and held clandestine meetings to inform activists about their leader’s well-being. Afterwards she would return to Mexico City to let Vallejo know the latest news.

Benítez displayed the political skills of a seasoned organizer. She contacted national newspapers, such as Excelsior and Últimas Noticias, to inform them that officers had beaten Vallejo. She had particular success with La Prensa, which published a bulletin that she wrote. Editors at other newspapers were less welcoming, however. When reporters tried to get her story out, editors changed or omitted news of Vallejo, kowtowing to unnamed political officials.

Although Benítez could not count on editors or politicians to support her and the prisoners, she did find political solidarity among rieleras. In particular, Señora Marina, a secretary employed by the FNM and a member of the railway union, stuck by Benítez’s side as she worked to collect aid for her uncle’s day in court in March of 1959. Señora Marina had been a dedicated activist, joining protests and offering her secretarial skills to Vallejo. FNM officials fired her without explanation when they discovered her involvement in the movement. Despite losing her job, Señora Marina seemed to have had no regrets about striking, as she continued to make sacrifices for the movement. She sold her television and encyclopedia set and vended food to raise money for Vallejo’s defense.
As Vallejo and other dissidents languished in jail in the summer of 1959, Benítez led railway families resisting their continued imprisonment. When one day, guards escorted Vallejo from the military camp to the penitentiary, prisoners who had not been formally processed began a hunger strike. Outside the camp, Benítez led men and women in spreading word of the hunger strike. She explains, “We were in the streets, passing out propaganda, holding meetings wherever we could. The police chased us out of one place and we went to another. It was a tremendous movement to... save the prisoners.”

The effort to release jailed rieleros crystallized when Benítez and other rieleras formed the Committee for the Liberation of Political Prisoners, which was exclusively comprised of women, presumably because their male counterparts were in jail, hiding, or afraid of getting arrested. The women visited stations to collect donations from workers to sustain the resistance. Station agents opened their doors, permitting Benítez on work sites, where she ate with men and urged them to contribute money. Her status as Vallejo’s niece surely aided her in getting access to the traditionally male space of the railway yard, as it was well known that she was in direct communication with her uncle. Benítez nonetheless preferred to be known for her commitment to the movement rather than for being Vallejo’s niece. She admits as much by stressing to Poniatowska that many workers did not know that she and Vallejo were related. Benítez wanted to be regarded for her actions, independent of her relationship to Vallejo, or any other man.

Conclusion

Railway women played a central role in contesting the PRI’s postwar modernization program. Women like Lilia Benítez and Virginia López López politicized informal networks among rieleras to help sustain the most combative working-class movement in postrevolutionary history. In the process, they did not challenge patriarchy but rather pragmatically embraced it, pressuring men to live up to railway codes of masculinity and remain on strike. In doing so, they affirmed male power while broadening the opportunities available for women’s political expression within the parameters of railway patriarchy. This study thus suggests that scholars should look beyond the ballot box when assessing the direction, and impact, of Mexican women’s political involvement. Working-class women shaped the course of postwar history through everyday actions in neighborhoods and through their participation in social movements.

In order to access these histories, scholars must also look beyond the archive, where records often focus narrowly on male leaders. Oral histories open up the world that rieleras made in a way no archival source can. These
memories provide factual details about the past as they reveal emotional residues of past political struggles. These residues differ depending on the interviewee’s position in the community. More specifically, if there is a “working class way of being a man or a woman,” as Daniel James and John D. French maintain, there are also memories specific to men’s and women’s experiences. In the case of railway communities, rieleras convey a decidedly less romantic portrait of railway life than their male counterparts. Women recall that wives and children endured economic hardship while men spent time on the job or in cantinas. Wives endured men’s tendencies to spend much-needed pesos in bars and on lovers, and often suffered physical abuse when their husbands did come home. While men cherished their time spent on the rails, wives complain of loneliness and neglect. Moreover, by the 1950s, women’s expectations that railway work would provide a decent family wage proved illusory. Opening her arms to indicate her disappointment with her shabby dwelling, the wife of a former activist in Puebla complains, “When I married a ferrocarrilero, I expected something more, you expect something more than this. But no, nothing.” Like men, rieleras distinguished themselves from other working-class women by their association with an industry of national importance. However, their shared experiences of sexism and deprivation led them to craft an identity separate from men. During the railway movement, rieleras drew on their collective identity to make economic and political demands as women, urging hesitant men to join the struggle.

Notes

I would like to thank Mark Wasserman, Temma Kaplan, Joan W. Scott, Nancy Hewitt, and William H. Beezley for their comments on earlier drafts of this material, as well as the three anonymous Journal of Women’s History readers. Special thanks to Elena Poniatowska for providing me with her interviews of Demetrio Vallejo and Lilia Benítez. Finally, my deepest thanks go to the rieleros and rieleras who shared their stories with me.


2Railway women are referred to as rieleras, or ferrocarrileras; railway men are referred to as rieleros, or ferrocarrileros.


Ibid., 20.


Bortz and Aguila, “Earning a Living,” 125.


Middlebrook, *Paradox of Revolution*.

Demetrio Vallejo, interview by Elena Poniatowska, Mexico City, 1972, private papers of Elena Poniatowska, Mexico City.


Box 8, Folder 27, Frame 1551, Mexican Communist Party Archive (hereafter MCPA), Rare Book and Manuscript Library (hereafter RBML), Columbia University.

August 1957, Box 8, Folder 53, Frame 3358-3361, MCPA, RBML, Columbia University.

Unificación Ferroviaria, 16 March 1948.

Ibid.


23Carlos Bernal Romo, FNM Dossier, Box 3, Matías Romero, Centro de Documentación e Investigación Ferroviarias (hereafter CEDIF), Puebla, Mexico.

24This figure includes passengers and workers. Estadística de Ferrocarriles y Transvías (Mexico City: Dirección General de Ferrocarriles en Operación, 1959), 245–251.


26See photos in Hermanos Mayo Collection, Fototeca, Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN).


31Adulio Arenas Antón, FNM Dossier, Box 1, Matías Romero, CEDIF.

32Unificación Ferroviaria, 1 March, 1948.


34Salvador Zarco, interview by author, Mexico City, July 1999; Juan Colín, interview by author, Mexico City, July 1999.


36Ibid.


36Niño Mendes, interview.
37Ibid.
38Moreno, interview.
41Many articles on the team appeared in the 1950s. See *Revista Ferronales*, December 1950.
42Ibid.
44Cortés Medina, interview; Hernández Orozco, interview; María del Cielo Watanabe, interview by author, Matías Romero, July 2004.
45Ibid.
46Cortés Medina, interview; Cielo Watanabe, interview; Hernández Orozco, interview.
47Guadalupe Acosta, interview by author, Mexico City, July 2004.
48Cielo Fuentes, interview; Ruth Ramírez, interview by author, Puebla, February 2004; Hernández Orozco, interview.
52Vallejo, interview; Lilia Benítez, interview by Elena Poniatowska, 1972, private papers of Elena Poniatowska, Mexico City.
53Benítez, interview.
54Ibid.
55Ibid.
56Ibid.

Benitez, interview.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

James, *Doña María’s Story*, 162.

Benítez, interview.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Exp. 26-1-959, Hoja 200, Legajo 14, 29 Jan. 1959, Dirección Federal de Seguridad (hereafter DFS), AGN; Exp. 26-1-59, Hoja 195, Legajo 14, January 1959, DFS, AGN.

Exp. 26-1-959, Hoja 180, Legajo 14, 9 January 1959, DFS, AGN.


Gill, *Ferrocarrileros*, 177.

Ibid.

Ibid.


“La participación,” 19.


Niño Mendes, interview; Fidel Tabares, interview by author, Puebla, 2004.


81 July 1959, Document 712.00/7–159, Record Group 59, (hereafter RG 59), National Archives and Records Administration, (hereafter NARA), College Park, Maryland.

82 Exp. 26-1-959, Hoja 98, Legajo 16, 30 March 1959, DFS, AGN.

83 Exp. 26-1-959, Hoja 227, Legajo 16, April 1959, DFS, AGN.

84 Benítez, interview.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Elena Poniatowska, interview by author, Mexico City, August 2008.

88 Adan Cortés Ceballos, FNM Dossier, Box 3, Matías Romero, CEDIF; Ildefonso Aquino Castillo, FNM Dossier, Box 3, Matías Romero, CEDIF; Octavio Bonilla del Rivero, FNM Dossier, Box 3, Matías Romero, CEDIF; Hector Casanova Martínez, FNM Dossier, Box 4, Matías Romero, CEDIF; César Carbajal Vallejo, FNM Dossier, Box 4, Matías Romero, CEDIF.

89 Hernández Orozco, interview.

90 Cortés Medina, interview; Hernández Orozco, interview.

91 19 November 1959, Document 812.062/11-1959, RG 59, NARA.

92 Benítez, interview.

93 Ibid.

94 Benítez does not give Señora Marina’s last name.

95 Benítez, interview.

96 Vallejo, interview.

97 Ibid.

98 Exp. 26-1-959, Hoja 267, Legajo 17, May 1959, DFS, AGN.


100 Ruth Ramírez, interview by author, Puebla, February 2004.