Unions Struggle to Define Role After PRI Defeat in July Presidential Election

LADB Staff

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

Recommended Citation


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.
Unions Struggle to Define Role After PRI Defeat in July Presidential Election

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2000-07-19

Mexico's official labor unions have lost their ability to influence the policies of the federal government because of the defeat of their longtime ally, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), in the July 2 presidential election. PRI candidate Francisco Labastida lost the election to Vicente Fox Quesada of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) by almost six percentage points (see SourceMex, 2000-07-05).

The defeat will almost certainly unravel the cozy relationship these labor organizations the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM), the Congreso del Trabajo (CT), the Confederacion Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos (CROC), and others enjoyed with the federal government for almost seven decades. This relationship was strongest under the leadership of Fidel Velazquez, who presided over the CTM for almost 60 years. Velazquez, who ruled the union movement with an iron hand, died in 1997 at age 97 (see SourceMex, 1997-07-02).

Velazquez’s successor, Leonardo Rodriguez Alcaine, is perceived as a generally ineffective leader. A member of the older generation of labor leaders, he is also said to lack political savvy. In an ill-advised move, the CTM leader issued a threat two days before the election to organize a work stoppage in the event of a Fox victory. "We would run the risk of losing much," said Rodriguez Alcaine. "They would try to do away with unions, which won't happen." In the end, the CTM leader decided not to follow through on his threat because of the wide margin of victory for the PAN candidate.

Under Velazquez's leadership, the CT and CTM literally became units of the PRI, supporting most programs proposed by the executive. These labor organizations openly endorsed or tolerated wage controls, free trade, and other neoliberal policies endorsed by recent PRI administrations, even though the measures were generally viewed as detrimental to workers. The close relationship to the PRI allowed some union leaders to amass great wealth, causing further friction with the rank and file. In a report published in mid-July, the daily newspaper La Jornada said Rodriguez Alcaine, Victor Flores of the Sindicato de Trabajadores Ferrocarrileros de la Republica Mexicana (STFRM), and Carlos Romero Deschamps of the Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros de la Republica Mexicana (STPRM) bought a new luxury automobile every year and owned homes in exclusive Mexico City neighborhoods. "How did these labor leaders, some of whom did not even finish high school, accumulate such fortunes?" the report asked.

In the end, the failure of neoliberal policies to improve living conditions for Mexican workers caused the CT, CTM, and affiliated unions to gradually lose the support of their rank- and-file members. Some disaffected union members joined new labor organizations, such as the Union Nacional de...
Trabajadores (UNT), which are gradually gaining influence in labor policy. The UNT, increasingly viewed as an alternative voice for the rights of workers, was formed in 1997 by disgruntled CTM and CT affiliates (see SourceMex, 1997-11-26).

**Union leaders failed to deliver votes for PRI**

The loss of rank-and-file support was especially evident in this year's presidential election. As was their custom, union leaders like the CTM's Rodriguez Alcaine and Joel Ayala Almeida of the Federacion de Sindicatos de Trabajadores al Servicio del Estado (FSTSE) endorsed the PRI candidate. But unlike in previous elections, union bosses could not guarantee delivery of a massive number of votes for the governing party.

Many workers opted to vote either for Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) or for Fox. The PAN candidate had a special appeal among younger workers because of his pledge to end the extremely corrupt policies that prevailed under the PRI. "Official unionism looks bad because the government's economic policy isn't designed to give anything to workers," said economist Alfonso Bouzas of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) a few weeks before the election.

The July 2 election was also a setback for labor leaders' ability to influence policy through the legislative branch. Labor-affiliated PRI members either won or were allocated only five seats in the Chamber of Deputies and none in the Senate because of the PRI losses in both chambers. In 1978, when the PRI had almost total control of both houses, labor representatives controlled 102 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 13 in the Senate. Even though the PRI still enjoys a plurality in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, the party's numbers have eroded (see SourceMex, 2000-07-12).

The PRI's loss of influence has led the CT to form a commission to draft a new policy that will define the organization's "new relationship" with the party, CT vice president Enrique Aguilar Borrego said in mid-July. Unions to focus on new labor-reform legislation CT and CTM leaders are expected to continue a loose alliance with the PRI delegations in Congress, and perhaps also PRD legislators, to work on proposals for modifications to the federal labor code (Ley Federal del Trabajo, LFT). The LFT, originally drafted in 1931, has not been modified since 1970.

Some labor leaders are concerned that Fox and PAN legislators will join with business organizations to enact unfavorable changes to the LFT. Business groups like the Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (CCE) have already proposed sweeping changes to the LFT, including imposing a time limit on the duration of a strike and allowing employers in some instances to pay workers on an hourly basis instead of a blanket salary. But even these proposals have received mixed reviews among CT and CTM affiliates. Some unions like the FSTSE have pledged to vigorously oppose these changes. "There will be no steps backward in the social and economic gains attained by workers over the years," said FSTSE leader Ayala.

Conversely, CROC leader Alberto Juarez Blancas said his union would be willing to accept the hourly-wage proposal as long as legislators preserve benefits and other social rights of workers.
"It is necessary to adjust to changes in the political climate," Juarez Blancas told the daily business newspaper El Financiero.

The UNT, for its part, is attempting to take advantage of the leadership gap during the transition period between the administration of President Ernesto Zedillo and the incoming Fox government. The UNT has already called on Fox to enter into an agreement with labor unions regarding the rights of workers. UNT leader Francisco Hernandez Juarez said his organization hopes to present its LFT proposal to the Fox transition team sometime in the near future.

"We wish to convey to [Fox] our willingness to maintain a mutually respectful relationship and open dialogue with his administration," said Hernandez Juarez, who also heads the Sindicato de Telefonistas de la Republica Mexicana (STRM). Among other things, said Hernandez Juarez, the UNT will take advantage of Fox's offer to allow members of civil society to propose candidates for his cabinet. He said the UNT is expected to propose one or more candidates for labor secretary, although a list has not yet been developed. (Sources: The News, 06/06/00, 06/29/00; Proceso, 07/09/00; Notimex, 07/12/00; El Universal, 07/07/00, 07/17/00; Excelsior, 07/11/00, 07/12/00, 07/13/00, 07/17/00; La Jornada, 07/14/00, 07/17/00; Novedades, 07/04/00, 07/11-13/00, 07/17-19/00; El Economista, 07/04/00, 07/12/00, 07/19/00; El Financiero, 07/05/00, 07/06/00, 07/14/00, 07/18/00, 07/19/00)

-- End --