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TRADE UNION STRUCTURES LIMIT WORKERS' MOVEMENT

The Mexican labor movement has not emerged unscathed from the economic crisis experienced by our country since 1982. During recent years, salaries, and, in general, the living conditions of the workers have suffered a vertical decline. Unions and labor federations are in a clearly weak period, with reduced capacity to confront industry and the state.

In 1982 Mexico faced the following problems: 100% inflation, an economic deficit in government finances, weakening of productive activity, a high foreign debt, and the highest open unemployment of recent years. These circumstances constituted a discouraging panorama for the workers, which was sustained and aggravated during the following six years: dismissals, wage contraction, disproportionate price increases, shutdowns of employment sources, loss of collective contracts, and the disappearance of unions.

In contrast to other Latin American countries where industrialization has come late and where the working class is smaller than the peasant population, Mexican workers have built solid organizations at many levels of industry and in the services. It includes industrial unions, workers' organizations called *frentes* and *centrales*, each encompassing thousands of workers and employees. These organizations of the workers' struggle have played leading roles in important chapters of our history such as the expropriation of the petroleum industry in 1938, the creation of social security institutions, and the modernization of numerous industries, including the telephone and aeronautical companies.

Nevertheless, this strength has been diluted not only by economic forces but also by government policies. In these years of crisis, salaries have been diminished by factors such as price increases, reductions in contractual benefits, fixed government-

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al limits to wage increases, and the salary freeze agreed upon in the "social solidarity" pacts.

This crisis period, which seems to have no clearly defined end, and in which the workers are at the bottom of the economy, is characterized by labor protest. The policies of austerity and the salary ceilings imposed by the government as belt tightening measures in the face of the foreign debt and its resulting obligations have been questioned by almost all Mexican unions. Despite this, the response of businessmen and the government has been rigid.

The first great defeat of the labor movement in these crisis years occurred between May and June of 1983. The Nuclear Industry Workers Union (SUTIN) went on strike on May 30 against the National Nuclear Industry Institute. The salary demands were accompanied by proposals for national independence in this type of energy and its use in the country's development. Despite the labor movement's support, the strike was declared nonexistent by labor authorities. At this time, the tactics of shutdown were begun and along with this, the disappearance of established unions: Uramex, a state agency, closed its doors and dismissed all its workers in accordance with the favorable verdict handed down by the Board of Conciliation and Arbitration.

The SUTIN was not to be the only union pushed into virtual disappearance. During the last six years, 40 collective contracts have disappeared in the cinematographic, sugar, electrodomeestic, metallurgical, automobile, and aeronautical transport industries. The most well-known cases have been the Monterrey Foundry (10,000 workers dismissed in 1986), the Renault and Ford Motor Com-

WORKERS' RIGHTS

José Dávalos, director of the National Autonomous University's Law School, has drawn attention to the fact that workers are losing well established labor rights as a result of the grave economic crisis. During an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper *unomásuno*, Dr. Dávalos said there is a world wide tendency for employees, in the name of a mistakenly labelled "concertation" or "conciliation", to renounce to rights won in past battles with employers and which now protect them by law.

"This new kind of negotiation at the highest level, which is affecting workers all over the world, implies the limitation and abandonment of some victories won by workers, and frankly contradicts the principles of the permanence of labor rights and the right to work as a minimal social guarantee for workers", he said.

Dr. Dávalos warned that the suppression of advantages and rights already established as a result of past labor victories, such as the right to strike, stability in employment and the minimum wage, place the peace and security of the nation in useless risk. "This is a good moment", he added, "to restructure trade unions, to transform the paralysed union leaderships and their traditional way of doing things. The field of employment is one which has received the strongest blows of the crisis."

The statements made by the Director of the UNAM Law School take on special importance at this moment, when modifications to the Federal Labor Law are about to be debated in the Congress, which is to decide, from the legal point of view, the future of relations between workers and their employers.



The strike by the Mexican Electricians' Union was declared non-existent in 1987. Photo by Marco Antonio Cruz/Imagenlatina

panies, as well as the shutdown of the state-owned company Aeroméxico which left a total of 10,000 unemployed stewards, stewardesses, technicians and pilots in 1988.

A bad example

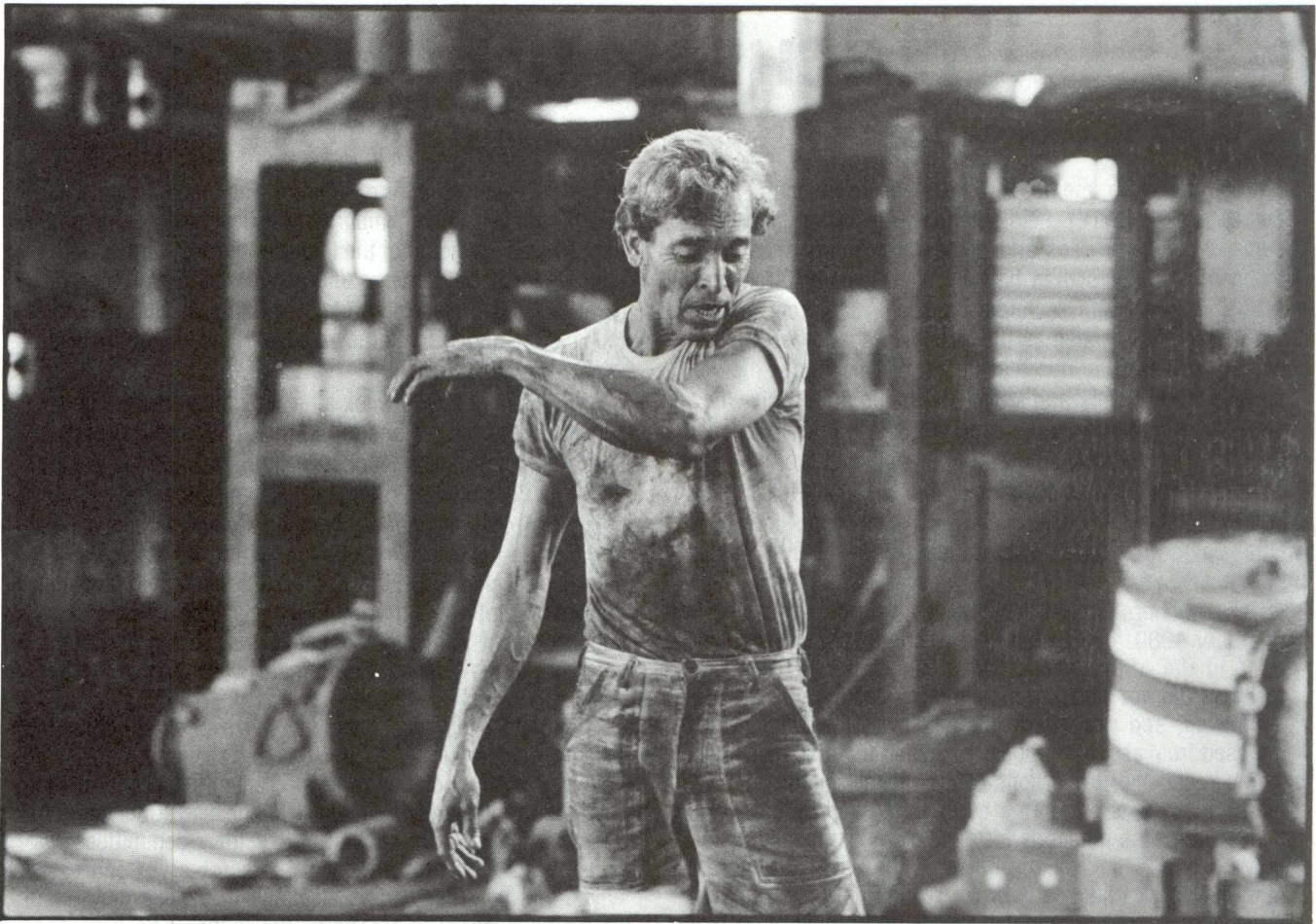
On May 10, 1986, the state-owned companies Monterrey Foundry and Flat Steel, located in the state of Nuevo León, followed the example of Uramex. Despite high production records during the previous two years, which, in the case of the foundry supplied 25% of national steel production, it was decided to close the doors in the face of upcoming workers' strikes. Sections 67 (Monterrey Foundry) and 68 (Flat Steel) of the National Mining Metallurgical Union, affected by unilateral suspension of work relations, protested what they called an illegal shutdown and a violation of the Mexican Constitu-

tion. "The disappearance of the Monterrey Foundry," explained the dismissed workers, "is an attack on sovereignty since there is a return to private industry in response to measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund, thus destroying union organizations and collective contracts, and thrusting thousands of foundry and related workers into poverty."

From 1985 to 1987, various companies disappeared, including Harper Wyman, a components manufacturer for stoves and stationary gas tanks; Acros, an appliances manufacturer; Land Transportation Services of the Mexico City Airport; 1,200 textile shops in Tlaxcala; Isabel, a tin factory; Renault of Mexico; Packers and Freezers of Matamoros; Mexican Buses; Kindy, a textile company; Moctezuma beer distributor; Informex, an information agency; Motors and Automotive Adaptations; Ecatepec Steel; Jacket and Raincoat Company, and the Continental Company, also in the clothing industry.

It must be clarified that a large part of the management shutdowns have not adhered to the legislation in that bankruptcy was not declared; besides, after the shutdown, many companies re-opened their doors with new personnel who did not have a collective contract and who were put to work in substandard conditions. Such was the case in the governmental decision to close Aeroméxico in 1988. After

In contrast to other Latin American countries where industrialization has come late, Mexican workers have built solid organizations



Is this hell? Photo by Marco Antonio Cruz/Imagenlatina

Despite high production records during the previous two years, Monterrey Foundry and Flat Steel closed their doors in the face of upcoming workers' strikes

the disappearance of the National Union of Mexican Aircraft Technicians and Workers (with more than 7000 dismissed), as well as the severance of 3000 stewards, stewardesses and pilots, the government created the company *Aerovías de México*, with new personnel, without a recognized union organization nor the advantages of previous collective contracts. The disappearance of Aeroméxico was considered a serious attack on the right to strike.

Other labor-management incidents have occurred where the right to strike was seriously affected. The strike of 36,000 workers of the Electricians' Union interrupted the supply of electrical energy to the Federal District and to the states of Hidalgo, Mexico, Morelos, and Puebla on February 27, 1987, and five days later was declared non-existent. Strikers demanded an emergency salary increase and maintained that the government should end its austerity policy, declare a moratorium on the foreign debt, de-freeze salaries and end repression against the labor movement. The Labor Ministry, the Energy, Mines and State-owned Industry Ministry and the Light Company avoided any

dialogue with the workers, brought in new personnel, and finally achieved a declaration that the strike did not exist, since, according to the authorities, the request for an emergency increase was not the cause of the imbalance among the production factors.

Manuel Fuentes, union legal advisor, explained at the time that "the authorities even bypassed determinations handed down by the Supreme Court of Justice in which workers were supported in their right to strike. The authorities, in similar cases, have proclaimed strikes non-existent. But this time, they had to end this strike by any means. The electricians' movement demonstrated that strikes continue to be a myth".

The Telephone Union went on strike April 9 for an emergency salary increase. The telephone company was immediately requisitioned and the authorities obliged the workers to return to work upon threat of dismissal. This was the eighth occasion that the Mexican telephone company had suffered a government seizure in order to end strikes.

The labor tribunes promote the registration of official unions and deny the same to independent ones

TEACHERS' UNION

Mexican teachers, members of the National Union of Education Workers, (SNTE), held a nation-wide strike this year in demand of salary rises and democratization of their trade union affairs. More than half a million teachers from preschool, primary and secondary schools, and from teacher training institutes such as the National Pedagogical University, as well as other non-teaching staff, suspended their labor between April 17 and May 10. Although they only won a 10% wage rise and an increase of 15% in other economic benefits, the teachers' movement established the bases for democratizing various sections of the SNTE, in Mexico City, and in the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Michoacán, Guerrero, Baja California Norte, Zacatecas, Nuevo León, Jalisco, Puebla and Yucatán.

The teachers' discontent began to be expressed in February 1989, during the local sectional congresses held prior to the 15th National Congress of the SNTE. Many teachers did not accept the manner of electing union representatives, and described this system as "fraudulent and imposed from above". Nobody expected that this discontent would reach the proportions of a national teacher's movement, which was supported by students and parents.

In spite of the demands for democracy expressed mainly in Mexico City, Oaxaca and Chiapas, the National Congress of the SNTE was held on February 16 in Chetumal, Quintana Roo, without any representatives of the internal opposition groups. The national leadership, dominated since 1972 by the group known as Revolutionary Vanguard, refused to dialogue with the dissident teachers. Meanwhile, salary demands were not resolved either, as the Education Department insisted that the Mexican government was unable to offer more than a 10 percent salary rise.

The teachers then resorted to other tactics: huge demonstrations, 48-hour strikes, a permanent sit-in outside the offices of the Education Department, interviews with public officials, forums and debates on education and trade union politics, as well as assemblies in schools and local union groups. Mexico had not known such a huge teachers' movement since the end of the 1950's.

The SNTE was formed in 1943 and is considered to be the largest trade union in all of Latin America, as it has more than a million members. The union has always had strong internal conflicts: from 1949 to 1972, the SNTE was controlled by the leader Jesús Robles Martínez, who dominated the union during 23 years, although he was not always in the formal post of General Secretary. He was accused of committing fraud with union funds, of sponsoring armed gangsters and of illicit accumulation of wealth. In 1960, Robles defeated an internal opposition movement led by the teacher Othón Salazar, and which demanded democracy in union affairs. This movement began in 1956 and was finally destroyed in 1960 through the use of public force, dismissals and imprisonment.

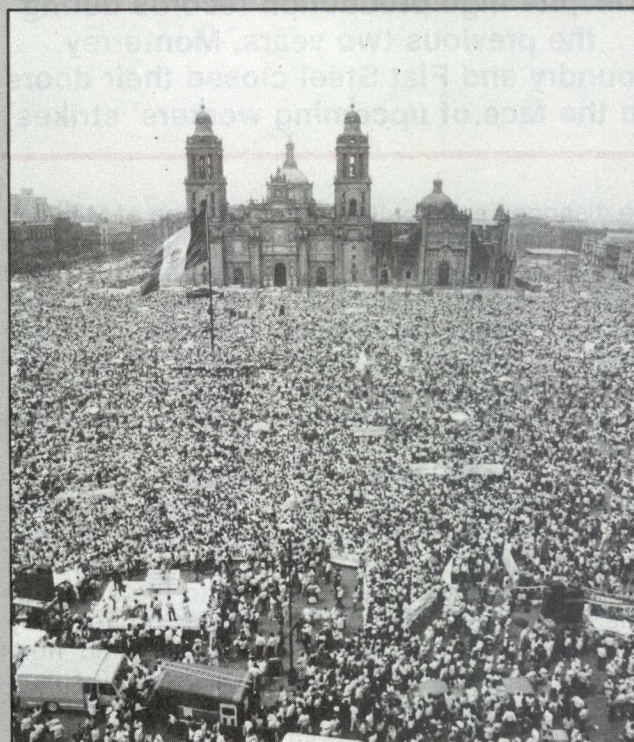
In 1972, Carlos Jonguitud Barrios led a violent take-over of the SNTE offices, and with his pistol in hand, promised order and efficiency in the union, and destroyed the power of Robles Martínez.

Jonguitud's group, the Revolutionary Vanguard, later initiated one of the union's most critical periods, when more

than 100 teachers were murdered. The leaders of the Vanguard rapidly assumed important political posts —Jonguitud himself was President of the Labor Congress, director of the Institute for Social Services and Security for State Employees (ISSSTE), Governor of the state of San Luis Potosí, and is today a Senator. He was the all powerful leader of the teachers' union over the last 17 years.

On April 24, 1989, a week after the national strike began, Jonguitud Barrios resigned from the SNTE under pressures from the half a million teachers who demanded his destitution. The Revolutionary Vanguard also disappeared as such. It was then that dialogue —something which had not existed in the trade union since 1949— began to take place and to determine union life. Elba Esther Gordillo, appointed new General Secretary of the union by government recommendation, began conversations with the striking teachers, members of the National Co-ordinator of Education Workers (CNTE).

The CNTE was recognized by the executive committee elected democratically in the Oaxaca section. It has also achieved the repudiation of former union leaders in Mexico City and in the states of Chiapas, Michoacán, Guerrero, and Nuevo León, and the naming of executive committees responsible for the preparation of extraordinary Congresses which will hold democratic elections to choose new union representatives. The teachers' movement has extended, and teachers' efforts to improve their working conditions and to democratize their union, continue in another 14 states of the Republic.



Education workers in the Mexico City Zócalo, demanding salary increases and trade union democracy. April, 1989. Photo by Angeles Torrejón/Imagenlatina

Weak Labor Unity

The defeat of the electricians' and telephonists' strikes in 1987 constituted the unequivocal demonstration that the labor movement was incapable of maintaining unity in critical moments. The unions of state-owned companies sought to make a 23% raise in the minimum wage applicable to contractual wages. The Labor Congress, a majority organization grouping 33 national labor unions and confederations, affiliated to the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), had decided to back the strike simultaneously in all state-owned companies in demand of a 23% increase. Nevertheless, it did not do so. The electrician and telephonist unions began a solitary struggle while the pilots, stewards and stewardesses, the railroad workers, the oil workers, the miners and metal workers negotiated separately for smaller rises.

For the first time in many years, leaders of the Labor Congress, including Salvador Ramos, Francisco Chena and César Rodríguez, admitted to the presence of bungling labor leaders and to division, dispersion, and low capacity for response, all of which place the Labor Congress in a weak position before the government. The official labor movement not only was shown to be incapable in the defeat of strikes for salary increases, but also permitted price hikes in gasoline, domestic gas, white

The *frentes* and *centrales* of workers have played leading roles in important chapters of our history, such as the expropriation of the petroleum industry in 1938

bread, and milk that further lowered the workers' standard of living in 1987.

The second wing of the labor movement, labelled as independent unionism, numerically less but with a greater fighting potential, is weakly falling back. Since the disappearance of the Democratic Trend of the Electricians Union in 1976, its attempts to unify have been ephemeral. Affected by dispersion, independent unionism has sought to unify through organisms such as the National Front for Popular Action (FNAP of the 1970's), the National Union Coordinator (Cosina, now extinct), the Board of Union Reconciliation (practically dissolved in 1987) and recently, the National Front for Organization of Masses (FNOM, short-lived in 1988).

Independent unionism, impelled by the still recent 1968 student movement, had a great apogee during the 1970's. Its proposals for union democracy, defense of workers' living conditions and for national sovereignty and economic independ-



Striking workers of Altos Hornos in Monclova, Coahuila, in a general assembly, April, 1989. Photo by Marco A. Cruz/Imagenlatina

FEATURES

ence, were heard by an important number of small company unions and others on the national scene. Thus, in the states of Mexico, Jalisco, Morelos, Nuevo León, Guanajuato, Michoacán, Veracruz, Guerrero, Sinaloa, Oaxaca, and in the Federal District, and to a lesser degree in other states, democratic unions multiplied, opposed to official unionism and government intervention in their internal affairs.

Violation of Workers' Rights

Though tardy, the businessmen's reply during the following decade was sharp and non-negotiable: democratic workers and teachers were murdered in the states of Mexico, Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Tlaxcala; dismissals and black lists, shutdowns and transfers of companies to new areas, harassment of workers, bribing of labor authorities, and contracting of goon squads from the official unions. These events, in violation of legal order and damaging the right to free organization, were permitted by the deficiencies in labor justice. The labor tribunals, dispersed and without homogeneity in their decisions, promoted the registration of official unions and denied the same to independent ones, thus retarding the resolution of conflicts and prejudicing judgments on strikes.

From 1985 to 1987 various gas, transportation, textile, beer and clothing companies closed down

The lack of dialogue between the official unions and the government as well as the virtual disappearance of the units of independent unionism would make people think that the Mexican labor movement was on the path to extinction. However, the workers' discontent has found new modes of expression. The workers, as citizens, disqualified the official party (PRI) candidates for worker leadership positions during the past federal elections in 1988, thus demonstrating that the credibility of the official labor movement had disappeared. On the other hand, the workers, in the face of an independent unionism that is almost a mirage, have decided to seek democracy in their unions. Musicians, employees of the Mexican Institute of Social Security and diverse Ministries of State, teachers, dock workers, truckers, oil workers, university workers, and the workers in the state owned companies oppose the old practices of union corruption, demand democracy, and seek to raise living conditions.

It is difficult to extinguish a labor movement with such a long history as the Mexican one. Industrial modernization in the country is unthinkable without respect for the point of view of the workers and their unions. To forget this is to ignore the fact that the life of the labor movement reflects the life of the entire country. □