

Enrique Vargas Anaya

Unemployed Mexicans create Multiple Survival Strategies

For many Mexican citizens, including women and children, survival seems to be based on the saying "Necessity is the mother of invention", as they go out every day to fight for life by selling objects, singing songs in the subway or by fire throwing. This is an expression of what seems to be a growing crisis that submits 51% of the national population to conditions of extreme poverty. Details of this daily fight for survival are given by Enrique Vargas, who also interviewed specialists on the theme in his report on the socio-economic panorama of today's Mexico. Economist José Antonio Rojas Nieto then gives a succinct analysis of the deterioration in workers' earnings over the last fourteen years.

A thin scrawny-looking woman enters a subway car. She is dressed in torn and ragged clothes, she carries a one year old baby in her arms. Finding her way through the people, she gives a horrible interpretation of a *bolero*. At her waist she has a cord to which her seven year old daughter is attached. Aida, the little girl, collects the small amounts of money given by passengers with evident indifference and boredom. The woman, together with her children, changes subway car in each station, and sings the same sad song, incomplete and incoherent. Every day she covers the same subway line, that which goes from Martín Carrera to El Rosario in Mexico City.

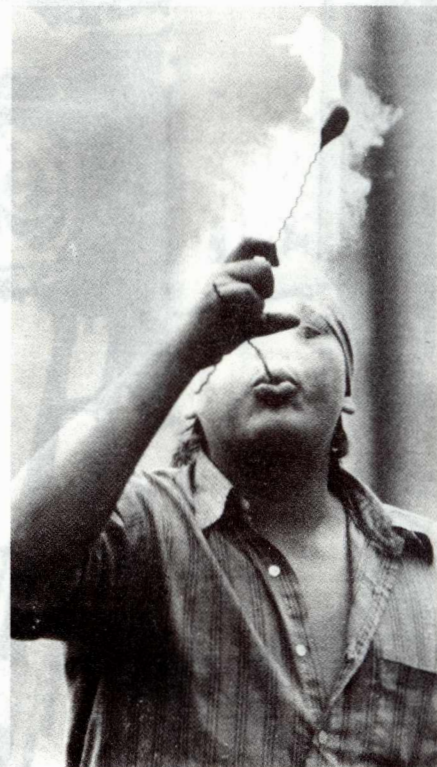
She refuses to speak to strangers. She mistrusts the reporter and pulls her daughter closer to her; finally she utters a few monosyllables and incomplete phrases, from which one can reconstruct a common story: she arrived in Mexico City in May this year.

She is a widow, has two children, and cannot find work. She lives near the Basilica of Guadalupe in the north of the city, in a small room that someone is lending her temporarily. She leads her daughter around on a string because she is afraid of losing her. The mother has heard about the abduction of children in Mexico and keeps a close eye on her children.

This small extract from the metropolis's day to day existence seems to fulfill the sentence of the most important researcher on the "underground economy", and author of the book *El otro sendero* (The Other Path), Hernando de Soto: "The only alternative for survival for the poor, lies in a marginal existence."

The fact that millions of Mexicans have been able to survive and resist the economic crisis which has hit the country over the last several years, implies that great sacrifices have been made in areas of well-being such as food, health, housing, education and clothing.

Their survival is also due to their inventiveness.



People risk their health to earn a living. Photo by Marco Antonio Cruz/Imagenlatina

With regard to the sacrifices made, these are translated into alarming indicators of falls in living standards: 51% of the national population lives in conditions of extreme poverty; one of every five Mexicans does not satisfy 60% of his/her essential needs in food, education and housing. Meanwhile, only 5% of the population controls 90% of the national wealth.

The statistics also show that 70 of every thousand Mexicans born, die within five years, although in Chiapas and other states in the south-east, the mortality rate is 100 deaths in the first five years, for every thousand births. Fifteen of every 100 children are born under-weight, and more than 60% of all Mexicans suffer malnutrition.

These figures are given by three researchers of the National Autonomous University (UNAM), Lomelí Macías, Fausto Burgueño and Javier Delgadillo, in their study "Pronasol, nuevo maquillaje a la pobreza" (National Solidarity Program: new make-up for poverty).

There are people who consider that ingenuousness is a virtue of the Mexicans, while a summary visit through the streets of Mexico City is sufficient

to be able to observe the versatility of inventiveness of those who have no permanent job and who have to find a way to feed their families. During this visit, one will quickly find the key to the "social peace" within the economic crisis: dispersed throughout the city there are some 50,000 street vendors with more or less permanent stands, and an unknown but significant number of ambulant vendors, with more or less permanent stands, according to information given by the Federal District's Supply Coordination Office.

In some points of the city, the concentration of street vendors is alarming, and the high rates of unemployment and sub-employment more evident: the stairways, corridors, platforms and wagons of the subway are literally inundated with make-shift stands where men, women and children sell a great variety of objects, from the most simple to the most unusual – from a newspaper or a candy to the sophisticated radios and tape-recorders which are smuggled into Mexico as contraband.

During peak-hours, the noise of various musical amplifiers played at full volume by their vendors, com-

petes with the shouts of salespersons who desperately try to attract potential buyers.

Along the platforms of some stations, such as Pino Suárez in the center of the city, the obstruction caused by vendors is such that it threatens the very security of the travellers. Within the subway cars, sometimes a musician, a beggar and a salesman or woman, promoting whatever product, will coincide in the same wagon.

An estimated 2,000 ambulant sellers are said to work in Mexico's subway system, although legally they have no permission and are frequently removed by security police.

In some parts of the city, especially in the center, competition for control of the streets has often caused brawls. This phenomenon is so complex, and has advanced so rapidly, that the authorities have practically lost control of the situation.

Hernando Soto, in an interview given to the Mexican business magazine *Expansión* in September 1987, declared: "The informal economy is not a good thing. Essentially, it is anarchy. The good thing about the informal economy is that it proves the exist-



Street photographer. Photo by Angeles Torrejón/Imagenlatina



Preparing for the show ... on any street corner. Photo by Angeles Torrejón/Imagenlatina

ence of a quality thought to be reserved to the superior strata: the capacity to create a business..."

But not only that...

The informal economy "fulfills a strategic function as an informal shock-absorber for open unemployment which has been increasing in proportion to the (worsening of) the economic crisis", according to Dinah Rodríguez Charent, Felipe Torres and Juvencio Wing, authors of the book *La industria de frituras: empleo informal y modernidad* (The fried food industry: informal employment and modernity).

The authors state that "those who dedicate themselves to this kind of activity, are, in part, workers who were sacked from their former employment... The other part is made up by immigrants from rural areas who have come to the country's main urban areas with the hope of finding some economic activity which will allow them and their family to survive until they find a formal job".

A similar case to the picture given in the book, is that of Manuel Landeros. Every day, from 6am to 2pm, as if he were still following his old work schedule at the factory, he extends his

poor and shoddy stand of books and magazines on the ground outside the subway station Aquiles Serdán. There are only some 20 books and a few old magazines and pornographic miscellany. Landeros was a worker in the Mundet soft drinks factory for 20 years, but he was sacked at the beginning of the year, along with other workers, during staff cuts made by the company. He invested some of the money he received on his dismissal on buying these meager texts.

He told me that things are not going well, and that he is thinking of looking for another job. Some days he hardly sells anything. The good thing is, he says, that he only has to worry about himself and his wife. He still seems to have a good dose of patience, and while this runs out, he lies down on the grass and reads, waiting for his clients.

With certain frequency, politicians and researchers, both from Mexico and abroad, have asked themselves why the Mexican poor have not taken to the streets to protest against the consequences of the economic crisis, or why have they not opted for violent expressions of popular discontent, such as the ransacking of shops seen in Venezuela, Peru and other Latin American and Caribbean nations.

One possible explanation is that given by Felipe Torres, sociology professor and researcher in the Economic Research Institute of the UNAM. He is also a specialist in the study of food production and distribution, and has written some 20 books on this theme, as well as dozens of articles and conferences. His opinion: "It is the family structure which has prevented the crisis from overflowing, because the family unites to confront adversity. In this way, family ties are strengthened. If someone is unemployed, the others help, even though the levels of consumption are reduced."

Besides, he says, the heterogeneity and complexity of the Mexican society has been another factor which has prevented the unification of social-political forces and objectives in the struggle for social well-being.

Another significant element considered by this researcher, is the political evolution of the government. The gradual relaxation of political control which began in 1978-79, during the government of José López Portillo, helped to relieve social tensions which were accumulated after the student movement of 1968 and the activities of guerrilla groups, especially the

Communist League September 23.

Thus the society slowly left the one-party system behind, and began to develop other political alternatives. Although, says Professor Torres, "this also served like a shop-window to cover up the misery". In other words, the popular discontent was institutionalized.

Another factor which Felipe Torres considers important in answering this question about the lack of social protests in Mexico, is the lack of sufficiently popular leaders or organizations which could canalize the discontent and give it coherent expression.

"Yet another element", says Professor Torres, "is biological: Mexican families have grown used to living in conditions of under-consumption, to the point that our protein intake is below the world level. The body gets used to this under-consumption and inhibits its necessities, and this is reflected in the levels of productivity".

He continues: "In the United States, for example, when there is a decrease in the intake of animal protein, the

people immediately begin to protest, but in Mexico, we lack buying power and we reduce our consumption. People buy food which is cheaper but less nutritive. At the same time, in other areas of social well-being, we can observe a great fall in living standards: in housing, health, recreation...".

Open unemployment in Mexico is around 16%, says Professor Torres, but the effects of this are absorbed to a certain extent by self-employment, prostitution, delinquency and begging.

Even those who have permanent jobs resort to additional commercial activities to augment their incomes, and spend part of their time in the sale of various products in their workplace, where it is common to see employees participating in raffles, group saving programs called "tandas", and all kinds of surprising mini-businesses. This is all due to the fact that the workers' buying power has fallen 60% since 1982.

There are of course, no statistical records on all these additional commercial activities, but they have a very

real presence in the workplace, says Professor Torres.

Other Mexicans resolve their economic problems, or seek to resolve them, by migration to the U.S., with all the risks that this involves. Others, familiarly known in Mexico as "mil usos" (a thousand uses), dedicate themselves to any and every activity which comes their way, even though it might damage their health.

A Governmental Program for the Defenseless

The Mexican government has opted for the path of social assistance in the face of the economic crisis and its accompanying social problems. Thus, it has established the National Solidarity Program (Pronasol), which aims to help some 15 million Mexicans who live in extreme poverty —although there are an estimated 48 million poor people in the country.

Some of the objectives of Pronasol are: the installation of communal kitchens in urban centers, school breakfasts, flexible credits for the pur-



Music box from the early 20th Century. Photo by Marco Antonio Cruz/Imagenlatina

chase of homes, the restoration of structures which have deteriorated or which were not completed, the rehabilitation of health centers, and other programs.

Felipe Torres says that this kind of social assistance aims to lessen the build-up of social pressures or to delay an imminent explosion of discontent. But he expressed his disagreement with these kinds of programs, because they do not resolve any of the underlying causes.

Latin America: An Erupting Volcano

The same problems observed in Mexico exist in other countries, and in many cases the situation is even more critical: thousands of children begging on the streets, thousands of street vendors, beggars and homeless all over the place.

In its most recent annual report (1990), the World Bank informs that Latin America was the only region in the developing world which suffered another fall in per capita income in 1989. The reduction in production per inhabitant from 1980-89, was 7.1% in Mexico.

The journalist Estela Calloni wrote a report where she warns of the effects of the economic stagnation in Latin America. In "The Violent Paths of Poverty", published in the weekly paper *El Día Latinoamericano* on September 17 this year, she points out that 80% of the population is trapped in the circle of poverty, while "a majority of this percentage stands on the threshold of unimaginable violence. Hunger oppresses 70% of the population...".

Calloni adds that there is no country in Latin America which has not had important strikes in the last few months. She says that Argentina, Peru, Venezuela and the Dominican Republic are the countries most under threat of possible social explosions.

What Perspective for Mexicans?

Professor Torres states that conditions in Mexico have not yet reached the level of open hunger, but he warns that in some parts of the country, new indexes of misery are being registered, which are more dramatic than in other parts of the world.

He recalls a popular saying, "Where one can eat, so can two" – the

equivalent to our "Put more water in the stew" when there are extra mouths to feed – but, says the university professor, this kind of reaction has its limit.

He points out that there are isolated outbursts of violence and protests, such as the recent demonstration named "the empty pots", organized by urban groups, who held a sit-in outside the National Palace to protest against rising prices.

Professor Torres is pessimistic about the situation: "There is an improvement in the economy, but this is not reflected in social development. The deterioration in incomes and buying power continues." ■