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Official Labor Group Elects New Leader: Unions Show Signs of Fracture

by LADB Staff

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In late August, members of the Congreso del Trabajo (CT) elected Hector Valdes Romo to head that labor organization. Valdes is also director of the union that represents government workers (Federacion de Sindicatos de Trabajadores al Servicio del Estado, FSTSE). Valdes assumes leadership of the CT during a very difficult period for organized labor, which is experiencing strong internal divisions, a loss of its traditional influence with the government, and growing competition from a new labor organization, the Foro Sindical Unitario (FSU).

The CT's sister organization, the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM) is scheduled to elect its new leader sometime in February. Current leader Leonardo Rodriguez Alcaine assumed the post on an interim basis following the death of long-time CTM leader Fidel Velazquez in June (see SourceMex, 07/11/97).

Eight major unions announce departure from CT

Dissent within the CT and CTM has become particularly apparent in recent months. On the day Valdes was elected to head the CT, eight unions formally withdrew from the CT, citing concerns that the organization had lost touch with the needs of Mexican workers. The dissidents were led by the Asociacion Sindical de Pilotos Aviadores (ASPA) and the Sindicato de Telefonistas de la Republica Mexicana (STRM). "A number of labor organizations and unions are ignoring the signs of the times," said ASPA in justifying its withdrawal from the CT. "Their leaders refuse to acknowledge our country's deep economic crisis and the defeat of the labor movement in the face of neoliberalism and globalization."

Several of the dissident unions either joined the FSU or expressed interest in joining that organization. Many of those unions had previously expressed a desire to leave the CT and CTM but had delayed their departure because of a lack of a viable alternative and their loyalty to Velazquez. According to the weekly news magazine Proceso, a number of unions strongly resent former CT leader Victor Morales Flores, a close ally of Velazquez. Flores is accused of having cooperated with the government in the breakup of the national railroad Ferrocarriles Nacionales (FERRONALES).

Internal dissent also evident within CT, CTM

In addition to the unions that have left the official labor movement, the CT and CTM is also facing strong dissent within its own ranks. For example, CTM education secretary Juan Millan, who is also a federal senator and a leader in the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), has continued to push for drastic changes within the CT and CTM and for cooperation with the newly formed FSU. During a forum in late August, Millan repeated his position that the CTM and CT should work closely with the newly formed FSU because the labor movement is in a "state of

crisis." Millan's statements drew strong criticism from the CTM's executive committee, which said he shouldn't pretend to speak for the CTM or CT.

"Millan should make these statements as personal opinion and not as an official position of the CTM," Rodriguez Alcaine told reporters. Even with the resistance to cooperate with the FSU, some union leaders are beginning to recognize the need for reorganization within the official union movement. In early September, Rodriguez Alcaine raised the possibility of merging the CT and the CTM into a single organization that will truly "fight for the interests of the working class."

However, Rodriguez Alcaine cautioned that this proposal is still in its initial stages and must yet be worked out by leaders in the two organizations. Raul Trejo Delarbre, a labor expert at Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), questioned whether long-time labor leaders like Rodriguez Alcaine, Juan Moises Calleja, and Jose Ramirez Gamero are able to take the steps required to implement true reforms within the labor movement. "The question is, how much capacity do they really have, and how much can they be trusted to promote a true modernization of a union movement in which they are the most dramatic example of the pre-modernist generation," Trejo said in a column in the Los Angeles Times.

Political parties divided over changes to federal labor law

Meanwhile, some changes to the Mexican labor structure could come about as a result of reforms to the federal labor law (Ley Federal del Trabajo, LFT), which the Chamber of Deputies is expected to consider during the current session. However, partisan differences could make these changes difficult. The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) are expected to push for an end to the longstanding system by which the CTM and CT give preference to workers affiliated with the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

For its part, the PRI claims that the current system is necessary to ensure that the constitutional right of workers to strike and engage in collective bargaining is protected. (Sources: Associated Press, Los Angeles Times, 08/20/97; Proceso, 08/24/97; Diario de Yucatan, 08/26/97; The News, 08/21/97, 08/28/97; El Universal, 08/26/97, 08/28/97; Excelsior, 08/19/97, 08/25/97, 08/26/97, 08/28/97, 08/29/97; La Jornada, 08/21/97, 08/27-29/97; El Nacional, 08/29/97; Novedades, 08/19/97, 08/25-29/97, 09/15/97; El Financiero International, 09/22/97; El Economista, 08/19/97, 08/21/97, 08/26/97, 08/27/97, 09/23/97)

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