

Concept and Inspiration for ¡Lesivo!

Telling the Guatemalan railway story with a propaganda poster

By Henry Posner III and Mitch Markovitz

The Guatemalan railway story is one that needs to be told often and in different ways, as the audience is highly diverse, from Guatemalans to railway policy makers worldwide: the railway's decline, death, rebirth as Ferrovias Guatemala, and ultimate martyrdom is unique in world rail history. One commentator has compared its fate to "a scene from *Atlas Shrugged*."

For these reasons it seemed that a propaganda poster in the Latin style would be a good way to bridge cultural gaps and command a broad range of viewers' attention. Artist Mitch Markovitz has been doing posters for a long time, but he had not previously created one with a political bent and so he took up "The Cause" as a new challenge. The resulting image has had the intended strong reactions.

The most poignant use of the poster was at the farewell dinner for the remaining employees of Ferrovias Guatemala: each of us left with a copy of the poster signed by each of our *companeros*, to occupy a place

of honor in our homes and offices. But most important is that the message was delivered to a broad audience: Mitch has achieved that with this fine piece of work.

Henry Posner III
Chairman, Railroad Development Corp.

Henry Posner contacted me concerning the story of the railroad in Guatemala. He was interested in my creating a poster painting that would relate the sad situation of the railway infrastructure being removed by thieves and vandals. Mr. Posner continued to explain there was little if no support from the Guatemalan Government regarding restoration of the railroad. I was shocked to see photographs of the line with right of way stripped of rail. I was completely surprised to see images of railroad bridges partly removed and askew.

Then came the task of creating the setting and story for the poster. A poster painting, or any other painting of this genre, has to relate its story upon first sight of the viewer in an instant, as if it were a one act play and overture that lasts less than one minute.

Mr. Posner told me about the Guatemalan national bird, the Quetzal. He went on to speak about the "shame" of the state of the railroad and requested there be a Quetzal weeping in the painting.

After researching the style of poster that was favored by my client, researching the Quetzal, and studying photographs of the railroad and its motive power, I came to my visual conclusions. Having been a locomotive engineman, a conductor, and a brakeman myself, I know the very worst situation to come upon in train service would be a missing bridge. There would be nowhere else to go if you did not get stopped in time. I wanted the view to look upward at the train as it was the railroad that was to assume the "hero" position in the painting. The Quetzal, being attractive in its coloring, was placed on the right to take the position of the right-hand border of the image, as if the bird might place its wings in comfort over the train.

The phrase "Lesivo" means "against the interests of the State." As the word is one of emphasis and negativity, I used large, vermilion red letters with the exclamation points fore and aft as in the Spanish language. I had the engineman looking directly at the viewer as if to make the statement to the audience.

Mitch Markovitz

Left: Railway bridge in Guatemala in 2011, partially destroyed by thieves and vandals. Photograph by Jorge Senn

Opposite: Mitch Markovitz, *¡Lesivo!*, 2011, oil on canvas, 28 in. by 42 in.

