

8-25-1999

Students Continue Strike at Mexico's Largest University

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Students Continue Strike at Mexico's Largest University." (1999). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/4128>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Students Continue Strike at Mexico's Largest University

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1999-08-25

The Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), the largest university in Latin America, remained shut down at the scheduled start of the fall semester as a group of dissident students refused to relinquish control of the buildings they seized in April. The students, who had created a formal strike council (Consejo General de Huelga, CGH) to press their demands, called the strike on April 20 to protest the university's decision to raise tuition from the symbolic cost of less than 1 peso (US\$0.10) to between 600 pesos (US\$65) and 700 pesos (US\$75), depending on the degree sought (see SourceMex, 1999- 06-02).

After the strikers refused to relinquish the buildings, the university decided to hold classes off campus, which allowed more than 70% of the students to complete the spring semester. Still, the refusal of the students to give in forced UNAM rector Francisco Barnes de Castro to rescind the tuition increase. In June, Barnes and the university's governing body agreed to make the tuition strictly voluntary, effectively rescinding the increase announced only weeks earlier.

Tuition concessions fail to appease hard-line factions

But hard-line factions of the CGH were not satisfied with the administration's concession and were pressing for further changes. These factions, known as the "ultras," also want the UNAM administration to eliminate student fees for laboratory and computer use.

The hard-liners have also demanded the elimination of an entrance exam, an end to the limit on the number of years a student may be enrolled, and the dissolution of the UNAM governing body, which would be replaced by a new body designed by the strikers. "The only possible way of resolving university issues, according to our law, is through the university's governing body," UNAM spokesman Gerardo Dorantes told The New York Times. "We cannot create another body."

Dorantes said the university cannot accept the demand to dissolve the governing council but is willing to look at the other demands. Still, Dorantes said any changes to the fee structure and admissions requirements would have to be decided in consultation with the entire student body. The hard-liners, however, have refused to accept any of the administration's gestures and have vowed to press on with their demands. The administration, meanwhile, enrolled students for the fall semester at off-campus sites.

Some CGH hard-liners attempted to disrupt the registration, forcing the Mexico City police force to intervene. The involvement of the police had the approval of Mayor Cuauhtemoc Cardenas. This prompted hard-liners to include Cardenas and Mexico City police chief Alejandro Gertz on a list of persons considered unfriendly to the strikers. The list also includes President Ernesto Zedillo, Interior Secretary Diodoro Carrasco, and Barnes. "Cardenas is in a difficult position," said Marco Levario, a political commentator and editor at Etcetera magazine. "If he calls in the police, he loses credibility...and if he does nothing he loses politically."

Retired professors offer compromise plan

Several attempts were made to end the strike during the summer months. The most notable effort was a compromise proposed by eight distinguished retired UNAM professors. In a meeting with striking students at the Che Guevara Auditorium, the professors proposed that UNAM temporarily suspend all fees while a resolution of the students' demands is mediated.

The professors emphasized their compromise was not offered as a final solution but as a starting point for negotiations. "There are no real guarantees that the university authorities will comply with the students' demands, as history teaches us that nothing in the world is guaranteed," said Adolfo Sanchez, one of the retired professors. "But we shall work together to build a moral front that will force the authorities to enact the reforms demanded by this movement. That is our only guarantee."

Barnes endorsed the proposal by the emeritus professors and called a meeting of the university council to discuss the plan. More than 50 prominent Mexican scholars, including Carlos Fuentes and Elena Poniatowska, also endorsed the plan. But after a seven-hour meeting with the professors, the hard-line factions voted to turn down the compromise and reiterated their demands to the university administration.

The insistence of the hard-line factions on pressing their demands at all costs has created tensions with moderate groups within the CGH, which were seeking to negotiate an end to the strike before the start of the fall semester. Tensions reached a boiling point when 500 moderates and nonstriking students marching through campus came to blows with hard-liners. The moderate demonstrators, demanding that the university be allowed to resume classes, directed their anger both at the hard-line factions and at Barnes for adopting a "passive stance" against the hard-liners. But the hard-liners denied initiating any violent action against the moderate marchers. They said the violence was incited by outsiders, probably hired by the university administration and the federal government.

The hard-line students have justified their refusal to compromise, citing the need to preserve Mexico's tradition of universal free education. Many claim the tuition increase was only the first step in a plan recommended by the World Bank to privatize UNAM and other Mexican universities. "This is a class struggle between those on top and those of us on the bottom," said striker Omar Flores. "They want to privatize the schools so that no one can afford an education."

Legislators, business groups seek end to strike

Mexican legislators, particularly members of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), have called for direct and decisive action by the Mexico City and federal governments to end the strike. "If the strikers continue their refusal to negotiate, then federal authorities should restore the rule of law," said PAN Sen. Francisco Xavier Salazar, who chairs the Senate's education committee (Comision de Educacion).

In the Chamber of Deputies, Deputy Armando Lopez of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) said the lower house is ready to form a multiparty group to mediate. Members of the private sector have also urged a quick resolution to the strike. Mauricio Gonzalez, director of Grupo de Economistas Asociados (GEA), warned that the extended conflict is a potential red flag

for the Mexican economy. Gonzalez cited widespread concerns that the conflict could destabilize Mexico's political environment and thus affect economic expectations for 2000.

But the Zedillo administration is expected to stay out of the conflict as long as possible, in large measure because of the university's autonomous status. "We cannot intervene in a matter that the university should resolve for itself," deputy interior minister Jesus Murillo Karam recently told reporters.

Zedillo is also intent on avoiding the mistakes that led to the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968, when police used excessive force to put down a student demonstration. Recently declassified documents and independent historical research confirm that plainclothes paramilitary forces incited violence by firing at student demonstrators (see SourceMex, 1998-10- 07). "I am one of those who experienced first-hand the developments of the late 1960s, which traumatized and continue to traumatize many Mexicans," Zedillo said in a speech in Hidalgo state. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Aug. 25, reported at 9.31 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Chicago Tribune, 07/21/99; The Dallas Morning News, 08/06/99; The News, 07/29/99, 08/03/99, 08/10/99, 08/11/99; The New York Times, 07/12/99, 08/13/99; El Financiero Internacional, 08/16/99; Proceso, 08/01/99, 08/14/99, 08/22/99; Associated Press, 08/04/99, 08/15/99, 08/16/99, 08/23/99; Spanish news service EFE, 08/13/99, 08/21/99, 08/23/99; El Economista, 08/18/99, 08/23/99; Notimex, 08/23/99; Excelsior, 08/10/99, 08/12/99, 08/18-20/99, 08/23/99, 08/24/99; Reuters, 08/23/99, 08/24/99; Novedades, 07/28/99, 08/02/99, 08/05/99, 08/12/99, 08/16/99, 08/17/99, 08/19/99, 08/25/99; La Jornada, 08/05/99, 08/10- 12/99, 08/17/99, 08/20/99, 08/25/99; El Universal, 08/17- 20/99, 08/23-25/99)

-- End --