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President Felipe Calderon Absent from May Day Celebrations

by LADB Staff

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Breaking with tradition, President Felipe Calderon decided not to host an official celebration in observance of International Labor Day in Mexico. The Mexican president said he did not want to detract from the celebrations and marches planned by various labor organizations. The decision elicited mixed reactions, with the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) accusing the president of abandoning Mexican workers.

Most labor leaders, however, said that they were not bothered by the lack of an official ceremony, which comes as Calderon's party, the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), is embroiled in a major controversy with the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalurgicos y Similares de la Republica Mexicana (SNTMMSRM) regarding the ouster of its leader last year because of corruption charges (see SourceMex, 2006-03-01 and 2006-05-03).

Calderon announced his decision during a meeting with representatives of the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM), one of the largest labor organizations in Mexico. The president told CTM president Joaquin Gamboa Pascoe and other leaders that the best way to pay tribute to Mexican workers was to respect the autonomy of labor organizations. "Today we live in a different time, and that's why we decided to commemorate May 1 by giving the spotlight to the workers," said Calderon.

Rather than host a ceremony, Calderon taped a message for workers, aired on May 1, in which he pledged to respect the historic achievements of labor, including labor autonomy, collective bargaining, and the right to strike. Calderon's decision drew some criticisms from the PRI, which organized a major celebration on May 1 every year during the seven decades that the party held the presidency.

The PRI lost the presidential election to the PAN in 2000 and again in 2006. In many of the May Day celebrations, the president would lead the parade organized by the Congreso del Trabajo (CT) and the CTM. Former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari even used the May Day celebration and his cozy relationship with the two largest labor organizations to rally support for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) while negotiations were still in progress (see SourceMex, 1993-05-05).

The PRI's relationship with the labor organizations was not always cozy, however. Labor organizations used the May Day celebrations to organize protests against former President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), blaming him for Mexico's economic woes (see SourceMex, 1995-05-17). PRI officials criticized Calderon's decision to forego an official ceremony. Even Calderon's predecessor, Vicente Fox, who had a tense relationship with labor, would hold some ceremony on Labor Day (see SourceMex, 2003-05-07), although he would avoid taking part in the parade.

Party president Beatriz Paredes Rangel said the president's presence at May Day ceremonies was an important symbol for workers. "This decision not to have a ceremony is regrettable," said Paredes. "I hope it is not a sign that this administration is shutting off all channels of dialogue with organized labor."

Labor leaders have no problem with decision

Leaders from Mexico's largest labor organizations said they had no problems with Calderon's decision not to have even a private ceremony to commemorate May Day. Enrique Aguilar Borrego, head of the CT, said labor unions affiliated with his organization did not place any major significance on the president's decision. "Anyone who thinks that labor is estranged from Calderon is mistaken," said the CT president who also heads the la Federacion Nacional de Sindicatos Bancarios (FENASIB). "We have had good communication with [President Calderon]."

Independent unions like the Frente Autentico del Trabajo (FAT) and the Union Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT) also placed little importance on the absence of an official ceremony. Jorge Robles, an official in the FAT, said the Calderon and Fox governments have demonstrated little ability to respond to the demands of workers. "That's why they have stopped putting on this theater," he said. Given the government's stance on workers, the May Day events were "not for celebration, but for protest," said Robles.

UNT president Francisco Hernandez Juarez agreed that the government's presence was not needed. "Without an official parade, the May 1 celebration will be better," he said. "This event should be for the workers." Under PRI governments, the May Day celebration had become an official act where the president was the main focus of the event, said the UNT leader.

Unions protest Calderon's labor policies

The president drew some criticisms for his labor policies, including the decision to push for the privatization of the health and pension system (Instituto de Seguridad Social al Servicio de los Trabajadores del Estado, ISSSTE) for government workers this year. Even though it was Congress who approved the plan, the Calderon administration was lobbying heavily for it on the premise that this was the only way to keep the ISSSTE solvent (see SourceMex, 2007-03-28). "Workers cannot stand [government-sponsored] moves that stifle their economic well-being, accentuate inequality, and erode their historical gains," said Hernandez Juarez.

As part of their May Day activities, the UNT and unions representing workers at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) and the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS) made the ISSSTE reforms a focal point of their protests. The unions were planning to follow up the May Day events with other actions on May 2, including work stoppages and blockades of highway tollbooths and border crossings to protest the ISSSTE reforms, said Artemio Ortiz, a spokesperson for the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion (CNTE).

Other labor groups like the Congreso Agrario Permanente (CAP) staged protests before the Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentacion (SAGARPA) to demand that the government come up with an in-depth solution to the recent increase in tortilla prices (see SourceMex, 2007-01-10 and 2007-01-31).

The government has taken some short-term measures, such as negotiating a pact with the private sector to keep prices down. Despite initial uncertainties on whether the pact would be renewed upon its expiration on April 30 (see SourceMex, 2007-04-18), tortilla manufacturers and the government decided to extend voluntary price controls through Aug. 15.

The CAP was also lobbying for the government to renegotiate the agriculture section of NAFTA, which will eliminate tariffs on imports of corn, sugar, powdered milk, and beans.

Some Mexican agriculture groups have been pushing for the government to seek changes to NAFTA to eliminate or push back this deadline. But agriculture officials in Mexico say this renegotiation is unlikely (see SourceMex, 2006-09-06).

Calderon inherits dispute with miners union from predecessor

The Calderon administration is also grappling with a nasty labor dispute, inherited from the Fox administration, involving the SNTMMSRM. The conflict dates back to March 2006, when the Secretaria del Trabajo y Prevision Social (STPS) removed SNTMMSRM leader Napoleon Gomez Urrutia after two members accused him of misappropriating US\$55 million in union funds (see SourceMex, 2006-03-01).

The STPS, which under Mexican labor statutes has the power to certify union leaders, approved the nomination of retired SNTMMSRM member Elias Morales to replace Gomez Urrutia. Gomez Urrutia fled to Canada after the government took steps to prosecute him on charges relating to the alleged misappropriation of funds (see SourceMex, 2006-06-18).

Despite the embezzlement allegations, Gomez Urrutia remained highly popular with a large segment of the rank and file, setting up a conflict between the SNTMMSRM and the Fox administration. Union members and supporters used the May Day parade last year to protest against Fox and the two Cabinet ministers who had a role in Gomez Urrutia's removal, then labor secretary Francisco Javier Salazar and then interior secretary Carlos Abascal Carranza (see SourceMex, 2006-05-03).

While Gomez Urrutia was in self-imposed exile, his attorneys filed a lawsuit challenging the government's right to remove him. The legal action was successful, as a federal labor court ruled in mid-April that the Fox administration had failed to comply with union statutes in forcing the ouster of the SNTMMSRM leader. In a unanimous decision, the three-member tribunal ordered that Gomez Urrutia be reinstated. The decision cannot be appealed, but the court left open the possibility that the STPS could open a new case against Gomez Urrutia.

Gomez Urrutia's attorneys, in the meantime, have filed a criminal complaint against Salazar and deputy labor secretaries Emilo Gonzalez Vives and Jose Cervantes, accusing them of intentionally abusing the system to install Morales as head of the SNTMMSRM. There are allegations that Salazar and other former STPS officials accepted documents implicating Gomez Urrutia even though they knew that they contained false signatures.

Sen. Ricardo Monreal, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), has taken the case one step further and asked that Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora launch an investigation of Salazar and ex-President Fox to determine whether there were any illegal actions to remove Gomez Urrutia from his post. Regardless of the court's decision to reinstate Gomez Urrutia, the union leader will not resume his old position immediately. He has asked the SNTMMSRM to appoint a temporary leader until the embezzlement complaint against him is resolved.

The Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR), which is continuing its investigations into the embezzlement charges, said there are 200 lawsuits from union members pending against Gomez Urrutia. "We are going to continue fighting until our comrades recover their patrimony," Morales said. Congressional leaders, while lauding the court's decision to uphold labor autonomy, also asked that authorities get to the bottom of the embezzlement case.

"[Prosecutors] should ask for an explanation of what happened to the US\$55 million that was supposedly embezzled from workers," said PRI Sen. Manlio Fabio Beltrones. Leaders for the CT, the umbrella organization that includes the miners union, said the embezzlement case against Gomez Urrutia makes it difficult to officially recognize him as the leader of the SNTMMSRM, even if union members vote to reinstate him. "There is no room for Gomez Urrutia in the CT," said Borrego.

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