

7-2-1997

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Changes Expected in Labor Sector Following Death of Long-Time Labor Leader." (1997).
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Changes Expected in Labor Sector Following Death of Long-Time Labor Leader

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1997-07-02

The recent death of labor leader Fidel Velazquez is expected to generate important changes in the structure of Mexico's labor movement, although the extent of change remains uncertain. Velazquez, who presided over the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM) and the Congreso del Trabajo (CT) for 57 years, was 97 at the time of his death in mid-June.

Velazquez was replaced on an interim basis by Leonardo Rodriguez Alcaine, leader of the Sindicato Unico de Trabajadores Electricistas de la Republica Mexicana (SUTERM). Rodriguez Alcaine will head the CTM until February, when the labor organization has scheduled elections. However, observers suggest the SUTERM leader, who is considered a member of the old guard, will probably not retain the position on a permanent basis because of strong demands among some members of the rank and file for internal changes in Mexico's labor organization and the appearance of a competing labor organization.

Labor groups expected to distance themselves from PRI

The most important change expected in the aftermath of Velazquez's death is a move to distance the CTM and CT from the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Even before Velazquez's death, the CT and CTM were already considering some sort of separation from the PRI, given the recent decline in the governing party's influence. In late May, Velazquez hinted that the CTM and CT would promote the creation of their own political party if the PRI performed poorly in the upcoming congressional and gubernatorial elections on July 6 (see SourceMex, 05/28/97).

Indeed, almost all public opinion polls suggest the PRI could lose its overwhelming majority in Congress, thus ending the governing party's traditional control over the legislative process. The PRI is also expected to lose the mayoral post in Mexico City, and perhaps one or two gubernatorial races. The strongest call for separation from the PRI has come from Sen. Juan Millan Lizarraga, the CTM officer who also belongs to the executive body of the governing party. Millan, who represents the labor sector in the PRI leadership, has often hinted that the close relationship of the labor movements to the governing party has hindered the ability of workers to obtain higher salaries. "We want to promote an intense and reasoned participation by workers in the political process," he told reporters. "We can no longer tell union members that the PRI is the best option."

In June, Millan displayed a measure of independence from CTM leadership by suggesting that PRI candidate Alfredo del Mazo would have difficulty winning the Mexico City mayoral election. Millan was promptly scolded by Velazquez for making an "anti-PRI" statement (see SourceMex, 06/04/97). Millan's position is in stark contrast to statements made by Rodriguez Alcaine in late June. The interim CT leader promised to deliver 5 million union votes for the PRI, which he described as the "only viable option" for labor. "We are closing our ranks behind the PRI to contribute to the party's clear and undisputed triumph," said Rodriguez.

Dissident leaders formalize move to form new labor congress

The greatest challenge to the CT and CTM structure, however, is expected to come from a rival organization formed by dissident CT leaders. The principal proponent of the rival union the Foro Sindical Unitario (FSU) is Francisco Hernandez Juarez, leader of the Sindicato de Telefonistas de la Republica Mexicana (STRM). Hernandez Juarez and other labor leaders announced the FSU's creation as an alternative to the CT in February of this year (see SourceMex, 02/12/97). The new organization will formally initiate operations in late July.

According to Hernandez Juarez, the FSU will chart an independent course, generally following the example of the US-based AFL-CIO. "The major difference between this and other labor federations is that the FSU will be born outside of government control," said Hernandez Juarez.

Similarly, labor-law expert Pedro Robles said the FSU could attract unions that currently belong to the CT if the FSU succeeds in promoting higher increases in the minimum wage than those negotiated by the CT and CTM. For his part, Hernandez Juarez told reporters that the new organization would end autocratic practices that have tended to perpetuate the power of unions, but that did not represent the best interests of rank and file members. For example, the FSU leader called for an end to the negotiation of "protection" contracts signed by many foreign companies with unions before they hire workers or initiate operations. These "protection" contracts which Hernandez said have become more widespread under the North American Free Trade agreement (NAFTA) have tended to set wage scales at relatively low levels and often contain guarantees against strikes.

On the other hand, Hernandez Juarez said he would "not issue a call to revolution" in the labor movement. "I don't see assertiveness necessarily defined as going on strike," said the new FSU leader. The creation of the new labor congress has caused some concern among CTM and CT leaders, who have called for talks with FSU counterparts to explore areas of common interest following the July 6 elections. As expected, one of the main CT-CTM proponents of establishing the links with the FSU is reformer Juan Millan. For his part, Hernandez Juarez expressed strong support for the discussions with the CT and CTM, but also pledged to follow through with the formation of the FSU even if the traditional labor organizations propose major internal reforms. (Sources: Associated Press, 06/25/97; La Jornada, 06/26/97; Novedades, 06/26/97, 06/27/97, 06/30/97; El Financiero International, 06/30/97; The News, 06/26/97, 07/01/97; El Universal, 06/19/97, 06/22/97, 06/26/97, 07/01/97; Excelsior, 06/22/97, 06/26/97, 07/01/97, 07/02/97)

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