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Dissident Union Members Protest Against Government Economic Policies

by LADB Staff

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The Mexican labor movement, which has presented a united front for several decades, is showing signs of internal divisions. The differences became particularly evident during the May 1 labor day commemoration in Mexico, when several member unions of the Workers Congress (Congreso del Trabajo, CT) organized a May Day parade in direct defiance of orders from union officials. This year, as in 1995, both the CT and the Mexican Workers Confederation (Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico, CTM) decided against holding a May Day parade to avoid embarrassing protests against President Ernesto Zedillo's administration and the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The CT and CTM, two closely linked organizations, have long enjoyed a privileged alliance with the PRI, which has governed Mexico for 66 years.

CT and CTM representatives have participated in key economic decisions in Mexico, such as negotiations on the annual anti-inflation pact. In fact, support by the CTM and CT for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which was staunchly opposed by labor organizations in the US and Canada offered a particularly powerful reflection of the alliance that exists between those labor groups and the PRI. Until now, the only dissident voice within the Mexican labor movement has come from the authentic workers front (Frente Autentico de Trabajadores, FAT).

With the help of labor allies in the US, the FAT's relatively small membership has focused on organizing workers at maquiladora plants. The FAT also took a strong anti-NAFTA stance and has frequently criticized Mexico's PRI-led governments for abandoning the "true plight" of workers. However, the FAT's influence has remained relatively small (see SourceMex, 02/16/94).

The strong relationship among the CT, the CTM, and the PRI began to gradually erode after the devaluation of the peso in late 1994 and the ensuing economic crisis. In dealing with the crisis, the Zedillo administration took a series of widely unpopular moves, including the elimination of price ceilings for basic products such as powdered milk and tortillas (see SourceMex, 03/20/96). These moves, along with Zedillo's inability to deal with massive unemployment and a significant drop in the purchasing power of salaries, have led some union members to question whether labor should continue its unquestioning loyalty to PRI administrations.

On the other hand, key union leaders, such as Fidel Velazquez of the CTM and Rafael Rivapalacio Pontones of the CT, have been very reluctant to split with the PRI. The decision to cancel the May Day parade for the second consecutive year angered many rank-and-file members who called for the resignation of both Velazquez and Rivapalacio. In the absence of an "official" May Day parade, a faction of the CT, led by Francisco Hernandez Juarez president of the telephone workers union (Sindicato de Telefonistas de la Republica Mexicana, STRM) helped organize an informal march with the participation of 40 CT-affiliated unions. To coordinate the parade, the participants formed

a new group, the Coordinadora Intersindical Primero de Mayo. In an interview, Hernandez Juarez hinted that he was not necessarily seeking a split from the CT and CTM. However, he warned that the Mexican union movement is in danger of falling apart unless CT leaders abandon their policy of blindly towing the government line.

For their part, CT leaders acknowledged in an interview with the daily newspaper *Excelsior* that the CT and CTM were facing a "problem of unity" given the differences among union members on how May Day should be observed. CT leader Enrique Aguilar Borrego, who heads the banking workers union, said all factions in the union movement generally shared the same goals, including improving salaries, promoting more democracy in Mexico, and supporting growth and development. On the other hand, he acknowledged there were different approaches on how those goals should be achieved. Therefore, he said, the CT must proceed cautiously and take the views of all member unions into account in determining future policy.

Still, Aguilar suggested that it would be counterproductive for the CT to totally change its relationship with the government. "We cannot throw away the gains that organized labor has achieved during the past 30 years," he said. Indeed, CT leaders, acknowledging that they could not do anything to stop the Coordinadora Intersindical Primero de Mayo from proceeding with its May Day parade, instead negotiated an agreement pledging that neither side would resort to violence. In the end, no confrontations occurred. Only a few inflammatory protest acts were reported, such as the burning of several US flags in front of the US Embassy, which was on the parade route.

Still, despite the criticism of the US, the bulk of the anger was directed at President Zedillo. Thousands of participants in the parade held signs urging President Zedillo to stop "betraying" Mexican workers. They demanded that the administration take steps to restore constitutional rights to Mexicans, including health benefits, education, employment, and fair salaries. In addition, they demanded that the government immediately halt all privatizations of state enterprises, including the administration of retirement funds. These demands were contained in a document dubbed the "Manifiesto to Our Country" (*Manifiesto a la Nacion*), which was signed by the 40 participating unions. Participation by CT members in the march was overwhelming, a sharp contrast to 1995, when only three unions defied the leadership's ban on holding a May Day parade.

In addition to the STRM, a key organizer of the event was the union representing social-security workers (*Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores del Seguro Social (SNTSS)*). Among the participants were unions representing white-collar professional workers, such as the airline pilots union (*Asociacion Sindical de Pilotos Aviadores, ASPA*), and unions representing employees at *Banco de Comercio (Bancomer)* and *Colegio de Mexico*. This year, organizers of the event decided against delivering formal speeches and focused principally on bringing the parade together. Several key figures joined in the parade, including former presidential candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) and leaders of *El Barzon*, an increasingly influential organization of middle-income farmers that was formed several years ago to protest high interest rates on agricultural loans. The protests against the Zedillo administration's economic and social policies were heard beyond Mexico City. According to Mexican news reports, union members in most urban areas organized some sort of public event to celebrate International Workers Day and to denounce the government's economic policies.

Many of the protests outside of Mexico City were directed against local governors and mayors, many of whom are members of the PRI. Workers throughout the country sounded the same themes, urging Zedillo to push for emergency salary increases, take steps to halt price hikes on basic products, and propose concrete steps for borrowers to deal with overdue debts. Meantime, the CT and CTM leadership and their supporters held a low-key May Day celebration in Mexico City. President Zedillo, who addressed the gathering, attempted to appease the protestors by acknowledging that the Mexican economy was far from recovered. He pledged that his administration would continue efforts to boost employment and income back to levels prevalent before the crisis hit Mexico in 1994. "Workers and the government alike know that, given the extent of the crisis, full recovery will take more time and more effort," Zedillo said.

But the president also emphasized that Mexico is "on the path to recovery." He cited as evidence increases in employment and productivity. At the same time, he warned that any quick-fix solution is bound to send the country into another economic crisis. For their part, Rivapalacio and other CT and CTM leaders used the May Day celebration to pledge their support for Zedillo's economic program. They also criticized the opposition National Action Party (PAN) for taking a confrontational approach in dealing with the PRI. There were some protests even at the official ceremony. For example, Hector Valdez Romo, secretary general of the federation of government workers unions (Federacion de Sindicatos de Trabajadores al Servicio del Estado), urged Zedillo to provide Mexican workers with "breathing room." "The Mexican worker earns the least of all workers in Latin America," said Valdez. "Our country ranks sixth in the world in social inequality."

As a result of the dissent by member unions, the CT and CTM may attempt to find a safe distance between themselves and the PRI. As an alternative, CT and CTM leaders appear to be seeking ways to work more closely with employers and business organizations in an effort to hammer out strategies to deal with the economic crisis. In early May, union leaders and representatives of the Mexican Employers Confederation (Confederacion Patronal de la Republica Mexicana, COPARMEX) unveiled a joint document in which the two sides generally agreed on guidelines governing such areas as worker rights, salaries, hiring practices, worker efficiency and productivity, and other issues. According to union sources, the document was drafted after eight months of consultations, which included participation by some members of the Labor Secretariat (Secretaria de Trabajo y Prevision Social, STPS). Among other things, the two sides proposed the creation of a new Employment Secretariat (Secretaria de Empleo), which would be devoted to finding solutions to Mexico's massive unemployment problems. (Sources: Agence France-Press, 04/28/96, 04/29/96, 05/01/96; Reuter, 04/30/96, 05/01/96; Notimex, Deutsche Press Agentur, 05/01/96; Excelsior, 04/26/96, 05/02/96; El Financiero, 04/30/96, 05/02/96; New York Times, 05/02/96; Reforma, 05/02/96, 05/03/96; La Jornada, 05/02/96, 05/03/96, 05/06/96)

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