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Official Labor Organization Elects New Secretary General

by LADB Staff

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In early March, the official Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM) unanimously elected interim leader Leonardo Rodriguez Alcaine to the post of secretary general for 1998-2004. Rodriguez had served as interim secretary general since June 1997, following the death of long-time leader Fidel Velazquez (see SourceMex, 07/02/97).

Among Rodriguez Alcaine's first actions as permanent head of the CTM was to reaffirm the alliance between the labor organization and the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). "The CTM is an integral part of the PRI, we share its principles and goals, and we are convinced that the party is the only option," Rodriguez said, referring to the alliance forged by Velazquez and the ruling party in 1941. Still, the new CTM leader criticized some economic programs supported by the PRI in recent years, including the privatization of the retirement-savings program (Administradoras de Fondos para el Retiro, AFORE) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Leader demands renegotiation of NAFTA labor sections

In his attack on NAFTA, Rodriguez demanded that the Zedillo administration renegotiate the labor sections of NAFTA because the agreement does not provide the same benefits to Mexican workers as it does to US workers. "The CTM is willing to push for changes in NAFTA that will benefit Mexican workers," Rodriguez said. Rodriguez's criticism of NAFTA was a sharp contrast to Velazquez's position of staunchly defending the agreement.

The criticism coincided with the visit of George Becker, an official with the US labor organization AFL-CIO. The US labor leader, a special guest at the CTM convention to elect Rodriguez, pledged to support the CTM's efforts to revise labor standards in NAFTA. "Bankers and speculators have joined forces to protect their interests," said Becker. "Labor unions and worker confederations must also unite to preserve our rights." The AFL-CIO has already developed a working agreement with the independent labor organization Union Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT). This agreement could create an obstacle for the AFL-CIO to work closely with the CTM and its sister organization Congreso del Trabajo (CT).

The CT and CTM have viewed the UNT with suspicion since it was formed in November 1997. The UNT was left out of the initial negotiations among government, labor, and business leaders to develop a substitute to the annual anti-inflation agreement (see SourceMex, 02/04/98). At his acceptance speech, Rodriguez blamed the UNT for a lack of dialogue among the labor organizations. "Our door is open for the UNT to dialogue with us," said Rodriguez. There may be some room for cooperation between the CT-CTM and the UNT regarding the upcoming international Labor Day celebrations May 1.

The two organizations are expected to agree to hold joint May Day parades. Rodriguez's election came amid allegations that the union leader is being investigated for involvement in a money-

laundering scheme. The daily newspaper El Universal said federal drug-enforcement agents were investigating CTM- affiliated bank Banco Obrero for links with the powerful Juarez drug cartel. Rodriguez Alcaine has been linked with Jorge Bastida Gallardo, said to be deeply involved in money laundering for the Juarez Cartel. Bastida is a former employee of the Sindicato Unico de Trabajadores Electricistas de la Republica Mexicana (SUTERM), which Rodriguez Alcaine has headed for several years. CTM and Banco Obrero spokespersons denied any involvement with drug traffickers.

But the alleged links with drug traffickers may have a political cost for the CTM. On March 25, El Universal reported that more than 40,000 members have left the organization because of the allegations and perceptions that the CTM is being mismanaged. (Sources: Notimex, 02/19/98; La Jornada, Excelsior, El Economista, Novedades, The News, 03/09/98; El Universal, 03/09/98, 03/24/98; Reuter, 03/20/98; Diario de Yucatan, 03/25/98)

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