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Carlos Navarro

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Workers Congress Cancels Annual May Day Parade For Third Consecutive Year

by Carlos Navarro

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In early March, labor leader Fidel Velazquez announced that the country's two largest labor organizations the Congreso del Trabajo (CT) and the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM) would not hold their annual parade to commemorate international labor day on May 1. This is the third consecutive year the CT and CTM have canceled the parade. The two labor organizations called off the event in 1995 and 1996 to avoid embarrassing protests against the economic policies of President Ernesto Zedillo's administration and the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). In his weekly address to the media, Velazquez used the same reason when he informed reporters that the parade would not be held again this year. The CTM leader said the economy has improved in general, but the benefits have yet to reach much of the working class. Labor leader says decision based on consensus of member unions Velazquez emphasized that the parade's cancellation was not a unilateral decision on his part but rather an agreement reached by leaders of the 41 member unions of the CT. Still, some leaders of CT unions denied that they had any input into the decision and raised the possibility that they would organize their own march on May 1, as was the case in 1995 and 1996 (see SourceMex, 04/12/95 and 05/08/96). Among those planning a parade are the Confederacion Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos (CROC), the Confederacion de Trabajadores Regionales de Mexico (CROM), and the Federacion de Sindicatos de Trabajadores de Servicio del Estado (FSTSE). Some of the smaller independent unions, such as the Frente Autentico del Trabajo (FAT), are expected to organize their own march. Speaking to reporters, FAT leader Antonio Villalba said Velazquez's announcement was a reflection of a "great fear among union leaders" that their members would express their true feelings in front of President Zedillo. Critics say labor seeking to quiet dissent before elections Also, some critics said the cancellation of this year's May Day parade is an attempt by the CT and CTM to limit public dissent against the Zedillo administration and the governing PRI ahead of the July 6 local and national elections. Velazquez and other CT and CTM leaders have already pledged thousands of votes on behalf of PRI candidates. Unlike Velazquez, many union leaders said they cannot guarantee they will deliver the vote for the PRI in the July elections. One leader warned that the poor economic conditions for the working class could be reflected in high abstentionism or in a vote for opposition parties such as the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD). In recent weeks, Velazquez has made conflicting statements regarding the labor movement's position on the Zedillo administration's economic policies. As recently as mid-February, the 96-year-old labor leader threatened to call a nationwide strike to protest the loss of purchasing power for workers and the deterioration of social conditions in Mexico. "While salaries have increased 40% in the past year, prices have increased up to 140% more in real terms," said Velazquez at that time. Yet, despite the presence of small dissident unions such as FAT, the CT and CTM have traditionally kept tight control of the labor movement while maintaining a close relationship with the governing PRI. However, that control has shown some signs of weakening, with labor leaders of important CT member unions threatening to form their own labor organization (see SourceMex, 02/12/97). Similarly, other union leaders, including CT vice president Enrique Aguilar Borrego and Mario Suarez of the Confederacion Revolucionaria

de Trabajadores (CRT), have expressed their dilemma in wanting remain loyal to the PRI but also to more visibly protest the country's economic situation. Still, one powerful labor organization, the electricians union (Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas, SME), has decided to take matters into its own hands. The SME has threatened to strike on March 16 if management from the power company Luz y Fuerza does not meet their demands for a 55% salary increase. A SME strike could leave 5 million customers in parts of Hidalgo, Mexico, Puebla, and Morelos states without electrical power. Company executives have refused to offer increases beyond the 17% called for under the anti-inflation and economic-growth agreement (Alianza para el Crecimiento Economico, ACE) negotiated among representatives of the government, labor, and business. (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 02/17/97; The News, 02/18/97; Novedades, 03/07/97; El Universal, 03/10/97, 03/11/97 La Jornada, Siglo 21, El Nacional; 03/11/97)

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