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Official Labor Organizations Again Involved in Controversy Over Labor Day Parade

by LADB Staff

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Mexico's labor organizations are once again embroiled in controversy regarding participation in the International Labor Day parade in Mexico City on May 1. For the fourth consecutive year, the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM) and its sister organization, the Congreso del Trabajo (CT), decided not to hold a parade. Instead, the CTM and CT have planned a massive rally in Mexico City's huge central square, the Zocalo. CTM member unions accepted the decision without dissent, but some influential counterparts in the CT angrily denounced CTM and CT leaders for taking actions to "weaken the Mexican labor movement."

In mid-April, the Confederacion Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos (CROC) and the Confederacion Revolucionaria de Trabajadores (CRT) announced plans to organize their own parade, in defiance of the "unilateral position" adopted by CTM leader Leonardo Rodriguez Alcaine and the CTM directorate. Federal Deputy Isaias Gonzalez Cuevas, who represents the CROC in the Chamber of Deputies, said the CROC, CRT, and other dissident unions could easily mobilize 250,000 workers to march in the streets of Mexico City. Other CT unions such as the Confederacion Revolucionaria de Obreros de Mexico (CROM), the Federacion de Sindicatos de Trabajadores al Servicio del Estado (FSTSE), and the Federacion de Sindicatos de Empresas de Bienes y Servicios (FESEBES) are expected to urge their members to participate in the CROC-CRT parade.

A third major labor organization, the Union Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT), expects as many as 250,000 workers from its 32 member unions to participate in its own May 1 parade. The UNT parade will be held in conjunction with the Coordinadora Intersindical Primero de Mayo (CIPM). As recently as April 1, the CTM was considering a proposal to organize a parade with the UNT. In fact, the emergence of the UNT, formed by former members of the CT, was a major reason why the CTM considered resuming the parade (see SourceMex, 02/04/98). "We discussed the May 1 parade and other options for our organizations to cooperate," said CTM leader Rodriguez Alcaine following a meeting the UNT leadership in early April. However, the two organizations were unable to reach an agreement in subsequent meetings, which led to the CTM's decision to organize the Zocalo rally.

Since 1995, the CTM and CT have canceled their traditional May Day parade to avoid embarrassing demonstrations against President Ernesto Zedillo. CTM leaders were concerned that the parades would turn into protests by rank-and-file members against Zedillo and the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), whom they blamed for the devaluation of the peso and the ensuing economic crisis.

Ouster of CT leaders also cause rift in labor movement

The decisions by the CROC, the CRT, and other unions to hold their own May Day parade coincided with a major controversy regarding the ouster of CT president Hector Valdes Romo and vice president Humberto Elizondo. In September 1997, Valdes and Elizondo were elected to lead the CT

for one year (see SourceMex, 09/24/97). Valdes and Elizondo have faced opposition from other CT members because of their outspoken endorsement of efforts to reach out to the UNT. The expiration of Valdes' term as head of the FSTSE and Elizondo as leader of the Asociacion Nacional de Actores (ANDA) in March and April provided the excuse for some CT members to seek the ouster of the two leaders.

Detractors of Valdes and Elizondo pointed to CT statutes that require any CT officers to also be active leaders in one of the member unions. Some CT member unions urged the organization to allow Valdes and Elizondo to serve out their terms. In the end, the CT ousted the two leaders. Rather than appoint a leader with broad support, the CT replaced Valdes with Joel Lopez Mayren, who is not considered a consensus builder.

Immediately after Mayren's selection, the CROC issued a statement opposing the new leader. The CROC pledged to remain a member of the CT, but to "break relations" with the new leader. The splits caused by the ouster of Valdes and the controversy regarding the May Day parade have caused some concern among CT members. "Today, the CRT has more divisions than any time in its 32-year history," said CRT leader Mario Suarez. For his part, UNT leader Francisco Hernandez Juarez said the split could be an opportunity for disgruntled CT unions to join his labor organization. "This is exactly what happened in 1997, when seven unions abandoned the CT to form the UNT," said Hernandez Juarez.

Opposition parties drafting reforms to labor law

The turmoil in the labor movement coincides with efforts by the major opposition parties to modify federal labor legislation (Ley Federal del Trabajo) to remove the close relationship between the PRI and the CTM and CT. The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) are drafting proposals that differ in some points, such as the right to strike, minimum wages, and a limit to the workday, but contain enough common ground to develop a unified proposal.

Labor lawyer Arturo Alcalde Justiniani, who has participated in drafting the PRD proposal, said there is wide agreement among the PRD, PAN, Partido del Trabajo (PT), and Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) for changes in the current model, which encourages corruption among union leaders and leaves workers out of negotiating collective-bargaining contracts. "We are constantly hearing instances where the current labor model fails to meet the needs of workers, employers, and society in general," Alcalde said in an interview with the weekly news magazine Proceso. "The PRI, CT, and CTM offer the most conservative excuses to defend current legislation while criticizing proposals that advocate change," said Alcalde.

Federal Deputy Javier Paz Zara of the PAN said the opposition parties are hoping to introduce the first initiatives to reform the LFT sometime in September. Before the initiatives are discussed, said Paz, the PAN is pushing for a series of public forums where all proposals will be presented. (Sources: The News, 04/02/98; La Jornada, 04/15/98; Notimex, 04/01/98, 04/15/98, 04/21/98; El Economista, 04/22/98; Proceso, 04/26/98; El Nacional, 04/02/98, 04/27/98; Excelsior, 03/31/98, 04/01/98, 04/03/98, 04/13/98, 04/14/98, 04/15/98, 04/21-23/98, 04/27-29/98; El Universal, 04/13/98, 04/15/98, 04/21/98, 04/29/98)

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