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## **Conflict Between Oaxaca Government, Teachers Union Remains at Impasse**

by LADB Staff

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The bitter conflict between a local chapter of the teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion, SNTE) and the Oaxaca state government entered its third month with little sign of a resolution. The sometimes-violent conflict, which started as a dispute regarding pay raises, has deteriorated into a battle of wills between the Oaxaca-based Section 22 of the SNTE and the administration of Gov. Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). The SNTE Section 22 represents 70,000 elementary, secondary, and preparatory teachers. The teachers had organized similar protests during the last 26 years, each time gaining few, if any, concessions from successive PRI governments.

The protests have varied through the years but have frequently involved a presence in the historic square (Zocalo) in the city of Oaxaca. This year, the SNTE asked for about 1.4 billion pesos (US\$127 million) to cover salary increases, but the Ruiz administration denied that request, arguing that the state government does not have the funds to cover an increase that large. Instead, Ruiz offered a package, including some federal contributions, of only 157 million pesos (US\$14.2 million) in salaries and benefits.

The SNTE rejected the state's offer, saying the raises could be covered with some of the money that Ruiz uses to buy media advertisements to promote the accomplishments of his government. "The governor says there's no money for the teachers, but there are lots of [self-promotion] spots on television and radio all over the state that are paid by the governor [with taxpayers' funds]," one SNTE member said.

### ***Union takes over Zocalo, blocks buildings, roads***

In late May, the SNTE's Section 22 decided to underscore its demands by taking over the Zocalo and some city streets and blockading several highways, government buildings, an oil-distribution plant, and other important facilities. The Ruiz administration responded by sending state police to attempt to dislodge the protestors, especially from the Zocalo, resulting in a bloody confrontation.

The incident left more than 80 people injured, prompting SNTE members to harden their position, including pledging not to stop the protests until Ruiz resigns or is removed from office. "If the governor insists on practicing a 'deaf-ear' policy and on using violence, then the teachers will organize a statewide strike, with the support of the campesino, indigenous, labor, and transportation sectors," said Enrique Rueda Pacheco, secretary general of the SNTE's Section 22.

The SNTE has incorporated other groups into the strike by forming an umbrella organization called the Asamblea del Pueblo de Oaxaca (APPO). Critics said Ruiz's decision to use force was symptomatic of his style of governance. The governor has also been accused of conducting a

vendetta against the newspaper Noticias, Voz e Imagen de Oaxaca in 2005 because it endorsed his opponent Gabino Cue Monteagudo in the 2004 gubernatorial election. Ruiz defeated Cue by only two percentage points (see SourceMex, 2004-08-04).

On orders from Ruiz, police raided the newspaper on the pretext of quashing a labor dispute, but Amnesty International (AI) and the Inter American Press Association (IAPA) said the raid was not necessary. The dispute, they said, was actually started by a labor union sympathetic to Ruiz, which had attacked management.

The SNTE has said it will no longer negotiate with the Ruiz administration, and its ultimate goal now is to have him removed from office. The union, which extended its blockade to include the state, municipal, and judicial buildings, admits its actions are intended to create chaos in Oaxaca city, thus creating a climate of ungovernability, which would provide the pretext for the governor to be removed from office.

Under the Mexican Constitution, only the federal Senate can make this determination. A delegation of SNTE Section 22 members traveled to Mexico City in late July to ask the Senate to dissolve the Oaxaca state government and call for new elections. The Senate, however, said it was unlikely that it would consider such action. "The situation is not grave enough to justify a dissolution of the Oaxaca government," said Sen. Cesar Jauregui Robles, a member of the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), who serves as vice chair of the Senate.

Meanwhile, the SNTE has vowed to expand its protests even further, as Ruiz has "generated the conditions for ungovernability throughout the state." The blockades have had some repercussions for the SNTE and its supporters. The homes of union leaders were attacked with homemade bombs. Additionally, assailants fired several shots at Radio Universidad, which openly supported the SNTE actions.

### *Tourism industry reports heavy losses*

The clashes and the blockades have already caused significant economic losses for the state's tourism industry, which is down about 75% in the capital city of Oaxaca. The businesses near the Zocalo report losses of about 70 million pesos (US\$6.3 million) since the SNTE took over the square, said the local chapter of the Camara Nacional de Comercio y Servicios Turisticos (CANACO) and the Asociacion de Hoteles y Moteles de Oaxaca (AHMO). Protestors also have shattered hotel windows and spray-painted buildings with slogans.

The unrest forced city and state authorities to cancel the Guelaguetza dance festival, one of Oaxaca's most popular celebrations. The festival is normally held the last two Mondays in July. "Most of the tourists have been scared off. It doesn't look safe when you have to go through a barricade and everybody is standing there with sticks and stones," restaurant owner Chris Schroers told the Associated Press. "The police are not here. They don't dare to come into town."

SNTE officials acknowledged that their actions could damage one of Oaxaca's major industries. But they said they had no choice but to carry out their protests. "We respect and welcome tourists, but it is important they understand that there is a climate of instability and the government is not

meeting the demands of the people," said SNTE leader Rueda. Some observers said the discontent against Ruiz is also directed at his predecessor Jose Murat Casab, who is accused of using unfair and perhaps illegal means to ensure a victory for the PRI in 2004. "The uncompromising demand for Ulises Ruiz to leave the government is a sign that society is tired of the arbitrary way in which government has been conducted since 1998," said Ernesto Reyes, a columnist for Noticias, Voz e Imagen de Oaxaca.

Murat was also the subject of controversy. During his tenure in office, he was accused of misusing federal funds, protecting paramilitary groups sympathetic to the PRI, and fabricating an assassination attempt against himself to win sympathy for the PRI in the 2004 election (see SourceMex, 2004-06-09).

### *Federal mediation lacking*

Critics have attacked President Vicente Fox's administration for failing to intervene in the case and perhaps mediate the conflict. The federal government's involvement in the dispute has been minimal, with the Secretaria de Educacion Publica (SEP) participating in discussions with the SNTE before talks broke down. The SEP had offered to supplement the state funds for teacher raises, but Public Education Secretary Reyes Tamez Guerra also described the SNTE salary demands as unreasonable.

The only other federal involvement has been by the Secretaria de Seguridad Publica (SSP), which had members of the Policia Federal Preventiva (PFP) on standby near the historic center in Oaxaca City. Some critics suggested the Fox government's inaction might be a sign that it has taken the side of the Ruiz administration. "As long as the government refuses to assume its proper role as a mediator, the problem is going to worsen," said Porfirio Santibanez, a researcher at the Universidad Benito Juarez de Oaxaca.

An even more conspicuous absence in the conflict is that of SNTE president Elba Esther Gordillo Morales, who has generally remained silent about the situation except to initially offer support and encouragement to members of the union's Section 22. A small SNTE faction sympathetic to Ruiz accused Gordillo of quietly financing the strike with monthly donations of tens of thousands of pesos to Section 22.

Some critics suggest Gordillo could have intervened early during the strike to reduce tensions but decided to remain on the sidelines for political reasons. The conflict erupted just weeks before the presidential election, and the strike-related problems reflected badly on Gov. Ruiz and on PRI presidential candidate Roberto Madrazo Pintado. Gordillo has had a long history of feuds with Madrazo, even when they both held high-ranking jobs within the PRI (see SourceMex, 2003-12-03, 2005-08-17 and 2005-09-28).

Gordillo and former Oaxaca governor Diodoro Carrasco Altamirano, a former PRI member who was Murat's predecessor, supported Gabino Cue Monteagudo in the 2004 gubernatorial election.

### *PRI leadership expels SNTE leader*

The allegations that Gordillo supported the strike, combined with her move to encourage the creation of a new party, the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL), were the last straw for the PRI. In mid-

July, a PRI commission voted unanimously to expel Gordillo from the party despite the objections of several governors and legislators. The commission said this was not a sudden decision, but the culmination of a process that began in mid-2005. The process was postponed during the presidential campaign and resumed after the July 2 election.

The PRI leadership was especially angered at Gordillo's involvement in the creation of PANAL, even helping approve the new party's platform. "We are closing our eyes to reality if we deny that Gordillo's intense activity against Madrazo was significant in our party's loss," said Deputy Manlio Fabio Beltrones, who recently served as the president of the Chamber of Deputies. PANAL, represented by ex-PRI member Roberto Campa Cifrian, obtained almost 1% of the national vote in the presidential race and received enough support in the congressional elections to be allocated nine at-large seats in the Chamber of Deputies (see SourceMex, 2006-07-12).

The PRI, by contrast, failed to win a single state in the presidential election and suffered major losses in the Congress. Several prominent PRI members opposed Gordillo's expulsion, including Francisco Labastida Ochoa, who lost the 2000 presidential election to Fox. "This action will not promote harmony during this worrisome period in our party's history," said Labastida.

The PRI governors of Tamaulipas, Sonora, Veracruz, Durango, and Nuevo Leon also openly opposed Gordillo's expulsion from the party. A few days before the decision, Sonora Gov. Eduardo Bours Castelo angrily described the party's effort to remove Gordillo as "a stupidity," but also denied rumors that he was about to bolt the PRI. "Now is not the time to look for scapegoats for the huge defeat on July 2," said Bours. \

Other PRI members took the opposite stance, arguing that Gordillo should have been expelled long ago. Tomas Lopez Gonzalez, who heads the PRI's Democracia 2000 faction, said he asked for Gordillo's removal two years ago, but the proposal was opposed by then party president Madrazo, who cited the need to maintain party unity. Beltrones also lamented that Gordillo was not expelled sooner. "The PRI did not make the right decision at the appropriate time, and this delay created conflicts that affected us in the elections," said the PRI legislator.

Gov. Ruiz blamed Gordillo and the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) for what he considered the intransigent positions taken by the SNTE's Section 22 in Oaxaca. He noted that PRD candidates for several state and federal offices had joined the demonstrations. Some political observers said many participants in the SNTE actions, even though supported by Gordillo and PANAL, are sympathetic to the PRD.

Public sentiment in Oaxaca, which has traditionally favored the PRI, is now shifting decidedly to the PRD, they said. The PRD and its coalition partners, the Partido del Trabajo (PT) and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), received roughly 47% of the Oaxaca vote in the presidential election, compared with 31% for the PRI and about 17% for the PAN. Similar percentages were reported in the congressional elections. "The PRI bet that the traditional way of doing things would work," says Gloria Zafra, a sociologist at the Universidad Benito Juarez de Oaxaca. "But the people changed."

## *Gordillo's role in presidential election questioned*

Gordillo played multiple cards in her effort to ensure Madrazo's defeat in the presidential election. In addition to helping create PANAL, she also threw her support behind PAN presidential candidate Felipe Calderon Hinojosa. Some political experts suggest Gordillo's support may have accounted for at least a half-million votes cast for Calderon, more than twice the PAN's final margin of victory reported by electoral authorities.

The PRD and its coalition partners have contested the results, alleging that massive irregularities and fraud gave Calderon the small margin over their candidate, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. The electoral tribunal (Tribunal Federal Electoral, TRIFE) is reviewing the complaints and is expected to announce a decision by Aug. 31. By law, authorities must either announce a new president by Sept. 6 or call for a new election. In the interim, the PRD continues to press its demands for a vote-by-vote recount through nationwide demonstrations.

PRD officials have also accused Gordillo of helping perpetrate the alleged electoral fraud that gave the PAN its apparent victory. Sen. Jesus Ortega, Lopez Obrador's campaign coordinator, said there were some precincts where only observers from the PAN and PANAL were present. In these precincts, the PAN obtained more than 60% of the vote, said Ortega. In late July, Gordillo further angered the PRD when she described Calderon as "president-elect" during a television interview where she was explaining the SNTE's plans to collaborate with a new administration in improving Mexico's educational system.

Facing criticism not only from the PRD, but also from the PAN, Gordillo was later forced to send a letter to TRIFE president Leonel Castillo to clarify her statement, calling it a personal political comment and not a legal opinion on the election. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Aug. 2, reported at 10.97 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: [www.oaxacainfo.com/guelaguetza.htm](http://www.oaxacainfo.com/guelaguetza.htm); The American Prospect, 07/07/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 06/07/06, 07/12/06, 07/13/06, 07/18/06, 07/19/06; El Financiero, 07/14/06, 07/19/06; Associated Press, 07/21/06; The New York Times, 07/23/06; Reforma, 07/13/06, 07/17-24/06, 07/26/06; The Herald-Mexico City, 06/09/06, 07/27/06; La Crisis, 07/11/06, 07/14/06, 07/27/06; Notimex, 07/26/06, 07/27/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 07/14/06, 07/28/06; El Universal, 07/12-14/06, 07/21/06, 07/30/06; La Jornada, 06/22/06, 07/11/06, 07/14/06, 07/17/06, 07/20/06, 07/27/06, 07/28/06, 07/31/06; El Economista, 06/29/06, 07/12/06, 07/14/06, 07/17-20/06, 07/31/06; Excelsior, 07/07/06, 07/11/06, 07/13/06, 07/14/06, 07/17/06, 07/19/06, 07/20/06, 07/21/06, 07/31/06; Noticias, Voz e Imagen de Oaxaca, 07/26/06, 07/28/06, 07/31/06; Milenio Diario, 07/11/06, 07/14/06, 07/17/06, 07/27/06, 07/28/06, 07/30/06, 07/31/06; The Dallas Morning News, 07/31/06)

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