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George Rodríguez

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Long-standing Labor Problem Explodes Immediately Before Start of New Costa Rican Government

by George Rodríguez

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Delays and other problems have characterized salary payments at the Ministerio de Educación Pública (MEP) for years, and 2014 has been no exception. But this year, the problem turned out to be more serious than usual, and it exploded just three days before the new government took over. The new government was the first administration headed by the Partido Acción Popular (PAC), a center-left and fairly new political organization—thus alien to this Central American nation’s traditional establishment. In its fifth election process, it overwhelmingly won April’s presidential vote to the historic and social democratic Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN)—then in power (NotiCen, April 17, 2014).

The official technical explanation states that, in April, the past administration’s education authorities decided to change the old, problem-causing, computerized salary system for the new Integra-2 system, used by other ministries.

The decision was made, said the authorities then in charge, because delayed and incomplete fortnightly salary payments dating back to February of this year made it necessary to address and solve the problem, which had MEP workers—mainly teachers in the public-education system—increasingly upset.

Local media began to widely report on the issue, including giving testimony by many of the almost 14,000 teachers—of a total of some 78,000—who had received either no salary at all or had been paid ridiculously low amounts such as 5,000 colones (some US$10)—or even less.

Days before taking office, new Education Minister Sonia Marta Mora—a former state Universidad Nacional (UNA) rector and former head of the Consejo Nacional de Rectores (CONARE)—began to look for a solution to the MEP salary crisis. This included a meeting with predecessor Leonardo Garnier, who held the post during the past two PLN-led administrations (2006-2010, 2010-2014).

In repeated statements to the media before leaving the post on May 8—when the new government came in—Garnier vowed that the problem would be solved by the first of the two payments in May and that the new administration had nothing to be concerned about. After taking office, Mora told a press conference at Casa Presidencial that, during a meeting with Granier, her predecessor gave her the same assurance and that she left the meeting with a feeling of relief.

Teachers walk out

By the end of April, with that month’s second payment, the problem persisted, and on May 5 it blew up: that morning, MEP teachers went on strike nationwide for as long as it could take to have the problem solved.

A few hours after the teachers’ movement was launched, then President-elect Luis Guillermo Solís—himself a college professor—expressed support for the strike during a meeting with civil
society leaders and immediately after in statements to journalists and advised them to not end the movement until the problem was solved and every single teacher began to receive payments normally. "As an educator, and as a citizen, I am in solidarity with the strike by Costa Rica’s educators, and I join it," he told the meeting.

In statements to journalists shortly after the gathering, Solís again said, "I join the strike," adding that "failures [in salary payments] can only trigger a reaction like this. The problem must be solved."

"I wish we could solve the problem, and also that it’s understood that the strike could go on for I don’t know how long, without the problem being solved, and I want the problem to be solved and the strike to end, for a very simple reason: there are thousands of kids and youngsters that are going to be affected by the strike," Solís explained only three days before being sworn in. "So, I’d prefer that, once and for all, we reach an agreement—I’m not saying the strike should end before we have an agreement ... the agreement should include the end of the strike. Because, otherwise, we’ll not be able to fulfill this obligation. We’re too early in the school year."

By then, Mora, the appointed education minister, was holding meetings with MEP technical staff in charge of the salary-payment system, aiming to have the situation under control by May’s first salary disbursement. But the problem turned out to be much more complex than expected—and much worse that explained by the previous authorities.

On May 9, the president’s first full work day at Casa Presidencial and minutes after Solís ordered that metal police fences be removed from the sidewalk around the building, leaving only several Fuerza Pública (police) officers for security (NotiCen, May 22, 2014), a massive, peaceful teachers demonstration marched up to the place, and union leaders met with Mora.

Five days later, when the first salary payment was made by the new administration, irregular payments again occurred, teachers’ frustration rose, and the strike and massive, peaceful demonstrations were kept in force by the public-teachers unions.

Despite their recognition the government’s disposition to dialogue with unions, tension began growing after several days of bilateral talks and after administration efforts to return to normal, through emergency payments, proved unsuccessful.

On May 27, an early afternoon meeting took place between Mora and Labor Minister Víctor Morales, representing the government, and teachers union leaders—including Gilberto Cascante, Gilberth Díaz, and Ana Doris Gutiérrez, presidents, respectively, of the Asociación Nacional de Educadores (ANDE), Sindicato de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores de la Educación Costarricense (SEC), Asociación de Profesores de Segunda Enseñanza (APSE), the three major state educators organizations.

**Mysterious email**

As the meeting was starting, a political element surfaced when PAC congresswoman Nidia Jiménez said that hundreds of striking teachers had received that morning a message with the PLN logo, calling on them to maintain the measure. The message originated in an apparent MEP department email, said Jiménez, quoted in a communiqué issued by the PAC legislative bloc.

"This morning, hundreds of educators received a message from the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN), calling on them to continue the teachers strike," said the five-paragraph text. "The email
message was sent to education center principals from the electronic mail of the Supervisión Educativa del Circuito 03 in San Carlos," a northern city some 75 km northeast of here.

Quoted in the communiqué, Jiménez said, "It is unacceptable that a political party should try to benefit from the strike, since this movement stems from a real and just need. Educators deserve that their salary be paid on time. ... Nothing of this should be used to sabotage, with political-electoral interests, the government’s undertaking. While the authorities, along with teachers organizations, are devoted to seeking solutions, Liberación Nacional obstructs the dialogues through its networks within the teaching staff."

The four-paragraph text mentioned by Jiménez states, "WE WILL NOT YIELD, and we will overwhelm this government to disfavor its administration," and it adds, "All educators throughout the country are invited to stay on the streets for an indefinite time. Mainly those who have payment problems. The struggle will remain, the message goes to the present government, the people are on the street and will remain on the street."

Congressional PLN bloc members immediately reacted denying the authenticity of the message, saying that the PLN logo was forged and asking the Ministerio Público (MP) to investigate the matter. Meanwhile, at the government-unions meeting, the leaders of the teachers’ bloc presented both ministers with a proposal that had been consulted with rank-and-file members.

The meeting extended for some twelve hours, and around 2 a.m. on May 28, a document was produced—basically the unions’ proposal, with specific legal and technical additions that did not change the core of the original text, as Cascante told NotiCen that morning. He said the text was brought for consultation with ‘las bases’, through the organizations’ Internet sites.

The draft agreement established a fast-payment mechanism to update delayed salaries and to make up for incomplete payments and also a bilateral committee to monitor the update as well as future salary payments into 2015 and to solve whatever problems still occur, and it called for the end of the strike, Cascante said.

"It looks pretty good," the head of ANDE said. "If there’s consensus in general, the specific end of the strike could be signed this afternoon. I’d expect that now ... the people [rank and file] understand that this is a major effort to reach a solution to the conflict, as soon as possible."

Also that morning, in a live interview with the local Radio AND, Mora said, "I’m optimistic. I believe that today will be a very important day for the country."

But the situation was to take an unexpected turn, when, that afternoon, union leaders told the ministers that "las bases" had now rejected the document.

Mora and Morales immediately left the meeting for the Casa Presidencial, where at night they told a press conference of the inexplicable contradiction, said the talks were on hold until the strike was ended and teachers returned to classrooms, and warned that teachers still striking on Monday would be liable to salary deductions.

Unions have now asked the Costa Rican Catholic Church to mediate in an effort to draw up a document, in replacement of the previous text, to be consulted with "las bases" and, if accepted, to be presented to the government for signing. Meanwhile, the strike is on.