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UNAM Students Hold Prolong Strike to Protest Tuition Increases

by Guest

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The student strike at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) is entering its third month, with the university administration and tens of thousands of strikers at loggerheads. For students, the mood bounces between determination and desperation on the sprawling campus in southern Mexico City. "We could lose the whole year but we can't let the rector walk over us," said student activist Mario Ramirez, who has been living inside the Philosophy & Letters building for six weeks. "This movement is about the future of free public education in Mexico."

Fee increases comply with World Bank directives

The Mexican government's effort to "privatize" higher education in Mexico in compliance with World Bank dictates is at the root of the strike, said Ramirez, who shares the feelings of most strikers, known as paristas. A 1997 memorandum signed with the World Bank (MXPE 19895) obligates Mexico to increase university tuitions in exchange for US\$180 million in educational credits. The agreement is scheduled to take effect this month.

In April, UNAM students voted overwhelmingly to reject the dramatic student-tuition hikes ordered by the university government at the behest of rector Francisco Barnes, a chemistry professor hand-picked for the job by President Ernesto Zedillo three years ago. When the rector refused to back down, student activists hung black and red strike flags outside the university's 40 schools and research centers, closing down all classes and occupying the buildings to prevent nonstriking students from seizing them back.

The UNAM strike invokes memories of the 1968 student movement, a watershed moment in recent Mexican history during which hundreds of thousands of young people defied the iron fist of then President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz on the eve of the Olympic Games in Mexico City. The president, labeling the students "traitors" and "communists," eventually sent the military to the UNAM and the Instituto Politecnico Nacional (IPN), dismantling the student strike committee and jailing all its leaders. On Oct. 2, 1968, hundreds of students and supporters were gunned down in the Tlatelolco housing projects during a police operation to guarantee the inauguration of the Olympics.

Recently declassified documents confirmed that plainclothes paramilitary forces were largely responsible for inciting the violence (see SourceMex, 1998-10-07). Even though Zedillo has purposefully avoided admonishing student strikers, the shadow of Tlatelolco hangs heavily over the UNAM these days. One senior senator from the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) has called for authorities to crack down on the strikers, and student leaders from the Colleges of Sciences and Humanities have been kidnapped and assaulted by unidentified goons.

Clashes with police and campus security have resulted in multiple arrests. One young striker was crushed by a bus following an enormous march on the Zocalo plaza in the center of the city, giving the 1999 strikers their first martyr. The strike is the first in 12 years at the UNAM. In 1987, then UNAM rector Jorge Carpizo sought to "elevate educational excellence" by eliminating automatic admission from the university's high school system and drastically raising tuition fees. Carpizo, who later served as attorney general and interior secretary, was forced to back down on both counts 22 days later. The 1999 action has long since surpassed the duration of the 1987 protest.

Current rector Francisco Barnes successfully eliminated the automatic admission two years ago when a debilitated campus movement was unable to muster much resistance, but the rector has run into stiff opposition from students and parents in his bid to raise tuitions. A key strategy in the "Plan Barnes" would raise enrollment costs from the current symbolic cost of less than 1 peso (US\$0.10 cents) per semester to between 600 pesos (US\$61) and 700 pesos (US\$72), depending on the degree sought. The proposed tuition increase, plus student fees of 2,000 pesos (US\$205) for laboratory and library use, would amount to about US\$275 per term, a bargain compared with the extravagant cost of higher education north of the border.

But the strike organization formed by the students, the Consejo General de Huelga (CGH), contends the hikes would force economically struggling families out of the national university. The Barnes Plan stipulates exemptions for students from families who earn the equivalent of four minimum salaries or less. Moderates on the strike council have been trying to extend the exemption to all students from families earning six minimum salaries or less to help lower-middle-class families.

Some students say Constitution guarantees free education

More radical voices like Ramirez and members of the Bloque Universitario Izquierdista (BUI) argue that the Mexican Constitution guarantees a free public education to every citizen and that any tuition increase is unacceptable. Barnes has responded by pointing out that the university is an autonomous institution that is beyond the constitutional mandate. The rector's hard-nosed attitude has been aggressively countered by the students.

Now the CGH is demanding the reinstatement of the automatic pass Barnes eliminated in 1997 and the revocation of new rules limiting the number of years a student may be enrolled on campus. Barnes' insistence on holding off-campus classes during the strike has resulted in physical altercations with nonstriking students, university officials, and police as the paristas seek to shut down the off-campus sites.

The CGH has insisted that the rector suspend the outside classes as a condition for beginning negotiations. As the strike drags on, Barnes appears to be banking on attrition and division within student ranks. The strike council includes representatives from all the striking UNAM schools and divides its sympathies between five groups. The factions are about evenly stacked between moderates and so-called ultras, and meetings often stretch into dawn. The ultras, gathered together in the leftist-oriented BUI, are resistant to the administration's tepid offers of negotiation. Also, the BUI's slight numerical edge in the CGH dims prospects for an early settlement.

As Mexico moves toward presidential elections in 2000, the UNAM standoff has begun to stir the political winds. Some political columnists in Mexico City say Barnes' job could be on the line if he allows the strike to drag on into the summer. Health Secretary Juan Ramon de la Fuente, another Zedillo favorite, is mentioned as a probable successor.

Privatization of university education in Mexico remains at the heart of the UNAM conflict. Inti Munoz of the Consejo Estudiantil Universitario (CEU), which spearheaded the 1987 strike, has long charged that Barnes was selected as rector by Zedillo to transform the UNAM from a mass university into an elite institution in accordance with blueprints designed to privatize higher education in Latin America laid out by the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD).

Meanwhile, Barnes has been quite successful in one respect. Under his plan, 85,000 student hopefuls are denied admission each year because they fail to meet academic standards. Many rejected students are forced to consider inferior private schools, which lower-middle-class families cannot really afford. At the end of May, activists brought the UNAM battle against privatization to all students and parents in the Mexico City metropolitan area when they conducted a public referendum or "consulta" that drew over 600,000 participants.

The first question asked voters if they believed that Mexicans have a constitutional right to a free public education. The huge turnout for the referendum, which was open to all Mexicans 11 years of age or older, was a sign that the strike is growing far beyond the UNAM's borders.

The strikers have also drawn enthusiastic support from the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN), whose charismatic spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos is probably a UNAM graduate. Busloads of strikers recently visited the EZLN leader in the Chiapas jungle, and the guerrilla leader has reciprocated with a steady stream of communiqués offering solidarity and advice.

Student activists have also forged ties with labor militants. Strikers marched with independent unionists on International Workers Day May 1 in a display of mutual solidarity against privatization of both the university and the electricity industry, another Zedillo project (see SourceMex, 1999-04-28). The UNAM campus-workers union Sindicato de Trabajadores de la UNAM (STUNAM) has stood solidly with the strikers, offering cash donations and joining forces on the barricades. Marches have also been bolstered by thousands of striking public-education teachers from around the country who have been encamped in the capital for weeks, seeking substantial salary increases. Government says center-left PRD helped organize strike Much as in 1968 when authorities red-baited the student movement,

Barnes and former Interior Secretary Francisco Labastida, now Zedillo's designated candidate in the July 2000 elections, have sought to pin the blame for the strike on radical elements, on the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), and on Mexico City's PRD Mayor Cuauhtemoc Cardenas. Carlos Imaz, a leader of the 1987 strike, is now the head of the PRD in Mexico City, and several prominent former leaders in that student strike hold positions in the

Cardenas administration. Cardenas has refused to allow the UNAM use of city buildings to conduct off-campus classes, which students say would be equivalent to strike breaking.

In addition to Imaz, the PRD's interim national president, Pablo Gomez, was the communist youth leader at the UNAM during the 1968 movement. "We're still universitarios," said Gomez, who spent several years behind bars for his role in 1968. But Imaz has been quick to point out that the PRD had no role in organizing the latest student action. "We're not behind this strike," said Imaz. "We're only marching alongside the students."

In retaliation against Imaz, Labastida, who was still interior secretary in the first half of May, reportedly utilized the state intelligence apparatus to tap the PRD leader's phones and film a meeting in a private home between Imaz and several members of the student strike council. The film was then leaked to TV Azteca, a private network with close ties to the government. TV Azteca has been particularly virulent in its coverage of the strike.

The government- controlled media played a similar role during the months leading up to the 1968 massacre at Tlatelolco. The tuition hike that sparked the strike could be easily resolved if the UNAM's annual budget were to be increased by US\$60 million in federal appropriations. The Zedillo administration has rejected this solution, pleading budget shortfalls as the result of low petroleum prices earlier this year.

Nonetheless, Zedillo and the PRI recently pushed a bank bailout through Congress that would allocate about US\$65 billion to cover bad bank loans from which both the bankers and the PRI profited (see SourceMex, 1999-12-16). UNAM economics professor David Lozano said the bank bailout is equivalent to 97 times the UNAM's budget for the next 16 years the time it will take to pay off the banks' bad loans. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on June 2, reported at 9.76 pesos per US\$1.00]

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