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Nitrate Workers and State Violence:

The Massacre at Escuela Santa

María de Iquique

Elías Lafertte

This document from Elías Gaviño Lafertte's memoirs provides a vivid description of social conditions and cultural life in Chile's nitrate mines by a worker, union militant, and cofounder of the Chilean Communist Party. Lafertte describes his first jobs in the nitrate mines and ports as a child, reflecting the prevalence of child labor in the north. Lafertte and his family moved from nitrate camp to nitrate camp, and to the port city of Iquique, underlining the tremendous transience of Chilean workers, who had come to compose an unsettled, mobile labor force in both northern and central Chile, in the mines and cities as well as the countryside. Lafertte's memoirs also contain a powerful description of the infamous 1907 massacre of hundreds of workers and their families who congregated in a peaceful protest at the Escuela Santa María (Santa María School) in Iquique. Thousands of workers and their families came to Iquique from the nitrate camps to demand higher wages and occupied the Escuela Santa María. Army troops commanded by Colonel Roberto Silva Renard, who was ordered to dislodge the striking workers from the school by any means necessary, opened fire, leaving many hundreds of people dead and many hundreds more wounded. The massacre has come to symbolize the violent response of the Chilean state to any kind of popular protest or labor organization during this period.

The life of our poor is characterized by the disorganization that misery brings. Work causes families to separate, and children have to live far away from their parents, either because the parents cannot support them or because circumstances prevent the parents from staying. This happened to me at a very early age. First, my father disappeared from the house in search of a better life and never returned. Later, when I was ten years old, I had to

leave my mother's side because her "great job" in the La Serena teachers' college didn't even allow her to see me. At that point, my mother decided to send me to Iquique, where my grandmother and uncles had moved. . . .

As soon as I arrived I learned that things were not going at all well: the nitrate camp had "halted" and everyone was leaving. . . . When the traditional horseshoe was nailed to the door of the "Providence" company store, we had to get going to the "Pearl" nitrate camp, where Uncle Juan had found work in the materials warehouse. The sun of the plains tickled my back, but soon I became accustomed to it. In the beginning, I just went around the encampment, observing the work, conversing with the *pampinos* [residents of the pampas], and in general making friends everywhere. When I became more familiar with the work, it began to seem less terrible, and one day it occurred to me that, in spite of my youth, I could work to help support the family.

And so it was that I took my first job in the nitrate fields, and this was the position of ore-crusher, or "toadkiller" as we were known. I worked with another boy of my same age, shoveling the fragments of ore that were too large to fit into the sacks or that were too heavy to carry. We worked twelve hours a day, in the full sun, reducing the large lumps of ore into smaller pieces. But because we were just a pair of kids, of little importance to the company, who only earned sixty cents a day each, nobody paid us any attention. . . .

Later, I took a job in the materials warehouse, where I worked with my uncle. . . . My work consisted of untangling the twine used to sew shut the sacks of nitrate so as not to lose a single ounce of the material. From what I earned in that first year in the nitrate fields, I was able to buy myself some clothing and even send 100 pesos back to my mother. . . .

Once again I had to depart for the north, where my family was now living, at the "Holy Water" camp, next to the nitrate railway. I left Coquimbo on the steamboat *Mapocho* and disembarked one Saturday afternoon in Caleta Buena, a port located between Iquique and Pisagua that had grown a great deal because of nitrate production. . . .

Finally, I arrived at "Holy Water," where I found work as a *herramentero* [tool-carrier], which was a job generally filled by boys my age [13 or 14]. This was one of the most cosmopolitan nitrate companies, given that alongside Chilean workers there were Argentine, Peruvian, and Bolivian workers as well. The boss of the tool-carriers was the "superior" Leonor Juárez, who supervised us each morning when we left, each one in charge of two mules that carried tools to the nitrate fields. There, right out in the fields, was a

forge to fix the augers that belonged to each *barretero* [workers who dug or blasted preliminary holes in the desert floor] and the iron bars owned by the company.

The barreteros had to prepare the blasts that extracted the nitrate from the fields. I watched them intently as they worked, as they used the augers and iron bars to open up small shafts within the craters. These shafts were about one foot in circumference and their depth varied according to the terrain. Then, beneath the shaft the barreteros would open up a space, extracting the soil and sand from underneath, so that the [explosive] powder would fill more space and the explosion would be as large as possible, in order to extract as much nitrate as possible. Then they would set up the wick. The barreteros conducted their work with extreme caution. They were paid according to each foot dug out and the barreteros made it a matter of honor to avoid reckless charges—which threw the nitrates too far out—and “lazy” charges, which failed to explode altogether. . . .

At that point, following the custom of the residents of the pampas who got this custom from Bolivia, I learned to “arm myself,” that is to chew coca leaves in a very organized and complex fashion. The company store sold coca leaves to the barreteros and miners at one peso per handful. Between lunchtime and the time the explosives were detonated, the workers sat upon the ground and “armed themselves,” which consisted of placing in the mouth a large mass of jute and carbon ash, mixed with ground raw potato, that one mixed with the coca leaves in the mouth. The resulting pasty mass swelled up the cheeks of the *armadores* [coca-chewers], who smoked at the same time. No one spoke: they only watched the cars rise and descend during the half hour that the process lasted. The first time that I—imitating my elders—“armed myself,” I got sick to my stomach and vomited violently.

The coca leaves, which were brought from Bolivia in large sacks or bundles on the backs of mules, represented one more source of profit—and not a small one—for the company stores. . . . After more than a year in the “Holy Water” camp, the family decided to move to “Puntachara,” in the same district of Negreiros. At that time, the phenomenon that most characterized the plains was the mobility of workers from one nitrate camp to the other. No one took root in any one place. Rarely did anyone ever grow old in the same place. Indeed, the plains dwellers were nomadic and wandering in nature and did not stay in one place for long. . . .

Eventually, the family left for Puntachara because of the odd reason that my grandmother was having trouble maintaining her cow in Agua Santa. In Puntachara, I changed my job as toolman for the blue overalls of the workers of the dockyard. . . .

I became familiar with the tools of the mechanic, the distinct keys [or switches] with strange-sounding names. In the end, I learned about all of the instruments that were utilized in the dockyard. My salary was two pesos and ninety cents per day. They paid a small part of the salary in cash and the rest in tokens, exchangeable only in the general store. I liked the look of the tokens. They were silver-plated metal, polished, and shiny and very different from the bone and shell tokens used in the nitrate camps. The tokens came in denominations of one peso, and from ten to twenty cents.

The company’s strategy was that the workers would spend their money at the company stores and not outside the camps. Buying provisions on a monthly basis in Negreiros was a convenient and less expensive option for the workers. But I had to buy everything in the general store with those infamous tokens, at high prices fixed by the company. It was often said that the companies did not profit as much from the sale of nitrates as they did from the business from their company stores.

At the end of 1904, I joined my family in Iquique. . . . I did not idle long in Iquique. Just when I was becoming familiar with the wharfs and streets, my grandmother took me by the arm to the railyard to see if there was work for me there.

They hired me and assigned me to the docks, in the lathe department, where train cars and locomotives were repaired. More than two thousand “stained ones” worked in this enormous workshop. In one area of the shop, locomotives with slight damage were repaired. The trains were fueled by burning large blocks of coal imported from Cardiff, England. The local coal from Lota did not have enough energy generating potential. The engineer worked on one side of the boiler and the coal stoker on the other. I began in the lathe room. . . .

I began working in the San Lorenzo *oficina* [mine] [in 1907]. . . . The night of December 10 the whistle sounded three times to wake the mechanic and his apprentice. Ernesto Araya got up and went to work. I remained sleeping and the next morning I was awakened with the news that a strike had broken out. Who had declared the strike? Everything had been done so silently, that for many, including me, the news came as a complete surprise.

What were the reasons for the strike? While I worked in the workshops of the Nitrate Railroad I had seen my salary rise and fall according to the fluctuations in the exchange rate. . . . But here in the pampa things were very different. Here one worked by the job, for a piece rate, or for a fixed wage. The exchange rate had fallen [by half] and as a consequence many basic goods, principally clothing and food, increased in price, in some cases by double.

There was misery and hunger in the pampa, above all for large families. . . . The strike movement had been underground because there were no union organizations that could legally represent the workers then. . . .

Twenty-four hours later a group of some thirty workers, carrying Chilean flags and banners, left for the nearest oficina, Santa Lucía, . . . and were able to halt production there. The column became larger as the pampinos joined it and the peregrination continued from oficina to oficina, until it arrived at La Perla. . . .

The columns of workers had to spend the night in the middle of the pampa at the edge of improvised campfires to combat the cold. . . .

The town was bubbling with energy, full of workers from different oficinas. Orators spoke spontaneously from the kiosk for musical performances or from the flatcars in the railway station. I listened to all the speeches—those leaders who had come out of the heat of the struggle said they were on strike; that we could not continue living with the miserable wages; here was oppression, repression and exploitation; a large loaf of bread cost a peso, that is to say a fourth of what a worker earned in a day. . . .

The word to go down to Iquique began to spread rapidly among the diverse group of pampinos since the province's intendant did not stoop to coming to Alto San Antonio. If the mountain didn't come to us, we would go to the mountain. . . .

The fifth day of the strike, that was a Sunday, there appeared in the morning in the hills, the first groups of workers. In Iquique there was a great deal of excitement. The maritime workers and other workers' organizations commented with enthusiasm on the heroism of the pampinos who had made this long and difficult march, driven forward by their desire for justice. The authorities, on the other hand, were prisoners of a tremendous alarm. They had the Huasares and Esmerelda regiments brought to the city, since the strike of the pampinos coincided with a strike of the port workers, who were also suffering economic problems. The great fear of the authorities was that the pampinos and the workers from Iquique would make contact and initiate an offensive together. To prevent this from happening, as the nitrate workers arrived in the city, they were pushed into closed precincts of the city in Iquique's suburbs. . . .

On Monday, the sixth day of the strike, the nitrate workers continued coming down from the pampa and filling the streets of Iquique. They came in large groups, with their women and children, on foot or on trains that they themselves operated. The railroad company had stopped service in support of the companies, but there were plenty of workers who knew how



Nitrate workers, c. 1906. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Colección Archivo Fotográfico Biblioteca Nacional de Chile.

to drive locomotives and moved the convoys carrying cargoes of pampinos. . . .

The pampinos paraded through the streets and organized large assemblies in which the orators did not tire of recommending that the workers stay calm and maintain order; that nobody drink and that if any undisciplined pampino were to disobey these orders and get drunk, his own comrades would take him to the police station. In the days the pampinos were in Iquique there was not one act of disorder, not even the most minimal violation of private property, nothing that could provoke the intervention of the police. . . . In the assemblies, the orators, almost with tears in their eyes, condemned violence and called for respect for law and order. . . .

The streets filled with soldiers and marines and no groups of more than two were allowed to circulate. The strikers were cornered wherever they found themselves. . . . Around nine I went to the Escuela Santa María and I saw how the soldiers took the stoves away. How were my *compañeros* [comrades] going to eat? . . .

Upon returning in the afternoon I saw that they were setting up machine guns in front of the school. The police were pushing the people, telling them the intendant was going to respond to their petitions. But, in reality,

Two years old! This is a cry that, in terms of the life and action of the Seamstresses' Association, sounds something like a victory song, one of joy, deep satisfaction and tenderness!

For those who follow every step in the development of modern workers' movements; for those who predicted that the organization of trade resistance societies would only last as long as the needs of the moment; for those who laugh sententiously, placing the success of women's organization in quarantine; for all of those people it will seem strange, incomprehensible and doubtful that the Seamstresses' Association, organized and founded by women workers, should have arrived quietly, with slow but sure steps, at the end of two years of existence.

Actually, this might be the first time in the life of female organizing in the capital that a women's trade organization—discussed and attacked so much since its foundation—presents the beautiful spectacle of completing two years of existence. Don't be surprised if they say that it's strange that a society such as the Seamstresses' Association should boast of entering a third year of life.

If we keep in mind the indifference and the almost complete lack of organizational spirit that characterizes women workers; if we remember that women resist everything that smells of violence and organized struggle; and then we note that in the actual case of the founding of the Seamstresses' Association, the statutes call for economic improvement through energetic trade organization activity and the practice of the redemptive doctrines of solidarity and union (until recently little known to our working *compañeros* [comrades]); we will see that, in reality, the triumph of the Seamstresses' Association's second anniversary is one of the greatest victories to be achieved in the recent years of trade organization. And we might add an important observation here: in these two years, working women have demonstrated their gifts of faith, action and perseverance. And what is even more valuable, we see what these two years of organized existence have meant for us: women have shown their deep and rigorous discipline, and demonstrated their new consciousness of their worth and of their important and crucial productive potential.

The love and kindness of my *compañeras*, as well as my love for the cause we defend, have obliged me to remain until today at the head of this wonderful organization, which a handful of modest *obreras* [women workers] started on June 24, 1906. Today, just as yesterday, I feel in my breast the beautiful and energetic longing for justice for the crushing and ill-paid work of the *obreras*, for these noble and bold collaborators of the increase of capital, who fuel employers' exploitation and luxury.



Washerwomen in a Valparaíso slum, c. 1900. Although many nineteenth-century observers dwelled on Chile's dramatic rural poverty, the cities increasingly attracted the attention of journalists, novelists, poets, and others. As land scarcity and early industrialization drew ever larger numbers of poor Chileans to urban centers in search of work, the shanties that ringed them gave rise to *conventillos*: poor dwellings organized around a central patio where washing and cooking took place; photographs of the era often show women at work there. Photographed by Harry Grant Olds. Courtesy of Colección Museo Histórico Nacional de Chile.

On the wings of memory I go back two years to examine the moral and physical state of my sisters of the workshop, comparing them with the women workers of today, who bear that noble and brave stamp that imprints on our acts the awareness that we know what we are and what we are worth. I see more self-assurance and energy in the formerly timid countenance of women workers, and as though to complement such a pretty picture, I find an atmosphere, a perfume of social solidarity that inspires all of their organized activities. These reflections are another valuable face of the victory that has been achieved with the spread of women's association and organization.

As for the rest, we all know about the change that has taken place in bourgeois practice and customs, in terms of the consideration and relative respect they now pay to women workers in the workshop and the

factory. With a few brush-strokes, we can paint a water-color that shows the struggle and the victory that women workers have carried out during these past two years of female trade union organizing. The street actions achieved by women's organizations have been few—one could truthfully say that the strike itself has not existed. It would be more correct to say that a perfume—that powerful spirit of discipline, organization and solidarity—has pervaded the proletarian environment and has caused women's action and energy to take its place in the economic struggle, a place that modern progress had reserved for it. The relative gains in wages, work-hours and the personal consideration for the woman worker that have been achieved in some workshops and factories—in this category the Camisería Matas, the Fábrica de Tejidos and the Justiniano Military Workshop stand out—show that union spirit and pressure are slowly but surely taking deep root in women's trades. And the day is not far off in which the diverse and lost elements of women's organization will fuse together into one action and one force; and this will show working women the beginning of a dawn that will have no dusk, which will usher in an era of improvement and economic independence for working women.

The Seamstresses' Association, rightly enough, has not been far from this slow but sure female awakening. One can say that because of the initiative, energy and constant propaganda of the women workers who belong to those different workshops and factories (each of which contained members of the Seamstresses' Association), the timid women workers—the classic and slavish meat of exploitation—one day rebelled and refused to be automatic machines any more; they took hold of the book and opened their hearts to the committed voices of their sisters who want to save them from the opprobious and bestial yoke of capitalist exploitation.

Oh! How beautiful! What a touching event! How our spirits move at the memory of such an important victory, the noble victory of freeing the spirit of our sisters! Ah! The awaited hour has come: that hour glimpsed by the *visionaries*, by those noble [women] fighters who sowed the seed of economic redemption in the midst of jokes and indifference. They have accomplished what the skeptics called *impossible*. These classic and legendary sheep evolved into wounded lionesses—modest and quiet, conscious and lofty—and demanded of their boss, that usurper of their well-being and energy, the fair and legitimate payment for the work they do for 10 or 12 hours a day. The struggle did not last long. The furious and despotic boss laughed at the demands of the women workers and threw them out onto the street. Several days went by and the doors of the factory remained closed. However: the blindfold of pride and fatuousness that covered the avaricious eyes

of the boss fell before the magnificent glimmer of iron-like female organization, and the boss of yore, who waited for the obrera to come begging for work, had to surrender before the evidence and recognize that the obrera of today had woken up and demanded what, as an agent of industry, corresponds to her.

Days went by and the Chilean obrera gave the most beautiful and noble example of union and social solidarity, perhaps for the first time. Union and force defeated the pride and gold of the despotic boss: he called his workers and made an agreement. "It is not possible," he said, "for me to give you all that you ask. This would ruin me. I will give you half and . . . afterward we'll see if I can give you more. But you must promise me that no other boss will find out what I am paying you."

Here I have sketched the outlines of my talk, the work and triumph of women workers' organization. With victory attained singly in different workshops and factories, the value of women's trade organization has been recognized, at the same time that the organization moves toward a future and colossal collective victory.

It would be a mistake to sleep on our laurels, or to give in to the biased propaganda of our enemies, who spread the idea that women's trade organization has no purpose. It would be a crime to betray the work we have begun and have already set in motion with bravery and foresight. It would be cowardly and reprehensible to get left behind on the way. We must continue energetically and confidently to the end, even if we do so at a slow pace.

Like other human actions—the great causes, the struggles, the innovations, the very progress of humanity—this movement also has its painful aspects: deep sorrows, profound discouragements, which wound, demoralize, and destroy the warmest spirit. This has happened in the very bosom of our dear institution. It is painful to say this, but our mission is like that of the surgeon, who rips open living flesh to extract the pus that suppurates inside, and heals the wound with fire if necessary.

Not just a few, but many *compañeras* have deserted our ranks—why not say it?—discouraged by the antipropaganda that some members have blindly and treacherously carried out, lending credence to the rumors and slander that vent their fury on even the most noble and honorable things. This has meant that we have had to carry out a mortal struggle within our own organization.

However, our enemies' propaganda against us have been countered in part by the constancy, bravery, and conviction of those courageous members, of those who have every day been like a sentinel, watching over the future of our beloved institution. And today, in spite of the vicissitudes and

mishaps, in spite of the fact that the bone of contention has been sown in the very bosom of our association, in spite of mistrust and even demoralization, our Association has stayed virile and lofty, challenging the rigors of the division that some have tried to sow there. Like those armies, destroyers of universal peace, who after combat and victory call the roll of the brave ones who have remained at the foot of the cannon, we today—after the innumerable tests through which we have passed in our short organizational life of two years—call the roll of the courageous ones who remain, the fighters who make up the vanguard of the proletarian women's army. We are few, perhaps, but we know that we are foot-soldiers, seasoned and experienced in the field of battle, the anonymous proponents of the cause, who march unshaken to conquer the ideal that can be seen in the distance.

Translated by Elizabeth Q. Hutchison

The Lion of Tarapacá

Arturo Alessandri

Arturo Alessandri was leader of the Liberal Alliance, composed of the Liberal, Radical, and Democratic parties, and president from 1920 until his removal at the hands of a military coup in 1924. He was known as "the Lion of Tarapacá" for his famous populist senatorial campaign of 1915 in Chile's nitrate districts, in which he assailed the Chilean aristocracy and embraced the working class and poor as mi querida chusma (my beloved rabble). Alessandri injected a personalistic populist style into Chilean politics, competing with the Left and organized labor for the loyalty of miners and urban workers. In the speech provided here, he makes the case for social welfare and labor legislation as vital for the resolution of the bitter labor conflicts and profound social changes produced by nitrate-generated economic modernization. In office, Alessandri sought to implement key social reforms, including a labor code, but met with an intransigent conservative Congress, who consistently refused to pass his legislation. The political stalemate was broken in 1924 when military officers placed pressure on Congress to pass a number of Alessandri's social and economic reforms and then took power after his resignation and departure into exile. A second coup, led by the army majors Carlos Ibáñez and Marmaduke Grove, who supported Alessandri's reformist program and opposed the more conservative upper-level officers who had taken power in 1924, led to Alessandri's return to the presidency in 1925. The Parliamentary Republic came to an end with a new Constitution in 1925 that restored a number of key presidential powers and imposed limits on congressional authority. Alessandri's government would last only months; he resigned once again in late 1925 under pressure from Ibáñez, who had become his minister of war.

Despite his populist appeals to workers and efforts to build a state-directed system of labor relations, Alessandri, like his predecessors, responded to strikes with military force. In 1925, for example, he declared a state of siege and sent troops to Tarapacá to repress a general strike of railroad and port workers and nitrate miners who demanded a series of rights encoded in Alessandri's own social legislation, including the eight-hour day, as well as the nationalization of the nitrate industry. The crackdown on the strike resulted in the massacre of hundreds of workers who had occupied the La Coruña oficina (mine). Nonetheless, Alessandri's government