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LADB Staff

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Mexican Government Action Averts Aeromexico Strike

by LADB Staff

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The Mexican Constitution became a major focus in a labor dispute between Mexico's largest airline Aeromexico and the flight attendants union Asociacion Sindical de Sobrecargos de Aviacion (ASSA). On June 1, more than 1,000 ASSA members called for a strike in a dispute with management regarding wages, benefits, and staffing levels.

But the walkout was averted when the Secretaria de Comunicaciones y Transportes (SCT) immediately intervened and took over the airline's operations, appointing an independent administrator to oversee day-to-day management. The SCT also invoked its power to force ASSA members to stay on the job. "This action was necessary to guarantee that people have transportation, and also because much of our economy depends on air transportation," said deputy communications and transportation secretary Aaron Dychter.

But flight attendants, working under protest, accused the government of violating their constitutional right to strike. "We had no alternative," said ASSA secretary-general Alejandra Barrales. "Either we returned to work or we lost our jobs to strikebreakers. Government accused of violating workers' right to strike Both the government-affiliated Congreso del Trabajo (CT) and the independent Union Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT) strongly supported ASSA, pledging to seek revisions to the law that allowed the SCT to require ASSA members to stay on the job.

CT and UNT spokespersons questioned why the constitutional clause used by the SCT was more important than the constitutional right of ASSA workers to strike. The UNT and CT protests gained a sympathetic ear from members of the labor-issues committee (Comision del Trabajo) in the Chamber of Deputies. The committee planned to meet in mid-June to draft legislation to modify the law that allowed the SCT to intervene in the strike.

Despite the constitutional aspects of the Aeromexico labor action, the dispute lasted less than one week because the two sides' positions were not that far apart. For example, ASSA was seeking a 19% salary increase, while the airline was offering an 18% raise. The two sides agreed on an 18.3% increase. The flight attendants also won a concession from the airline to increase staffing levels, increase pay scales for overtime, and establish a pension plan.

Graciela Bensusan, an independent labor analyst, credited ASSA leader Alejandra Barrales Magdaleno for taking the initiative to call the strike at a time when labor actions in Mexico have dwindled. According to Bensusan, only 39 strikes were called in Mexico during 1997, compared with 675 in 1982. "This strike is emblematic because it shows that some workers are now willing to return to mobilizations to improve working conditions," Bensusan said in an interview with The New York Times. "This strike not only strengthened our union but the entire workers' movement," Barrales told ASSA members, who unanimously approved the settlement.

When the strike seemed imminent, Aeromexico executives warned that a work stoppage could damage the airline's financial position. "This action would prevent us from having the capital to buy planes and to expand," Aeromexico director Alfonso Pasquel Barcenas told reporters. "We can't put our viability as a profitable company at risk." Barrales, elected ASSA president in 1995, accused Aeromexico of pleading poverty when the airline was in a very solid financial position. She said the airline profits were almost US\$100 million in 1997. (Sources: Reuters, Bloomberg News, 06/01/98; Novedades, 06/02/98; The News, 06/01-03/98; Notimex, 06/03/98; La Jornada, 06/01-03/98, 06/05/98; Excelsior, 06/01-05/98; Associated Press, 05/31/98, 06/06/98; Agence France-Presse, 06/06/98; The Miami Herald, 06/07/98; The New York Times, 06/01/98, 06/08/98; El Universal, 06/02/98, 06/04/98, 06/05/98, 06/09/98; El Economista, 06/04/98, 06/05/98, 06/08/98, 06/09/98)

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