

DEMOCRACY IN TEACHERS' UNION WILL HELP RESOLVE EDUCATION CRISIS

The Mexican education system is currently undergoing changes which were unimaginable a year or two ago. On the one hand, a project of modernization fostered by the federal government is under way, while on the other, 1989 saw mass mobilizations of teachers demanding better salaries and democracy within their trade union, the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE). The teachers of this movement for democracy, members of the dissident group known as the National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE), have had some victories, mainly the resignation of the would be 'life-long' leader of the SNTE, Carlos Jongitud Barrios, and some improvement to their salaries. However, these victories are not a total solution to the problems of teachers, nor to those of the education sector as a whole. Reporter Arturo Cano Blanco, who is also a primary school teacher, interviewed separately representatives of the two sides in the union conflict: Elba Esther Gordillo, who succeeded Jongitud as General Secretary of the SNTE, and Jesús Martín del Campo, leader of the democratic teachers' movement, the CNTE.

I am convinced that we have to modernize, that is, modify attitudes and make profound changes with the consent of all those involved in education

Mexico has an education system with some 25 million students, from kindergarten to post-graduate level. However, according to researcher Gilberto Guevara, there are another 25 million Mexicans who have not completed primary school.

These two facts reveal one of the principal contradictions facing teachers and their trade union, the National Education Workers' Union (SNTE). The great majority of teachers at basic and middle levels of education, and an important number of higher education teachers, belong to this organization. The SNTE has recently seen great changes, especially since massive mobilizations of teachers in April and May 1989 - and these changes are opening the way to the possible participation of teachers in a transformation of education which will help in the construction of a juster and more democratic society.

With the dismantling of the group Revolutionary Vanguard (see Voices No. 11), which dominated the union for 17 years, and which decided the fate of millions of workers and controlled vital zones of the education department's administrative apparatus, people such as Elba Esther Gordillo and Jesús Martín del Campo have come to the front of the teachers' movement. They represent, from opposite trenches, two of the main forces most directly involved in national education.

The main problem
in the education
crisis lies in the
teachers' loss of
autonomy in
decision making



Elba Esther Gordillo, General Secretary of the Education Workers' Union. Photo by Laura Cano.

Professor Elba Esther Gordillo (1945) is General Secretary of the National Executive Committee of the SNTE. She was appointed to this post following the events of April and May last year, although she has occupied various positions in the union since 1971. Professor Gordillo has also had a political career in the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) - she was organization secretary and also general delegate of the party in the state of Chihuahua. She was a federal deputy and until April 1989 she was head of the Gustavo A. Madero delegation in Mexico City. Jesús Martín del Campo (1948) studied to become a teacher in the National Teachers' School, and went onto the higher level of this school with a specialty in history; later he studied two Masters degrees in History, in the UNAM and in the National Anthropology and History School. He began his trade union activities in 1967 and was a founding member and is today an important leader of the National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE), an organization of dissident teachers. He is currently Organization Secretary of one of the most important sections of the teachers' union, Section 10, which is made up by teachers of the middle and higher education levels in Mexico City.

How would you describe Mexico's education system to foreign readers?

Elba Esther Gordillo: It is an education in a country which has had a great demographic explosion and which needs an education system that serves as a

CHALLENGES TO IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

Omar Ocampo

The centralized control exercised by the State over education as well as over many other points, has led to evident backlog and a negative situation in the present educational system. From this point of departure, the administration of President Carlos Salinas presented early in its history, the project for reform and modernization for 1989- 1994, a program given form in the National Plan for Development (PND).

These reforms, according to the PND, respond to real needs in Mexican society since 'the social transformations (...) have accentuated factors with negative impact on school productivity and student continuity and on educational services'. In this way, using the very words of the Plan, to modernize means to better the quality at all levels, from pre-school to postgraduate studies, technical educational, adult education and training programs, and special education.

In this respect, the National Plan for Development proposes the use of modern social communication techniques, as the radio and television have proven to be efficient and mobile support units for education.

As regards the de-centralization proposed in the Plan, the scheme deals with educational resources and service transfers to local governments in order that these react to the reality existing in each state; also, it is hoped to avoid social desintegration and fragmentation insofar as the federal government will maintain its managing posture in relation to Study Plans and Programs well as in their evaluation, transfer and recognition.

For some observers and analysts, the third task proposed by the Plan creates some doubt. This task refers to the "promotion of alternative and complementary forms of social financing of the educational task". Does this mean giving financial influence to private initiative? If so, then, under what conditions? In this sense, the Representatives' Assembly of the Federal District proposed an increase in education spending corresponding to 8% of the Gross Internal Product, but the PND is not clear in what way it will maintain its administrative management within this educational modernization.

All of the previously mentioned proposals were affirmed by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari in his first State of the Union address, and went beyond this because he analyzed the educational situation with regard to teachers: In April and May (of 1989), the teachers demonstrated for union re-organization and better benefits. The prolonged suspension of classes awoke an increasing unrest among parents and students. The government scrupulously respected the right of teachers to demonstrate, made an extraordinary effort to respond to the economic demands in the face of economic restraint by granting the highest wage increase of the decade in recognition of the fall in the standard of living. As regards the above, there is an impressive figure contradictory to that spoken by the President: the teachers' wage deterioration is close to 76% from 1976 to 1989. Returning to the presidential address: "There is no substitute for education in economic and social modernization. It is the highest priority sector in the government's duties. We have already begun a new stage in education in Mexico. This program maintains that a universal, useful, and high quality primary educational level must be achieved, and that it is a right defined by revolutionary proposition and is a modernizing task. The educational re-definition of the secondary and the high school levels promote links with social and community necessities. In the universities, we seek the organization and financing for innovation and excellence. Society believes in the proven vocation of the teacher. We are committed to their excellence. We will expand the open and non-formal systems of education. For the justice and progress we seek, we will broaden the options available to all Mexicans..."

The Representatives' Assembly itself proposed to re-structure study plans and programs, to respect the third article of the Constitution with regard to the Church's intervention in education, to raise the standard of living of teachers, and to achieve an increase of 8% of the Gross Internal Product for education.

The debate regarding educational modernization has been a long one. But teachers have been excluded from it; they are a sector of vital importance since they are the actu-

al givers of education, and they know the system's deficiencies and the potentially beneficial reforms.

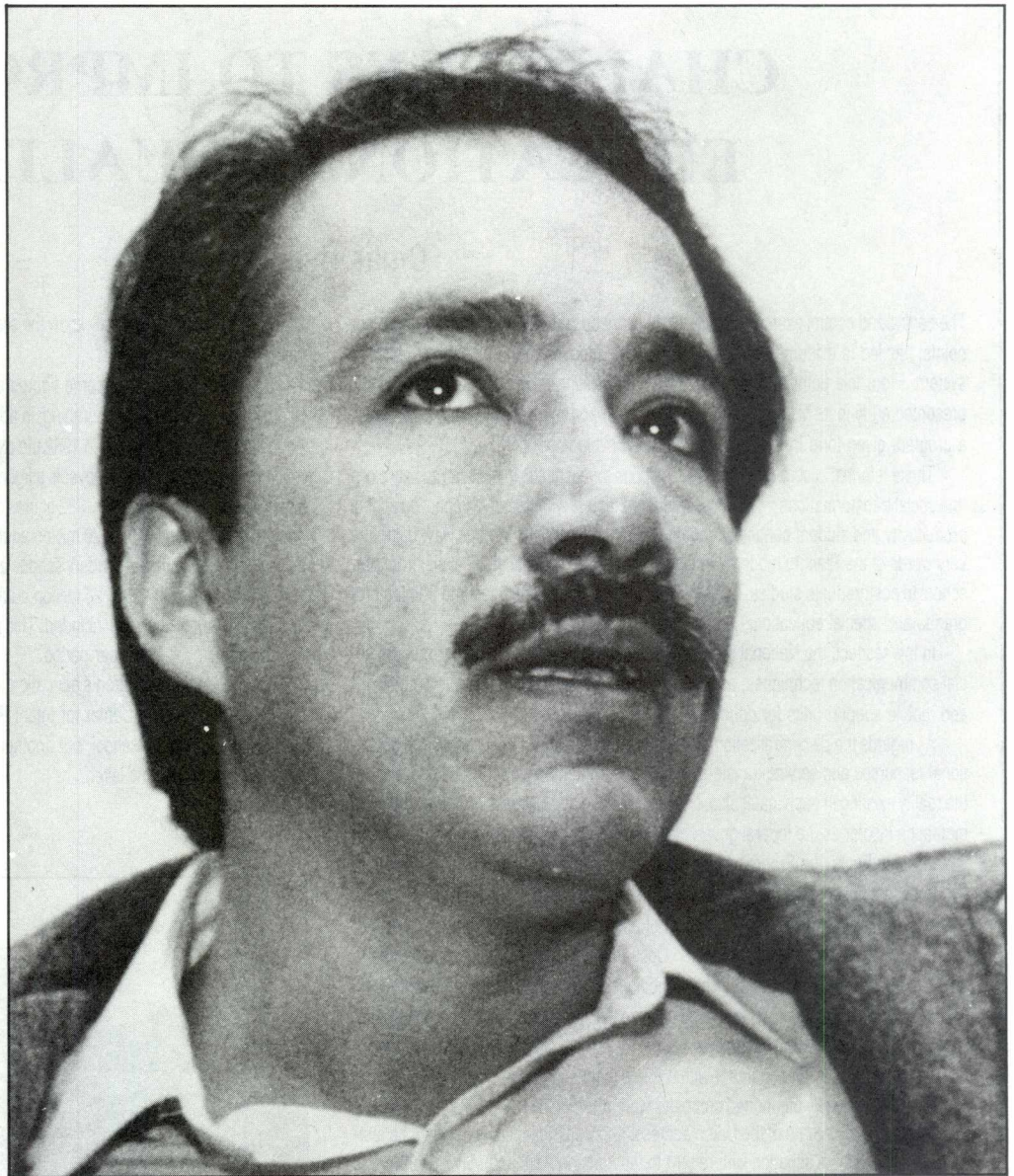
If we take into account some figures regarding this point, we could note that the reformist future is not so encouraging; in adult education, the National Institute for Adult Education (INEA) recognized in 1982 the existence of six million adults who can neither read nor write, and in 1989, it reveals a figure of four million. This would indicate a reduction in illiteracy even though in 1982 figures show 13 million persons who had not finished primary school, and in 1989, 20 million adults who had not completed it. In 1982, seven million had not finished secondary school, and by 1989, 16 million had not. If we synthesize these figures, in 1982, 26 million adults were included in these three categories, and in 1989, 40 million were included. This points to a 70% increase in the adult education problems over a six year period.

As regards basic children's education, according to figures provided by the general director of the Mexican Center for Infant Rights, Andrea Barcena, 14 million children are enrolled in primary school, but another 14 million children have to work and have not even enrolled at this level.



Teachers from the democratic groups, marching in Mexico City to give thanks to the general population for its support. Photo by Angeles Torrejón/Imagenlatina.

The teachers have a right to a better salary and the trade union has the obligation to demand it



Jesús Martín del Campo, a leader of the dissident teachers' movement. Photo by Laura Cano.

lever for social benefits; because education should be an instrument not only of knowledge, but also of restitution.

We have been informed that the 1990 budget will have a 40% increase: it is of great importance that this money really reaches those areas which most need it. Because in a country like ours, with ethnic groups, with an urgent need to respect the culture but also to guarantee better health, housing and well being, there is a need for education which teaches its population to be productive for its own benefit.

It is also a system which needs to regionalize itself: it has been a long time since we had a text book which speaks to the pupil about his or her own home state, and this means that the students become disconnected from their origins. And people without a memory can have many serious problems.

Jesús Martín del Campo: As a system which has always been treated politically: the demands of the population have been attended in order to achieve a political justification, rather than to develop an educative project for a modern nation. This has been done so as to generate an image abroad of a government which attends to the needs of its population. Another sign of this kind of treatment is the state's use of employment: the Mexican Education Department (SEP), is a bureaucratic, stagnant dependency, it is the state department with most employees, but this does not automatically translate into the best attention to education needs. And it is the way it is because the employee of the SEP has been used as a pawn in support of government policy, not only in education but in all fields.

The school is no longer the most important socializing agency, it has given way to the mass media

In relation to education levels we can make the following summary: during the 20's and 30's attention was given to alphabetization, and this went on advancing into primary education, so much so that in the 1960's there was a fair expansion of this level, which covered most of the demand in urban areas, with a certain unfulfilled demand in rural zones. In secondary education - still speaking in quantitative terms - the system managed to fulfill 70% of the demand. Just as in all Latin American countries, there is a pyramid in education which gets narrower until education at the top, at post-graduate level, is for an elite.

Generally I think we can speak of an education system which is very bureaucratized, which has grown quantitatively but which still has great deficiencies in attending other needs of the population, beyond the number of students who have passed or failed exams.

The commentary that the situation of Mexico's education system is of great concern has become a commonplace, but: what characteristics do you see? What is your opinion about the critical viewpoints presented by the teachers' union, and what role does this union have in education?

Elba Esther Gordillo: Firstly, to accept that there is a crisis, because there is no national education plan and there is a lot of disarticulation between the different levels. Here there is a real problem concerning youth, because even though official statistics do not recognise the fact, there are serious levels of unemployment. And this means that we should revise the technical aspect so as to provide youths with guarantees of development possibilities which will assure them a minimal level of well being when they finish their studies.

Concerning the proposals made by President Salinas on education, I am convinced that we have to modernize, if by this we understand the modification of attitudes and the making of profound changes with the general consent of all those involved in education processes. It is not enough to unite a group of experts to discuss methodology and planification - we need a more democratic school, right from the lowest levels. That is, modernization plans must be worked out with the consensus of teachers, parents and the trade union.

We are going to study and revise the plan, that's why we are insisting on the formation of committees in each school so that they study this education program. We are concerned that it might turn out to be, yet again, just another six year plan, because this does a lot of damage to education.

Jesús Martín del Campo: In the field of declarations, everyone agrees that education is in crisis - this was seen in terms of quantity since the 1960's, and in terms of quality, since the 70's. While the government sees the problem mainly in terms of products (the number of drop-outs, the number of successful students, etc), those of us who work in education see the problem as a combination of factors, from the economic to the cultural, where the main issue lies in the teachers' loss of autonomy in making decisions on education.

The national leadership of the SNTE recognizes the education crisis, but from the viewpoint which follows government proposals. Because at the moment it urgently needs to show initiatives which are in advance of reports from the government and from dissident groups, it is trying to make some new moves. It has more a sense of anticipation of politics and publicity than an in-depth proposal on education.

There is a lot of debate on this point, because in its desires to anticipate, the national leadership of the SNTE even takes proposals made by the dissident teachers and empties them of content and meaning. One of these is the idea of re-evaluating the teaching profession, which came from the democratic groups at academic levels, and which the SNTE has now made its own. For us, a re-evaluation of the education worker means an historic revision of the experiences of Mexican teachers, studying those aspects which can help the teaching profession recuperate its place in society. It also involves localizing those factors which have caused a blockage in the teachers' creative capacities, and finding out why the profession has become extremely routine and bureaucratized. On the level of declarations, it sounds like the same discourse, but it has very distinct implications and consequences.

Illiteracy Rates in Mexico, 1980		
Age	Male	Female
15 years old or less	14.1%	17.6%
15-24	5.8%	7.4%
25-44	11.4%	18.1%
45 and older	22.8%	32.99%

Some days ago I interviewed some 20 teachers about what they could do to improve the quality of education. All of them attributed the system's deficiencies to the lack of funds and to bad programs. What causes this attitude of the teachers? What makes them distance themselves from their work in this way?

Elba Esther Gordillo: In this problem there is something at the bottom which has to do with the political and trade union effervescence that we have experienced recently. It is the question of the dignity of being a teacher. I am convinced that the great problem of modernization is, has been, and can be, letting teachers be simple bureaucrats.

I do not agree that the salary is the most important factor in the making of a better teacher. Obviously as a human being he or she has the right to a better salary - and the trade union has the obligation to demand it - but the teacher should be formed in a different way: he or she should have a certain mystique.

There is a problem of dignity which is the responsibility of governments and of the union leadership. We need to re-evaluate our functions, and become totally aware of what these imply. On this point I always talk about something which has impressed me: one of the governments which paid teachers least was that of President Lázaro Cárdenas. Once, the teachers were planning a demonstration and they invited President Cárdenas to their national council meeting. Cárdenas avoided going, because he knew the teachers would demand better salaries, but he sent them a letter where he



Elba Esther Gordillo promised profound democratic changes in the teachers' union. Photo by Laura Cano.

**For better or worse,
the trade union had
an important role in
the state of today's
education**

said: "Teachers, there is no money, but you are the Revolution: go out and make it".

Jesús Martín del Campo: It is a defense mechanism. The identity of the teacher has been so badly treated, that they are not even given the rank of professional. The career has lost status, for some it is a sub-profession, a technical career, a second class job. Socially it does not have the importance it used to, it has been displaced by other activities. Thus, there is a defensive attitude: "those responsible for everything are the authorities, which are bad, the programs, which are bad, and the union leaders, who are also bad". This defensive attitude could be hiding a sensation of powerlessness and a questioning about how to resume the teaching work with a new sense of direction. However, what the teachers pointed out to you is real: the programs are inadequate, they are reformed without consulting the teachers, and often they are mixtures of new theories which are not compatible with each other, while many are just six-year fashions.

But the other problem is how to assume responsibility - in so far as teaching is not a technical activity - for the relation between teacher and students, between teachers and knowledge. We need to resolve the problem of the teachers' commitment without entering into fields of accusation and blame. We also need to recognize those limitations of the teachers due to their formation.

**Expenditure in Health and Social Security as a Percentage
of the Gross Internal Product**

1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986
3.6	3.6	3.0	2.8	2.8	2.4

Source: IV State of the Union Address, statistical appendix.

What distance is there between the teacher of the 1930's, who confronted the great challenge of taking education to all the isolated regions of the country, and the Mexican teacher of the 1990's?

Elba Esther Gordillo: Plenty. We have to understand that societies evolve. In today's country of more than 80 million better informed inhabitants we demand another kind of professional. What would be worth seeing is if the teacher of the 1930's who had so much mystique and who managed transcendental actions in the rural school, did that because they knew a lot or earned a lot. But neither of these is the case - it was because they had a different emotion, affection, they knew they were transformers.

In contrast, the teachers who graduate today, go to a marginal area and discover that what they were told in school does not coincide with reality. They arrive in schools where there is no blackboard, no chalk, but besides, they become involved in the same problem because they also become marginated, not only materially, but also culturally.

How is it possible that we teachers do not have cultural, editorial programs, nor actualization systems? What most concerns me are the schools which form the teachers: those who become teachers should do so because they have the vocation, not because they think they will earn more money or so as to later go to university. Because the moment comes when the teacher realizes that the job goes beyond the classroom time, and that the salary is not going to solve his or her problems, and then comes a period of frustration.

Jesús Martín del Campo: We have to recognize the first difference between the 1940's in Latin America and the societies we live in today: the school is no longer the most important socializing agency, it has given way to the mass media. This has a succession of negative effects on the teaching profession: as an individual, the professor is an almost unknown subject, an anonymous being in the huge numbers of teachers in the big cities, although he/she still has a certain image in the rural areas. But in both cases the teacher has been put

NATIONAL EFFORTS TO MODERNIZE EDUCATION

Gisela Salinas

In October 1989 the government of President Salinas announced its education policy in the Program for the Modernization of Education, 1989-94. This followed the national debate on the modernization of education, a debate that lasted several months and gave the opportunity to teachers, parents, and those in charge of educative institutions to give their opinions on the issues involved.

The 1989-94 Program is part of the President's project to modernize Mexican society in all its aspects. Thus, "education will be a lever of transformation if Mexicans can find there the means to develop new capacities: the capacity to generate a liberating and efficient productive structure with the help of scientific and technological know-how; the capacity to strengthen social solidarity, national identity and scientific and technological culture; the capacity of workers to acquire and humanize new forms of plural and democratic participation; the capacity to perfect services so they work efficiently for the well being of the population".

To modernize education, according to the Program, means: "revise and systematically rationalize education costs and at the same time order and simplify mechanisms for management and administration; it will call for innovations in procedures, imagination of

new alternatives, action and political decision, solidarity and consensus to serve the general interest".

Leading Mexican education researchers see the situation of the country in this field as critical. During the last six year government, it was announced that the Education Department (SEP) was able to attend 100% of the demand in primary education. The present government admits that nearly 300,000 Mexican children, 2% of the total, have no access to primary school, while nearly 800,000 primary school students abandon their studies each year, and 1,700,000 children from 10-14 years of age are not registered in the education system at all. The high level of failures and drop outs in primary education (see Chart 1), indicates a difficult social and educative reality.

The number of Mexicans who have not finished primary school or who have not even had access to education, according to the Program, is 24.4 million (see Chart 2). Education researcher Guevara Niebla, writing in the national newspaper *La Jornada* (22-Oct-89), had the following comment about this situation: "This makes us think that objectively, the system has produced more people with no primary education than it has produced students who finished primary school, and that the effort needed to attend to this

demand would be almost equivalent to the efforts carried out by the state in its entire education system".

Currently, there are almost 26 million students enrolled in the education system, with one million teachers in 154,000 schools and institutes. The Program recognizes that "the achievements of Mexican teachers have been extraordinary". From 1921 to the present, the illiteracy rate dropped from 66% to 8% and the percentage of Mexicans who have attended primary school rose from 22% to 98%. However, the Program talks about the need "to impart better education, carry out profound modifications of our education system to make it more participative, efficient and of better quality, that is, more modern".

According to this way of thinking, the formation and actualization of teachers constitute a fundamental task of the educative modernization and require the "establishment of promotion structures so as to reconcile the sense of service, appropriate in the teaching profession, with better standards of living" (from the Program for the Modernization of Education). That is, "we should have teachers with the best academic preparation and a sense of vocation who incorporate themselves with maximum enthusiasm to the processes of educative modernization" (José Angel Pescador, Rector of the Nation-

al Pedagogical University).

Mexican teachers, who in spite of their "extraordinary achievements" are punished with miserable salaries and a corrupt and anti-democratic trade union leadership, managed to break the traditional balance of power in the education sector this year, with national demonstrations. Following these mass teachers' movements in April and May, and the triumphs achieved by the democratic teachers, their opinions about their work has taken on a new meaning.

Any education project should take the teachers into account. The modernization program for 1989-94 defines the following challenges: decentralization, number of students not enrolled in the school system, structural changes, establishment of links between schools and the productive apparatus, scientific and technological advances and investment in education according to new necessities. These challenges cannot be met without dignified economic justice for teachers, nor without their free and creative participation in the processes of modernization, which otherwise would be only an official project with great intentions, but lacking in real opportunities to make transformations in the complex reality of Mexican education.

CHART I

SCHOLARITY INDEX

	1984	1989
Primary School (of every 100 students)	48 did not finish	46 did not finish
Secondary School	26 did not finish	30 did not finish
Tertiary Education	50 did not finish	49 did not finish

SOURCES: 1984: National Program for Education, Culture, Recreation and Sport, 1984-1988.
1989: Program for the Modernization of Education, 1989-1994.

CHART II

ADULT EDUCATION DEFICIT

	1984	1989
Illiterates	5.7 million	4.2 million
Did not finish primary school	15 million	20.2 million
Did not finish high school	7 million	16 million
TOTAL	27.7 million	40.4 million

SOURCES: 1984: National Program for Education, Culture, Recreation and Sport, 1984-1988.
1989: Program for the Modernization of Education, 1989-1994.
(Figures refer to all those aged over 15.)

For many years, the trade union bureaucracy and that of the Education Department fed off each other. No innovations could be made during that matrimony of the two bureaucracies

aside, and teachers thus join in the complaints of the family and the church, which have also been displaced as socializing agencies.

In this general framework there is another problem: our education system separated teachers' education from the University, thus creating a second class network for teachers. In other times, this allowed children of people with low incomes to study a career that was both short and socially useful. But in the long run, the repercussions have been negative and only the other professions are recognized as "real".

Efforts have been made - though so far only at bureaucratic levels - without immediate results, to give the rank of university degree to the teaching career. So far this has only served to stall enrollments in teachers' colleges.

Finally, in contrast with the teachers of the 1930's who did not have much knowledge but who did have social recognition, the teacher today lacks both, being backward both in rank and in academic formation.

What role has the SNTE played, and how important is its trade union structure in the education system? How responsible is the SNTE for the current panorama in education?

Elba Esther Gordillo: I believe everyone has been responsible. But I think there has been a mistake made about the trade union. The SNTE, because of its character as educator-worker, should make proposals in education, it should have a say in the improvement of the profession, take care that it be concerned not only with money, it should be a class grouping, a more committed trade union. In this, I don't think we have yet found the way.

But I think that, for better or for worse, the trade union had an important role in the state of today's education. Now we should be looking to the future, that is where the key lies. In the SNTE there are very young teachers, mature ones and very old ones, all with their various academic proposals.

Jesús Martín del Campo: For many years, but especially since the years of the Revolutionary Vanguard, the trade union bureaucracy and that of the SEP were superimposed and vinculated as complementary bureaucracies. One fed off the other, the two co-existed in a symbiotic relationship. The growth of employment in non-fundamental areas of the SEP favored all the clients of the Vanguard of the SNTE, and vice versa.

The consequence is stagnation, as the huge number of people who received wages without working made the SEP inefficient. Some two years ago an internal struggle began there, firstly in order to get rid of Revolutionary Vanguard representatives in vital areas.

This is related to the two currents which exist in the Education Department: one, modernizer, made up mostly of people who arrive with a new Cabinet, with each new Education Minister, the other, a conservative nucleus made up by those who say they know education, and who - not by coincidence - are associated with the Revolutionary Vanguard. No innovations could be made in this panorama, in this period of matrimony of the two bureaucracies. And thus, the responsibility they have for the situation of our education system is direct and very considerable.

You head a trade union made up mostly of women, but which traditionally has been in hands of men. What implications does this have for you and for the trade union?

Elba Esther Gordillo: We women still have to jump many puddles. Sometimes, dealing with bureaucrats, politicians or with the dissidents, one notices that they think that a woman can be weak and vulnerable just because she is a woman, that she will be incapable of making decisions, or will lack serenity. They think our emotions will beat us. That's why we women have a great challenge to demonstrate that we are capable of being leaders.

Here there is something related to education. Even though it embarrasses us, or it is difficult to accept this truth, if there is so much machismo in this country it's because there are two great people responsible: the mother and the teacher. In the classroom we tell them that boys' tasks are one thing, and the girls' another — we are not educating with equality. This is one of the reflections we have to make for the modernization of education. □