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## **Official Labor Organizations Return to Labor Day Parade After Three years**

*by LADB Staff*

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After a three-year absence, the official labor organizations Congreso del Trabajo (CT) and Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM) announced plans to lead this year's May Day parade through the streets of downtown Mexico City. The two organizations, which have been closely linked to the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), had refrained from participation in the parade in the past three years to avoid public demonstrations against President Ernesto Zedillo's policies (see SourceMex, 03/12/97).

The decision not to march on May Day was made by the late Fidel Velazquez, who presided over the CTM in both official and unofficial capacities for 57 years. Velazquez died in June 1997 (see SourceMex, 07/02/97). According to CT leader Hector Valdes Romo, the CT, CTM Confederacion Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos (CROC), and the Confederacion de Trabajadores Regionales de Mexico (CROM) are expecting wide participation from their members in the May Day parade. The four organizations represent 10 million workers.

### ***Official labor groups seek to stem popularity of rival UNT***

In addition to Velazquez's death, the return of the CT and CTM to the May Day parade is an effort to stem the growing popularity of newly formed rival labor organization Union Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT), which was created in 1997 (see SourceMex, 11/26/97). As one of its first priorities, the UNT pledged to restart large labor marches. In November 1997, the UNT and its sister organization Coordinadora Intersindical Primero de Mayo formally announced plans to organize a huge parade. The two organizations represent about 3 million workers.

The UNT, which has taken an aggressive pro-worker stance, pledged to march in protest of President Ernesto Zedillo's economic policies. UNT leaders said marchers will carry signs demanding revisions to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), increased social spending, and support for programs to combat extreme poverty. "Under current economic policies, everything is oriented towards the benefit of the wealthy, constantly increasing poverty levels in this country," UNT leader Francisco Hernandez Juarez said in an interview with Reuter. UNT forges alliance with US-based AFL-CIO The UNT has taken other strong steps to assert its position as an independent union, such as forming a partnership with the US labor organization AFL-CIO. The partnership, which also involves the UNT sister organization Federacion de Sindicatos de Empresas de Bienes y Servicios (FESEBES), was formalized during a visit to Mexico City in late January by AFL-CIO leader John Sweeney.

As part of their ongoing link, the UNT, FESEBES, and the AFL-CIO formed a special committee to ensure that provisions of the NAFTA parallel agreement on labor are enforced in Mexico. The three organizations are pushing for the inclusion of a social charter in NAFTA that covers labor, environmental and human rights issues. The text of the charter which also includes a code of

conduct for multinational companies and protection for migrant workers would have to be signed by the US, Canadian, and Mexican governments.

UNT leader Agustin Rodriguez Fuentes said the three organizations may complete a rough draft of the charter by July or August, when the document will be presented to the US House of Representatives and Senate, and to the Mexican Chamber of Deputies and Senate.

As part of the discussions on the charter, the three unions proposed to include input from a wide spectrum of US, Canadian, and Mexican labor and agricultural organizations. But the CT and CTM, which have strongly supported the Mexican government's position on NAFTA, are unlikely to join the charter effort.

Shortly after the meeting among the UNT, FESEBES, and the AFL-CIO, CTM leader Leonardo Rodriguez Alcaine issued a statement strongly criticizing the NAFTA charter initiative. Rodriguez said the charter opens the door for violations of Mexican sovereignty. "This will give foreigners the power to affect matters where Mexicans should have exclusive say," said Rodriguez Alcaine. Rodriguez Fuentes attempted to appease the CTM leadership by offering assurances that the UNT will not accept any measures that would violate Mexico's sovereignty. "As Mexicans, we will defend our country against any action by a labor organization or government that violates our sovereignty," said Rodriguez Fuentes.

But Rodriguez Fuentes cautioned the CT and CTM about becoming irrelevant to the needs of Mexican workers. "The UNT was not formed with the purpose of destroying the CTM or dividing the labor movement, but to build a new labor front that is relevant to the needs of our country," said Rodriguez Fuentes. UNT activities force CT & CTM into more militant positions. The mere existence of the UNT has forced the CTM and CT to take a more outspoken stance against the PRI-led government than in past years, when the organizations were led by Fidel Velazquez.

In mid-January, the CTM accused Labor Secretary Javier Bonilla of taking an overly optimistic stance by stating that worker salaries were recovering. The two organizations said they will press for an increase in the minimum wage of at least 17%. Late last year, the CT and CTM were proposing a minimum wage increase of 23%. The CT has threatened to call an assembly of agricultural and labor unions to analyze the possibility of a nationwide strike to protest the government's argument that salaries are on the recovery. The CT and CTM have been able to advocate more openly for larger increases in the minimum wage this year because the annual practice of negotiating anti-inflation agreements has been discontinued (see SourceMex, 01/14/98).

While leaders of the labor organizations have not been shy about publicly airing their differences, there are efforts on both sides to find some common ground. In early February, the CT-CTM coalition and the UNT both issued public statements criticizing the government's decision to raise the minimum price of tortillas by 15% to 2.20 pesos (US\$0.26 cents) per kg, up from the previous rate of 1.90 pesos (US\$0.23 cents). CTM leader Rodriguez Alcaine said the tortilla price more than cancels out the 14% salary increase, which was approved under a non-binding informal pact with government and business (see SourceMex, 01/14/98). "This increase is an attack on the less privileged classes," said Rodriguez Alcaine.

Similarly, UNT leader Rodriguez Fuentes said labor organizations would be more effective if they formed a common front to fight escalating prices for basic foodstuffs and a larger increase in the minimum wage. "We have reached a point where we must abandon our tendency for confrontation and unite the labor movement to demand an emergency increase in the minimum wage," said UNT leader Rodriguez Fuentes. The UNT has also prepared a separate initiative to present to the Chamber of Deputies to modify the structure and functions of the Comision Nacional de Salarios Minimos (CNSM).

UNT leader Rodriguez Fuentes said the CNSM must cease to exist if the federal agency fails to enforce the constitutional right of workers to a dignified salary. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Feb 4, reported at 8.41 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: The News, 01/13/98; El Economista, 12/11/97, 01/15/98, 01/26/98; Novedades, 01/27/98; Reuter, 01/29/98; El Nacional, 01/30/98; Notimex, 01/21/98, 01/23/98, 01/28/98, 02/03/98; Excelsior, 01/12/98, 01/13/98, 01/15/98, 01/27/98, 02/04/98; La Jornada, El Universal, 02/04/98)

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