



REPRESENTATIONS OF LABOUR [1]

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"Presentation by the Workers? Committee of Tarapacá to the Minister of the Interior and members of the National Congress, of twenty-eight points detailing the needs, reforms and demands for the improvement of working conditions in the nitrate pampa. Iquique, 15th of March 1904."

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1. That they consider necessary the currency of company scrips or tokens, provided that the *salitreros* [nitrate bosses] fulfil the commitment undertaken with the Government and its representative, the *Intendente*, to exchange them at par; but that the paper vouchers issued to individuals by some *oficinas* [desert field factories] should be abolished, since they are nonconvertible and cannot be used as a means of exchange;
2. That being themselves, the workers, owners of the salary that they earn by their arduous work in the nitrate fields, they should not be denied the freedom to purchase basic necessities for themselves wherever it is most convenient to them, as currently they are obliged to purchase only at certain shops, such as the *pulperias* [factory general stores], where the inflated prices double the cost of essential commodities; also that travelling salesmen should not be turned out of the precinct of the *oficina*, nor should workers? purchases, under pretext of being contraband, be snatched from them, a practice now inveterate in all the *oficinas*;
3. That the monthly quota of one peso to pay the doctor and drugstore is unnecessary; that this represents a monthly capital of more than 18,000 pesos, that is, around 200,000 pesos per year, which goes back into the pockets of the *salitreros*. That in the *pulperias*, medicines are never given to the sick, but what is dispensed must be bought at extortionate prices. That the doctor is only obliged to make two visits weekly; and in the event of accidents, the injured are sent to the hospital in Iquique, without the doctor even knowing of it in most cases. That these patients are cared for at the hospital as inpatients, thanks to payment made by the mutual aid societies, established all over the pampa [desert plains]. That this capital of 200,000 pesos is

usually even more, since any worker who leaves or is fired from an *oficina* pays the quota of one peso twice if he changes jobs within a month, because it is charged both where he is leaving and also where he takes up employment, and these changes of workplace are common, running into the hundreds across the pampa. That if this quota is not abolished, it should go towards the public good, so that when combined with state subsidies, local infirmaries may be set up in the pampa towns, at regular distances, in order that the lives of those injured in accidents may be saved, because in almost all cases, they die during transportation by train to Iquique hospital;

4. That due to the *cachucos* [boiling tanks] where the nitrate is extracted having no protective grills, railings or fencing, there are frequent tragedies from carelessness or haste in working, maiming hundreds of workers who fall into the boiling *caldo*, and permanently crippling those lucky enough to survive. The production machinery is a machinery of death, since neither is there any safety for the machine operators, who work there at a temperature of 125 degrees, testing the endurance of our race to the limits. And, finally, the poor condition of the gunpowder magazines is another great danger, together with the trains, boiling tanks and system of work in the *caliche* fields, representing a peril of death for all the workers, leaving a multitude of destitute widows and orphans, the *salitreros* giving them no assistance whatsoever, and instead, with no compassion, turning these unfortunate people out of the camps;

5. That the *salitreros*, through those in their employ, tax the traders and sellers of fruit and vegetables that visit the compounds of the *oficinas*, without these fees being handed over to the Municipal Treasury, but rather paid into their own coffers;

6. That the state schools are shameful blots on our community given their sheer scarcity and the teachers' meagre salary of 70 pesos per month, while there are many private schools, where students are obliged to pay between 2 and 5 pesos per month for the maintenance of the teaching staff; that the majority of teachers are not properly trained to carry out their posts, and that compulsory education is enforced only to avoid truancy and corruption among the children so numerous across the pampa;

7. That all minor judges should be hired independently so that they administrate even-handed justice, because currently some among them are in the service of the industrialists and capitalists, who have bought this justice. In the case of claims over salaries or other issues, when the defendant is an important employee or the boss, he does not attend and his defence is heard over the telephone, the worker always cheated because the judge, if not employed by the *oficina*, at least receives some recompense;

8. That security and guarantees for savings should be given, and that the State treasury should give back Union money, because ordinary people, busy with their daily work, cannot spend months and years in making legal claims to the State for payment owed, to recover what has been taken against their will from these Unions and to

whom it rightfully belongs;

9. That in most of the *oficinas*, with honourable exceptions, norms of hygiene are completely ignored. That in the midst of the camps there are pens of animals, while in others there are slaughterhouses, which contaminate the air with their decomposing waste and can be the source of epidemics bringing death, desolation and fear;

10. That the workers, upon any protest or conflict with the stewards or factory employees, are turned out with no prior warning, whilst they are under obligation to give two weeks' notice if they wish to leave. The expulsion is carried out by placing a wagon at the door of the worker's room, and loading all of his worldly possessions and his family onto it, by armed force if they resist, then depositing it in the middle of the inclement pampa, without resources of any kind, leading to scenes of horror that would pierce the soul of even the most stony-hearted. The man must wander the pampa in search of work and a new roof to shelter the unhappy family. During this time, we have often seen tender infants crying from hunger and thirst, under a blazing sun, the mother having nothing to give the child of her flesh, neither water nor bread nor shade, and covering the body of the child with her arms, for food and water only her own tears which embody the bitterest of sufferings this family, full of miseries, must endure. This tribulation, which happens daily to workers, lasts all through the day and sometimes into the next, the families having to spend the night in the midst of the desert, with no roof other than the black vault of the heavens;

11. Those who extract *caliche* [nitrate ore] on their own account are called *particular* [self-employed labourers]; what such a worker collects within a certain time limit is paid by the cartload. He works desperately, with superhuman effort, under the intolerable tropical sun. He is given 1.50 pesos per day as an advance, which he must give back later on the first settling up. Sometimes the *caliche* he has collected is thrown out under pretext of being low-grade but the *oficina* employee gathers it up afterwards, to profit without paying for this work; other times the *particular* does not find any *caliche* within the area allocated to him and works in vain, owing the advance at the end of the day; still other times, after the work has already been done, the price of the cartload is lowered, and he is forced to put up with this simply to avoid the wagon being sent to his door and expulsion of himself and his family; and there are other times when he is left standing with the *caliche*, not being given a cart to transport it to the boiling tanks or *cachuchos*, until he gives up in despair, and moves on elsewhere leaving the *caliche* abandoned, the capitalist then collecting it free of charge, since he has made no payment of any kind to the departed worker;

12. There are sections of the nitrate railway that do not have fixed ticket prices for either freight or passengers. There charges are whatever can be got away with. There are occasions where to travel less than a mile the worker or labourer is charged one peso per person and one peso for each bundle of cargo

13. That apart from the elevated prices of the merchandise sold in the *pulperías*, above all for basic necessities, such as meat and other essentials, the pound is weighed at 12 ounces, always of poor quality and handed over imperiously, against which no-one can appeal, for fear of not being served and being prevented from obtaining provisions for the day's victuals, not to mention the hidden charges, and the rudeness and abuse hurled at wives and daughters, showing the depths of degradation to which the shopkeepers have sunk;

14. That the *salitreros* have established a clandestine flow of foreign immigration to take the place of national workers, and since this is the prerogative of the Government, a quick and efficient solution should be found to avoid it;

15. That in the *pulperías* liquors of abominable quality are fabricated, which constitute veritable poisons putting public health at risk, without any inspection from the authorities to correct this evil, which infringes the law on alcohol openly and brazenly, as it refers to this matter;

16. *Abandonment of the cemeteries.* ? That a number of cemeteries are to be found in a state of utter abandonment, no longer enclosed, with disinterred corpses half-eaten by dogs, while others have become tips for nitrate waste, so that the graves of loved ones are lost forever, with there not even being any way to protest at such profanation;

17. On this point we submit that an effort has been made to spread about in official circles that the worker of Tarapacá earns a daily wage of eight or more pesos, while in fact, by a general and approximate calculation, it scarcely reaches two pesos per day, on top of which this miserable wage is eaten up in the *pulperías*, by the extortionate prices and by the swindling and cheating in weights and measures;

18. That the homes of workers have been forcibly entered by the police, on the orders of the *salitreros*, on any pretext, in the absence of their residents, without the authorization of any competent authority, treasured possessions (whether of monetary or sentimental value) sometimes disappearing;

19. Gambling is tolerated in the inns or gambling dens of the *oficinas* and protected by the *salitreros* and the police, to allow the innkeeper to make enough profit with which to pay the exorbitant monthly tax to the *oficina*, as otherwise, obliged to buy from the *pulperia*, with the price of food so elevated, he cannot make a profit but only losses in this business. Apart from this, there are frequently workers who having drunk too much liquor, lose their entire days earnings at the gambling house, leaving their families in misery and hunger, circumstance that leads them often, in the pits of despair, to commit crimes and misdemeanours;

20. The administrators also apply fines for any absences, but this revenue is not deposited with either the national or municipal treasuries but with the management

itself, without any authority preventing the *salitrero* from being boss, debt collector and judge.

21. That in the *pulperias* personal correspondence is violated and official correspondence is intercepted, neither one being treated with the least care, so that better remuneration of the postal workers is essential, or the setting up of an administrative system that would improve such a terrible service. Currently correspondence is thrown out, and found by the recipient covered in dirt: to say nothing of that posted from the *oficinas*, which suffers from as much neglect as the incoming mail, and is sometimes sent to its destination, when the shopkeeper feels like it, or may be opened, read or stolen. The newspapers from Santiago and elsewhere are also stolen by these dishonest employees, who deliver them when they feel like it after having read them; and 'El Pueblo?', that newspaper published on alternate days which is hated by all wicked people for the great crime of telling the truth, uncovering frauds and theft, defending the oppressed and condemning executioners with fiery censure, is not only not delivered, but its reading is forbidden, and in many places it is torn into shreds to prevent its circulation

22. That public meetings held by the workers are strictly prohibited, as is the right to petition, and that their meetings, despite always being conducted peacefully, with great order and respect, are broken up with the sword and horseback charges by the police, on instructions of the *salitreros*, their assaults on defenceless citizens resulting repeatedly in death and serious injury;

23. That the water across most of the pampa is brackish, unhealthy and of the worst quality, producing diarrhoea, stomach illnesses and many other problems, also causing infant mortality, and about the condition of which neither the *salitrero* nor the doctors nor the authorities concern themselves, because throughout this province the lives of the workers are valued at nothing, the attitude towards them seeming closer to one of wilful destruction, like that of mice; as seen with such zeal when the bubonic plague appears in the great population centres of the civilized world;

24. That compulsory education should be properly put in place for the children of the workers, with the protection of orphans and homeless children, to which the State should supply food and clothing;

25. The dwellings of the workers within the camps are in general, with some exceptions, unhealthy, unhygienic, usually constructed from discarded materials found on rubbish tips such as sacks, milestones, pieces of canons, cables and other refuse, without taking into account the constant dampness of the ground due to its high concentration of nitrate;

26. That the police leave completely unattended the police stations of the towns, being always at the service of the *salitreros*, so that the *oficinas* act as headquarters of the

rule of law, from whence are issued orders, always arbitrary and tyrannical, to the nitrate worker of the pampa;

27. That the workers are always slandered and labelled as trouble makers and anarchists; that by claiming their salaries, expressing their grievances and uniting to resist capital they are seen as endangering the lives and interests of the industrialists; because they are oppressed, insulted, and robbed of their salaries, by what is subtracted for moneys owed to the administration, or the exorbitant prices of the *pulperias*. Whenever the workers rise up they do so peacefully, and in recent times, with the existence of mutual societies organising for aid and even for resistance, no excess has been so much as rumoured, much less murders or theft, unless on the part of starving people not belonging to these community organisations, brought about by the *salitreros* themselves. Strikes are always orderly, and when they take place it is because the workers are so tired of the endless harassments, humiliations and abuses, that they have no choice but to put their patience and their enslavement to one side so that there may be a glimmer of justice for them;

28. That the government premises leased to other individuals generally house dens of prostitution, source of incurable diseases that bring the ruin of our people.

Apart from the above exposition, it remains for us to point out that the *salitreros* never contribute to the maintenance of schools, hospitals and other institutions which could benefit the workers, apart from belated and limited subsidies which certain *oficinas* make on rare occasions, when conscience must be pricking them over this immense accumulation of profits, amassed with tears, with blood and even with human flesh.

Such is the presentation made to the Minister by the Workers' Committee at the audience of 15th March of 1904, that lasted one and a half hours, from 2.30 to 4 in the afternoon, and at which the Minister asked that it should be set forth in a written record, ending by saying that it was not be possible that there should be hostility towards the *salitreros* on the part of the workers, since the former afford them their bread and provide them with work.

The members of the Committee consider the closing words of the Minister an insult to the thousands of workers that they represent; and did not object solely in order to demonstrate to him their amenability and their confidence in the Government's ability to curb the impositions of the big industrial enterprises, which trample on our laws and make themselves arbiters of our fates.

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[Source: Manuel Salas Lavaqui, Trabajos y precedentes presentados al Supremo Gobierno de Chile por la Comisión Consultiva del Norte. Imprenta Cervantes, 1908]

Cluster: Nitrate

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