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John Neagle

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Mexico: Teachers' Union Boss Resigns, Strike Continues

by John Neagle

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Since April 17, at least half of Mexico's public school teachers have participated in a "work stoppage" program called by the National Education Workers Coordinator (CNTE), a dissident faction within the National Education Workers Union (SNTE). Some teachers walked off the job and have not returned, while others are participating in a staggered work stoppage schedule, starting with a few hours, and increasing over time according to results of negotiations with government and "mainstream" union officials. (See LADC, 04/18/89.) The teachers' major demands are a 100% pay hike, and "democratization" of the SNTE, including the ouster of union leader Carlos Jonguitud Barrios from all positions of influence. According to dissident teachers, the national union has long been run by a corrupt clique headed by Jonguitud, and with the direct and indirect backing of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The SNTE is reportedly Latin America's largest union, with a membership of about 850,000. As of April 21, negotiations among government officials, and representatives of the CNTE and the old-line faction of the SNTE known as the "Revolutionary Vanguard" (VR), had produced only one "preliminary" agreement on arrangements for an extraordinary congress of the union's Section 9, scheduled for September. Section 9 includes some 80,000 teachers who work in the Federal District. The CNTE insists on equal representation for the dissident faction and the old guard under the VR at the congress. Similar demands have been delivered by teachers in union sections pertaining to the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca and the Valle de Mexico. On April 22, the Federal Conciliation and Arbitration Tribunal called on the SNTE and its dissident CNTE faction to ensure that teachers returned to work by noon on Monday, April 24. The Public Education Secretariat called on the tribunal to attempt to break the negotiations stalemate. The tribunal warned that disciplinary action (probably dismissal) will be taken against teachers who stay off the job after mid-day April 24. On April 23, Carlos Jonguitud Barrios resigned, after a 20-minute meeting with President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The resignation was announced by Salinas' office, not Jonguitud. Jonguitud remains a federal senator from the state of San Luis Potosi. Governor of the state from 1979 until 1985, Jonguitud took over the SNTE in 1972. He and 30 armed men entered union headquarters and declared themselves in charge. The takeover was supported by then-president Luis Echeverria, who disliked the previous union bosses, headed by then-secretary general Carlos Olmos. From 1972 to 1974, Jonguitud's front man, Eloy Benavides, served as SNTE secretary general. In 1974, Jonguitud took over as secretary general, created the Revolutionary Vanguard, and declared himself as the Vanguard's "leader for life." In later years, nominal leadership was turned over to his supporters, while Jonguitud retained titles such as "unique leader and permanent adviser" to the union, "natural leader of Mexican teachers" or "moral guide," in addition to life-time chief of the Vanguard. He renounced all of those titles after his meeting with Salinas. Jonguitud has been accused by dissident teachers of numerous types of corruption and of responsibility for the murder of 150 dissident teachers since 1980. He is widely reported to be a multimillionaire, whose fortune was derived from the union dues he controlled for about 15 years. [A primary school teacher in Mexico earns around \$140 a month basic pay, while secondary schoolteachers get up to \$250 a month. Together, the nation's teachers pay \$1.5 million in union dues a month.] In public denunciations, dissident teachers have accused Jonguitud and his clique of "selling jobs" (requiring payment of 2 million pesos for individuals entering primary

school teaching positions), extortion (taking up to 30% of loans granted to teachers from union funds), trafficking in professional certification (selling various certification documents at prices ranging from 5,000 to 500,000 pesos), among other forms of corruption. After learning of Jonguitud's resignation, Mexico City dissident regional leader, Jose Luis Ortega, said, "It's another step, an important step in our advance toward democracy and away from `caciquismo.'" He was referring to a traditional system of rule by "caciques," wealthy landowners, at the expense of the poor. "But it does not resolve our dispute. Our struggle will continue, our work stoppage will continue," Ortega added. National Democratic Front (FDN) senator, Porfirio Munoz Ledo, said that the resignation was the outcome of the national teachers' movement, and represents the beginning of a process toward full democratic participation by the nation's teachers in their union and reform of the education system. CNTE leader Juanita Gonzalez said Jonguitud's resignation may represent a strategy to demobilize the dissident movement for union democratization. A CNTE leader from Oaxaca, Patricio Hernandez, said the sheer magnitude of the dissident movement within the SNTE made Jonguitud's resignation imminent, but that his "presence" continued in the union structure and its leadership. At a strategy meeting, Hernandez asserted that the CNTE must demonstrate to the Mexican public that the time for the removal of Jonguitud's "Revolutionary Vanguard" from decision-making and control of union funds has come. Former presidential candidate of the National Action Party (PAN), Manuel J. Clouthier, told reporters in Monterrey that the struggle of the teachers to advance democratization has won its objective with the fall of Jonguitud Barrios. Despite the arbitration tribunal's demand that teachers return to work on Monday and Jonguitud's resignation, dissident leaders said they would go ahead with the work stoppage and a series of marches to the center of Mexico City. On April 24, after an overnight meeting of the SNTE central committee, all loyal to Jonguitud, the union's secretary general Refugio Araujo del Angel resigned at dawn. By breakfast time, the central committee had voted unanimously to replace him with Elba Esther Gordillo, a 20-year union veteran. She immediately called on the dissident teachers to end their work stoppage. The SNTE's finance secretary, Serafin Ramirez Ramirez, and another national officer, Alvaro Brito Alonso, also resigned. Some estimates indicate that more than half the union membership has supported the dissidents by participating in the movement for higher pay. With Jonguitud out of the picture, dissident leaders predicted that teachers previously afraid to speak out would now join the marches for higher pay. A CNTE leader, Teodoro Palomino, said four separate protest marches would go ahead as planned Monday, converging in the central zocalo square. He told reporters, "The government could give us what we ask if they cut the amount they pay their creditors in foreign debt." In its April 24 edition, daily newspaper La Jornada called Jonguitud's resignation an "important result of the efforts of Mexican teachers for union democracy." According to La Jornada, the resignation "is inscribed in a complex and convulsed period of political transition...Jonguitud is gone, but the vertical, cacique structure remains intact. In order to dismantle the Jonguitud caciquismo, the SNTE must democratize." (Basic data from Notimex, 04/20-24/89; Copley News Service, 04/24/89)

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