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Unions Rally on Labor Day, Protest Move to Oust Miners' Union President

by LADB Staff

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Tens of thousands of Mexican labor-union members filled the historic Zocalo in Mexico City on International Labor Day, also known as May Day, primarily to protest President Vicente Fox's labor policies but also to show solidarity with thousands of expatriates who were marching in cities around the US in support of immigrant rights.

The heavy turnout was a marked contrast to recent years, when the Labor Day observance has been a low-key affair, with the official labor organizations, the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM) and the Congreso del Trabajo (CT), holding relatively small rallies indoors (see SourceMex, 1998-02-04, 1999-04-28 and 2001-04-25).

Independent labor organizations, led by the Union Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT), have had more success than the CTM and CT in attracting members to marches and rallies, but attendance at these events was also low compared to this year. "For the first time in [President Fox's] six-year term, we have a May Day featuring a confrontation between the government and labor organizations," said Enrique Quintana, a columnist with the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. "The truth is that Labor Day celebrations have been very quiet since the days of President Ernesto Zedillo's administration, where the big gatherings at El Zocalo had almost disappeared and had gone into closed auditoriums."

Three separate events held at Zocalo square

This year, three separate events were held at the Zocalo, each starting at a different time. The first event was organized by the CT and the CTM, two organizations that have had strong ties to the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which held power in Mexico for seven decades.

The second event, by far the largest of the three, was organized by the UNT and other independent unions, which have come together in a coalition known as the Frente Nacional por la Unidad y la Autonomia Sindical (FNUAS). Also participating in the rally were unions traditionally aligned with the CT and CTM, such as the Confederacion Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos (CROC) and the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion (SNTE).

"Until recently considered an alternative event, the rally staged by the coalition of independent unions was clearly the main focus of the day," said Kelly Arthur Garrett, a columnist with the Mexico City English-language daily newspaper The Herald. "It was bolstered this year by support from unions normally aligned with the 'official' sector."

The third rally was sponsored by the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN), as part of the nationwide campaign organized by Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos to bring

attention to issues that affect indigenous and rural communities in Mexico during the presidential campaign (see SourceMex, 2006-01-18). The Zapatista event began in front of the US Embassy, with participants later marching through the streets of Mexico City to the Zocalo.

In particular, the three rallies called attention to the recent decision by President Fox to withdraw recognition of Napoleon Gomez Urrutia as head of the miners' union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalurgicos y Similares de la Republica Mexicana, SNTMMSRM). Labor unions consider this move an effort by the Fox government to quash the autonomy of labor organizations. The administration justified its decision on the grounds that Gomez Urrutia violated the law by misappropriating union funds (see SourceMex, 2006-03-01). Labor organizations argue, however, that the administration is meddling in the SNTMMSRM's internal affairs, thus violating the principle of labor autonomy.

Some union members contend that the Fox government has no proof that Gomez Urrutia did anything wrong, while others say the decision on whether the union leader should remain in office should rest in the hands of the union, regardless of what he may have done.

Independent unions seek ouster of labor secretary

The level of criticism of the Fox government differed markedly between the first and second rallies. The rally organized by the CT and CTM attempted to walk a middle ground, supporting some labor decisions promoted by the Fox government but also criticizing the administration for violating labor autonomy.

The UNT and its supporters, however, threatened a crippling strike unless Fox fired Labor Secretary Francisco Javier Salazar Saenz, whom they say is the principal instigator of Gomez Urrutia's ouster. By some estimates, the rally attracted about 75,000 participants. "A mobilization of this size is evidence that we are creating a new force of workers. The government will now have to sit down and dialogue," UNT president Francisco Hernandez Juarez said in an interview with the Agencia de noticias Proceso. "We are proposing Salazar's resignation as a starting point to resolve the government's conflict with the unions."

Representatives of some unions affiliated with the CT and CTM also voiced support for the effort to oust Salazar, putting them at odds with union leaders Victor Flores Morales and Joaquin Gamboa Pascoe, who have expressed public support for the labor secretary. Dissidents accuse the CT and CTM leaders of continuing the "corporate" practices employed during the seven decades when the PRI held power.

The SNTMMSRM has also received support from international organizations like the Federacion Internacional de Trabajadores de las Industrias Metalurgicas (FITIM), which has filed a complaint about Gomez Urrutia's ouster with the International Labor Organization (ILO). "FITIM considers it unacceptable for Francisco Javier Salazar to intervene directly in the removal of Napoleon Gomez Urrutia from his post," the organization said in a prepared statement.

The administration's record on labor also came up during the rallies sponsored by the Zapatistas in front of the US Embassy and in the Zocalo, but it was one of many issues presented by Marcos

and other speakers. Violent intervention at Michoacan mill adds to tensions Tensions between the Fox government and the STNMMSRM have been rising during the last two months, with the union calling work stoppages at several mines and steel mills around the country. The federal government, in turn, has accused Gomez Urrutia, who is said to have fled to Vancouver, Canada, of inciting violence at some of the mines where workers have held work stoppages.

One strike at the Sicartsa steel mill in Lazaro Cardenas-Las Truchas in Michoacan state turned violent when authorities attempted to dislodge union workers who had shut down the facility for three weeks. Hundreds of police stormed the complex, killing two workers and injuring several dozen others during a battle that spilled onto the streets. There were conflicting reports on which official ordered the operation, with members of the Michoacan state police participating in the operation along with units from the federal police agency (Policia Federal Preventiva, PFP). "The federal government requested our assistance in this operation," said a statement from the office of Michoacan Gov. Lazaro Cardenas Batel.

Cardenas Batel, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), acknowledged that Michoacan state police played a major role in expelling the striking workers from the Sicartsa facility. "This operation turned out badly," said the Michoacan governor. "Evidently, it should have never been carried out."

Cardenas Batel called for the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) to participate in a full investigation of the incident and said his government would take responsibility for any violations incurred during the incident. "What I want is full clarity," said the governor, who accepted the resignation of state public safety director Gabriel Jimenez Mendoza.

Fox said the Sicartsa strike was illegal because the workers had no labor dispute with the owners but conducted the work stoppage only to support Gomez Urrutia. "Mexico needs unions that defend their legitimate interests within the framework of the law and respect for the law," the president said at a brief May Day ceremony at Los Pinos presidential residence.

The president's decision to hold a separate event on May Day is a departure from the first five years of his administration, when he usually attended the events sponsored by the CT and CTM. STNMMSRM members from the Sicartsa plant in Lazaro Cardenas-Las Truchas held a peaceful march on May Day, demanding that the government withdraw arrest orders against their leaders as a result of the April 20 incident.

Among the marchers was union leader Mario Medina, for whom several arrest warrants have been issued. In addition to protesting the ouster of Gomez Urrutia and the violent crackdown at the Sicartsa mine, union members participating in the Mexico City marches also questioned the administration's failure to hold companies like Grupo Mexico accountable for poor working conditions at mines operated by the companies. In particular, they blame the Fox government for failing to prevent an explosion at the company's Pasta de Conchos coalmine in Coahuila that killed 65 miners in February (see SourceMex, 2006-03-01).

There were also strong protests about the federal government's failure to recover the bodies of the dead miners, three months after the incident. The heavy damage caused by the explosion

and dangerous conditions at the site have hampered rescue operations. The lack of progress in recovering the bodies prompted the widows and other relatives of the miners to join the May Day parade in Mexico City to demand action from the Fox administration. "The federal government has not given us any help at all. We are participating [in this march] to ensure that we are seen and heard," Aida Farias, the widow of one of the victims, told the Comunicacion e Informacion Sobre la Mujer (CIMAC) news service. "At times it seems like [government officials] are blind and deaf."

Unions show solidarity with expatriates in US

Speakers at all three May Day rallies in Mexico City expressed solidarity with Mexican expatriates and immigrants from other nations who organized massive marches in dozens of US cities on May 1 to press for a just immigration-reform law. In December 2005, the US House passed a punitive immigration-reform bill, which proposed the construction of a wall along the US-Mexico border and contained several provisions that would treat unlawful entry into the US as a felony and would penalize any individuals who assisted undocumented immigrants (see SourceMex, 2006-01-11).

In late March, the US Senate Judiciary Committee approved a more migrant-friendly bill that would legalize 1.5 million agricultural immigrant workers, eliminate penalties against activists, doctors, and members of religious groups who help undocumented immigrants, and authorize 400,000 work visas per year, under which an immigrant could become eligible for citizenship. That bill met strong opposition from key senators, which delayed a vote on the legislation before the Easter break. This means that the judiciary committee's bill could be watered down in a compromise with the dissenting senators. Then the measure would be diluted further when reconciled with the punitive House bill in conference committee.

As part of their campaign, immigrant-rights organizations and their supports called for boycotting US products both in the US and Mexico. This call especially resonated with the EZLN, which made it a major theme of its May Day rally. "As Zapatistas, we support the boycott of all the US products that have proliferated in Mexico," Subcomandante Marcos said at the EZLN rally. The effect of the boycott was not readily apparent in Mexico, as businesses like McDonald's, Wal-Mart and other subsidiaries of US companies appeared to be operating normally for a Monday, said The Dallas Morning News.

The economic impact of the immigrant-campaign was greater in the US, not as much a direct result of the boycott as a result of the high absenteeism at businesses in several cities that rely on immigrant labor. The absenteeism forced businesses of all sizes to suspend or greatly reduce operations for the day, including the port of Los Angeles-Long Beach, Tyson Foods, Perdue Farms, along with many restaurants and retailers.

The largest rallies took place in Southern California, with an estimated 400,000 immigrants and sympathizers participating in a march through the streets of Los Angeles. Huge rallies were also reported in Houston, Chicago, New York, and Phoenix. (Sources: Reuters, 04/06/06, 04/10/06, 04/20/06, 04/21/06, 04/24/06, 04/28/06, 05/01/06; Associated Press, 04/20/06, 05/01/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 04/20/06, 04/24/06, 04/25/06, 05/01/06; Notimex, Comunicacion e Informacion Sobre la Mujer, CIMAC, 05/01/06; The New York Times, 03/28/06, 05/02/06; The Herald-Mexico City, 03/29/06, 04/11/06, 04/17/06, 04/21/06, 04/24/06, 04/25/06, 05/02/06; Los Angeles Times, 03/29/06,

03/30/06, 05/01/06, 05/02/06; The Dallas Morning News, 03/31/06, 05/01/06, 05/02/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 04/17/06, 04/26/06, 05/01/06, 05/02/06; The Chicago Tribune, 04/30/06, 05/02/06; El Economista, 04/04/06, 04/11/06, 04/20/06, 04/24/06, 04/25/06, 05/02/06, 05/03/06; La Jornada, 04/04/06, 04/11/06, 04/20/06, 04/21/06, 04/24-28/06, 05/01-03/06; El Universal, 04/11/06, 04/19/06, 04/21/06, 04/24-27/06, 05/01/06, 05/01-03/06; Milenio Diario, 04/11/06, 04/21/06, 04/24-28/06, 05/01-03/06; Reforma, 04/11/06, 04/21/06, 04/23/06, 04/25/06, 04/26/06, 04/28/06, 05/01-03/06; xcelsior, 04/21/06, 04/28/06, 04/30/06, 05/02/06, 05/03/06; La Crisis, 04/26/06, 05/02/06, 05/03/06)

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