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Rector's Resignation Could Resolve Prolonged Strike at National University

by LADB Staff

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In mid-November, the chancellor of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), Francisco Barnes de Castro, submitted his resignation. Barnes' decision to step down could pave the way for authorities to resolve a prolonged strike that has paralyzed the UNAM, the largest university in Latin America.

Barnes' resignation was a principal demand of the Consejo General de Huelga (CGH), the council formed by students to manage the strike. The students began their protest in mid-April, when Barnes proposed to raise enrollment fees from the symbolic cost of less than 1 peso (US\$0.10) per semester to between 600 pesos (US\$64) and 700 pesos (US\$75), depending on the degree sought (see SourceMex, 1999-06-02).

Barnes eventually backed down from the tuition proposal, but this did not appease the radical factions of the CGH known as the "ultras." The ultras consider the strike a means to seek more profound changes in both UNAM policies and the federal government's policies on education and other areas.

The ultras are demanding a greater voice in university decision making and the reversal of policies implemented under former UNAM rector Jorge Carpizo requiring tougher admissions requirements and limiting the time period allowed for a student to earn a degree. The ultras have been at odds with more moderate factions of the CGH, which had been ready to accept Barnes' alternative proposing to make the payment of the higher tuition voluntary.

The moderate factions were also willing to compromise on some demands presented by the ultras, which put the two groups at odds during the strike (see SourceMex, 1999-08-25). But Barnes, who was steadfast in his refusal to cave in to further demands from the ultras, was unable to offer any new proposals or solutions that would end the impasse. This inability to end the strike lost the chancellor any support he had from moderate factions of the CGH and members of the faculty.

At the time of his resignation, Barnes' only support came from the university council (Consejo Universitario). In submitting his resignation in mid-November, Barnes expressed hope that a new chancellor could end the impasse. "I hope my resignation will open up new ways to solve this conflict, which affects the lives of hundreds of thousands of students and the work of tens of thousands of academics," said Barnes, who has headed the UNAM since January 1997. The CGH welcomed Barnes' resignation. In a statement, CGH leaders said the chancellor's departure removed the "main obstacle that prevents the start of a dialogue" to end the impasse.

UNAM secretary-general Xavier Cortes Rocha, who replaced Barnes on an interim basis, said the Consejo Universitario has promised to announce the appointment of the new chancellor by Nov. 18 or 19. Striking students oppose proposed replacements But the strike is far from over. The Consejo Universitario has compiled a tentative list of candidates, all of whom the CGH has declared unacceptable. Sources said the 10 candidates under consideration include Alejandro Cravioto, dean of the UNAM's School of Medicine; Rafael Perez Pascual, former dean of the UNAM's School of Sciences; former attorney general and jurist Diego Valades; Francisco Bolivar Zapata, the UNAM's director of scientific research; federal Health Secretary Juan Ramon de la Fuente; and deputy health secretary Jose Narro Robles. In a statement, the CGH said the candidates all belong to the "mafia groups" that have controlled the university. Some faculty members raised concerns about the presence of Health Secretary de La Fuente and his deputy Jose Narro.

The faculty members said the appointment of members of President Ernesto Zedillo's Cabinet could be considered a violation of the UNAM statutes, which guarantee that the university is autonomous and free of direct control by the president. [Note: Peso- dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Nov. 17, reported at 9.33 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: Associated Press, Reuters, Notimex, 11/12/99; La Jornada, Novedades, San Antonio Express-News, 11/13/99; Reforma, Excelsior, 11/13/99, 11/17/99; The News, 11/17/99)

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