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University Voters Overwhelmingly Support Plan To End Student Strike & Discuss Reforms

by LADB Staff
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A vast majority of students, faculty members, and employees at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) who participated in a university-sponsored referendum voted to accept a proposal by rector Juan Ramon de la Fuente to end a nine-month strike. The nonbinding referendum, open only to members of the UNAM community, was considered a major step in resolving differences with a group of students who took over the university in April 1999. The final results released by university authorities showed 180,000 of the 300,000 eligible members of the UNAM community participated in the process. Roughly 87% of participants voted in favor of de la Fuente's proposal to suspend tuition increases indefinitely and organize an all-inclusive forum at the UNAM to draft university reforms. "This referendum is an agreement to unite, to reconcile, and to begin the significant reform that our university needs," de la Fuente said. Tuition increases became a focal point of the strike when, in April, then rector Francisco Barnes de Castro proposed charging a small fee to students to compensate for increasing costs and reduced government subsidies to the university (see SourceMex, July 2, 1999). Barnes' proposal angered the student body, which formed the Consejo General de Huelga (CGH) to organize a strike. The students argued that a tuition increase, along with the elimination of an open-admissions policy in 1995, would prevent many lower-income students from obtaining a university education. As part of the pressure on Barnes to change his stance, the CGH seized several university facilities. The students got the attention of Barnes, who modified his proposals to make the tuition increase voluntary. But rather than accept the new plan, a hard-line faction in the CGH known as the "ultras" pressed for university authorities to make further concessions to students, including eliminating lab fees. These students argued that all recent UNAM reforms were mandated by the World Bank and were a byproduct of neoliberal policies implemented by the government in recent years. Barnes, who resisted any further concessions to the students, was increasingly attacked by politicians for failing to resolve the strike. In November, Barnes tendered his resignation and was quickly replaced by then Health Secretary de la Fuente (see SourceMex, November 17, 1999). The noncompromising stance of the ultras created a rift with the more moderate factions of the CGH, which were seeking to resolve the strike (see SourceMex, August 25, 1999). As a result, ultras and moderates frequently clashed during subsequent discussions on whether to continue the strike. The moderate factions strongly supported Barnes' plan and later threw their support behind de la Fuente's plan.

Mexico City mayor, key groups endorse referendum

In the few weeks he has held office, de la Fuente has aggressively worked to end the strike. In early January, the new rector announced plans to hold a referendum Jan. 20 for the university community to vote on his proposal. The referendum was endorsed by moderate factions of the CGH, the university-employees union Sindicato de Trabajadores de la UNAM (STUNAM), and the administration of Mexico City Mayor Rosario Robles. The support from STUNAM and Robles was crucial, since in the past both had tended to side with the students. The UNAM referendum was also praised by the nongovernmental election watchdog Alianza Civica, which rated the process
as generally clean. "There were some irregularities, but these did not affect the final outcome," a spokesperson for the organization told the daily newspaper La Jornada. The radical factions of the CGH countered by announcing their own "plebiscite" for Jan. 18-19, which would be open to students as well as members of the general public. In contrast to the UNAM referendum, which was limited to university facilities, the CGH plebiscite was held at various locations throughout the Mexico City metropolitan area. Several daily newspapers reported that the CGH's plebiscite was chaotic and confusing and failed to attract participation from members of the university community. La Jornada cited several irregularities, including the absence of boxes to collect ballots and the lack of any means to determine how many students participated. The ultras, who claimed to have placed more than 1,000 ballot boxes in the capital and surrounding states, said a majority of participants in the plebiscite supported their position to continue the strike until their demands are met.

Radical student groups refuse to recognize results
As expected, the ultras refused to recognize the results of the UNAM-sponsored referendum and vowed to retain control of university facilities. Faction leaders charged that the vote was fraudulent and de la Fuente's plan was drafted by the administration without input from the CGH. De la Fuente attempted to open dialogue with the ultras following the UNAM referendum, but warned that no negotiations would take place until the radical factions surrendered control of the UNAM campus. The rector also urged the striking students to cut ties to the outside organizations that are participating in the strike but have no connection to the university. He said these groups include Frente Popular Francisco Villa, Bloque de Organizaciones Sociales, and the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores. "I ask the CGH to break with these organizations, and as members of UNAM to recognize the mandate of the university community," de la Fuente said. The ultras refused to surrender the campus facilities, leaving the impasse unbroken at the end of January. Meanwhile, moderate student leaders pledged to hold consultations in several of UNAM's schools and colleges to push for a formal vote to end the strike. Leaders of the moderate factions reminded the ultras that the decision to strike in April 1999 was made through individual votes at each of UNAM's schools and colleges and this same method would be used to determine whether to continue the suspension of classes. (Sources: Reuters, 01/18/00, 01/21/00; The Dallas Morning News, 01/20/00, 01/22/00; Notimex, 01/19/00, 01/21/00, 01/22/00, 01/23/00, 01/24/00, 01/25/00; Associated Press, 01/22/00, 01/25/00; El Universal, 01/24/00, 01/25/00; The New York Times, 01/20/00, 01/22/00, 01/26/00; Notimex, 01/11/00, 01/18/00, 01/19/00, 01/24-26/00; La Jornada, Reforma, 01/19/00, 01/24-26/00; The News, 01/11/00, 01/12/00, 01/13/00, 01/25/00, 01/26/00; Excelsior, 01/13/00, 01/14/00, 01/25/00, 01/26/00)

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