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Telephone Union Leader Proposes Creation of New Labor Organization

by LADB Staff

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Mexico's official labor movement which over the years has faced very little organized dissent within its ranks has begun to face some challenges from influential member unions. At a special labor conference (Encuentro Sindical Nacional, ESN) in Mexico City in late January, the leaders of the telephone workers union (Sindicato de Telefonistas de la Republica Mexicana, STRM) and the union from the national university (Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, STUNAM) questioned whether the labor congress (Congreso del Trabajo, CT) is working in the best interests of members.

In pushing for an alternative labor organization, STRM president Francisco Hernandez Juarez argued that the CT had lost its autonomy because its decisions are too closely tied to the policies of the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Hernandez and other leaders also accused the CT and its sister organization, the workers confederation (Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico, CTM), of adopting "autocratic and undemocratic" practices in their decision-making processes. "The CT has no remedy," said Hernandez Juarez. "It is an organization that has become weak and lost all its value."

Hernandez Juarez proposed that members consider replacing the CT with an autonomous organization, which would be named the united workers central (Central Unitaria de Trabajadores, CUT). The STRM leader's proposal received strong support from STUNAM president Agustin Rodriguez, who described the CT as "obsolete." On the other hand, other key members, such as the electricians union (Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas, SME), agreed with Hernandez's call for change but suggested that such changes be made within the CT. "Our position is for the CT to be renewed," said SME president Pedro Castillo Medellin.

Failing in his proposal to replace the CT, Hernandez later predicted that one-fourth of the CT members would eventually join the new CUT. "The decision to form a new labor organization is irreversible," Hernandez told the daily newspaper El Universal. "We want to create a competing option to a labor movement that has become complacent and corporatist." Labor leader Fidel Velazquez downplays new challenge In one of his weekly press conferences, CTM president Fidel Velazquez insisted that the official labor movement remained united despite challenges from Hernandez and other leaders. He said the new movement has very little chance to become a viable alternative because most of the rank-and-file members remain very loyal to the CTM and CT.

Still, Hernandez's decision to challenge the CTM and CT leadership caused some irritation to Velazquez, who insulted the STRM president and asked him to prove that he is capable of leading the union movement. Indeed, some critics have questioned the 96-year-old Velazquez for his insistence on hanging on to power. In fact, 90% of respondents to a public opinion survey conducted

by the daily newspaper El Universal agreed that Velazquez should relinquish the post that he has held for 50 years. "Fidel is the product of the political system, said political columnist Francisco Marin Moreno in the daily newspaper Excelsior. "There has been no election and no campaigning. No negotiation on the union leadership is possible."

Despite strongly negative public opinion, CTM members in early February elected Velazquez for another three-year term, through the year 2000. Official unions pledge support for PRI in July election. The small cracks within the labor movement have come at a time when Velazquez and other leaders of the official labor movement are attempting to organize their members for the upcoming congressional and state elections in July of this year. Velazquez has already promised to deliver the vote of CT and CTM members to the PRI candidates in the July local elections. "No one is going to support a party that will eliminate unions and weaken collective bargaining and labor rights," Velazquez said, referring to the opposition National Action Party (PAN), which is expected to make further inroads against the PRI.

In the past year, the union leadership's relationship with the PRI has shown some strains because of the economic crisis, which resulted from the devaluation of the peso in late 1994. Some union leaders have openly questioned President Ernesto Zedillo's willingness to cave in to business interests and accept increased prices for consumer products such as tortillas (see SourceMex, 09/27/95 and 12/11/96). On the other hand, CT and CTM protests against the economic crisis have been relatively mild and purely symbolic. The most visible protest was the CT's decision to cancel the annual May Day parade for two consecutive years in 1995 and 1996 (see SourceMex, 04/12/96 and 05/08/96). Even then, the CT said the parades were canceled to avoid violent and angry demonstrations from workers affected by the economic crisis.

Unions to return to May Day parade this year

At one of his weekly press conferences, Velazquez announced that the CT would resume its participation in the May Day parade this year. He said workers should no longer be angry at the government because President Zedillo's policies have helped Mexico emerge from the economic crisis.

Velazquez pledged that no restrictions would be imposed on the 6 million CTM workers participating in this year's parade as long as all public demonstrations were orderly and legal. The decision to return to the May Day parades is considered by some as another effort to influence the July elections. Some members of opposition parties have also accused the CTM of adopting unfair tactics to influence the upcoming vote.

In an interview with the weekly news magazine Proceso, federal Deputy Jose Narro questioned the timing of the CTM's new commodities program. Under the program, which was announced in early January, the CTM is purchasing beans, rice, sugar and other foodstuffs at wholesale prices, then reselling the goods at half the normal retail price to members of CTM-affiliated unions.

According to Narro, a member of the opposition Labor Party (PT), the CTM and the campesino confederation (Confederacion Nacional Campesina, CNC) initiated the program to coincide with

the start of political campaigns. He said he would ask the federal electoral institute (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE) to conduct an investigation of the program's "illegal" practices.

For his part, Velazquez has denied that the program has any connections to the upcoming elections. "When food is distributed to the people in any significant manner, it is not political," he said. "One has no relation to the other." Narro's accusations are also directed at the CNC, which has pledged to work for PRI candidates in the upcoming elections. On the other hand, other organizations representing small agricultural producers have announced their intention to form an alliance with the opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD).

"We see a need for legislators who are inclined to correct the agricultural policies adopted thus far by the government," said a letter to the PRD leadership signed by five organizations. "These policies have failed to halt the impoverishment in rural areas and the increasing dependence on food imports." The letter was signed by such organizations as the Centro Independiente de Obreros Agrarios y Campesinos (CIOAC), the Union Nacional de Trabajadores Agrarios (UNTA), and the Union Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas Autonomas (UNORCA). [Sources: The News, 01/07/97; La Jornada, El Nacional, Novedades, 01/30/97; Reuter, 02/03/97; Excelsior, 01/06/97, 02/05/97; El Economista, 02/05/97; El Universal, 01/30/97, 01/31/97, 02/04/97, 02/06/97].

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