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**The Mexican Left,  
the Popular Movements,  
and the Politics of Austerity**

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*edited by*  
*Barry Carr*  
*and*  
*Ricardo Anzaldúa Montoya*

Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies  
University of California, San Diego

**THE MEXICAN LEFT,  
THE POPULAR MOVEMENTS,  
AND THE POLITICS OF AUSTERITY**

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1986

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\*Translated by Sandra del Castillo

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

ANOCP	Asamblea Nacional de Obreros y Campesinos Popular
CEN	Comité Ejecutivo Nacional
CES	Comité Ejecutivo Seccional
CGT	Confederación General de Trabajadores
CIOAC	Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos
CNDEP	Comité Nacional para la Defensa de la Economía Popular
CNOP	Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Populares
CNPA	Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala
CNTE	Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación
COCEI	Coalición de Obreros, Campesinos y Estudiantes del Istmo
CONAMUP	Coordinadora Nacional del Movimiento Urbano Popular
CONASUPO	Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares
COR	Confederación Obrera Revolucionaria
COSINA	Coordinadora Sindical Nacional
CROC	Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos
CROM	Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana
CS	Corriente Socialista
CT	Congreso del Trabajo
CTM	Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos
DICONSA	Distribuidora CONASUPO
FAT	Frente Auténtico del Trabajo
FNCR	Frente Nacional Contra la Represión
FNDESCAC	Frente en Defensa del Salario Contra la Austeridad y la Carestía
FSTE	Federación de Sindicatos de Trabajadores al Servicio del Estado
FSUNTU	Federación Sindical Unitaria Nacional de Trabajadores Universitarios
FTM	Federación de Trabajadores de México
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INBA	Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes
IPN	Instituto Politécnico Nacional
ISSSTE	Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores del Estado

LOM	Liga Obrera Marxista
LOPPE	Ley Federal de Organizaciones Políticas y Procesos Electorales
MAP	Movimiento de Acción Popular
MAUS	Movimiento de Acción y Unidad Socialista
MRP	Movimiento Revolucionario del Pueblo
OCP	Organización Comunista Proletaria
OIR-LM	Organización de Izquierda Revolucionaria-Línea de Masas
PAN	Partido Acción Nacional
PAUSS	Pacto de Unidad Sindical y Solidaridad
PCM	Partido Comunista de México
PMT	Partido Mexicano de los Trabajadores
POS	Partido Obrero Socialista
PPM	Partido Popular Mexicano
PPS	Partido Popular Socialista
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional
PRT	Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores
PSR	Partido Socialista Revolucionario
PST	Partido Socialista de los Trabajadores
PSUM	Partido Socialista Unificado de México
SME	Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas
SNTE	Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación
STPRM	Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros de la República Mexicana
STUNAM	Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
SUNTU	Sindicato Unitario Nacional de Trabajadores Universitarios
SUTERM	Sindicato Unico de Trabajadores Electricistas de la República Mexicana
SUTIN	Sindicato Unico de Trabajadores de la Industria Nuclear
UIC	Unidad de Izquierda Comunista
UNAM	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
UOI	Unidad Obrera Independiente
URAMEX	Uranios Mexicanos

# THE MEXICAN LEFT, THE POPULAR MOVEMENTS, AND THE POLITICS OF AUSTERITY 1982-1985

by Barry Carr

## Introduction

In Mexico the left is currently on the defensive. Although a severe economic crisis has rocked Mexico since 1981, neither left-wing political parties nor the organized working class and urban popular movements have managed to mount any serious challenge to Mexico's political and economic system. The left seems to have made no significant qualitative advances, either in the elaboration of new strategies to deal with the crisis, or in enlarging its constituency. Moreover, it has suffered serious defeats in the political/electoral arena, as in the Oaxacan city of Juchitán, and in some of the nerve centers of its union base, like the Nuclear Industry Workers Union (SUTIN).

The opportunities opened up by the economic debacle appear to have been seized for the most part by right-wing parties or, less clearly, by sectors of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional and the state apparatus. On the right, the National Action party (PAN) has made important electoral gains in northern Mexico. More importantly, the PAN has presented itself, with considerable success, as the standard-bearer of democratization. The state bureaucracy and certain sectors of the official party, meanwhile, have also tried to take advantage of the crisis in order to implement a new politico-economic project. Their program, radically opposed to the populist and statist tradition bequeathed by the *cardenista* social pact of the mid-1930s, embraces many of the postulates of economic liberalism, in particular, an end to the "fictional economy" of price controls and subsidized production and consumption. The plan also involves a commitment to a liberal recomposition of Mexico's political system, centering on greater openness to the opposition and an erosion of the crucial mediating role of mass organizations. However, neither aspect of the politico-economic package is entirely unambiguous and free from contradictions. This is especially true in the case of political liberalization, given the ferocious repression unleashed against the PSUM/COCEI in Juchitán in 1983 and the continuation of electoral fraud throughout the country. These events and trends have given the

lie to much of the pluralist and "moral renewal" rhetoric of the de la Madrid government.<sup>1</sup> The left's responses to the crisis have been labeled passive, defensive, and demoralized, even by its own spokespeople. A closer look at developments since 1981, however, shows that the responses by the Mexican left cannot be categorized and dismissed so simply; the left's performance is much more highly differentiated than appears at first sight. The gloominess of the overall picture conceals the development of new tactics (*paros cívicos*, for example), the emergence of major new social actors (the *coordinadoras*), and renewed struggle among groups with long-standing traditions of radicalism (such as the teachers' movement).

These issues and phenomena, as well as the Mexican left's general response to the "politics of austerity," occupied the attention of a workshop held in May 1984 at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, on the campus of the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). A representative group of Mexican socialists from both academic and mass-organization backgrounds attended the workshop to discuss the situation of the Mexican left and present written analyses of its response to Mexico's economic crisis. This introduction, although not a direct commentary on the papers presented at the meeting or on the discussion that they provoked,<sup>2</sup> does incorporate many of the themes that arose during the discussion, both within and outside the formal sessions.

### The Dimensions of the Crisis

Several of the contributors to this volume discuss the ways in which the economic crisis has affected wage earners in Mexico, and I have commented elsewhere on the impact of the economic debacle on organized labor.<sup>3</sup> However, in order truly to come to grips with the overall effects of the crisis, we must be aware of certain basic characteristics of Mexico's working class and the impact of economic crisis on Mexican workers.

First, Mexican wage and salary earners have suffered a drastic cut in real wages since 1980. Movements in the minimum wage are normally taken as a measure of general

<sup>1</sup> "En Juchitán, el poder lo tiene el pueblo," *Así Es* 90 (Nov. 25-Dec. 1, 1983):9. "Elecciones en Juchitán: una realidad encubierta," *Perfil de La Jornada*, 22 Nov. 1984:15-18; Francisco Ortiz Pinchetti, "La Reforma Política, solo un recuerdo," *Proceso* 370 (5 Dec. 1983):10-13.

<sup>2</sup> Two of the papers presented at the conference (those by Adolfo Gilly and Héctor Aguilar) were not available for publication in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> Barry Carr, "The Mexican Economic Debacle and the Labor Movement: A New Era or More of the Same?" in *Mexico's Economic Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. Donald L. Wyman (La Jolla, Calif.: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, UCSD, 1983):91-116.



changes in wage levels because changes in the minimum wage are the conventional benchmark for wage negotiations. However, the minimum wage has no clear relationship to the actual distribution of wages. The figures most commonly cited during the early 1980s suggest that only 15% of the economically active population (EAP) earned more than the minimum wage, while 54% earned less and 31% received wages in line with the minimum rate.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, shifts in the minimum wage are not automatically reflected in wage settlements throughout the labor force, whether in the private or the state sector. Thus, real wage movements calculated on the basis of changes in the minimum rate may understate the drop in real wages experienced by some sectors of the labor force.

More significantly, overemphasis of the wage component of workers' remuneration can be very misleading. What counts in Mexico is the social wage, that is, money wages plus the package of non-wage benefits or *prestaciones*. These packages often include subsidized food, transport, health services, clothing, and housing, plus the right to purchase from union- and state-administered stores which sell at below-market prices. Non-wage benefits increased dramatically during the early and mid-1970s, and the fact that many of them are distributed via the resources of the official labor movement greatly enhances that movement's coercive powers.<sup>5</sup>

Another basic fact which helps explain the overall impact of the crisis is the differentiation of Mexican workers along the lines of age, sex, skill, wage levels, plant size, and degree of permanency. Much of the discussion of the impact of the crisis on working people and on the nature of their responses has assumed the existence of a homogeneous and undifferentiated mass of workers. However, economic crisis affects different segments of the labor market in different ways, and it has also served to accentuate differentiation and fragmentation in the labor market. Unemployment, for example, is highest among construction workers. Declining wages, on the other hand, have fallen hardest upon state employees and bureaucrats, which partly explains the recent resurgence of militancy in the FSTSE (Federation of State-Sector Workers Unions).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> These data, taken from a study by the Confederación Obrera Revolucionaria, were cited in *Unomásuno*, 4 Mar. 1984 and 14 Mar. 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Carr, "The Mexican Economic Debacle," pp. 97-98. Throughout 1984, however, there were reports of reductions in the *prestaciones económicas* received from such institutions as the ISSSTE. See *Unomásuno*, 25 Mar. 1984.

<sup>6</sup> The figures for the construction industry show 800,000 workers unemployed at the end of 1983 (*Unomásuno*, 27 May 1984). In April 1984, textile industry sources claimed that 40,000 of Mexico's 120,000 textile workers were unemployed. See Manuel Robles, "La política recesiva aplastó a la industria textil," *Proceso* 391 (30 Apr. 1984):11-15.

Another aspect of differentiation which must be taken into account is regional economy. Recent reports have noted, for example, that the downward movement in real wages has been reversed in the U.S.-Mexican border region. There, *maquiladora* industrialists have found it necessary to increase wages in order to retain their labor force, which is increasingly attracted by relatively high wages paid on the U.S. side of the border, even for menial and unskilled work.<sup>7</sup>

An important aspect of the economic crisis which has received little attention is the manner in which it has led to changes in the labor process itself. One of the speakers at the UCSD conference, Adolfo Gilly, has suggested that the crisis is permitting an intensification of Mexican capital's project of modernizing the country's manufacturing infrastructure. By putting workers on the defensive, he argued, the crisis has allowed the most dynamic and aggressive sector of Mexican capitalism to advance the modernization process in order to secure major productivity gains. The "devaluation of labor power" involves not only reductions in real wages, but also a managerial onslaught on worker rights, a reduction in the amount of leverage exercised by workers in the production process, and a freer hand for management revolutionizing production processes through microelectronic technology.<sup>8</sup>

Evidence to support such conclusions is still fragmentary. In the telephone and telecommunications service industries, however, the introduction of new technology is closely linked with managerial strategies for the neutralization of worker militancy: capitalists have evidently pursued this strategy, apparently in response to major victories won over the past five years by democratic currents within the telephone workers union.

A final dimension of the economic crisis which bears noting is the markedly economistic bias of most discussion and research on the issue. The workplace, the point of production, occupies the prime position in most discussion. Social, familial, sexual, and other dimensions of the crisis, factors which transcend the boundaries of production relations, are meanwhile pushed into the background. Accompanying this emphasis on the sphere of production is an excessive attention to the political potential of mass responses to austerity, in spite of evidence that the real transformatory potential of mass movements is more sociocultural than political. There are a few exceptions to this analytical trend, including a praiseworthy series, published in

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<sup>7</sup> This point was made by a conference participant from Tijuana, José Luis Pérez Canchola. For an excellent summary of the regional manifestations of the crisis, see "Perfil regional de México," *Estrategia* 58 (July-Aug. 1984): 3-96.

<sup>8</sup> Adolfo Gilly, "México: dos crisis," *Nexos* 70 (Oct 1983): 13-24.

1983 and 1984 in *Nexos*, on the real-life experiences of a score of men and women as they carry the burden of "economic stabilization."<sup>9</sup>

In many ways, the crisis is felt most strongly and encounters its most vigorous and creative responses outside the realm of production. Workers are not only producers: they are consumers too. The "politics of consumption," located not so much in the factory as in the barrio, the street, and at home, has emerged as an important focus of popular organization and struggle in recent years. These issues, such as the struggle for land, water, and public services, are introducing new tactics and posing severe challenges to traditional left-wing political parties. This challenge, and especially the alleged inability of much of the left to comprehend the newly emerging social movements, understandably provoked considerable discussion among the conference participants.

### **Responses to the Crisis: Independent Currents in Organized Labor**

Opposition to official labor movement practices and leadership exists within the official unions themselves, as well as in independent unions which have made a more formal break with the "charro" union leadership. The economic crisis of the past four years might seem at first glance to have provided independent currents with a golden opportunity to exploit the obvious discomfiture and loss of maneuverability suffered by the traditional union bureaucracies. Leaders of the official unions have shown growing signs of frustration over their diminishing margin of maneuver and especially their inability to halt the deterioration in living standards of their members. The de la Madrid government has consistently and vigorously opposed the positions taken by the official labor sector. For example, in June 1984, when the Congreso de Trabajo called for an end to the value-added tax (IVA), a rent freeze, and semi-annual labor contract negotiations, the de la Madrid administration immediately issued a sharp rebuttal. The frustration which has resulted from such political impotence is neatly summed up by Fidel Velázquez's warning of October 1983: "Only out of discipline do workers vote for the PRI."<sup>10</sup>

Such threats, however, are hollow. Time and time again, the CTM and other central labor organizations have demonstrated their reluctance to break out of the traditional "theater of maneuver" which surrounds campaigns for wage increases and

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<sup>9</sup> "Con el sudor de tu crisis," *Nexos* 63 (Mar. 1983); *Nexos* 65 (May 1983); *Nexos* 66 (June 1983); *Nexos* 68 (Aug. 1983); *Nexos* 80 (Aug. 1984).

<sup>10</sup> *Unomásuno*, 29 Oct. 1983.

the use of strikes. Furthermore, certain inter-federation tensions, particularly between the CTM and the CROC and CROM, have weakened the Congreso de Trabajo's ability to present a coherent and united front.<sup>11</sup>

The official labor movement's only novel and creative response to the crisis has been to expand substantially the level of union-controlled commerce and manufacturing. The union movement's "social sector" had reached major proportions by the fall of 1984. In September 1984, the CTM allegedly controlled 400 enterprises in agriculture, transport, fishing, manufacturing, and retailing, with a total value of 200,000 million pesos.<sup>12</sup> The development of a "parallel economy" under union control may be a powerful weapon in the hands of the union bureaucracies, which are anxious to forestall rank-and-file disquiet over declining standards of living. The expansion of this sector is one more reminder that the leadership's maneuvering ability and capacity for self-legitimation is by no means exhausted.

In contrast, independent currents within the labor movement have not only failed to advance during the crisis but have suffered a number of serious reverses since 1981. The Nuclear Industry Workers Union, for example, endured a series of attacks by the de la Madrid administration during 1983 and 1984, the most serious of which involved the closing of URAMEX, a parastatal company which employed 2,300 workers, about half of SUTIN's total membership.<sup>13</sup> For at least five years before that incident, SUTIN had played a crucial role in the independent labor movement as a rallying point, role model, and source of inspiration and advice. In this respect, the nuclear workers were following in the footsteps of the Democratic Tendency of the Electrical Workers Union (SUTERM), which fulfilled a similar role during the early and mid-1970s. Unlike most other independent unions, however, the SUTIN was a member of the Congreso de Trabajo, a distinction which proved in the end of little use in deterring what appeared to be a deliberate government ploy to destroy the union.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Unomásuno*, 18 Jan. 1984; 26 June 1984, p. 3. Salvador Corro, "La pugna CTM-gobierno coincide con el surgimiento de la CROM," *Proceso* 351 (25 July 1983):20-23. Guillermo Correa and Salvador Corro, "Aparente acuerdo entre líderes y gobierno, pero queda lo dicho," *Proceso* 399 (25 June 1984):12-15.

<sup>12</sup> *Unomásuno*, 2 Mar. 1984, pp. 1, 8; Salvador Corro, "La CTM tiene empresas que valen 200,000 millones y funcionan como negocios de líderes," *Proceso* 412 (24 Sept. 1984):24.

<sup>13</sup> Salvador Corro, "Por castigar al SUTIN, Escofet reniega de su proyecto nuclear," *Proceso* 348 (4 July 1983):20-25.

<sup>14</sup> The SUTIN, through its national leaders Arturo Whaley and Antonio Gerschenson, also had strong links with the major party of the Mexican left, the Mexican Unified Socialist Party (PSUM).

The left also took a beating in another important nucleus of democratic unionism, the STUNAM. In this organization of workers at Mexico's National Autonomous University (UNAM), however, divisions within the left, rather than government actions, caused the difficulties. In particular, conflicts between factions inside the PSUM and between the PSUM and rival groups on the left rendered the union impotent.<sup>15</sup>

Other significant defeats for opposition currents within the union movement have occurred as a result of the government's use of certain legal devices. For example, the administration used the *requisa* to weaken the Telephone Workers Union, a significant if shaky focus of democratic unionism within the official labor movement. In September 1983, it employed a legal maneuver to remove a reformist group from the leadership of the Metro Workers Union in Mexico City.

The economic crisis has also taken its toll among federations and labor groupings completely independent of the official union movement. Even the largest independent grouping, the UOI (Unidad Obrera Independiente), a militantly "anti-political" and also anti-communist union federation, has lost ground during the economic crisis. Several of its most important affiliates, in automobile manufacturing and aviation, have recently terminated their affiliation.<sup>16</sup> A number of smaller and looser independent labor groupings, such as the National Trade Union Coordinating Body (COSINA), have also been weakened. Of the twelve key unions active in COSINA when it was founded in November 1982, about half have suffered "*charrazos*" (Metro, ACERMEX, Textiles Morelos, Moctezuma, etc.).<sup>17</sup>

Segments of the union movement in the state sector have also experienced moves to clamp down on outbreaks of rank-and-file dissidence. The government's wage policy and austerity campaign have hit the over two million members of the Federation of State-Sector Workers Unions (FSTSE) with particular force. Not only the state bureaucracy, but especially parastatal enterprises (like URAMEX) have become major targets of the de la Madrid government's struggle to cut public expenditure in compliance with IMF guidelines. As a result, state-sector workers have become increasingly restless, and loud public demonstrations of this discontent occurred during the 1984 May Day celebrations.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the leadership of the state-sector

<sup>15</sup> *Punto Crítico* 134 (July 1983):21-22. María Esther Ibarra. "La presencia del PSUM divide al STUNAM ante las próximas elecciones." *Proceso* (27 Feb. 1984):24-26; *Unomásuno*, 25 Mar. 1984, pp. 1, 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Así Es* 50 (4-10 Feb. 1983):9.

<sup>17</sup> "La situación actual: período, coyuntura y programa para la lucha obrera." *Punto Crítico* 143 (Dec. 1984-Jan. 1985):14.

<sup>18</sup> Guillermo Correa. "Encabezan los burócratas la impugnación de la política económica oficial." *Proceso* 390 (23 Apr. 1984):6-8. *Unomásuno*, 2 May 1984, p. 5. "En Salubridad contra la austeridad y el charrismo." *Punto Crítico* 133 (June

labor movement has been severely challenged by rank-and-file action in the Ministries of Health, Agriculture and Water Resources, Fisheries, Ecology and Defense of the Environment, and Treasury.

One of the sharpest trade union battles of 1984 also involved state-sector employees. In 1981, workers in a branch of CONASUPO (DICONSA, with 3,900 employees) elected a reformist leadership and in February 1984 reaffirmed that decision in a second round of elections. The federal leadership of the FSTSE, hostile to the reform movement, undertook a campaign of destabilization, and the government threatened to dismiss more than half of the union's membership. By June the reformists, headed by Román Alonso, had been removed.<sup>19</sup>

For some years, the biggest threat to the *burocracia sindical* within the FSTSE has come from a democratic and anti-*charro* current within the National Teachers Union, the SNTE. The emergence and subsequent evolution of the National Coordinating Body of Educational Workers (CNTE) is an important expression of this current, which is discussed in a provocative essay by Luis Hernández in this volume. Recently, however, the CNTE has shown signs that it may have passed its peak and entered a phase of stagnation. The victories achieved by the CNTE in southern Mexico, its earliest and most successful recruiting ground, have not been repeated elsewhere in the country. At the same time, its strategy and momentum have been seriously affected by the program of educational decentralization inaugurated by former education minister Jesús Reyes Heróles.

Such changes in federal educational policy have tended to fragment and divide opposition forces in the CNTE, as well as in the national leadership of SNTE itself. The government abolished the National Teacher Training College (Escuela Normal Superior de México), which had been a focus of CNTE dissidence in the Federal District, and replaced it with four regional centers scattered throughout the country. This move eliminated not only large-scale concentrations in Mexico City of teachers-in-training but also the massive summer courses which have traditionally fueled teacher agitation.

This overview should not suggest that the labor panorama has been characterized by undifferentiated passivity. In addition to waves of unusually intense strikes in June 1983 and a

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1983):17-18. Democratic currents are particularly active within the National Union of Workers in the Ministry of Health, especially in section 22, which comprises eleven thousand workers in the state of Mexico. *Punto Crítico* 143 (Dec. 1984-Jan. 1985):7-8.

<sup>19</sup> Antonio Limas, *Complot contra los trabajadores de la CONASUPO* (México, D.F.: Información Obrera: Cuadernos de Insurgencia Sindical, n.d.); Heberto Castillo, "Imposible democracia sindical," *El Universal*, 15 Aug. 1984.

growing number of spontaneous "wild-cat" actions by workers, new tactics like the "civic" strikes (*paros cívicos*) have made their appearance in the last two years. I will return to these themes later in this introduction.

### The Non-Union Left

The category "non-union left" includes the myriad parties of the left (PSUM, PMT, PRT, PST, etc.) and a variety of pre-party formations (e.g., Corriente Socialista and OIR-LM), as well as several political forces grouped around magazines and journals (such as *Punto Crítico* and *Información Obrera*) that identify with the labor and socialist movements. Other important and increasingly active centers of left-wing political activity revolve around organizations which reject affiliation with formal political parties and associations. They do so mainly on the grounds that such affiliations place at risk the identity of local organizations and issues, and they tend to subordinate local bodies to the narrow, centralized, and often undemocratic structures of the traditional left. A number of "coordinating bodies" (*coordinadoras*), like CONAMUP and CNPA, fall into this category.

The economic debacle has in some cases assisted, and in others hindered, a number of important recent transformations in the Mexican left. The most important new development has been the emergence of a strong trend toward unification of political currents and parties. The creation of the PSUM in November 1981 from five left parties and groups including the Mexican Communist party (PCM) is the clearest example of this development. The phenomenon of unification and merger, however, has been a widespread feature of the recent political history of the left as a whole. In February 1982, for example, several Maoist regional organizations with strong roots in the urban popular movement came together to establish the OIR-LM.<sup>20</sup>

Given the traditional fragmentation and factionalism of the Mexican left, these developments represent an important step toward improving its ability to present credible and coherent alternatives to the current administration's economic stabilization policies. Unfortunately, the crisis, the worst in Mexico's history, exacerbated the difficulties inherent in any attempt at unification. It pushed the left onto the defensive and tended to exacerbate age-old disputes over how to define the character of the current regime and of the Mexican state. It also produced divisions over

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<sup>20</sup> Organización de Izquierda Revolucionaria-Línea de Masas, *Informe al congreso de fusión* (México, D.F.: OIR-LM, 1982). The merging groups were MOCER (Movimiento Obrero, Campesino, Estudiantil Revolucionario), a Zacatecas group; Frente Popular Tierra y Libertad from Monterrey; the Comité de Defensa Popular de Durango; and the Seccional Ho Chi Minh.

how the left should respond to the government's violently austere stabilization policies.

This crisis thus submerged the left in endless debate over the relative merits of different political positions. These include cooperating in limited fashion with austerity measures in order to force a fair division of the burden of recovery; exploiting fissures within the political bureaucracy and leadership of official mass organizations in order to foment convergence between the left and displaced elements in the PRI; and opposing the regime and its socioeconomic policies directly and militantly. In addition, the left has been unable to agree on how far to go in linking the struggle against reductions in popular standards of living to a program of demands for an alternative overall economic strategy.

The experiences of the PSUM during its first three years of existence clearly reflect the mixed results of the unification process. The decision of rail workers' leader Demetrio Vallejo to leave the Mexican Workers party (PMT) and join the PSUM, along with the enrollment in the party of Angel Reyna Menchaca, formerly a leader of the Revolutionary Workers Federation (COR), greatly strengthened the PSUM's team of union organizers. This infusion of new blood did not, however, significantly expand the PSUM's presence in the organized labor movement.

The new party has enjoyed modest growth in terms of membership, which currently stands around sixty thousand. Considering the initial enthusiasm surrounding creation of the PSUM and that two of the parties which merged with the old PCM had significant membership of their own, these membership figures are rather disappointing. Furthermore, the extent to which new members have been politically and organically integrated into the party is doubtful. A symptom of problems in this area is the low percentage of members who pay dues. At last count, well over 60% of the PSUM's income came from the salaries of its parliamentary representatives.

Similarly, the development of a "party of a new type," qualitatively different from any of the merging parties, has been uneven. Old loyalties have been difficult to eradicate and have already led to the secession of one of the founding organizations (the PSR) and to a bitter public struggle for power within the PSUM leadership. Intra-party struggles have also been fueled by personalist rivalries (such as the contest between the PSUM's secretary-general, Pablo Gómez, and the former *caudillo* of the PPM, Alejandro Gascón Mercado) and by the widely held belief that the former Mexican Communist party enjoys excessive influence within the new party.<sup>21</sup> In late February 1985, intra-

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<sup>21</sup> On the PSR's virtual self-exclusion from the PSUM, see the interview with Roberto Jaramillo in *Unomásuno*, 23 Jan. 1984, pp. 1, 6. For Gascón Mercado's views on the tension between the former PPM members and other currents in the PSUM, see *Unomásuno*, 24 Jan. 1984, p. 4.



party tensions reached a climax when the majority of the former members of the PPM, led by Gascón Mercado, abandoned the PSUM.

The PSUM's development has also been uneven in regional terms. The party has won a number of seats in state legislatures (in Puebla, Sinaloa, Veracruz, Nayarit, Baja California) and has retained pockets of influence at the *municipio* level in the mountains of Guerrero, in Chihuahua, and in several regions of Puebla, including San José Miahuatlán.<sup>22</sup> In 1982, however, it suffered a major setback in Juchitán, the second largest city in Oaxaca, when an election that it had won in coalition with a regional political grouping (the COCEI) was illegally and brutally overturned by the PRI.

The PSUM has been most successful in creating a "party of a new type" in about ten states (Zacatecas, Durango, parts of Chihuahua, northern Sinaloa, Tamaulipas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas). None of these states had exceptionally strong branches of the PCM before the merger, and all of them are predominantly peasant, some with a strong indigenous character.<sup>23</sup> In a few other states — Yucatán, Puebla, and Veracruz — many of the old PCM and PPM cadres have been pushed into the background by a newer generation committed to building the PSUM.

Political developments resulting from Mexico's economic crisis have had considerable impact on the new party. The new dynamism of the Mexican right and the more conservative stance of the Catholic church have prompted the PSUM to dampen some of its overtures to different sectors of Mexican society, such as the church. Such "openings" had done much to broaden the base of the PSUM during its "Eurocommunist" phase, but they came under attack from delegates representing the positions of the old PCM's more backward allies during the PSUM's second congress in August 1983. At that congress, the party rejected a resolution which described the PSUM as a feminist party and supported a women's movement independent of the party. The delegates to the second congress also modified the party's position on the granting of full civic rights to the clergy and on the autonomy of youth questions.<sup>24</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the nationalization of Mexico's banking system in September 1982, much of the left, including sections of the PSUM, were caught up in euphoria over what some called the demise of finance capital in Mexico. The

<sup>22</sup> On the PSUM's strength in Sinaloa, see *Así Es* 90 (25 Nov.-1 Dec. 1983):10.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Luciano Concheiro, Mexico City, 1 Oct. 1984.

<sup>24</sup> *Así Es* 79 (9-16 Sept. 1984). *Bandera Socialista*, 5-11 Sept. 1983, p. 5. "PSUM: un traspiés por la izquierda, dos pasos atrás." *Punto Crítico* 136 (Sept. 1983):9-10.

bold move of the López Portillo government in its last months appeared to strengthen the arguments and positions of a powerful left-wing ideological current which strongly supports "statist" and populist approaches to socialism. Represented within the PSUM by the former Movement for Popular Action (MAP) and by certain sections of the old PCM, the group with this political tendency adheres to a radical nationalism defined as the recovery by the nation of its resources (with the state acting on the nation's behalf). One of the key ideologues of this current, Rafael Galván, puts it succinctly: "Crecemos y avanzamos en nuestra historia, nacionalizando."<sup>25</sup>

Shortly after the nationalization of the banks, Arnaldo Córdova, a PSUM deputy and one of the founders of the MAP, praised the López Portillo administration for pursuing domestic policies as progressive as its foreign policy, especially in Central America.<sup>26</sup> Coming as they did from a prominent left-wing intellectual and activist, his comments provoked strong reaction both within and outside the party. In effect, Córdova was saluting what he and other MAP theoreticians considered a victory of the "national-popular" current over the "neo-liberals" in the eternal "disputa por la nación" waged during the course of the Mexican Revolution.

The nationalization of the banks dramatically demonstrated the Mexican state's strength and "relative autonomy" and was interpreted on the left as proof that a "national" and "popular" resolution to the economic crisis was possible. The episode also seemed to confirm the view that the left should actively strive to promote further and deeper political and economic reforms in the tradition of radical nationalism and populism of the Mexican Revolution. Developments in government policy, moreover, seemed to be creating opportunities for reform. As the neo-liberal, technocratic de la Madrid program displaced the mass organizations which gave sustenance to the *cardenista* social pact, there would be many more points of convergence between the radical left and reformist elements within these organizations.<sup>27</sup>

This position, espoused by MAP figures like Rolando Cordera, Arnaldo Córdova, and other individuals both within and outside the PSUM, was challenged by other forces on the left. The critics of the MAP tendency denied the possibility that the crisis might be resolved democratically within the framework of

<sup>25</sup> Arnaldo Córdova, "Nación y nacionalismo en México," *Nexos* 83 (Nov. 1984):27-33.

<sup>26</sup> "Debate en el comité central," *Así Es* 36 (8-14 Oct. 1982):12-15.

<sup>27</sup> In its conclusions, the January 1984 plenum of the PSUM noted increasing evidence of "the struggle between the bureaucracy and the public officials, especially the so-called populists, who have been displaced." *Unomásuno*, 27 Jan. 1984.

Mexico's peculiar model of capitalist accumulation and "mass politics." The tension between these two different positions was demonstrated with particular clarity at the end of 1981, when not one but two broad organizations were established to oppose government austerity measures.

The first, the National Front in Defense of Wages against Austerity and Measures in the Cost of Living (FNDESCAC) was the broader of the two groups, but the PSUM criticized it for its narrowly economic and trade-unionist outlook, as well as for overemphasizing calls for mass mobilization. The PSUM argued that FNDESCAC activism occurred at the cost of a more balanced campaign which would involve agitation for an alternative left-wing political economy. Although the PSUM and affiliated unions like SUTIN participated in activities of the FNDESCAC, they directed most of their efforts toward the second grouping, the National Committee for the Defense of the Popular Economy (CNDEP).<sup>28</sup>

In turn, adherents of the FNDESCAC line accused their opponents of harboring illusions about the possibility of democratizing and modernizing capitalism. The PSUM, they argued, had ignored the necessity for rallying mass opposition to government assaults on popular living standards. Implicit in this critique was a condemnation of the way in which the PSUM had emphasized parliamentary activities at the expense of mass work following the political reform of 1976-77, a criticism which had an important following within the PSUM itself.

Fortunately, the tension between the two anti-austerity fronts was resolved in June 1983 by their merger into the National Worker Peasant Assembly (ANOCP), which inaugurated a new tactic of popular protest, the *paro cívico*.<sup>29</sup> But while the merger resolved the dispute between FNDESCAC and CNDEP, the tension between the two tendencies — political negotiation for a popular solution to the crisis on the one side, and frontal assaults on the state through constant mass mobilization on the other — continued to wrack the left. In the summer of 1983, a series of events, beginning with the PSUM's publication of an alternative strategy for dealing with the economic crisis, brought this conflict into sharp relief.

Called the National Development Plan, the PSUM strategy presented alternatives for coping with the crisis which focused on satisfying the basic social needs of the majority of the population without destroying the human and physical resources of

<sup>28</sup> René Bejarano, "En el camino de la ANOCP: PSUM y movimiento de masas," *Espacios* 3 (May-July 1984):97-100; José Luis Hernández, "La ANOCP, va," *Espacios* 3 (May-July 1984):82-89.

<sup>29</sup> "Primera Asamblea Nacional Obrero Campesino Popular," *Punto Crítico*, p. 9; Bejarano, "En el camino de la ANOCP"; Hernández, "La ANOCP, va."

the nation. The plan called for a reorientation of Mexico's fiscal and productive apparatus toward broadening the domestic market, redistributing wealth, and reordering priorities in the field of public investment. The language of the plan echoed the concerns of both competing tendencies on the left. It sought to promote convergence between sectors interested in radical democratic change, urged direct worker control over public enterprises, and called for a break with the development models followed since the 1940s.<sup>30</sup>

While the PSUM's National Development Plan tried to have it both ways, the party's second national congress in August 1983 placed the PSUM squarely on the side of radicalism, at least at the level of rhetoric. Gone were the references to *convergencia* and the possibility of implementing a new economic policy, even within the framework of austerity programs. In their place, the congress emphasized the necessity of promoting and deepening everyday popular struggles by incorporating the energies not only of traditional socialist forces but of the new mass organizations which had emerged from the heat of anti-austerity battles.<sup>31</sup> The sharp radicalization of language, combined with the party's reversal of its previous policies on women, the Catholic church, and youth questions, evoked worried responses by PSUM gradualists and "parliamentarists." Among them were leaders like Roger Bartra, the leading figure in one of the two eurocommunist currents within the party.<sup>32</sup> Subsequent events would show, however, that the PSUM's radicalization had more form than substance.

An examination of the Mexican state's responses to the economic crisis provides little evidence to support the more optimistic scenarios outlined by the proponents of revolutionary nationalism. In spite of the drastic assault on their legitimacy and perquisites, the leaders of official mass organizations showed little interest in closer convergence with their left-wing critics. At the same time, the PRI continued its traditional practices of cooptation and "divide and rule" in its dealings with the left. In the summer of 1984, it granted electoral registration to the Mexican Workers party (PMT), thereby increasing intra-left competition, especially in electoral matters.<sup>33</sup> By the end of 1984 members of the PSUM were particularly concerned over the pos-

<sup>30</sup> Oscar Hinojosa, "Plan alterno del PSUM: producir lo básico y gravar a los ricos," *Proceso* 345 (13 June 1983):26-27.

<sup>31</sup> Gustavo Hiraes, "La radicalización del PSUM," *Así Es* 73 (29 July-4 Aug. 1983); "Restauración y modernización," *Así Es* 81 (23-29 Sept. 1983).

<sup>32</sup> Roger Bartra, "Un no a la política, un sí al activismo," *Así Es* 78 (2-8 Sept. 1983).

<sup>33</sup> José Álvarez Icaza, "El PMT registrado y ahora que?" *Insurgencia Popular* 103 (Aug. 1984).

sibility that the PMT would dilute their party's electoral base during the crucial state elections of the following year.

The Socialist Workers party (PST), a party which has important nuclei of support among poor peasants and *colonos*, has continued its critical support of the government, despite the regressive features of its economic policy. Arguing that the left cannot by itself reverse Mexico's political shift to the right, the PST has called for the broadening of left-wing alliances with "like currents" in the *oficialista* labor movement, the revolutionary nationalist sectors of the state, and Freemasons(!). The radicalization of the politics of other segments of the left has been denounced by the PST as symptoms of "left-PANism."<sup>34</sup>

On the other end of the left-wing spectrum, the Trotskyite Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT) called on all the parties of the left to form a united electoral front for the state elections of 1985, even at the risk of losing legal registration as political parties. This proposal was extraordinarily unrealistic given that some groups (e.g., the PMT) had just attained registration. Understandably, the other parties rejected the notion.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Coordinadoras and the Paro Cívico**

By far the most radical and novel development on the Mexican left in recent years has been the emergence of the *coordinadoras*. These loose national associations coordinate the activities and struggles of hundreds of local and regional centers of resistance to anti-peasant and anti-worker policies. Prior to the emergence of the *coordinadoras*, the resistance to declining living standards and conditions had been poorly coordinated and lacked a central organizational focus which could draw up and implement national-level actions.<sup>36</sup> *Coordinadoras* such as the National Coordinating Committee of the Urban Popular Movement (CONAMUP) and the National "Plan de Ayala" Coordinating Committee (CNPA), along with human rights organizations and the ANOCP, have spearheaded the left's response to the politics of austerity.

The emergence of the *coordinadoras* in the period after 1979 represents a major challenge to the structure and

<sup>34</sup> *Unomásuno*, 23 Jan. 1984.

<sup>35</sup> Manuel Aguilar Mora, "Izquierda unida para 1985," *Unomásuno*, 26 Aug 1984.

<sup>36</sup> "Breve historia de la CNPA," *Agencia Interamericana de Información: Servicio Especial*, 16 Jan. 1983, pp. 3-9; CONAMUP, "Crisis y respuesta obrera en México (1982-83)," *Espacios 2* (July-Aug. 1983):28-33; "IV Encuentro Nacional del Movimiento Urbano Popular (May 1983)," *Nueva Antropología 24* (June 1984):111-154; "Resolutivos del Foro Nacional de Análisis y Perspectivas del Movimiento Urbano Popular (el 12 de febrero de 1984)," *Nueva Antropología 24* (June 1984):155-164.

functioning of the Mexican left, for several reasons. First, *coordinadoras* tend to be located in the realm of consumption rather than production. The *coordinadoras* are centered not so much on the factory, mill, mine, or workshop as on the barrio, the street, the schools, the fields, and the struggles for access to land, housing, and urban services like potable water, roads, and power. These areas are of course in no way "outside" the realm of production; the shift in focus means simply that the centrality of work and the work process has been displaced by other concerns within the new movements.

A second point of challenge, closely related to the first, is that the location of *coordinadora* activities is defined much more by broad questions of space and geography than by the location of production. This aspect of the *coordinadoras* serves as a reminder that the interests and "primordial loyalties" of community, region, and *terruño* are powerful mobilizing forces for many people — especially those who find their freedom of maneuver in the workplace blocked by the despotism of official unions and the pressures of economic crisis.

*Coordinadora* groups have also had much higher levels of involvement by women and many more women in positions of leadership than have most other left-wing groupings. In Mexico, as in so many other nations, the workplace is still deeply permeated by relations of male dominance.

The *coordinadora* movement has also challenged the left directly by viewing the traditional parties of the left with suspicion and occasionally through open hostility toward left-wing involvement in *coordinadora* activities. Many members of *coordinadora* groupings still remember bitterly how certain sectors of the left have subordinated the concerns and needs of specific movements to the interests and goals of national political parties. As one conference participant (from the PSUM) put it, "the Mexican left is traditionally interested only in those things that it can control." The symptoms of this malaise among the *coordinadoras* are many and varied. They were painfully evident, for example, in the tension between CNPA peasants and PSUM, PRT, and PMT militants during an April 1984 march in Mexico City to commemorate the assassination of Emiliano Zapata. In denouncing the actions of the party representatives, one CNPA leader declared to the press:

We are not interested in whether any of our leaders are members of political organizations. What we reject are attempts by parties to manipulate the CNPA. They see us as "booty" and want to take advantage of our strength, something we will never allow . . . the vanguard of the left is among the masses, not in the parties or in the Chamber of Deputies.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Guillermo Correa, "La marcha rechazó oportunismos," *Proceso* 389 (16 Apr 1984): 29-31

Clearly, the parties of the left have a lot to learn about the delicate issue of respect for the autonomy of mass movements and local organizations.

Individual members of left-wing parties do of course participate actively in the work of the *coordinadoras*. However, both the political terrain occupied by the movements and the style of their activities encourage participation by those who are most committed to mass activism and frontal confrontations with capital and the state. This situation tends to reinforce the dichotomy — overtly political work versus organizing among the masses — which is a major element in the discourse of the Mexican left. As a result, organizations like the CONAMUP and CNPA have been reluctant to develop a global political *proyecto* of their own.

The *coordinadoras* and the ANOCP have been responsible for organizing a most dramatic and innovative response to the politics of austerity and economic stabilization. In October 1983 and again in June 1984, two civic strikes (*paros cívicos*) were held throughout the republic. The tactic consisted of activities ranging from work stoppages and non-attendance at work to meetings, marches, encampments outside public buildings (*plantones*), land occupations, roadblocks, hunger strikes, boycotts of commercial establishments, and power turn-offs (*apagones*).<sup>38</sup> *Coordinadora* leaders, recognizing that the possibilities and likely benefits of prolonged industrial action by workers were very limited under current economic circumstances, devised the *paro cívico* as the most appropriate form of protest during acute crisis. The *paro cívico* not only made available a great variety of alternative forms of registering popular opposition, but it permitted their consolidation under one banner within the space of a single day.

The flexibility and variety of activities during the civic strikes reflect only one aspect of their innovativeness. Equally important, the *paros cívicos* brought together a broad range of class, sectoral, and geographically based groups on a scale never before witnessed in Mexico. Between one-and-a-half million and two million Mexicans took part in the first *paro* on October 18, 1983, and half a million participated in the second in June 1984.<sup>39</sup>

Although the organizers of the *paros* did not expect large-scale participation by industrial workers, the participation of the organized labor movement failed to meet even their limited expectations. The only significant involvement in the action by

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<sup>38</sup> "Documentos básicos de la ANOCP," *Espacios* 3 (May-July 1984):38-47; "Síntesis informativa del Primer Paro Cívico Nacional," *Espacios* 3 (May-July 1984):56-57.

<sup>39</sup> Manuel Aguilar Mora. "Balance del II Paro Cívico," *Unomásuno*, 13 June 1984, p. 3.

union members came from the teachers of the CNTE and from groups of workers in government ministries like Health, Water Resources, Fisheries, and Ecology and Environment. The commitment of important independent left-wing unions such as the SUTIN was at best lukewarm, reflecting hostility toward the *paro cívico* concept on the part of the former Movement for Popular Action and similar groups.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

The emergence and continued growth of the *coordinadoras* shows that, even during severe economic crisis, many Mexicans want to express their alienation from a development model which has excluded a growing number of Mexicans from its benefits. How far the new urban social movements will be able to resist the traditional pattern of cooptation and repression of dissidents by the state will depend partly on the depth and duration of the crisis. Equally important is the future of the Mexican state's populist legacy, bequeathed by Lázaro Cárdenas. Any significant erosion of this crucial element in Mexican politics will cause a commensurate reduction in the state's ability to bargain with urban dissident groups. The result may well be an increase in the repressiveness of Mexico's political climate.

Similarly, the possibility of a break with the corporatist and populist tradition represents a serious challenge to the "political left." A large part of the left is captive to this tradition, and the language and practices of populism form an important part of its intellectual baggage. This heritage survives despite clear evidence that the same language and practices have contributed to the destruction of the independence of the mass organizations of workers and peasants which the left seeks to recover. The economic crisis could very well cause a radical reshaping of the Mexican state's functions and of the "mediating" role of official worker and peasant bureaucracies. If it does, the left might well find itself with a golden opportunity to forge a new practice and discourse rooted firmly in an *independent* socialist program.

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<sup>40</sup> Enrique Laviada. "ACNR: la marcha de la unidad no debe detenerse." *Espacios* 3 (May-July 1984):51. The secretary-general of SUTIN, Arturo Whaley, downplayed the first *paro* in October 1983, denouncing it for playing into the hands of "provocateurs." See Gustavo Hiraes, "18 de Octubre: jornada de lucha o comedia de equivocaciones?" *Así Es* 86 (28 Oct.-3 Nov. 1983).



## **THE MEXICAN LEFT AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS**

by Enrique Semo

The left throughout the world has undergone profound changes since 1968. Among the most important has been diversification, which in most countries has taken the form of broad heterogeneity in organizations, currents of thought, and political tendencies. Within this plurality two general types of leftist movements have emerged: one highly centralized and the other relatively diffuse. Examples of the first type include the movements in Italy, France, and Chile — countries in which a small number of political groups and social organizations unite into strong leftist parties. In contrast, in countries such as West Germany, the U.S., Peru, and Argentina, the left includes a multitude of actors, none of which is able to act as a centralizing force.

The Mexican left belongs to the second type. Rather than clustering around defined poles, it encompasses a large number of parties, political groups, labor unions, organized popular movements, and mass publications which continually fluctuate in both form and composition. The most prominent leftist organizations are the officially registered parties and political and popular organizations.

Registered leftist parties in Mexico include the Popular Socialist party (PPS), the Mexican Workers party (PMT), the Socialist Workers party (PST), the Unified Mexican Socialist party (PSUM), and the Trotskyite Revolutionary Workers party (PRT). Among political groups and associations are United Communist Left (UIC), Socialist Tendency (CS), the Party of Socialist Workers (POS), the Marxist Workers League (LOM), the People's Revolutionary Movement (MRP), Organization of the Revolutionary Left-Mass Line (OIR-LM), and the Communist Proletariat Organization (OCP). Lastly, popular organizations comprise the National "Plan de Ayala" Coordinating Committee (CNPA), the Independent Organization of Agricultural Workers and Peasants (CIOAC), the National Coordinating Body of Educational Workers (CNTE), the National Coordinating Committee of the Urban Popular Movement (CONAMUP), the National Trade Union Coordinating Body (COSINA), and the Authentic Workers Front (FAT).

Nevertheless, this lack of centralization does not imply that the movement is undergoing a process of dissolution, but rather that it is a new social force in a process of development and

definition. Of Mexico's five registered leftist political parties, only one — the PPS — existed prior to 1974. Not one of the principal political organizations (the POS, CS, OIR-LM, and UIC) was active before 1976. And the predominant organized popular movements, the CNPA, CNTE, CONAMUP, FAT, FN, and CR all appeared after 1979. Moreover, those organizations with longer histories are all undergoing reorganization and redefinition, the final results of which cannot yet be foreseen.

Diversity also characterizes the range of ideological currents on the Mexican left, which include Soviet-style Marxism-Leninism, Trotskyism, Maoism, and varying versions of Eurocommunism, as well as an entire gamut of revolutionary nationalisms and Christian socialism. In Mexico leftist ideas, like leftist organizations, have not yet acquired a well-defined identity of their own.

Variations in terminology, the proliferation of factional nuances, and frequent internal struggles hinder the definition of strategic positions. Despite the analytical difficulties imposed by these circumstances, careful examination reveals three principal political currents on the Mexican left. None of these currents is the property of any individual organization; rather each represents a broad direction which extends beyond party boundaries.

One such current asserts that the ongoing political reform in Mexico provides the left with an opportunity to begin competing for positions within the government rather than expending energy in frontal attacks against it. This ideology maintains that a fundamental contradiction within the Mexican state — its alternation between representing the interests of the capital sector and satisfying the needs of national development as inspired by the 1917 Constitution and the legacy of the Lázaro Cárdenas era (1934-40) — makes it the ideal arena for carrying on social struggle. According to this perspective, present governmental institutions provide an adequate infrastructure for reform in the direction of political, social, and economic democratization. The march toward socialism, in this view, is synonymous with increased mass participation in the established power structure, which should direct government actions toward the subordination of private property to collective social ends. This perspective excludes both revolution and leftist control of the power structure.

A second predominant current of Mexican leftists views the state as authoritarian and bourgeois, a structure which presides over a corporate system employing a subjugated labor force. In this view, repression and the labor bureaucracy are central forces, and only revolution can displace the bourgeoisie and the state, the primary enemies of labor. This ideological current views events following the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre as a

legitimacy crisis for the Mexican state: from 1969 to 1975, a popular movement challenged the state by taking the offensive in a concentrated struggle for autonomy. After 1977, however, Mexico's political climate changed; and the movement shifted from an offensive to a defensive posture. Political reforms instituted during 1977 succeeded in severing the bonds between reformist parties and the popular movement and, according to this perspective, redirected the efforts of movement leaders toward the parliamentary arena and negotiations, without the knowledge or consent of the people. In accord with this view, the primary task of the left has not changed: it must develop an autonomous popular force to oppose the present system. But conditions have been changing as the crisis has accelerated the fusion of organized revolutionary forces with popular movements. According to proponents of this view, the crisis could well lead to revolution.

A third perspective holds that, despite the Mexican state's authoritarian and corporative character, it still receives high levels of popular support. This view sees the origins of that support in the state's revolutionary roots, its reformist and modernizing attitude, and the period of sustained economic growth over which it has presided during the past several decades. A surprise attack on this power structure, according to this perspective, is impossible, even during the present crisis. The socialist struggle has endured not only periods of violent confrontation between the people and the state (such as occurred in 1958-75) but also eras in which it achieved some level of reform and voice in the government (such as 1975-84). The left therefore must develop strategies and organizational structures which enable it to pass easily between cooperation and confrontation with the state. As long as Mexico's corporate political system survives, the goal of the left will continue to be the creation of an autonomous popular force, regardless of the form adopted by this effort. As long as the popular force is unrealized or goes unrecognized by Mexico's political system, the parliamentary path to socialism will remain blocked.

### **The Fruits of Reform**

Two major forces have influenced the evolution of the Mexican left over the last decade: the political reform of 1975-1979, and the economic crisis which made its violent appearance in the early months of 1982, the effects of which have persisted to the present. Every alteration in policy and all the initiatives to reorganize the various factions on the left from 1975 to 1985 have in essence been efforts to adapt to these two changes and to their impact on Mexico's political situation overall.

The political reform comprised two distinct measures. One of them legalized Mexico's political left, which had previously existed semiclandestinely. This measure also increased freedom of speech and assembly for the left and gave left-wing parties access to television and the press. The government adopted a conciliatory attitude in its dealings with the foremost leftist organizations, decreasing repression and declaring a partial amnesty. The other measure of political reform was to alter the LOPPE, the law governing political organizations and electoral procedures, in the following ways:

- The official registration of political parties became easier. The law allowed organizations willing to present a declaration of principles, a program of action, and by-laws to request a status called "conditional registration." The party can subsequently achieve formal, permanent registration by obtaining 1.5% or more of the vote in a national election or by demonstrating a party membership of at least 65,000 individuals distributed throughout half or more of the nation's single-seat electoral districts. Changes in the law also opened up the possibility of registration for non-party political associations.
- The representation of registered parties became the responsibility of the Federal Electoral Commission. Registered parties also received the right to name delegates to observe all balloting locations and to appeal any irregularities.
- All political parties gained access to radio and television during electoral campaigns and were promised financial support for campaign activities.

Four parties received conditional registration under the new law: the PCM (later to form part of the PSUM), the PST, the PRT, and (in 1984) the PMT. Already in 1976, before the enactment of the political reform law, the PCM and the Socialist League (later part of the PRT) nominated Valentín Campa, a well-known communist labor leader, as a non-registered candidate for the presidency. By 1979, the PPS, PCM, and PST were taking part in elections as registered parties. The PRT, a Trotskyite party, joined them in the 1982 presidential race, in which three leftist candidates for the presidency appeared on the ballot. In 1985, five registered leftist parties participated in the Mexican elections. In 1980, the three registered leftist parties (the PPS, PST, and PCM) received 9.8% of votes cast, the PCM alone accounting for 5.1%. After a similar showing in 1982, three leftist parties won increased voter support in the local elections of 1983. In the 15 state congressional and 11 city council races contested that year, the PSUM, PST, and PPS

increased their vote totals to 2.82, 2.76, and 2.56 percent, respectively, while the PRT received only 0.38% of the votes cast.

The political reform provided independent left-wing parties with an unprecedented opportunity. Prior to the reform, only the PPS, noted for lending critical support to the dominant party, had participated in an election as a registered party. For the first time in history, then, the majority of leftist parties began to confront the problems of electoral campaigns and parliamentary life.

The complexity of these problems derives from the limitedness of the reform, which effected no substantial change in the corporate nature of the dominant political system. Mexican law, the structure of electoral commissions, and state control of electoral processes all interact to assure that the PRI controls the majority of elected positions, including the crucially powerful office of the presidency. Left-wing opposition parties can run candidates for positions in the Chamber of Deputies but are excluded from virtually all other elected positions. Most Mexicans recognize that the electoral route holds little hope for substantial changes at the core of the governing structure, political reform notwithstanding. Electoral campaigns, especially local ones, provide the context for important social confrontations, but extraparliamentary struggles continue to play a crucial role.

During the first three years of the political reform, perspectives on electoral participation caused deep divisions among the Mexican left. To some leftist parties, electoral opportunities meant having a real chance of broadening the influence of labor. Others saw parliamentary activity as a distraction which isolated leftist organizations from social movements, increased the dangers of corruption and cooptation, and made leftist organizations inaccessible to the majority of workers.

Despite these objections, elections have provided the most important political response to Mexico's economic crisis. Plummeting electoral support for the PRI and the ascent of the PAN are the most visible signs of popular discontent. At the same time, the power of social movements is on the decline, stimulating most leftist parties and organizations to seek the legal qualifications for participating in electoral contests. Should this situation persist, the left's deep-rooted resistance to electoral participation will continue to decline, although the role of electioneering vis-à-vis the many other objectives of the left will remain an important concern.

Electoral activity is producing profound changes within the left, including, most importantly, innovative new forms of alliance and unity. As it confronts the all-powerful PRI (which customarily receives 70% of the popular vote in national elections) and the increasingly popular PAN (with recent levels of voter support at about 17%), the left has quickly begun to realize that

it can become a truly viable electoral alternative only if it can overcome its fragmentation. Several recent strategic alliances foreshadow new developments in this direction, among them the appearance of the PSUM as a result of the fusion of five organizations; electoral coalitions among local groups and political parties, such as those of Juchitán (PSUM-COCEI); agreements by various parties to present joint lists of candidates; and the most recent accord among the PPS, PST, and the PSUM.

A second change resulting from increased electoral activity involves the culture and ideology of left-wing politics. The need to win votes has forced parties to put doctrinaire visions on hold in order to give more attention to immediate needs, to current political culture, and to the popular "state of mind." Since 1975, the left has been reevaluating its theoretical focuses, political styles, and organizational forms. The terms of this reevaluation have revolved around the need to adapt to legalization and the political reform, as well as to the debate on a rapidly changing political situation.

### **The Silent Crisis**

The symptoms of Mexico's current economic crisis, the worst of which began to appear in 1982, are by now well known and require little discussion. At the end of 1982 the de la Madrid administration's economic development experts summarized the situation thus:

- Unemployment has doubled.
- In certain sectors, production had come to a complete standstill.
- Numerous companies, unable to continue operations, folded.
- Inflation had reached 100% and continued to rise.
- National income was contracting.
- Public-sector debt had reached 15% of GNP.
- Mexico had virtually suspended payment on the foreign debt.
- Capital flight had reached unprecedented levels.
- Investments had fallen off precipitously.

Two years later, the situation remained virtually unchanged, even though certain economic indicators signalled that some symptoms of the crisis were under control.

The Mexican government has adopted an economic policy which strictly adheres to directives from the International Monetary Fund, as outlined in a letter of intent and the so-called Technical Memorandum of Understanding between Mexico and that body. This policy represents a sharp deviation from those pursued by the two previous administrations. The de la Madrid government has chosen to attack the crisis by cutting the public budget, increasing unemployment, and drastically reducing the real income of the majority of salaried workers.

Nearly all leftist organizations agree that Mexico's economic crisis began, not in 1982, but a decade earlier. They point to 1970-1971 as the end of the "Mexican economic miracle" and affirm that the nation's economic trajectory subsequently entered a period of stagnation and acute contradictions which went unresolved by successive administrations. The left is also united in its opposition to the PRI's economic strategy, but they differ substantially in their levels of criticism and confrontation.

Already by 1980 the Mexican economy had begun to manifest one ill effect of several years of accelerated petrolization: oil exports by then accounted for nearly 70% of Mexico's export total. When petroleum prices fell a few months later (in August 1981), the impact in loss of revenues sent Mexico's economy spiralling toward collapse. Some currents on the left had viewed the oil-based economic boom of the 1970s as the beginning of a period of growth which could provide the base for consolidating democracy in Mexico. Others, in contrast, opposed stepped-up petroleum exploitation on the grounds that petroleum exports could endanger Mexico's future internal energy supply. Some of those who held the latter view also warned that such exports would exacerbate inflation, technological dependency, and sectoral inequality, even if they did offer the government temporary relief from financial problems. When their warnings proved accurate, these symptoms of economic malaise served to bridge differences within the left.

However, the sharpest disagreements among leftist organizations and parties were still to come; they occurred in response to the nationalization of the banks and the introduction of currency controls on September 1, 1982. The left had called for such measures for decades, and some leftist parties, including the PSUM, viewed them as a fundamental change which created the possibility of a new relationship between the state and the left. Although it referred to the new policies as "highly transcendent," the PSUM gave its decided support to the measures, hailing what it interpreted as a break with foreign influences and a halt to capital flight and currency speculation. The PSUM saw in the new financial-sector policy an implicit breach between the government and financial capital circles, a division which would create a new political situation in Mexico. The PMT affirmed that

"on September 1 Mexico had changed in all aspects — with respect to the PRI, to opposition from the right or the left, to government officials and businessmen, and to the middle class." "The responsible left," the PMT continued, "which watches out for the interests of the majority, is necessarily opposed to imperialism, opposed to voracious businessmen and bankers; and because it sides against privileged groups and in favor of the people, it now shares a trench with the José López Portillo government." The PRT claimed that "by snatching the banking system from the hands of capitalist plunderers and shutting the valve on capital flight, Mexico regained control of tremendous resources which could support important social transformations. At the same time, such measures strengthen a semicolonial country like Mexico vis-à-vis imperialism." As always, the tone of the leftist declarations varied widely, and left-wing actions with regard to the bank nationalization reflected significant attitudinal differences regarding the government and its policies. Nevertheless, most of the left agreed that the nationalization signified a break in principle between capital and government and a *rap-prochement* between government and the populist position of the revolutionary family.

However, a few left-wing groups interpreted the bank nationalization as a single measure in a larger context of official economic policy, which included negotiations with the IMF and severe austerity measures. "The nationalization," according to a statement of FNDSCAC, "is a measure which seeks a bourgeois resolution to the crisis. These efforts to overcome the crisis rest upon the assurance of profits to capitalists as a group. The bank nationalization and currency controls go hand in hand with the negotiation of new loans and an agreement with the IMF." Other skeptics classified the nationalization as a ploy to recover lost popular support and to justify the austerity program. In summary, although some segments of the left supported López Portillo's final official acts, others opposed them, maintaining that any support of official policy would undermine the political goals of the left.

In the final months of 1982, the debate over the bank nationalization shook the left to its foundations. The resulting polarization seriously impeded efforts to form a united front to defend the living conditions of the people, and it culminated in the formation of two separate organizations: FNDSCAC and CNDEP.

However, a few months later, several events in rapid succession served to span the gap between the two sides. The de la Madrid administration, while preserving the principal elements of the nationalization, undertook a program to compensate the affected parties, grant them shares in companies outside the nationalized banking system, and renew their participation in the financial arena. This reconciliation with capital not only short-



circuited the expected turn toward populism, it also made certain that populism's best-known proponents would play no role within the government.

### **Roads to Unity**

The question of what attitude to adopt vis-à-vis the state has divided the left throughout history. In the context of political reform and economic crisis, however, this problem has created deeper and more significant divisions than ever before. Those sectors of the left which accept the conditions of the parliamentary agreement and its corollaries grow increasingly distant from those which insist that the left remain an independent social movement. Moreover, the very nature of the electoral laws gives the government, under ordinary circumstances, a wide range of opportunities for taking advantage of factionalism among registered organizations. Only the emergence of a single broad popular movement or political reform which guarantees a truly pluralist system can modify this authoritarian reality.

The economic crisis further increases the danger of the situation, which is marked by a subtle but escalating shift in political tone. Its symptoms include the austerity program, the technocratization of the state apparatus, the growth of a reactionary tone in the media, acts of violence such as the assassination of newsman Manuel Buendía and assassination attempts against ex-guerrillas and peasant leaders, and increasing pressure against union organization.

In the electoral sphere, the sudden ascent of the PAN is threatening to leave the left at the margins of electoral and parliamentary contests. In its current fragmented state, the left cannot effectively counteract this tendency. Additionally, left-wing social movements are weak. Two years after the onset of the crisis, popular responses to rapidly worsening living conditions have been unconvincing, diffuse, and sporadic. The popular response to the crisis has limited the ability of leftist organizations to attract a clientele on which to base resistance to the right-wing offensive. In such circumstances, the importance of presenting a united leftist front becomes crucial, especially in three areas: electoral battles; resistance to austerity policies; and the formation of political rallying points through the unification of various organizations.

All together, the left attracts about 10% of the total national vote, and this percentage will probably not increase significantly in the short term. The five registered left-wing parties (PRT, PSUM, PMT, PST, and PPS) can therefore expect to win very small shares of the vote. With every election, moreover, each of these parties is in danger of losing its official registration.

The major obstacle to electoral alliances lies in the electoral law, which obligates each registered party to enter all elections, thus eliminating the more effective forms of unity. This explains why coalitions between or among registered parties have not fared as well as those between one registered party and one or more unregistered organizations. If the left cannot reduce the current number of leftist electoral alternatives, it will be unable to present a viable national alternative, and its electoral chances over the medium term will be slim.

With respect to opposing the government's austerity policy, the causes of disunity lie within the left itself. The left has been unable to unite in opposition to government austerity measures because of significant differences in left-wing analyses of the government's policy and program. Certain organizations have refused to ally themselves with forces connected in any way with the state, even those which have simply adopted a conciliatory attitude toward the state. Others, basing their strategies on a convergence with progressive elements of the government bureaucracy, refuse to collaborate with organizations attacking the government. Several intermediate positions between these two extremes contribute to overall fragmentation. Nevertheless, occasional attempts at unification have occurred, such as the nationwide one-day strikes. Even though they had only limited success, the strikes did establish important precedents in the relationships among leftist organizations.

Despite these successes, the left must achieve a much more complex and admittedly fragile type of unity if it is to have any hope of becoming an alternative national force; it must successfully realize the organic fusion of many organizations into one. Of the mergers occurring in the last decade, the most important was that which created the PSUM. A brief discussion of this party's successes and limitations will help to illustrate the problems which arise on the treacherous road to organic unity.

On May 21, 1977, after 20 years of semilegal existence, the Partido Comunista Mexicano succeeded in making its 18th congress the first public congress in its history.<sup>1</sup> A year later, the Federal Electoral Commission approved the party's conditional registration to participate in elections after 32 years of having denied this right; and in the by-elections of 1979, the party reaped 5.1% of the national vote. Only a few years before, the PCM had persistently framed its political line in terms of frontal opposition to the "despotic and patriarchal" Mexican state, which favored the dominant bourgeoisie. It viewed the Mexican Revolution and state capitalism as having evolved into authoritarianism. Even though the PCM broke with Moscow in opposing

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<sup>1</sup> The PCM had attempted to make its 15th congress public as well, but those efforts proved unsuccessful.

the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, it maintained its ties with Socialist bloc countries and the international communist movement. Until 1978, the party held to Marxist-Leninist ideology and to the bureaucratic verticalism typical of the Third International. However, the political context created by Mexico's electoral reform and the emergence of a very heterogeneous left rendered these features of the PCM quite negative. In time, these characteristics would constitute insurmountable obstacles to the growth of the party, to the formation of alliances, and, more importantly, to improved relations with the Mexican government.

As early as 1977, however, the PCM had begun to initiate important changes in its orientation, which produced upheavals in both its membership base and its leadership. In 1978, some party leaders proposed a radical change in the party's official attitude toward the government, especially the more democratic elements of the PRI. Others reiterated their criticisms of existing socialist countries and made public their empathy with certain elements of Eurocommunism. At the same time, a group of militant youths in the Federal District proposed an alternative to labor unionization as the basis for political organizing.

In response to these pressures, the secretary-general of the PCM accepted the need for a thorough revamping of the party leadership. The most conservative leaders of the PCM interpreted his statement, made during the party's 60th-anniversary celebration in 1979, as a direct threat. They immediately prepared for a confrontation which has persisted, with increasing contentiousness, through the mid-1980s.

During the first ten months of 1980, the party endured heated internal squabbling as well as bitter disputations and public debates with other leftist organizations on the left's stance vis-à-vis the government, on Afghanistan, feminism, and dogmatism, and on issues of democratization within the party.

On November 21, 1980 the parameters of these debates changed radically. On that day 15 of the 60 members of the PCM Central Committee issued a manifesto titled "Toward the Renewal of the Mexican Communist Party." Among the positions that the so-called renovators endorsed for adoption by the party were the following:

- Democratic socialism, i.e., a socialism which aims toward the socialization of not only the means of production, but also political power.
- An ideological pluralism which would incorporate the revolutionary ideologies of the masses.

- A liberal party structure which would safeguard the rights of minorities.
- A party orientation directed toward the working class rather than toward the middle class.
- Emphasis on representing popular opinion and popular action through close contact with extraparliamentary social movements rather than an exclusively parliamentary focus.

The 19th congress of the PCM (held in March 1981) addressed these various orientations and proved itself the most democratic such meeting in the party's history. Thanks to the independence of the delegates, the minority of renovators was neither expelled nor obligated to separate from the party, a vital step toward establishing freedom of expression for minority points of view. The efforts of the renovators resulted in a change in the relationship between membership base and party leadership; the renovators gained 25% of the seats on the Central Committee and four leadership positions. However, the battle was not over. The majority, in firm control of the party apparatus, pressured minority members to the point that they began leaving the party.

In summary, the efforts to modify the party line and internal structure of the PCM produced a severe crisis at the core of the party, splits within the leadership, and severe, protracted internal conflict. Many party members feared that these conflicts, which hurt both the image and internal functioning of the party, would cause its collapse.

Two months after the PCM's 1981 congress, the Federal Electoral Commission granted conditional registration to the PRT and the PSD and arbitrarily denied it to the PMT and the PPM. This move, which excluded two major leftist organizations from parliamentary activity, profoundly modified the situation of the left overall. PMT leader Heberto Castillo, forced into a corner by the commission's decision, proposed the formation of a new party through the merger of his party with the PCM, PPM, MAUS, and PSR.

His proposal was not without precedent. In early 1977, the PCM, PMT, PPM, PSR, and the Tendencia Democrática of the Electrical Workers Union had attempted to merge, but those efforts were thwarted when the PCM accepted official registration. Leaders of the PPM and PCM subsequently held several joint sessions, indicating that although the multi-party fusion had not materialized, efforts at unity had paved the way for a leftist coalition. In the process, the PCM had demonstrated its willingness to merge organically with other parties and organizations. When faced with an internal struggle which raged out of control,

the party viewed such a merger even more enthusiastically, since it offered a means for dissipating internal strife.

On August 15, 1982, the five parties mentioned in Castillo's proposal made public their decision to merge. Just 15 days later, the decision by MAP to join the coalition provoked the first conflict between the PMT and the rest of the coalition. The PMT continued its expressions of dissatisfaction in early October and soon afterward decided to withdraw from the unification process until "electoral differences had passed." PMT members objected to inferences of communism in the symbols and program of the new party, insisting that they were not communists.

The withdrawal of the PMT, the second-largest party in the coalition after the PCM, dealt a heavy blow to the unification process. On November 5-6, 1982, the coalition called a unity meeting for delegates from the five parties remaining in the unification process. The profound divisions separating the merged parties became clear almost immediately. The issues of contention included attitude toward the government; the image and ideology of the new party; policy toward existing socialist countries; policy on labor unionization; and, lastly, the power to be wielded by the new organization.

Although the unification experience has rendered valuable lessons about ideological tolerance, political perspective, and the exercise of power, internal contradictions have increased. By the second congress (in August 1983), these contradictions had reached crisis proportions, and the congress became the scene of confrontation between radically divided blocs within the party. The dispute focused on the exercise of internal power and the party's stand on the government austerity measures. The congress ended with the withdrawal of one sector from the central leadership and a proliferation of conflict at all levels. The unification process has reached an impasse, and the future of the PSUM appears uncertain.

The experience of the PSUM demonstrates that the forces attempting to unify the fragmented left are very weak. In order for organic unification to occur, some rather uncertain elements of Mexican political life must become more concrete. These include:

- Popular resistance to the government's austerity policy. The economic crisis has remained unpoliticized; two years after its onset, it has stimulated no significant popular response. The nature, breadth, and orientation of a popular opposition movement would help resolve some of the problems dividing the left and also provide the necessary catalyst for the completion of the unification efforts now underway.

- Contradictions at the core of the governing bureaucracy. The government's current policy has created deep fissures in the power structure. The exclusion of nationalist groups and conflicts with union leadership produce friction, with unpredictable future consequences.
- The development of the electoral and parliamentary systems. These systems are still too limited to serve as the primary channels for expressing popular demands.

The left in Mexico, just as in many other countries, is temporarily inactive, in part because the country's present political context has generated a system with unstable links which could break at any time. Under these conditions, major left-wing successes are unlikely, if not impossible. Nevertheless, the experience gained from current efforts at unification, which are gradually eliminating the secondary and more superficial causes of fragmentation in the left, can prepare the way for unification under more propitious conditions in the future.

## **WAGES AND ECONOMIC CRISIS IN MEXICO**

by Jeffrey Bortz

### **Introduction**

It is by now a commonplace to say that post-World War II Mexico experienced unprecedented economic growth. From 1940 to 1970, Mexico's GDP grew at an average annual rate of approximately six percent, as a series of new industries sprang up, paving the way for the country's modern industrialization. By 1980, the transformation industry (manufactures, construction, and electricity) generated (or captured, depending on the economic theory used) 30.5% of GDP and employed about 21.8% of the work force. These figures closely resemble those describing the U.S. economy; thus, in relative terms, postwar Mexico succeeded in becoming an industrialized country.

According to some observers, Mexico's postwar economy was building toward a crisis throughout the 1970s. To make the point as briefly as possible, Mexico's economic transition during this decade from relative price stability to high inflation represented a structural change.<sup>1</sup> Yet even with this change, Mexico's GDP continued to rise for several years following the 1976-1977 crisis.

By 1982-1983, however, the panorama had changed dramatically. In 1982, real GDP fell 0.5% relative to 1981, and it declined by a further 4.7% in 1983. Inflation reached 98.9% in 1982 and 80.9% the following year. By 1982, the country's foreign debt had reached an alarming 85% of total GDP, while the public-sector deficit grew to an equally alarming 17.6% of GDP. These two years — 1982 and 1983 — witnessed the beginning of the worst economic crisis to befall modern Mexico.

### **Theories of the Crisis**

Economic crises present a harsh reality. Profits fall, forcing many companies into bankruptcy. The problem of declining profits is often expressed in Mexico as a company's inability to pay its debts, especially its debts abroad. In some of Mexico's strongest industries, such as Cerveceria Modelo and the Alfa

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<sup>1</sup> See Jeffrey Bortz, "Salarios y empleo," in *La crisis en México*, comp. Héctor Aguilar Camín (México, D.F.: Océano, 1985)

Group, management is resolving this difficulty by paying foreign debts with company shares — that is, by denationalizing.

Salaries fall as well. Some employees, the author of this essay among them, compensate for decreasing income by taking on a second job and working 14-to-16-hour days. Others, less fortunate, are obliged to forego “luxury” items such as meat. Those who had never been able to afford meat find themselves forced to abstain from eating fruits and vegetables and rely on a diet of starches, tortillas, and chiles. The life of a salaried worker is becoming extremely arduous.

The fiscal base of the state is also contracting. Taxes are collected basically from profits and from wages. As these decline, monies available to the government also decline. The inability of the state to secure additional external financing aggravates the situation and reinforces the need to extract resources internally via taxation.

In ancient times — that is, before capitalism — economic crises had a readily apparent natural component. A drought, flood, plague, or some other disaster contributed to decreases in production. In those times, identifying the enemy of the first instance was easy, even though the identification of a supernatural cause (witch, heretic, wrathful god, etc.) could provoke conflict and even bloody confrontation.

Since the dawn of the capitalist era, identifying the enemy has become more difficult. Natural forces are clearly not the only cause of declining production. And as modern people, much more intelligent than our forebears, we no longer resort to the idolatry of religion: we have *economic theory!* Even the most primitive among us, such as Ronald Reagan, do not blame the Russians for Mexico’s economic crisis.

There are as many theories of the crisis as there are economic theories. If this essay were meant to deal with the crisis in general, then it would have to address them. Since this is not my intent, however, I will simplify the discussion by grouping these theories into two sets — bourgeois and Marxist — and analyzing them as opposing schools of economic theory.

Bourgeois economic theory is hard-pressed to explain the crisis. The difficulty arises from two of its basic assumptions: the first is that money has no value; the second relates to equilibrium. Since the theory of money is so complex that discussing it would exceed the parameters of this essay, we will focus instead on the problem of equilibrium.

According to bourgeois theory, a market economy always seeks a state of equilibrium. In this balanced state, every action generates a corresponding reaction which reestablishes equilibrium and, in the process, maximizes the personal gain of those involved, either through salaries, profits, revenues, or transfers.



The founder of bourgeois economics is not Adam Smith, but Sir Isaac Newton; as is well known, Newton, as minister of Britain's Exchequer, established the gold standard, which survived until Richard Nixon assumed the presidency of the United States several centuries later.

No crisis will occur as long as the system remains at equilibrium. The neoclassicists (i.e., neo-Newtonians) still debate whether equilibrium can allow structural unemployment (as maintained by the Keynesians) or whether unemployment is voluntary and/or frictional, as claimed by the monetarists. This question, however, is irrelevant: the goal of a capitalist economy is to maximize profits, not employment and well-being — a fact which Reagan and Thatcher have correctly recognized.

The absence of crisis, however, does not imply that a capitalist economy does not experience periods of expansion and contraction. With its keen sense of humor, bourgeois economic theory has developed the so-called "theory of business cycles." An expert in the question of productivity and cycles, Solomon Fabricant, summarizes the cyclical pattern of the economy thus:

During the later stages of business expansion, labor shortages are pushing up wage rates more rapidly than at earlier stages. Yet it is just at this time that the rate of increase in labor productivity begins to slacken. As a result of this combination of more rapidly rising wages and less rapidly rising labor productivity, labor costs per unit of product begin to rise more rapidly than before . . . [and] depress profit per unit of output. These developments . . . contribute to the decline in investment commitments that . . . [brings] on a recession . . . . During the later stages of contraction, [however], labor productivity turns up. And with mounting unemployment the rise in wage rates slows down. As a result, unit labor costs stop rising and then decline, with cheerful consequences for profit prospects. Profit margins may actually begin to rise and with them the investment commitments that help to bring the contraction to a close.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the expansive phase of the cycle, instead of overheating the economy, brings about inflation and produces the conditions necessary for a recessive phase. This recessive phase provides the solution to the problems caused by expansion; but rather than producing permanent unemployment and poverty, the recessive phase generates the conditions that precipitate an expansive phase, which in turn solves the problems of the recessive phase. Every action producing a reaction, the restoration of equilibrium, and a harmonious world without crisis — the Promised Land of the Neoclassicists.

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<sup>2</sup> Solomon Fabricant, *A Primer on Productivity* (New York: Random House, 1969):97-98.

The Bible exhorts men to give themselves over to God for fear of falling into the hands of Beelzebub. The texts of bourgeois economics exhort governments to give economies over to free-market equilibrium for fear of falling into crisis. Just as God is goodness, so is the market economy. Aside from the neo-Keynesian debates of the postwar period and the heresies of some notable economists such as John Kenneth Galbraith, the belief in the natural balance of the market has reigned supreme in practically the entire Christian West.

Reality, however, is more complex than theory. Economies stagnate. Inflation persists. Unemployment, however voluntary it may be, rises involuntarily. And the real income of workers declines. In the short term, we can blame the Arabs (who are after all neither Western nor Christian); but for the long term — the stagnation of the world market from 1970 to the present — we must revise our theory.

Bourgeois theory, however, does not allow for any fundamental revision, since the concept of equilibrium is inseparable from the sacrosanct concept of Private Property. We must never question Private Property. It follows that even if there is a crisis, it is not because the theory or the market economy is flawed. If the "invisible hand" of Adam Smith is not functioning optimally, it is because someone is tugging at the phantom elbow.

Bourgeois theoreticians feel that when a crisis occurs, it is because a government has pushed Smith's arm too far or has not let go in time. The cause of the crisis is invariably poor economic policy, since the market, if left alone, produces internal mechanisms sufficient to avoid a crisis. According to bourgeois economic theory, then, the causes of crisis are political.

Whether or not this conclusion is correct, the Mexican government supports it and employs it, both to explain the crisis and to formulate economic policy. Therefore, if we wish to understand the current wage policy of the Mexican government, we must understand the logic on which the policy is based — the political explanation of the crisis. Since Mexico is, after all, a capitalist country with a bourgeois government, its government quite logically must adhere to a bourgeois theory of the crisis. The Bank of Mexico, for example, issued the following explanation of the crisis in February 1983:

The policy of employing petroleum earnings to finance a rapidly expanding federal budget did not succeed in consolidating a stable development base. Overextension of public investment, the current budget, transfers, and subsidies to the private sector (preserving a distorted price structure) provoked, as could have been anticipated, an extreme degree of inefficiency and waste in the functioning of the productive plant. Moreover, it reduced the maneuverability

for economic policy and led to unprecedented structural decay in the country's finances.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the crisis resulted from inefficiency and waste, not from the naturally occurring components of an economy in equilibrium.

The Mexican economy, so the theory goes, did not arrive at this state of inefficiency on its own. It was helped along by a government which was, at the very least, inept at handling economic policy. The government's deliberate and largely deleterious expansion of public investment, of the federal budget, and of subsidies rested heavily on external credit and petroleum earnings. This explanation implies that a correct handling of public finances would have prevented the crisis, which, according to dominant groups, has had its heaviest impact in the financial sphere. We can add to this explanatory scenario the rise in interest rates throughout the international financial market, the decline in petroleum prices, and especially the extravagance attributed to certain members of the previous administration. The first two factors lie outside the parameters of a national economy in equilibrium (another assumption of bourgeois theory), and the latter is beyond the range of the Bank of Mexico.

If this crisis has resulted from the confluence of uncontrollable factors in the world economy and the political mismanagement of the national economy, then the latter is suffering no *inherent* difficulty. We might even assert that there is no crisis — only a series of acute problems, each of which can be addressed in relative isolation. Since finances constitute the primary problem, the country should be treated as a company that needs its financial situation put in order. The country must pay its debts, spend no more than it receives, and seek internal support. Only through this logic of bourgeois economics can we explain the wage policy of the current administration.

Marxist theory makes no assumption of equilibrium. It sees in capitalist economies a combination of factors, some tending toward equilibrium and others toward disequilibrium. These factors, in the Marxist view, are kept in check by the three basic laws of the capitalist system: the law of value, the law of surplus value, and the law of a tendency toward a falling rate of profit.

Marxist theory considers periods of crisis in a capitalist economy to be as natural as periods without crisis. In fact, swings between periods of crisis and no crisis are an essential component of such an economy. Thus, in contrast to the assumptions of bourgeois theory, the elements of Marxist theory can very comfortably accommodate an explanation of the crisis.

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<sup>3</sup> Banco de México, *Informe Anual 1983* (México, D.F.: Banco de México, 1983):18-19.

Rather than exploring in detail the Marxist theory of economic crisis, we may simply note that what best characterizes an economic debacle is a trend toward declining rates of social profit. In monetary terms, social profit is the sum of productive workers' salaries, non-productive workers' salaries, productive companies' profits, non-productive companies' profits, and taxes paid to the government which are not returned to productive workers.<sup>4</sup> The growth of productivity which characterizes evolving capitalism tends to manifest itself in higher ratios of capital to labor, that is, a higher ratio between accumulated labor and active labor. As productivity rises, therefore, the economy must employ a greater amount of total labor in order to maintain a constant level of social profit. In other words, the rate of social profit tends to decline as a function of the increasing organic composition of capital.

Two difficulties have typically impeded an understanding of the Marxist postulate regarding declining rates of profit. Both stem from the sketchy, incomplete nature of the third volume of Karl Marx's *Capital*, as well as the abstractions which Marx employed in this master work.

The first difficulty arises when the law is interpreted as predicting a linear decline in the rate of profit to the point where the system collapses. Yet we know that productivity need not evolve at the same pace or in the same manner in all sectors. During long periods of history, productivity growth has centered either in sector 1 (producers of the means of production) or in sector 2 (producers of the means of consumption). Moreover, the rate of exploitation, a component of the rate of profit, is not now and has never been a constant. Ernest Mandel demonstrated in the early 1970s, using Marx's logic, that, in combination, the two factors mentioned above produce long waves or cycles in the global capitalist economy.<sup>5</sup> That is, the law predicting a trend toward declining rates of social profit forecasts not linear declines but long cycles dominated by downward pressures.

The second difficulty arises from the lack of a clear distinction in the Marxist literature between national and global accumulation. The relationship between these two measures is much too broad and complex to address in this essay. Let us say simply that the factors which produce declines in the rate of social profit might seem to disprove the law in a particular country. However, the incorporation of each country into a single capitalist world market assures that in any one country these factors will interact with the combination of factors in other

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<sup>4</sup> The traditional measurements of fluctuations in the profit rates of major productive industries should thus not be confused with fluctuations in social profit.

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1978).

countries, and, in the aggregate, the law will stand. To state it more concretely, a country may experience a drop in its rate of social profit as a result of forces other than an increase in its *internal* organic composition of capital.

The Marxist theory of economic crisis is extremely important for understanding Mexico's current crisis and wage problems, but the reasons for its importance differ from those pertaining to bourgeois economic theory. Marxist theory does not influence economic policymaking in Mexico and is therefore irrelevant in the formulation of wage policy. Nevertheless, Mexico's current problems provide a classic example of the many manifestations of a falling rate of social profit. Thus, Marxist theory helps explain the real and necessary fluctuations in salary which occur regardless of the ideology under which a particular wage policy may have been developed.

The rate of social profit has two components: the organic composition of capital and the rate of (labor) exploitation. If the organic composition of capital increases and thereby causes a decrease in profit-to-capital ratio (the rate of profit), an increase in the rate of exploitation may reverse the decline. Moreover, increasing the rate of exploitation is the only method for raising the rate of profit over the short term. In other words, every crisis leads inevitably to a decline in real wages. Salaries do not cause crises, but they provide a means of attempting to resolve economic difficulties while the true cause of the crisis is beyond reach.

### **Wage Problems in Times of Crisis**

In periods of crisis, profits fall. Thus, if all other factors remain constant, wages, along with all other costs, rise in relation to profits. Any attempt to stabilize profits by raising prices in these situations will cause a contraction of demand. These two tendencies generally interact and the crisis becomes a problem of both markets and costs.

A crisis imposes an urgent demand on companies: to cut costs in order to maintain revenues and reclaim profits. Over the short term, the cost of most factors of production are determined by the specific productive process being used and lie beyond a company's control. The one cost which a company can immediately reduce is wages. Thus crises almost invariably lead companies to adopt hard-line wage policies.

Such policies do not in and of themselves result in wage cuts. However, a hard line vis-à-vis workers' petitions for wage increases combines with a second factor inherent in the crisis: growing unemployment. Companies take this unyielding stance precisely because profits per unit of production are threatened or actually declining, a factor which also discourages further

investment and, as a consequence, produces increased unemployment. The effect is profound, even when layoffs are few; young people joining the labor force cannot find jobs, and, as unemployed, they exert pressure on the employed labor force.

Growing unemployment ensures that the relationship between labor supply and demand tends to depress wages. Even so, wages do not fall automatically. Furthermore, they can fluctuate within a fairly broad range, since their upper limit is determined by the lowest acceptable profit level and their lower limit is the minimum wage which will still permit the physical reproduction of the labor force. The point within this range at which salaries will be set depends on the political clout of the working class, the strength of its organizations, and its independence from the state. A feeble working class will inevitably succumb to the pressure of an unfavorable ratio of supply and demand in the labor market.

We can now summarize the problems of wages during periods of crisis from three different analytical perspectives: bourgeois theory; relations between companies and unions; and the problem of a declining rate of social profit. Bourgeois theory subordinates the wage question to the superficial characteristics of crisis. In Mexico, these include hyperinflation, the public-sector deficit, and a swollen foreign debt. This view of wage policy as a tool for combating inflation, reducing deficit spending, and paying the foreign debt has led the government to develop three distinct wage policies: a global one to fight inflation; another for bureaucrats, designed to reduce the deficit in the public budget; and a third, operating on a fiscal level, to pay the external debt. These strategies form the basis of the government's overall approach to the wage question, which will be discussed in the next section.

With respect to companies and labor unions, the problem of wages is much simpler. Companies are keenly aware of their genuine need to reduce costs and offer wage increases which are lower than increases in price per unit produced. Mexico's unions, tied to the state both in consciousness and in organization, generally accept the state's arguments for austerity and agree to accept pay raises below the rate of inflation. Their members, threatened by increasing unemployment, are in no position to complain.

Examined from the perspective of rate of social profit, the question is simpler still. No economic recovery is possible without an extraordinary increase in the rate of exploitation, beginning with marked wage cuts. But no one knows how low salaries must fall — not only in Mexico but throughout the capitalist world market — to arrest a world crisis.

## Wage Policy

In November 1983, Miguel de la Madrid stated: "The success of our 1984 program will depend heavily on the results of our efforts to control inflation. Combating inflation constitutes the core of this program, since bringing inflation under control will provide the stability essential for economic recovery and redirected growth."<sup>6</sup> According to the Mexican government, inflation is caused by excessive demand, which in turn arises from excessive spending by both the government and the private sector. Lowering private spending requires that both the number of workers and the wage bill be decreased.

Rarely will governments admit that their policy for countering inflation is nothing more than a policy of unemployment and depressed wages. Such an admission might provoke discontent or, even worse, questions about the reasons for not reducing the profits of the rich rather than the wages of the poor. Any responsible government realizes that the problem of stimulating the economy centers on stimulating savings, that the poor do not save, that internal savings come basically from companies, and that therefore the demands which must be controlled are those of labor, not capital. Additionally, current administrations — de la Madrid's, Thatcher's, and Reagan's — refer with increasing frequency to the Phillips curve and postulate that all unemployment is voluntary. The reduction of salaries, they say, occurs only to stimulate employment. Governments admit that this is an anti-wage policy, but they believe that it is also pro-employment.

As Mexico's letter of intent with the International Monetary Fund asserts, "wage policy is intended to protect the level of employment." The Phillips curve is now official. The same letter also notes that:

Inflation dropped from a monthly rate of nearly 11% in December 1982 and January 1983 to an average of 4% in the August-November 1983 period; price increases for 1983 are projected at around 80%. These successes in the struggle against inflation were possible not only because of reduced demand, but also because of the cooperation and sense of responsibility of the Mexican people. The solidarity of Mexico's labor movement deserves special recognition for its noted moderation in salary demands.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado, "Criterios generales de la política económica para 1984," *Comercio Exterior* 34:1 (Jan. 1984):85.

<sup>7</sup> "Cartas de intención con el FMI," *Comercio Exterior* 34:1 (Jan. 1984):89-92.

In other words, inflation was due to excessive demand, and the solution to the problem of inflation has been to decrease demand, thanks to the support of the Mexican "labor movement."

The Mexican government thus adopted a policy of restricting nominal wage increases to levels significantly below the anticipated inflation rate. It strove to hold wage increases in private companies at between 23 and 33%, depending on the particular economic situation of the firm in question, throughout two years of 100% annual inflation. Similarly, the legal minimum wage rose 43.7% in the Federal District during 1983, while inflation in Mexico City ran 78.3% between December 1982 and December 1983.

According to Mexico's orthodox government, however, an excessive demand for real wage increases is not the sole cause of inflation. Another is deficit government spending, which has reached unprecedented levels in the country's history. This problem should be addressed, according to the government, as a question of cash flow, a problem of income and expenditures. If we leave income aside for the moment, we may focus on wages as a major governmental expense. Given bourgeois theory, the government should attempt to reduce public-sector salaries even more than other salaries, since they have a double inflationary impact (as excessive demand and as deficit in the public budget). And Mexico's government has in fact attempted, with varying degrees of success, to control salaries in the public sector even more than those outside it.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the government's wage policy both decreases excess demand and reduces the public deficit. Related to the latter feature is the manner in which Mexico's wage policy helps address one of the major features of the crisis, the country's burgeoning foreign debt. Although space limitations prevent a detailed discussion of this question, we can easily see how an increase in available government revenues would assist Mexico in making its debt payments.

Moreover, if Mexico is to pay its debt, it must cease using foreign loans as a source of finance capital for the Mexican economy. This implies that Mexico will have to replace foreign loans with two alternative sources of capital: foreign investment and internal savings. Since foreign investment at a level high enough to make a difference is unlikely to occur during a period of economic crisis, Mexico will have to depend heavily on its only remaining option, internal savings. Increasing internal savings, in turn, is synonymous with increasing the profits of private companies; ultimately, then, economic recovery depends on the recuperation of private companies' profit levels, which will not occur if taxes are increased. The required increase in

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<sup>8</sup> Francisco Rodríguez, "Así se arreglan los salarios," *Impacto* 1762:80



government revenues can therefore not be drawn from profits, so it must come from wages. There is no choice.

The de la Madrid administration began its economic recovery program by imposing a 50% increase on sales tax and taxing end-of-year bonuses for the first time in Mexico's history. In February of 1985, the government redefined the "social benefits" portion of workers' salaries (a component generally paid in cash) as taxable income. We can summarize this complex of policy measures as a wage policy which tends to reduce workers' net salaries in order to pay the country's foreign debt.<sup>9</sup>

### Salaries and the Mexican Crisis

Salaries invariably fall during periods of economic crisis. In Mexico, the crisis has brought wage reductions in two distinct phases: a gradual decline from 1976 to 1981, and an abrupt deterioration beginning in 1982. By 1984, Mexico's minimum wage had fallen to approximately 100 dollars per month, and a salaried industrial worker earned about \$150 monthly.

Table 1 displays the proportion of Mexico's gross domestic product (GDP) represented by salaries and benefits. Three different patterns are discernible here — a slight increase (from 35.6% to 43.3%) from 1970 to 1976, a slight decrease (to 37.4%) between 1976 and 1981, and an abrupt drop in 1982 (to 23.4%), followed by a continuing decline (to 18%) the following year.<sup>10</sup> The trends revealed in table 1 are really quite astonishing. First, the data disprove orthodox theories of inflation. Between 1970 and 1981, Mexico's economy underwent a dramatic change. Relative price stability gave way to a long period of persistent inflation that eventually deteriorated into hyperinflation; but throughout this period, wage earners' share of national income remained steady. Thus, changes in Mexico's inflation rate cannot be attributed to excess demand. Nonetheless, the government insists that it will ease inflation by curbing demand.

Secondly, wages as a percent of GDP began to decline rapidly in 1982. In the advanced countries, wages generally make up about 60% of GDP. This figure tends to be lower in underdeveloped countries, usually somewhere around 40%. In Mexico today, however, wages account for less than one-fifth of total income — less than half of their 1976 share. This ratio is less than one-third of the corresponding figure in the United States, and working-class wages are no longer sufficient to provide families with an adequate diet.

<sup>9</sup> *Diario Oficial de la Nación* (Mexico City), 29 Feb. 1984.

<sup>10</sup> Data for 1970-1982 taken from Secretaría de Programación y Presupuesto, *Cuentas Nacionales* (México, D.F.: SPP, 1970-1982); 1983 data were calculated using the official GDP figure and estimating a 45% increase in wages.

Table 1  
SALARIES AND BENEFITS AS A PROPORTION OF  
GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT  
(percentages)

1970	35.6	1977	38.9
1971	35.5	1978	37.9
1972	36.9	1979	37.7
1973	35.9	1980	36.1
1974	36.8	1981	37.4
1975	38.1	1982	23.4
1976	40.3		

Source: *Sistema de Cuentas Nacionales de México* (México, D.F., 1983).

Thirdly, the dramatic collapse of wages as a part of GDP, a decline 8 times that of GDP itself (37% compared with 4.7%), simply reflects a dramatic increase in the rate of exploitation, the system's natural response to restore profits. Such increases in the rate of exploitation as a means of restoring profits are not new in the history of Mexican economic cycles. Table 2 illustrates the long-term cycles of workers' real wages in the Federal District from 1938 to 1982. From 1938 to 1952, wages fell drastically, by more than 50%. From 1952 to 1976, wages tended to rise. But from 1976 to the present, Mexico's economy is once again in a period of falling real wages, paralleling the 1938-1952 span.

In the 1930s, the capitalist world economy suffered the worst crisis in its history. If this crisis resulted from declining rates of profit, it is not surprising that the response to the crisis was a brutal increase in the rate of exploitation. The world economy today is apparently experiencing another crisis in the rate of profit. Not surprisingly, the response once again focuses on the rate of exploitation.

There are, however, some differences between these two crisis periods. For example, the onset of the crisis of the 1930s was apparently sudden, while the current crisis appeared gradually. Also, the impact of the Great Depression was heaviest in the imperialist countries rather than in their colonies; today this situation is reversed.

Table 2  
 INDEX OF WORKERS' REAL WAGES  
 IN THE FEDERAL DISTRICT  
 (percentages)

1938	100.0	1961	66.4
1939	92.0	1962	70.9
1940	83.2	1963	75.7
1941	79.1	1964	74.2
1942	66.1	1965	79.9
1943	66.8	1966	84.6
1944	53.0	1967	90.7
1945	50.3	1968	91.4
1946	45.8	1969	99.8
1947	46.4	1970	96.9
1948	52.4	1971	99.5
1949	52.1	1972	107.5
1950	66.1	1973	116.6
1951	50.9	1974	125.8
1952	49.7	1975	117.6
1953	53.3	1976	143.5
1954	57.0	1977	125.7
1955	57.1	1978	123.6
1956	60.2	1979	122.8
1957	59.9	1980	116.8
1958	63.5	1981	122.6
1959	64.2	1982	100.2
1960	64.7		

Sources: Jeffrey Bortz, "Industrial Wages in Mexico City, 1939-1975" (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1984); Jeffrey Bortz, *La estructura de los salarios en México* (México, D.F., 1984).

These differences are explainable at a hypothetical level. Capitalist governments have responded to the present crisis with different economic policies than those employed in 1929. These policies successfully postponed the full outbreak of the crisis, but only at the cost of continuing inflation. Another possible explanation is that structural changes have occurred in the transmitting mechanisms within the world economy, particularly within the financial arena. There are unfortunately very few

studies which might shed light on this hypothesis, especially studies explaining the links between one country's economic crisis and the crisis in the world economy.

Regardless of their differences, the crises of the 1930s and today share one fundamental characteristic: the need to cut workers' salaries and income, to increase exploitation as a means of increasing profits. Mexico's bourgeoisie understand the problem in the following way (although they may describe it in other language): If employment decreases less than output (as has happened up to this point) productivity declines. When productivity falls, salaries must decrease in the same proportion in order to preserve the distribution of income. If Mexico wishes to increase internal savings (profits), salaries must decrease even more than productivity; and if the country hopes to pay its external debt while simultaneously increasing internal savings, salaries must be cut still further.

It is all so logical: the solution to the crisis is an increase in the rate of exploitation. However, an increase in the rate of exploitation does not translate directly into an increase in the rate of profit. Mexican salaries have fallen to starvation levels, and the country has not yet even glimpsed economic recovery. We can thus legitimately ask, to what point must salaries fall?

As long as the world economy does not recover, economic recovery in Mexico is unlikely. And recovery through wage cuts will never occur unless the working class has been defeated worldwide. Moreover, if Mexico's workers do not take actions to defend their already precarious living conditions, salaries in Mexico will continue to fall.

## **CRISIS IN MEXICO: IMPACTS ON THE WORKING CLASS AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT**

by Alejandro Alvarez

This paper will begin with an outline of the problems resulting from Mexico's economic crisis, the administration's austerity program, and the reorganization of the country's industrial sector; following that, it examines the contradictions between the state and "official" trade unionism at various levels; and its conclusion examines the relationship between official and independent unionism. This overall discussion will give some indication as to how Mexico's working class has been hurt by the government's austerity policy, a program aimed at increased productive, commercial, and financial integration between Mexico and the United States. It will also suggest that the austerity policy has upset the traditional underpinnings of the relationship between organized labor and the state, a historical symbiosis which has been replaced by a sophisticated, broad-ranging policy of labor control. This situation has placed the working class and the union movement in a primarily defensive position. However, rather than coalescing unions around opposition political stances, the resulting growth in labor discontent has revealed increasing disarticulation in organized labor's ability to respond. When labor conflicts have occurred, wage policy has figured prominently, and workers dependent on the federal budget have been at the forefront of labor unrest. A new network of labor alliances has emerged in response to this situation, but it has yet to produce any visible positive results.

### **Crisis, Austerity, and Industrial Reorganization**

As of mid-1984, Mexico was experiencing a crisis of unprecedented severity and duration in its modern history. The context of crisis has become a constant, unavoidable reality for Mexico's working class, which is besieged by unemployment, low wages, inflation, and budget cuts in educational, health, and housing services. With their labor unions under government control, workers have found their efforts to resist fragmented, either by the effects of the crisis itself or by direct government repression.

The current economic crisis interrupted a process of capital accumulation which had continued almost unabated since the

1940s; in the 1970s Mexico's political elites began a search for new bases of support upon which to renew this accumulation process. At the onset of the crisis in 1982, they ended their search by deciding to impose a wide-ranging program of austerity measures upon Mexico's working population, both urban and rural. Thus, with one policy response, Mexico's leaders hoped to solve two critical problems simultaneously: a crisis of federal budget deficits, and the need to reorganize the country's heterogeneous, highly-monopolized, overprotected, inefficient, and technologically backward industrial sector.

After Mexico's brief, intoxicating oil boom had subsided, the severity of the country's financial crisis became increasingly evident. In 1982, Mexico was on the verge of bankruptcy, which, had it occurred, would have inflicted devastation on the international financial system. By successfully avoiding bankruptcy, the de la Madrid administration limited the crisis to one of internal production; but the resulting internal readjustments have wreaked havoc upon Mexico's working population. Mexican leaders soon realized that these maladjustments were not fleeting phenomena, but rather the indicators of a true structural crisis. The realization that Mexico is undergoing economic crisis has now spread throughout the country, but most Mexicans do not yet comprehend the severity, implications, and probable duration of the crisis. Recent economic indicators suggest the depth of Mexico's economic woes.<sup>1</sup> In 1981, for example, Mexico's gross domestic product (GDP) increased by 8%; in 1982, economic growth had dropped to zero, and in 1983, it went down to -5%. Inflation, which reached 100% in 1982, dropped only slightly (to 80%) in 1983. The number of workers employed in the manufacturing sector decreased from 605,000 in August 1981 to 540,000 in December 1982, and to 525,000 in August 1983. Although production has not fallen uniformly across all industrial sectors, production in general decreased from 0.4% in 1981 to -9% in 1983. The most abrupt declines occurred in such important areas as truck and tractor manufactures (-60% in 1983) and iron and steel production. Moreover, employment in the construction industry, which accounts for a significant proportion of overall employment in the Mexican economy, fell 18.7% between January and September of 1983.

In 1983 alone, the buying power of wage-earners fell 36%, according to government estimates. In the first half of that year, public expenditures for salaries decreased by 31.7%, compared with a decrease in total expenditures of only 17.4% during the same period. This erosion of wages, however, had begun long before the oil boom, as table 1 shows. As the crisis exacerbated

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<sup>1</sup> The following data are taken from the *Boletín Mensual de Información Económica* (México, D.F.: Secretaría de Educación Pública) and *El examen de la situación económica de México* (México, D.F.: BANAMEX, 1983).

Table 1  
 REAL WAGES IN MEXICO CITY, 1976-1983  
 (December to December)<sup>a</sup>

Year	Nominal Minimum Wage (pesos/day)	Real Minimum Wage (pesos/day)	Change in Real Wages Relative to Oct. 1976 (percentages)	Consumer Price Index (Oct. 1976 = 100)
1976	96.70	96.70	---	100.0
1977	106.40	84.42	-14.8	129.1
1978	120.00	80.59	-16.8	148.9
1979	138.00	77.31	-20.1	178.5
1980	163.00	70.53	-27.1	231.1
1981	210.00	68.51	-29.2	306.5
1982	364.00 <sup>b</sup>	61.16	-36.8	595.1
1983	455.00 <sup>c</sup>	76.45	-21.0	595.1

<sup>a</sup> Except where indicated otherwise.

<sup>b</sup> As of Oct. 1 (emergency increase).

<sup>c</sup> As of Jan. 1.

Sources: Comisión Nacional del Salario Mínimo and Banco de México.

these economic trends, significant changes began to affect the country's entire working population, even though these impacts were not distributed equally among all sectors.

These changes are explicitly noted in the Program for Economic Restructuring (Programa Inmediato de Reordenación Económica) and the National Development Plan (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo), two documents which shed considerable light on the accord between the de la Madrid administration and the International Monetary Fund on restructuring Mexico's foreign debt. These policy statements outline the incorporation of the Mexican economy into "the most recent global commercial trends" by encouraging export-oriented production. To this end, Mexico adopted economic policies which include an undervalued peso, wage restraints, and severe labor controls, all accompanied by an austere and severely curtailed federal budget. At the same time, the Mexican government is paving the way for productive commercial and financial integration with the United States by creating a shared geographic zone of production along the U.S.-Mexican border. The factors in the world economy which make reaching this goal possible are made evident in table 2.

### **Contradictions between the State and Official Trade Unionism**

The severity of the government's austerity program has implied a complete redefinition of the class alliance which has sustained the Mexican state since the 1930s. This alliance incorporated the basic economic interests of significant labor sectors into the policies of the PRI, Mexico's official party, which has similar alliances with other significant sectors of Mexican society. By focusing on workers who are organized within the official union movement, the following analysis is of limited use in terms of making generalizations about the entire working class; many sectors of Mexican workers are unionized, but a large number of them do not fall neatly into the category of the "official" union movement.

One consequence of the disruption in the traditional relationship between the state and the trade unions has been a reduction in the maneuvering space available to the official unions in their struggle to hold their own in the labor movement. All regressive policies contain a potential risk for labor organizations; the recipe which the government has followed with renewed vigor since 1982, however, encompasses a highly sophisticated and efficient policy of deliberate control over labor. In it, state leaders encourage and take advantage of competition between major labor organizations, especially the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), the Revolutionary Confederation of



Table 2  
ASSEMBLY-PLANT COSTS IN MEXICO AND OTHER COUNTRIES  
(July 1983)

Average Cost	Mexico	Singapore	Malaysia	Hong Kong	U.S.
Installations (dollars per sq. ft. — land and buildings)	25-30	35-45	36-46	50-60	30-40
Electricity (dollars per kilowatt hour)	4-5	10-12	7.5	N.A.	4.10
Labor (dollars per hour)	.91	1.75	.49	1.45	8.00-13.00

N.A. = not available.

Source: BANAMEX, *Examen de la situación económica de México* (México, D.F.: BANAMEX, 1983).

Workers and Peasants (CROC), and the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM); they refuse categorically to negotiate with any blocs or coalitions of unions; they deal differentially with disputes in order to erode the social base of the more democratic unions and more combative sectors; they rely heavily on the threat of violence by the police and the army, although choosing carefully the occasions on which they actually call these forces into action; and lastly, they support modernization within the "official" political party, the PRI.

During the extraordinarily conflictive first 16 months of the de la Madrid administration, the relationship between official trade unions and the government fluctuated between agreement and tension and confrontation. The following summary will touch only on the most significant episodes of this period, which illustrate the labor policy outlined above.

In marked contrast to the Mexican state's historical calls for labor unity (but faithful to the tradition that the state ultimately determines the legitimacy of labor organizations) the administration began with a proclamation by Minister of Labor Arsenio Farel that the CROC would serve as the vanguard of the labor movement. Meanwhile, the Congreso del Trabajo (CT), acting in its capacity as the institutional apex of official trade unionism, declared its support for the state's "National Solidarity Pact." The Pact assured that employed workers would receive at least enough goods and services to survive and outlined a program of social assistance to the unemployed. The importance of this accord lies in its definition of a "basic subsistence package," which includes transportation, rent, gas, electricity, water, clothing, and food — the first mention in history by the Mexican government of the budget of a working-class family. The Pact required only one political concession of organized labor, but it was highly significant: that no new political or union alliances be formed. This condition clearly precluded as well any reform in the official party which would exclude the labor sector and implied that the administration might support the formation of a new union central. Undoubtedly, the dominant feature of state-labor relations during this period was total submission by the official unions to the administration's austerity program.

Nevertheless, tensions were building, especially over wage and price policies. A major incident between the CTM and independent labor sectors — some grouped into the so-called Labor Unity and Solidarity Pact (PAUSS) and others into the National Front in Defense of Wages and against Austerity and Measures in the Cost of Living (FNDESCAC) — reflected the growing strains. Calling for an emergency wage increase which neither the CROC nor the Federation of State-Sector Workers Unions (FSTSE) wanted to accept, the CTM attempted to change the state's policy on prices and the increasing cost of public util-

ities.<sup>2</sup> As a demonstration of power, Mexican unionists organized imposing, socially and politically heterogeneous protests against the administration's wage policies in Mexico's major cities. However, the factions participating in these protests were unable to agree on a single wage demand: while the CTM called for a 25% increase, the PAUSS would settle for no less than 40%, and the CNTE, 100%. In the end, interactions between CTM leaders and the most important elements in the independent union movement generated a good deal of internal friction, and the government communicated its negative response selectively, thereby dealing a harsh blow to the independents.

The foundation of the mass protest included teachers, university and government employees, and workers in the nuclear energy, paper, transportation, soft-drink, cement, and mining and metallurgy industries. However, the dominant feature of this struggle is that it was and continues to be primarily one of workers dependent on the federal budget (those working in education, health, and energy services, and in the bureaucracy).

In July 1983, relations between the administration and the unions began a second phase, this one marked by a more conciliatory tone; the CTM pledged not to demand further wage increases in 1983 and kept that promise through early 1984. During this period, leaders of the official unions warned the administration of the danger that social unrest might erupt; at the same time, they entreated union members to moderate their demands so as to avoid "exacerbating the crisis." Meanwhile, changes in certain institutional relationships gave strong indications that the overall structure of power relationships within the CT would soon shift. Between April and June of 1983, according to one report, 15 national unions which since 1921 had belonged to the General Confederation of Workers (CGT) quit that union central to create the Federation of Mexican Workers (FTM), allied to the CROM.<sup>3</sup> Several months later, the same source reported that, in September 1983, 36 of the 40 unions in the Workers Federation of Querétaro (founded in the 1930s in opposition to the CTM) had formed the Revolutionary Federation of Workers and Peasants of Querétaro (Federación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos Queretana) in affiliation with the CROC.<sup>4</sup>

Within the official party, meanwhile, attempts at reform generated deep contradictions, particularly with respect to the

<sup>2</sup> In its public statements, however, the CTM referred only to a "wage and price freeze" and this at a time when numerous salary contracts in various sectors and firms, both industrial and service, were up for renegotiation.

<sup>3</sup> See "La situación de las luchas de los trabajadores," *Boletín de la COSINA* 7 (Sept. 1983):31. These unions had members in Veracruz, Oaxaca, México state, Tabasco, and Baja California.

<sup>4</sup> *Boletín de la COSINA* 8 (Jan. 1984):53.

participation of workers under the hegemonic CTM. Following the PRI's electoral defeats in Chihuahua and Durango in July 1983, unions began to increase pressure on the party to move ahead with reforms and give support to the demands of organized labor. Even a casual observer could see that the stakes were high; the CTM controlled 50 federal representatives, 14 senators, a number of local representatives and councilmen, 2 governors, and an under secretary in the federal cabinet.<sup>5</sup> In April 1984, the PRI announced the establishment of political committees within the unions. In so doing, the party admitted that its links to the unions' membership base and its methods for connecting the unions to the centers of political decision-making were worn and ineffective, despite the administration's formal affirmation of the need for an alliance between labor and the state.

The contradictory relationship between the major national unions and the de la Madrid administration becomes especially pronounced when we examine the latter's propaganda campaign against leaders of the oil workers' union. The campaign began with attacks on the public image of these leaders, as the administration made public the lucrative kickbacks that they had arranged under the cloak of complicated contract language (40% of total expenditures in the case of drilling contracts, and 2% of the state oil company's total investments in social infrastructure and services). The campaign was effective; the administration ultimately was able to restrict these practices, but, despite the seriousness of its attempts to open fissures within the oil workers' union (STPRM), the organization survived, essentially unscathed. However, the period did produce its share of tensions, readjustments, and elusive moments of equilibrium, which together tended to undermine the strength of the STPRM leadership.

Leaders of another large and powerful union, that of education workers (the SNTE), had since 1980 experienced constant struggle with a coalition of forces promoting union democracy, the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE). For a brief time, SNTE leaders locked horns with the administration over the issue of educational decentralization, but after the union's celebrated 13th national congress in February 1983, the two sides reached a "gentlemen's agreement" on the question. However, the Ministry of Public Education recently announced unilaterally that the content of educational reform is not a point of negotiation with the union.

An important issue within official unionism regards the newly unionized banking-sector workers, who were ultimately relegated to labor category "B," with limited union rights. These

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<sup>5</sup> *Excélsior* (citing Fidel Velázquez), 28 Oct. 1983.

workers were all incorporated by law into a single labor federation linked to the CNOP, which serves the interests of middle-class organizations. In this case as in others, the government's actions reveal an intention to modify power relations within the PRI and to develop methods for regaining control of Mexican society's middle sectors. In addition, such efforts attempt to dilute the strength of labor unions, since sectors such as banking remain beyond the control of the FSTSE, yet paradoxically within labor category "B," according to law.

In early 1984, frictions again emerged between the state and official trade unions, as price increases for gasoline, sugar, eggs, and cooking oil once again highlighted the problem of declining real wages. The government offered no concrete response to the resulting popular discontent; its only concession was to postpone temporarily the introduction of a multimodal public transportation ticket, which would have introduced fare increases that were perhaps too dangerous politically.

The administration's general approach to the crisis has been austerity and more austerity. Socially and politically, this formula translates into increased control, even at the expense of popular support. At the same time, the administration has forced its opposition, both political and union, each to swallow its dose of the same medicine.

#### **Official Unions and Independent Unions**

The relationship between official and independent trade unionism is perhaps one of the most complex phenomena in modern Mexican politics. However, an initial attempt at understanding this relationship is possible through an analysis of the proposals advanced by the university employees' union movement, and, more broadly, by adherents to the May 1983 Labor Unity and Solidarity Pact, of which the university workers formed a part. Another approach to analyzing this relationship is available in the pronouncements of a unique organization, the Independent Labor Unity (UOI), which combine anti-statist and anti-imperialist rhetoric with a call for national unity based on democracy and independence.

The outstanding feature of the PAUSS was its recognition that independent labor factions need to build coincidental similarities in government programs into a "broad unity of action" aimed at changing the orientation of the administration's economic policy. One antecedent of the PAUSS was the convocation in mid-1978 of the first national assembly of the Congreso del Trabajo. The stated goal of this assembly was to "reformulate the alliance with the state in order to reach agreement on a new program of collective development." Upon announcement of the assembly, STUNAM leader Nicolás Olivos Cuéllar (who was

also director of the Federation of University Employees Unions) indicated the willingness of his executive committee to participate in the event. Shortly thereafter, Cuéllar presented for the consideration of all university employees a lengthy document which proposed that they participate in the national assembly in order to offer to Mexico's unionized workers their perspectives on the current condition of the labor movement, to advance a popular alternative for dealing with the crisis, and to promote unity as the only means of pointing the country in a more progressive direction. In addition, the document outlined an alternative economic policy which addressed prices, wages, the federal budget, and employment.

This approach, which failed when labor legislation ended up prohibiting university employees from forming a national union, was taken up again five years later by the same forces, this time in a context of aggravated economic crisis. On May 1, 1983, several independent unions signed the PAUSS, the central objectives of which were to stimulate unity among its member organizations and the remainder of the labor movement and to move toward the development of an alternative economic policy.

By merging marginal sectors of the industrial proletariat with employees of universities, the nuclear industry, and certain sectors of government, the nascent PAUSS invited trial by fire. One month later, it expired under the impact of government policy manipulations: When the CTM demanded an emergency wage increase in June 1983, supporters of PAUSS backed the demand and lent their numbers to strikes aimed at achieving the increase. Yet while PAUSS forces came out in strength for these demonstrations, the CTM gave them only minimal support; instead it dedicated most of its resources to a strike against the theatrically named "gastronomic industry."

But the defeat of PAUSS forces only catalyzed more labor militancy: in March 1984, a proposal by the Mexican Electricians Union (SME) resulted in the convocation of the Labor Movement in Defense of Collective Bargaining and Unions (Movimiento Obrero en Defensa de los Contratos Colectivos y los Sindicatos), an event which was noteworthy for three reasons:

- First, the meeting was organized explicitly in defense of collective bargaining.
- Secondly, the resolutions adopted at the meeting dealt with topics critical for economic and labor policy as well as union politics. The issues addressed by general resolutions included prices and wages, employment policies, the establishment of a unity and solidarity pact, and respect for the unity of organizations grouped under the CT, as well as for independent unions. Furthermore, in special resolutions the convocation expressed its support for the CT's call for a

second national assembly of the proletariat and for the SME's efforts to revise its labor contract.

- Finally, the participants were drawn from a broad spectrum, including national unions (such as the SME, and the health, airline, and telephone workers' unions), federations (such as the FSTSE), confederations (such as the Revolutionary Workers Confederation and the National Confederation of Sugarcane Workers), and unions within the Authentic Workers Front (FAT) and the UOI, as well as some 147 miners' and metal workers' unions and unions representing employees of the universities of Puebla, Sinaloa, Guerrero, and Zacatecas.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, the concrete results of the SME's contract and salary negotiations left little room for future advances. With the exception of one major demonstration in Mexico City, the momentum generated by this assembly dissipated quickly. In the midst of a highly confused situation, the union was forced to accept a 30% ceiling on wage increases and to sign two debilitating agreements, one on work areas and the other regarding anticipated retirement in high-risk job categories. As their net effect, these agreements transferred the union's bargaining power over to state-level tacticians.

Such events illustrate one tendency of independent unionism, which, despite its formulation of an overall economic policy, has seen its concrete actions channeled into an orbit defined by the official trade-union movement. In this manner the official unions can assimilate these forces and internalize them as a vociferous minority with new ideas and a certain prestige. They thus have political control over a group which in these days of crisis could potentially become the axis of a complete reordering of unionism throughout the country.

The other principal factor in the independent movement, the UOI, includes numerous important unions — metal workers, mechanics, aviation and transport workers, and mid- and upper-level educators. However, the attractiveness of the organization, led by Juan Ortega Arenas, stems also from its continuous, belligerent declarations of independence from the state, from its aggressive condemnation of state-imposed labor bosses, and from its systematic disavowals of the "false parties of the left." These three ideological ingredients notwithstanding, the UOI has reached "pragmatic" agreements with companies, occasionally at the expense of workers' previously won gains.

In statements issued early in 1984, the UOI put forth the general view that Mexico's government was subjugating the

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<sup>6</sup> *Unomásuno*, 2 May 1984, p. 28.

Mexican population to the interests of foreign capital.<sup>7</sup> The populace, according to this analysis, was being destroyed by the development of state monopoly capitalism, bureaucratization, corruption, pillaging, price increases, and credit cutbacks; by the destruction of the internal market; by subsidies, including export incentives; by unemployment; and by escalating debt. According to the UOI, everyone — workers, most industrialists, merchants, peasants, technicians, craftsmen, professionals, transporters, teachers, students — was suffering from an industrial, commercial, and agricultural paralysis which benefits foreign consortiums.

These views have led the UOI to a strategy of formal alliances which precludes any form of unity with either official union bosses or the "false parties of the left." However, they do permit — and indeed predict — alliances with the labor coordinating bodies (*coordinadoras*). As of mid-1984, the UOI had maintained relative isolation and had not yet joined other organizations at the forefront of major mass activities.

Independent unionism, although diffuse and disjointed, has persisted in its frontal attack against official national and company unions. As a result, it has suffered a battering under the government's austerity program, including the busting of some unions, unjustified layoffs, assassinations, jailings, persecution, intimidation, dismissals of labor leaders, and the rigorous application of wage ceilings. These results explain a great deal of the ebb in the working-class and union movements and the defensive character of labor relations in mid-1984.

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<sup>7</sup> Unidad Obrera Independiente. "Reconquistemos a México," *Claridad* 90 (Apr. 1984).



## **THE SNTE AND THE TEACHERS' MOVEMENT, 1982-1984**

by Luis Hernández

In December 1979, the National Coordinating Body of Educational Workers (CNTE) was born, and along with that event came the possibility of coordinating the incipient struggle of Mexican teachers to win greater democracy in their labor union. The flame of their struggle soon began spreading; as the movement grew to include ever-greater numbers of teachers during the next three years, union members staged six successive waves of demonstrations, involving nearly 150 thousand education workers, against their union leadership at both the regional and the national levels. This rejection of state-imposed union bosses (known as the Revolutionary Vanguard) focused on better living and working conditions for teachers and on democracy within their union. The movement, led by teachers in southern Mexico, shook the very foundations of the official SNTE (the National Teachers Union, the largest union in Latin America). In response, the Revolutionary Vanguard blamed certain state governors and federal bureaucrats for the demonstrations and accused the left of trying to destabilize the country.

Besides coming under attack from dissident members, the Vanguard in 1983 found itself increasingly isolated from the administration of President Miguel de la Madrid as well. During his campaign, de la Madrid had indicated his support for the free expression of minority opinion and democratic elections of union leaders. The Vanguard's demonstrations of support during his campaign had apparently gone unrewarded: the number of legislative offices held by union members did not increase, and its hopes to have its leader named minister of education went unfulfilled. Nor was the union successful at the state level: in San Luis Potosí, a local "civic coalition" defeated Vanguard mayoral candidate Carlos Jongitud Barrios. Tensions in the relationship between the Vanguard and the administration increased further when de la Madrid announced his plan to decentralize education, which in practice would fragment the national union and weaken the Revolutionary Vanguard.

Early 1983 was not easy for the Vanguard's opponents in the CNTE, either. Regional congresses had been scheduled for September 1982 in three states — Morelos, Hidalgo, and México — where dissidents were in the majority. The National Executive Committee (CEN) of the SNTE and CNTE leaders had signed an

agreement to convene those meetings, and the pact had received the endorsement of the federal government. Although the plan called for the formation of a bipartite commission to organize the congresses, the CEN did not meet its obligations under the agreement and delayed the meetings until late December. The CNTE mobilized very little for the congresses, its forces not yet having recovered from the intense activities of early 1982. Moreover, the change in administration had weakened the CNTE's network of government contacts who had served as mediators and endorsers in formulating the agreement with the CEN. With the new administration remaining aloof from the conflict, the Vanguard was able to ride roughshod over the congresses. Only in Morelos were CNTE participants able to stand firm and retain some representation — albeit by accepting minority status — on their state's Sectional Executive Committee (CES). The CNTE had already learned the political game, but with the new administration, the rules had changed, and no one was sure what the new rules were. The old approach — staging mass mobilizations, influencing public opinion, exerting pressure on the federal government, and negotiating a settlement — no longer worked. Movements supported by the CNTE, such as the FNDSCAC (Front in Defense of Wages against Austerity and Measures in the Cost of Living), garnered less support than anticipated. A wave of strikes intended to strengthen the CNTE failed to materialize, and it was in no position to compel the CEN to honor the April 1982 agreements.

### **Swimming Upstream**

Having won the last round of 1982, the Revolutionary Vanguard took the offensive in the first round of 1983, which occurred at the SNTE's 13th national congress. Vanguard leaders set six objectives for the congress. They sought first to overcome any difficulties ensuing from the change of union leadership at the national level; second, they resolved to reaffirm Jongitud Barrios's central position within the union; third, they would consider educational decentralization; fourth, they intended to set about regaining, or even increasing, the SNTE's political influence within the administration; fifth, they would try to develop a strategy to guide their activities during the next three years of the administration's program of fiscal austerity; and, finally, they would confront the CNTE.

The CNTE, on the other hand, viewed the congress as an opportunity to advance the cause of democratizing the union and to establish itself as an autonomous and independent force with national stature and clearly distinguishable from the Revolutionary Vanguard. To accomplish these goals, the CNTE planned first to formulate a program for the union and a strategy for achieving it, and to emphasize the differences between its

position and that of the Vanguard, such as in the struggle for higher wages. The CNTE also planned to denounce the Vanguard's weak and corrupt strategy and increase its political influence, both by gaining control of union offices and by identifying ways to make itself heard within the CEN. The CNTE also placed a priority on receiving fair and respectful treatment — an issue which became the subject of intense internal debate; despite a strong push by the delegation from Hidalgo urging the CNTE to refuse to participate in either the congress or the CEN, the plan to use the congress as an opportunity for agitation was ultimately supported by a large majority of CNTE delegates and, in many states, resulted from extensive consultation with rank-and-file members.

The CNTE arrived at the congress with 71 delegates, most from Chiapas and Oaxaca. Vanguard maneuvers blocked the participation of more than 80 other democratically elected delegates from various states. Right from the opening ceremony of the meeting, CNTE delegates encountered Vanguard hostility. Individuals responsible for "maintaining order" were armed with sticks to protect the congress from attacks by dissidents, and the Vanguard attempted to downplay the CNTE's strength throughout the congress. On February 1, Jongitud Barrios told the national press that "the crest of the wave has passed and is now dissipating." Interestingly, during the four days of the congress, the Vanguard spent nearly 36 hours negotiating with representatives of this waning force. Representatives of the CEN attempted to negotiate with the Chiapas and Oaxaca delegations individually, rather than with the entire CNTE, but they were unsuccessful. During these negotiations, CEN representatives on several occasions emphasized their position that Mexico's political reform was not meant to affect social organizations, much less the SNTE. Rather, they insisted, the reform was intended to apply exclusively to electoral activities; it was a concession on the part of the majority to allow minorities to participate in the federal government — a concession which could not and should not be regulated. The CNTE took every opportunity to differ with this position, and on several occasions the debate became public, as rallying cries circulated throughout the congress. At last, five CNTE representatives were incorporated into the CEN.

The restructuring of the CEN during the congress accompanied important changes in its Vanguard membership. When naming the new committee, the Vanguard apparently decided to reinforce the weakest point in its defenses against the movement for decentralization — the regional committees. The best way of assuring regional loyalty, they decided, was to include regional secretaries-general in the national committee. Many old leaders were removed, a disciplinary action directed against those who had placed their own interests before those of the organization.

The creation of eight regional-level organizational secretariats reflects the Vanguard's intent to strengthen its control of the union in the face of possible expansion by the opposition.

Although swimming against the current in unknown waters — in statutory issues rather than the street demonstrations and popular assemblies where union unrest would naturally occur — the CNTE successfully avoided obstacles and built up its strength. Not only did it demonstrate its presence, the CNTE proved itself an independent, autonomous movement, clearly differentiated from the Revolutionary Vanguard within the SNTE.

### **The Vanguard's Institutional Intransigence**

Theoretically, the incorporation of CNTE members into the CEN should have inaugurated a new phase in relations between the dissidents and union bosses. When the CNTE had first appeared, the Vanguard had categorically refused to deal with it, despite the fact that it represented thousands of teachers. The "plural" CEN formed during the congress could, in theory, have designed a framework for resolving political-ideological differences through dialogue and negotiation, thereby replacing relations based on despotism and confrontation. But events soon proved that the Vanguard's position remained unchanged.

At a meeting with the CEN a few days following the congress, the CNTE outlined its basic proposals, and the committee agreed to study them for discussion in a future meeting. For the first time, two forces had met to exchange their points of view without the backdrop of a CNTE mobilization and resultant pressure from the Ministry of the Interior. For the first time in its history, the Vanguard appeared to have agreed to establish channels for "political-diplomatic negotiation."

This illusion of concession and a new relationship dissipated within just a few weeks. When CNTE members of the CEN began using their positions to organize their struggle, the new secretary-general of the union, Alberto Miranda Castro, ordered their offices in the union building closed. When the CNTE requested an explanation for this action, Miranda responded, between insults, that he was tired of CNTE-instigated turmoil throughout the country. A short time later, the local reopened, but its relationship with the national committee had changed; there would be no more negotiation. The Vanguard viewed the CNTE's incorporation into the national committee as a device to subordinate SNTE policy and to inhibit its organizational efforts. The CNTE refused to accept this.

Efforts by CNTE forces to negotiate a resolution to this conflict failed. All decisions on union policy were made by the Vanguard, with no input whatsoever from CNTE representatives. Rank-and-file members who worked for the National Institute of

Fine Arts (INBA) were obliged to seize control of their union local in Section 11 so as to gain the right to participate in the negotiations on a petition which they had submitted.

The CNTE, meanwhile, experienced a quiet growth in the strength of its forces. Section 9 teachers, in elections for delegate committees at the end of April, maintained the CNTE's statutory strength by electing about 50 CNTE committees despite the Vanguard's efforts and expenditures to secure the CNTE's defeat and successive offensives by the Ministry of Public Education and Vanguard leaders aimed at its annihilation. At the same time, the dissidents were regrouping, and teachers in Michoacán and Baja California had organized minor offensives. The winds of struggle were in the air; all signs pointed to a hot summer.

### **An Interrupted Explosion**

May 1983 marked a period of renewed effort in the teachers' struggle. Throughout Mexico, May Day parades reflected growing teacher discontent, but in the Federal District, Vanguard strongmen tried to prevent CNTE teachers and workers from participating, thus setting off a new wave of demonstrations. In a show of strength exceeding anything the CNTE had done in a long time, nearly 70,000 teachers from 15 states marched through Mexico City to the central square on Teachers' Day, May 15. On the preceding day, Interior Minister Manuel Bartlet had met with a delegation from the CNTE and offered his good offices to help mediate the growing conflict.

While the demonstration by union independents filed through the neighborhood of San Cosme, the official Teachers' Day ceremony took place in the Armory Hall of Magdalena Mixuca Sports Center. Contrary to expectations, this celebration included no mention of a significant wage increase. Thousands of professors who had patiently awaited the promised "May package" of wage increases had their hopes dashed when they learned that the much-touted package consisted of a 350-peso-per-month increase for primary-school teachers and 14 pesos per semester hour per month for teachers at the secondary level. Their patience had run out; upheaval was imminent.

On May 24, the CNTE called a highly successful 24-hour national work stoppage, in which nearly 200,000 workers participated. The strike brought new actors into the movement, a development which took some weight off the shoulders of those who had carried the load in previous demonstrations. These new actors included teachers from Baja California, Michoacán, Nuevo León, Sonora, the Federal District, and the Laguna region — all of which had previously been under the control of state-imposed union bosses. On the 9th of June, 300,000 teachers participated

in another one-day strike. At about the same time, work stoppages and mass actions focusing on the demand for a 100% salary increase registered levels of participation unseen for over a year. Despite the impressive growth of independent forces demonstrated by these actions, such activities did not amount to organized discontent.

The protests did, however, produce immediate effects in the upper echelons of the Revolutionary Vanguard. Caught in the crossfire between the rank-and-file and the federal government, the consensus among union bosses began to fall apart. Internal disputes grew into a silent war, which soon became public. In this new context, union bosses changed their tactics 180 degrees and threatened to hold their own strike and mobilizations. Although their strike never materialized — it was scheduled to take place during a time when most teachers would have been on vacation anyway — the SNTE leadership hoped through this move to regain support from its members, renew internal unity, and create a source of negotiating power for redefining its relationship with the federal government. However, the Vanguard's momentum began to fade with the beginning of summer vacation and the end of the academic year.

The teachers' offensives of May and June took place during a period of general labor unrest centering on the issue of an emergency salary increase. According to official figures, a total of 277,000 employees and 1,719 companies were involved in strikes, and many more participated in the popular demonstrations and war of accusations associated with the walkouts. The struggle for wage increases spread nationwide and came to include the majority of workers and, at least publicly, sectors of the union bureaucracy. The Revolutionary Vanguard's initial reaction to this outburst was to side with the CROC and CROM against the CTM.

As we have already noted, however, union bosses were already sharply divided over the issues. In some states (including Nuevo León and Sonora) and the Federal District, some leaders had voiced a desire to distance the union from Jongitud Barrios and to form an authentically revolutionary leadership. For some mid-level leaders, the costs of supporting Jongitud Barrios were becoming too high to bear. Others expressed their disagreements with the continuing use of violence to still the dissidents. An internal crisis was imminent. Many felt that all the preconditions for an institutional change were ready and waiting. At the same time, the Vanguard's national leaders had been busy bolstering their defenses. In addition to sending their top cadres to those states where the conflict was at its worst, they made plans to outline a new strategy at the SNTE's 12th national executive council meeting.

Certain incidents during this national struggle highlight the workings of the mid-level union bureaucracy: under greater pressure than the union's national leadership, mid-level union representatives began to assert their autonomy from national leaders. In Tamaulipas, 2,500 Section 30 teachers staged work stoppages in demand of salary increases and in support of the SNTE's National Executive Committee, but without CEN/SNTE endorsement. In Nuevo León and Michoacán, the majority of delegation secretaries, traditionally allied with the national bosses, cunningly joined the forefront of the struggle for wage increases; they planned to subvert the movement from within by snagging it on statutory fine print; by channeling it into the bureaucracy to isolate it, to impede the creation of a strong base of rank-and-file support, and to stall it; and eventually by betraying it. Executive committee leaders, meanwhile, openly opposed the movement, fighting it from positions of absolute safety. Even though the CNTE's message did get through to the most discontented, the union bosses had succeeded in convincing thousands of teachers that the CNTE was a communist, overly radical, and sinister force. Teachers from many states therefore took neither side, choosing instead to join movements which distanced them equally from the Revolutionary Vanguard and the CNTE.

The CEN's threatened national strike altered the political situation within the union. The action began with two-hour "civic" strikes, during which teachers and students played games rather than study. Later SNTE members throughout most of the country walked off their jobs, and in Guerrero, Puebla, and Nuevo León, dissidents marched in official union contingents and were able to overshadow the official leadership. In most other states, however, the Vanguard prevented such "infiltration," often through the use of violence; participants in these demonstrations attacked Reyes Heróles and the CNTE. In the words of the union's secretary-general, these demonstrations proved that the "SNTE is a legitimate labor organization."

Following a heated internal debate, the CNTE agreed to participate in the strike if union bosses called it, but only on the condition that it could present its own demands. It determined as well to denounce the Vanguard's strategy of calling the strike during the vacation period, without setting the level of wage increase they would demand or consulting the union membership.

As the CNTE had anticipated, the strike never materialized. Nevertheless, the threat of a strike permitted the Vanguard to escape the storm of unrest at minimal political cost. Regional movements, including a strike of 24,000 teachers in Michoacán, were thus reabsorbed into institutional channels before they became uncontrollable. The Vanguard had proved itself a survivor.

### **A Bitter Pill for the National Teacher Training College**

As of June, the CNTE had not yet suffered a full-fledged frontal attack by the state.<sup>1</sup> In its early development (from 1979 to February 1981), the CNTE's demands centered on wage increases and incremental bonuses. During that period, it was confronting a state which stood on relatively stable economic ground. Using oil-boom revenues, the state was able to satisfy these wage demands partially, although its response was limited and unsatisfactory. During its second stage of development (from February 1981 to May 1983), politics replaced economic issues as the CNTE's primary demands: the CNTE took a stance against state-imposed union bosses and in favor of union democracy. Certain segments of the political bureaucracy exploited this struggle to limit and weaken the position of the Revolutionary Vanguard, opening some escape valves along the lines of the political reform of the mid-1970s. Although repression occurred during both stages, the CNTE was nevertheless able to win a certain amount of political space and gain some negotiating strength.

This situation changed radically with the outbreak of conflict over summer courses at the National Teacher Training College, as the CNTE suffered serious repression and a bitter defeat at the hands of the Ministry of Education. The Teacher Training College had been a fundamental source of support for the CNTE, serving as operations center, as an inexhaustible source of leading cadres, and as proof that union bosses could be defeated. In many respects, this college became the center of professional activity for dissident teachers. The Ministry of Education seized the moment to put an end to a movement that it considered "overpoliticized"; for their part, leaders at the school assumed that the war could be won through an all-out use of their resources. In the belief that the righteousness of their cause would guarantee their victory, they neglected to compare their strength to that of the opposition and in the process exhausted all of their reserves. Their ultimate defeat had further repercussions in another area: an important group of liberal intellectuals with considerable influence on public opinion abandoned their position of solidarity with the CNTE and allied themselves with the minister of education. The CNTE's political space was reduced.

Underlying the conflict at the Teacher Training College was a broader question: the CNTE's attitude toward the decentralization of education. While the Vanguard opposed educational

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<sup>1</sup> The CNTE had been thus spared mainly because certain segments of the political bureaucracy hoped to use the CNTE's mobilization capacity in the state-SNTE-Jongitud conflict.



decentralization for reasons of political self-interest, the idea was, from its very inception, a principal point of debate with the CNTE. Severely lacking in information, the dissidents were nonetheless forced to take a stand; they decided to oppose decentralization on the grounds that the proposal's hidden agenda was to reduce federal expenditures for education and to reverse certain victories of the national union, such as nationwide working standards. The CNTE made it equally clear, however, that it did not support the Ministry of Education's tendencies toward centralism. As the debate evolved, the CNTE's position acquired nuances which distinguished it from that of the Vanguard, but the CNTE's official position remained one of opposition to decentralization.

With its assertion of control over the National Teacher Training College regardless of political cost, the Ministry of Education was demonstrating a willingness to pay whatever political price was necessary to impose its political will in the question of decentralization.

The Revolutionary Vanguard clearly understood the implications of the Ministry's actions. Its attempts to block the first stage of decentralization and the drafting of specific plans for overall educational reform had been utterly ineffectual. Thus, with little ado, the Vanguard shifted to a position of support for decentralization in exchange for government backing and expressed its opposition through passive resistance only — that is, by obstructing the implementation of decentralization in various states.

### **Toward a National Civic Strike**

When students returned to classes in September, the outlook for union dissidents had changed nationwide. The groups which traditionally had served as sanctuaries for the CNTE (the SUTIN, STUNAM, University of Guerrero, etc.) had been virtually dismantled as a consequence of their defeat in the June strikes. The peripheral group of democratic intellectuals who had formerly advanced the cause of the CNTE in the mass media and official circles had now turned against the movement. The Teacher Training College was under police control, and neither students nor faculty had been able to stage a counter-offensive. Union bosses had sold out their own strike, but they nonetheless had retained control of the ship, and the federal government had thrown its support behind the Revolutionary Vanguard. In Michoacán, the strike which had begun before the vacation recess was not resumed with the beginning of fall classes. Worse yet, the bands of teachers active in CNTE demonstrations could no longer be organized covertly from below, away from the watchful eye of union bosses.

The exceptions to this rule were too few to affect the prevailing trend. Among them, the most important were probably the actions of non-teaching staff — members of Section 11 who continued their efforts to gain control of union delegations and democratize them. This group included nearly 15,000 employees (between twenty and twenty-five percent of the total membership of their section), but their efforts were not coordinated with nationwide CNTE activities. Another noteworthy exception came in the form of a successful strike of the IPN, one of the few successful job actions to result from the national strikes staged in June.

The CNTE, meanwhile, began discovering new arenas for its continued activities: the National Worker Peasant Assembly (ANOCPE) and the national civic strike, scheduled for October 18th. The national strike appeared as a lifeline cast out to a drowning man; it came just in time to reverse the discouraging lull that occurred in the movement with the resumption of classes in the fall. To activists in the CNTE, the strike also presented an opportunity to fuse the teachers' movement with a popular mass movement involving many sectors of the population. In other words, it offered a chance to rise above questions of wages and union politics.

An intense, bipolar debate developed within the CNTE regarding the national civic strike. One side interpreted it as the crest of a wave of popular demonstrations powerful enough to meld broad popular opposition to the government's austerity policy. The other side — supported basically by teachers from Chiapas — considered the strike a provocation to the state, a daring action for which the political underpinnings did not exist, and which they therefore should not support. The internecine struggle over the strike became ideological and vicious as some leaders began labeling each other "revolutionary" and "reformist," based on their position regarding the strike.

The defeat of the Hidalgo and Mexico City movements caused further confusion, leading some groups to propound positions such as: "It doesn't matter that we are few in number; it is much more important to be clear and aware"; and "We must hold true to our principles and support an all-or-nothing struggle." Such attitudes obviously conflicted directly with the stances of those groups which had won some measure of power in democratized union sections and delegations.

As it finally materialized, the national strike marked a decline in the movement's momentum. According to official CNTE figures, only 50,000 teachers took part, in sharp contrast to the figure of at least 150,000 who had taken part in previous activities. Of these 50 thousand, moreover, nearly 30,000 were from Oaxaca. The participation of 50,000 teachers in the national strike does, however, indicate that teachers did not

mobilize only to satisfy their immediate demands; they did so to express their opposition to the government as well. On the other hand, these figures also demonstrate that the broader struggle did not mobilize any additional teacher support. After the national strike, the most politicized CNTE activists joined the ANOCP; they apparently saw the assembly as the best arena for political action and an opportunity to rise above economic-corporative issues.

### **Rebuilding the CNTE**

Despite the movement's decline, some CNTE activists opposed abandoning it in favor of the ANOCP; they held that the CNTE should still focus on building a democratic teachers' force independent of the ANOCP. Proponents of this view felt that their four years of struggle had defined an optimal political line for union dissidents. Their litmus test was very simple: the degree of a movement's success proves the appropriateness of its position. Even though the ANOCP and civic strike experiences were important, they argued, they should not constitute the core of CNTE activities.

The first joint assembly of state representatives from Chiapas and Oaxaca, in October 1983, established the foundation on which to develop a new direction for the CNTE. These forces, in coalition with other progressive forces in certain areas of the country, set about building a national movement, an effort that began with a second assembly, held in December. That meeting included the CNTE's national representatives in a discussion of the two opposing perspectives on ANOCP participation. These advocates of a restored CNTE operated on the premise that as the Vanguard's control mechanism became stronger, spontaneous movements were no longer likely; the CNTE therefore had to dedicate itself to the deliberate construction of a strong movement.

The Revolutionary Vanguard, for its part, had rebuilt its internal front, renewed its alliance with the federal government, contained the conflicts in Hidalgo, Morelos, and the Valley of Mexico; it was prepared to take the offensive against its strongest CNTE opposition, the Section 11 teachers of Oaxaca and Chiapas. The Vanguard began by taking legal action against nine labor leaders in Section 11, justifying their action by pointing to the leaders' participation in the takeover of the Section 11 union headquarters by democratic delegations, who had acted in solidarity with IPN employees. When the Vanguard threatened to jail these individuals, however, the "Section 11 block" mobilized against the union bosses, put pressure on the prosecutor, and carried the battle to other delegations, effectively stymieing the Vanguard's legal maneuvers.

On October 24th, a group of union bosses in Oaxaca took control of the democratic union local and the Section 22 teachers' center, kidnapped 14 teachers (including some section leaders), and demanded the dissolution of the democratic committee. Within hours, more than 5,000 democratic teachers had surrounded the building, stopped all academic activities, and cut off water and electricity; they stopped short, however, of evicting the labor bosses by force. Instead, two days later they negotiated the release of the hostages in exchange for the occupiers' freedom. The Vanguard had been acting on erroneous political calculations, and its takeover of the building had been a resounding failure. The Vanguard had assumed that Oaxacan teachers' participation in the national strike and their rejection of educational decentralization would give the federal government sufficient justification to support the bosses' move. They had assumed as well that teachers in this PRI-dominated region (who had felt repression by the COCEI) would back the bosses and provide them an internal source of support. However, the unequivocal response of the region's teachers put the lie to these assumptions. A few days later, the Vanguard called a congress, dismantled the section's democratic executive committee, and named a new one. This maneuver would fail as well: a combined effort of mobilization and continuous base support impeded the actions of the new committee and defeated its efforts to divide the movement.

In Chiapas, the CEN sent ex-Secretary-General Andrade Ibarra (an expert at official takeovers of local unions), along with an army of 500 assistants, to prepare the congress. He employed all his talents to create divisions within the ranks, looking to officials in the Ministry of Education and the state government for support. His efforts went for naught. In early March 1984, the Chiapas teachers held their congress and roundly defeated the Revolutionary Vanguard.

### **The CNTE in Support of Alternative Education**

While still on the rise earlier in the year, the CNTE had been able to implement one of its earliest proposals: a national forum on alternative education, oriented toward giving teachers control of their own labor process. Despite limited attendance (no one from Chiapas or Oaxaca participated), forum leaders organized working groups on June 11 and 12 to discuss alternatives to official education policy, teacher training, and democratic participation in the educational process. The low level of participation notwithstanding, this forum was important in that it had CNTE support and marked the beginning of real possibilities for building a class-conscious movement which could overcome union divisiveness.

Months later, on October 29 and 30, a group of prestigious democratic researchers, educators not dependent on the Ministry of Education, and a skeleton group from Oaxaca met at the Second National Forum on Alternative Education. (Surprisingly, the meeting included no representatives of the state of Chiapas.) Regrettably, the agenda of the conference included so many issues that the participants were unable to deal with any of them in depth. The meeting focused on written presentations, which served as a basis for discussion, and its debates were restricted to global theoretical questions, as opposed to specific past events and experiences.

Even with the discussions thus constrained, however, various issues aroused considerable debate. The issue at the center of the polemic, which pitted "reproductionists" against "liberationists," focused upon the role of the school in class struggle. Another posed the question of who should be the spokesperson for the educational process. Some participants — those who felt an urgent need to bring about reforms in the national educational system — argued in favor of giving leading roles to political figures, such as leftists who might be elected to Congress or spokespeople who could pressure the Ministry of Education to consider reform proposals. Others insisted that the principal spokesperson for the educational process should be the average teacher; they argued that a means should be sought to ensure the participation of all educators in policy-oriented discussions of the educational system so that they could contribute the knowledge derived from daily educational experiences to such analyses and thus raise the general level of consciousness.

These differences contributed to the evolution of various positions regarding the overall character that should be projected in the process of broadening the struggle to a mass level. For individuals favoring the reformist route, what mattered most was to produce a complete, finished project, whether or not the majority of teachers supported it. Others saw in this debate an opportunity to transform teachers into a body which could transcend in practice their economic-corporative limitations. For them, mass participation in the process constituted an essential factor.

These divisions notwithstanding and despite the limitations implicit in the structure of the conference, participants in this second forum did succeed in expanding the definition of the state's educational policy. The meeting also demonstrated the need to formulate political strategies which would go beyond the basic level of rejecting government initiatives at all costs.

### **Links to the People**

On December 10, state representatives from Chiapas and Oaxaca met at a second joint assembly of educational leaders from the two states. One of the resolutions passed at the meeting pointed out the need to strengthen ties between teachers and the general population so as to support the struggle of the working class. Although the assembly did not reach agreement on precisely how to go about strengthening this bond, two strategies proposed are worthy of note. One advocated the building of a political relationship through the formation of permanent organic structures similar to fronts. The political relationship in such a scheme would be vertical and would focus on the teachers' movement as the structural axis of the popular movement. Proponents of a second proposed strategy, which places heavy emphasis on social relationships, hoped to build a set of loose horizontal alliances which would resemble a network more than a political "column." The group envisioned in the first approach would be much like the Hidalgo Popular Front (Frente Popular Hidalguense), while the latter proposed would favor recapitulating the experiences of teachers in Chiapas or the bilingual teachers of Oaxaca.

Advocates of both positions rejected a purely instrumental tie to the people, a bond created solely for purposes of practical solidarity. Meanwhile, both sides had to confront a problematic reality: peasants tend to view teachers not as salaried workers, but as a service provided by the state for the peasants' self-improvement. In the daily life of Mexican peasants, education is the principal instrument for social mobility.

The "horizontal" strategy of network-building evolved during 1983, when dissident teachers created solidarity organizations, held community cultural festivals, and participated in land takeovers. The strategy of developing a vertical "column," on the other hand, reached its peak during the national civic strike, even though it simultaneously suffered setbacks in Morelos and elsewhere. Neither position, however, has won over the majority of teachers; and without internal unity, teachers have thus far been unable to strengthen their political ties to the population at large.

### **Toward a More Productive Political Line**

Near the end of the year, the CNTE convened a conference to formulate a union policy and a strategy for democratizing the SNTE which would systematize the fruits of the struggle. In this conference as well, groups voiced opposing views. On one side were the "insurrectionists," who viewed the CNTE as a revolutionary organization which should continue its global, generalized

confrontation with union bosses and the state. Opposing this interpretation were those who viewed the task of democratizing the SNTE as a worthy cause in itself, a "continuing struggle" which should avoid all-or-nothing conflicts and confront its enemies individually.

Although the conference had been called to reach consensus, many issues remained unresolved. For example, certain key concepts, such as "all-or-nothing struggles" and "step-by-step democratization of the SNTE" (versus one "all-out effort") remained undefined; agreement on methods for building strength continued to be elusive; the role and significance of political spaces were not clarified; and the desired relationship between mobilization and negotiation was not settled.

Despite having to leave these issues for later debate, the conference participants did make some important strides: they defined union boss leadership in the SNTE; examined the union-party-state relationship; evaluated the CNTE's own activities and outlined the characteristics that the CNTE advocated for the union; and developed some aspects of union strategy. Their resolutions reflect some of the most important experiences of Mexican union insurgency. Nevertheless, the differences persist and the diverse factions will continue to debate them for a long time to come. As mentioned earlier, some defeats have caused serious political setbacks, but supporters of the initiatives which experienced those defeats have failed to adjust their strategies in response. Rather, they continue to defend their approach, claiming that they are being attacked for following a revolutionary line and that the winners were reformists at best.

### **Epilogue**

As 1984 began, the magic spell cast by Christmas festivities and year-end bonuses was broken by the reality of Mexico's deep and persisting crisis. Facing hyperinflation and totally inadequate wage increases, teachers have once again begun to protest their lot; but dissent has been aired by teachers only during recess periods, and not yet in any organized manner. The crisis has reinforced the conservatism of certain groups of teachers, who wonder what the CNTE has to offer them. They opt for the known, the stable, even though their quiet discontent with the corruption of their union persists. The situation is volatile, at best.

Meanwhile, teachers in Chiapas have enjoyed a historic triumph. For the second consecutive time, their section has elected a democratic executive committee, a feat without precedent in the struggle to democratize the SNTE.

At the heart of union-boss leadership (Delegation 9), however, a different story is unfolding. In this delegation, a congress

stacked with Vanguard delegates prevailed over the 35 democratic delegates (only 5% of the total), who were unable to take any action to counteract Vanguard control.

Despite such repressive rigidity in the union, those involved in the struggle have formed a new front, in solidarity with other federal employees, to fight against the ISSSTE for social benefits. Albeit not without difficulty, these democratic forces have won some small victories, such as increases in credit levels, mortgage loans, etc.

For years, the CNTE has persevered in its struggle despite ill omens regarding the future. Although participation in its demonstrations is lower than it once was, its 150,000 members have remained loyal to the cause. No one can foretell the final outcome of their efforts, but simply to have involved tens of thousands of teachers in this movement eclipses all similar efforts in the past. By all indications, moreover, the CNTE will survive as a popular political force.



## MEXICO'S NATIONAL COORDINADORAS IN A CONTEXT OF ECONOMIC CRISIS

by Ana María Prieto

This essay draws from various proposals, analyses, and reports advanced during Mexico's labor protests of the early 1980s, especially those which help explain the origin, nature, and development of the social movements embodied in the national *coordinadoras*. Based on these materials, this essay will summarize as succinctly as possible the key elements in this notable era of organization and mass action in the history of Mexico's social movements.<sup>1</sup>

### Antecedents

In the early 1970s, Mexican leftists undertook two major initiatives aimed at unifying the popular movement. One, the National Front for Popular Action, which grew out of the "Democratic Tendency" among members of the Electrical Workers Union (SUTERM), was practically annihilated by government repression. The other was the effort to build a national popular front based on regional popular organizations (e.g., the "Land Liberty" Popular Front in Nuevo León, the Popular Front of Zacatecas, the Independent Popular Front of the Valley of Mexico, and COCEI in Oaxaca) as a real alternative to the dispersion of progressive forces. This movement, like the first, failed despite some initial success. The defeat of those two projects left the popular movement dispersed and barely able to maintain viable state-level coordinating mechanisms.

However, beginning with the López Portillo administration's steps to counter the impacts of the 1976 peso devaluation, the popular movement, spearheaded by university employees, became a national force once again. This recovery of strength became evident in 1978 with strident popular demonstrations of solidarity with the Nicaraguan revolution and demands for amnesty and release of political prisoners. The resuscitation of the national popular movement and the coordinated expression of popular discontent grew out of two factors: the example presented by the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua, and the deterioration of living and working conditions during Mexico's

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<sup>1</sup> The author would therefore like to thank those colleagues and organizational publications that contributed to the development of this essay.

worsening economic crisis. The moves toward national coordination beginning in 1979 differed from previous efforts, which had been based on the construction of multi-class fronts. The more recent efforts have focused rather on building intra-sectoral alignments based on shared problems and experiences.

Among the several organizational efforts which took place during this period, three resulted in the formation of national coordinating groups: the CNTE, representing a dissident group in the teachers' union; the CONAMUP, an organization aimed at voicing the demands of Mexico's urban population; and the CNPA, which coordinates the efforts of Mexican peasants. A number of other attempts to unify the popular movement proved influential as well, among them the FSUNTU, PAUSS, COSINA, FNDSCAC, CNDEP, ANOCP, and the FNCR. In addition, the development of the student movement has continued without producing a unified organizational alternative. This essay deals primarily with the history of the *coordinadoras*, the means by which they came to represent certain popular sectors, their accomplishments and limitations, and their role in the current Mexican context.

### **The National Coordinating Body of Educational Workers (CNTE)**

To some observers, the CNTE is the most important mass movement of the last decade; to others, it is the ultimate in labor-union fronts; but for democratic education workers, the CNTE was the organizational alternative that permitted unified resistance against state-imposed union bosses and a continuing struggle against corruption, blackmail, and the systematic violation of workers' rights. The CNTE is part of a larger strategy in the mass movement for obtaining workers' emancipation, the immediate recovery of lost labor rights, and the establishment of an independent, democratic, working-class union movement.

#### *Origins of the CNTE*

With 750,000 members, the National Teachers Union (SNTE) is the largest labor union in all of Latin America. Almost wholly dominated by a state-imposed leadership, the SNTE has been controlled, since a 1972 "coup" in which one set of union bosses replaced another, by a group called the "Revolutionary Vanguard." Two left-wing political parties have for a long time sustained currents within the union, but without notable success.

In September 1979, the economic situation of teachers in southeastern Mexico became critical, due both to oil-boom inflation and to the move toward educational decentralization. The establishment of state offices by the Ministry of Education produced administrative chaos, with two important repercus-

sions: delayed paychecks for thousands of teachers, and Vanguard control of local union leadership.

This situation provoked the spontaneous organization of teachers in northern Chiapas, who demanded that their local union representatives meet their demands for salary increases, upward revisions of benefits, and prompt salary payments. Unfurling the flag of union democracy, they requested mediation, and their regional committee appeared to respond. Ultimately, however, the dissidents received no satisfactory response to their demands, whereupon 14,000 Chiapas teachers went on strike (on September 17th); a month later, they received a 1,500-peso salary adjustment for inflation, a promise of prompt payment of overdue wages, and 100% of wages lost during the strike.

Soon thereafter, the Chiapas movement began spreading, as the *chiapanecos* joined with another movement supported by teachers in Tabasco. The unified leadership of these two movements, known as the Central Committee of the Chiapas-Tabasco Struggle, convened the first National Forum of Educational Workers and Democratic Organizations of the SNTE on December 18 and 19, 1979 in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas. Twenty-five democratic organizations and teachers from all over Mexico responded to the call to organize their struggle around wage increases, payment of overdue wages, the lifting of benefit ceilings, and union democracy. On December 19th they created the CNTE (National Coordinating Body of Educational Workers) to advance these demands.

Calm soon turned to storm. From the apparently monolithic and controlled teachers' union had arisen the most important mass movement to appear in Mexico since the 1976 defeat of the democratic current in the electrical workers' union. Although the outcome of this struggle is still uncertain, it has altered the SNTE irreversibly.

The democratic teachers' movement developed rapidly during its first four years, including teachers in more than twenty states and numerous regional sections of the union. During the course of their struggle, these teachers have built representative organizations, displayed an impressive ability to mobilize, and discovered innumerable weapons to use in achieving their demands. One such weapon is the mass demonstration, such as the one organized by Oaxacan teachers in May 1980, when 20,000 teachers carried the issue of teacher solidarity to Mexico City. From its beginnings, the CNTE was a mass movement seeking to promote unity. Its base lies with the masses in action.

During the first forum, a heated debate arose regarding the movement's future: whether to democratize the SNTE or to establish an independent union. The winning position supported democratization of the existing union and rejected the idea of a

parallel labor organization. In February 1980, the second CNTE forum adopted an outline of tactics and a strategy which have since guided the CNTE's actions.

#### *Description*

The CNTE is a national, autonomous teachers' movement, independent of the state and all political parties, although it recognizes the right of individual members to belong to the parties of their choice. In this respect, it differs fundamentally from the Revolutionary Vanguard union bosses, who are clearly dependent on the PRI, and whose power lies in their relationship with the state.

By contrast, CNTE's autonomy rests on its capacity for mobilization in response to the demands of its members, rather than to decisions of external organizations or political parties. It strives to function as an alternative organizational force within the SNTE, in opposition to the Revolutionary Vanguard, and it pursues independent and democratic union activities on behalf of rank-and-file teachers, not employers.

The CNTE's capacity for mobilization rests fundamentally on a tactical series moving from mobilization to negotiation and back to mobilization, through which it has achieved some successes for the democratic teachers' movement. These methods have thrown the Revolutionary Vanguard's gangster-like tactics into crisis, as the CNTE has discovered statutory protections and consolidated non-statutory base organizations.

Throughout its developmental period, the CNTE has rejected the establishment and definition of its objectives from above; rather, it has struggled for teachers' immediate needs and demands for improving their low standard of living and eliminating union despotism. Thus, regional movements have retained their tactical autonomy, while national actions have held the movement together. This structure has, however, created a number of serious problems: unequal levels of development within the movement; ideological pluralism among its leaders; a failure to consolidate victories; and the absence of any generalized uprising within the union.

#### *Development*

For the four years from the first outburst of teacher discontent which led to the formation of the CNTE to the time of this writing (1984), the *coordinadora's* struggle has continued unabated. During that period, the insurgents organized six major offensives, each wave ending in negotiation and followed by a period of retreat for consolidation and rebuilding forces.

These offensives involved teachers from Chiapas, Tabasco, Morelos, the Valley of Mexico, Hidalgo, and Guerrero in numerous marches, strikes, and demonstrations to present the

demands of education workers. Concurrent with these actions, the CNTE held a series of national forums intended to hone the movement into an increasingly powerful labor force. The demands of CNTE members during this period focused on wage increases, the formation of an SNTE executive committee with CNTE participation, and a halt to administrative repression. And repression was not simply administrative: after the assassination of Misrael Núñez Acosta, an outstanding CNTE member in the Valley of Mexico who had sought to link the teachers' movement with the popular labor movement, 40,000 education workers responded with a mass march and work stoppage to denounce repression and to support the continued struggle for union democracy.

The state responded with negotiations, in which it attempted to create discord and confusion, at the same time as it employed repression, suspending the 40,000 teachers who had participated in the mass action. Teachers in Guerrero, Hidalgo, and the Valley of Mexico countered by holding two more marches; however, through pressure from the Ministry of the Interior, the government forced the teachers to accept a deal in which they received a "concession" of five positions within the sectional committees and a promise of no administrative repression, in return for which they had to accept the old command structure and the operational by-laws of the SNTE. Under these conditions, the democratic movement was forced to retreat rather than risk a defeat in which the *coordinadora* might suffer an irreversible loss of some forces. Their task became that of reorganizing forces to defend the victories won on paper.

With the exception of congresses held in Chiapas and Morelos, the movement lost its momentum throughout the country following these negotiations, and the CNTE reverted to isolated, regional disputes. The SNTE leadership, although at first conflicting with the government (especially with the Ministry of Education over control of the National Pedagogical University), soon emerged as a mechanism of great political utility, given its abilities at electoral mobilization of a large part of the nation's teachers. Thus, the union bosses used this period to gain control of positions created by administrative decentralization in the university system and to mend fissures between the SNTE and the state bureaucracy. As the democratic movement spread and became radicalized, its enemies appeared increasingly as a unified institutional bloc.

When the SNTE's 13th national congress took place in 1983, the CNTE, with 81 delegates, fought hard for representation within the executive committee and succeeded in winning 5 seats. After this, the movement survived and preserved some of its victories, but without much chance of regaining the initiative. In part, certain gains took the spark away from the movement — among them, the thawing of benefit freezes, limited pay raises,

and modifications in the ISSSTE regulations. However, other factors were probably even more important: the wear and tear on the membership of the extended period of mobilization; the unification of their opposition; and the physical and emotional effects of the administration's policy of letting workers finance the country's worsening economic crisis through continual devaluations, inflation, and deterioration of real wages and working and living conditions. Together, these factors prevented the teachers' movement from advancing further, at least for the moment.

The experience of the education workers' movement indicates that the long process of democratizing the SNTE will be achieved only through a continuous and systematic grassroots work aimed at great offensives. The immediate objectives of this struggle should be to consolidate the advances already achieved and to extend its activities to states and regions which remain on the margin of the democratic union movement. Building on the impressive show of solidarity which has surrounded the education workers' struggle, the mass movement can extend the network of unity begun in the CNTE, which has since found its fullest expression in the organizing work of the ANOCP.

### **CONAMUP**

As thousands of peasants migrate to Mexico's cities daily in search of employment and amenities, their urban destinations grow rapidly and chaotically. The resulting shortage of housing and basic services threatens the living conditions not only of these migrants, but of all urban workers, many of their employers, and the urban middle class. Pressures build for increased provision of public services and housing, and, as the gap widens between government expenditure on social services and the people's needs, social struggle develops in marginal urban areas.

To overcome their isolation and dispersion, urban dwellers sought the means to increase the organization and coordination of their responses to the crisis and the administration; their efforts culminated in the formation of a number of popular organizations. In May 1980, the most prominent of these groups convened the First National Meeting of Neighborhood Councils, attended by about 700 delegates. This conference paved the way for the second such meeting, held in Durango, Durango in April 1981, which established the National Coordinating Body of the Urban Popular Movement (CONAMUP).

Based on strong grassroots movements rather than nuclei of activists, CONAMUP united a wide range of marginal urban dwellers seeking improved housing and public services with small merchants and casual workers squeezed by taxes and a

diminishing labor market. Its strengths lie in having moved the popular struggle into the arena of consumption rather than production and its ability to unite a wide range of actors in support of the revolutionary movement. However, in its efforts to consolidate broad social sectors, CONAMUP has been hindered by its heterogeneous composition and its relative isolation from the labor movement, as well as a general lack of popular political awareness.

The state, following policies which favor capital over labor, has responded to the formation of CONAMUP with repression and refusals to convert increased tax revenue into improved social well-being.

Five principal topics comprised the focus of discussion at CONAMUP's second national meeting: CONAMUP's role as an active participant in the revolutionary movement; analysis of the current situation and the administration's urban policy; MUP demands; past experiences in the social struggle; and perspectives for future activities. The meeting deepened CONAMUP's definition as a heterogeneous but primarily proletarian organization, a force not of support but of primary involvement in the revolutionary movement. The forum also provided an opportunity for more concrete discussions of the administration's urban policies; for sharing experiences; and for establishing the organizational bases for permanent linkages through CONAMUP.

During the thirteen months which elapsed between the second and third meetings, CONAMUP consolidated itself as a true *coordinadora* and defined its statutes, its declaration of principles, and its short-term plan of action. Its support of national forums against state repression of the popular urban movement and in support of the revolution in El Salvador increased the *coordinadora's* political and ideological profile. During the same period, CONAMUP undertook publication of its *Boletín* and tightened its relations with other *coordinadoras* as part of an overall policy of moving toward increased political unity.

The deliberations of CONAMUP's second meeting did not produce their sought-after characterization of Mexican capitalism as monopolistic, dependent, or underdeveloped; they did, however, note the trend toward capital concentration and capital control by monopolistic groups. That state policy favored capital through a restricted federal budget, wage ceilings without price controls, petrolization of the economy, etc., and stimulated the concentration of land tenure, to the benefit of landowners and developers. The assembly characterized the administration's political reform as a hostile response by the state to the mass movement; and although those present could not agree as to how they might use it, they did see it as an effort to divide the left by offering certain groups preferential treatment, including legal recognition.

Meanwhile, the Mexican economy entered the worst recession in recent history. Urban workers faced increasing unemployment, inflation, the reduction of government subsidies to social services, tax increases, shortages of basic goods, and a marked increase in the cost of living, along with strict wage controls. The political correlate of the crisis forced the state to reverse certain concessions to the popular urban sector; in their place, it increased the level of repression.

From among its alternatives for dealing with the crisis, the state opted to redistribute its scarce resources in support of capital accumulation, especially within the dominant banking and financial sector, in hopes of turning the economic situation around. The lower and middle classes, meanwhile, have been left to bear the brunt of the crisis brought about by unbridled speculation, precipitated by a voracious bourgeoisie, which saw the imminent final curtain to the cycle of high, short-run profits to be extracted from the Mexican economy.

In this context, the third (May 1982) national meeting of CONAMUP set a central goal for the organization's activities: having set "national days of protest" to decry the high cost of land, housing, and services, the CONAMUP established alliances with various labor, peasant, democratic, and revolutionary groups. These agreements led to the formation of the National Front in Defense of Wages against Austerity and Measures in the Cost of Living (FNDESCAC), which would present a unified response to administration policy at the state and national levels. The national days of protest to be carried out by the Front would give CONAMUP's popular base an ideological and political focus.

During the final year of the López Portillo administration, the government made some concessions (under duress) and at the same time increased repression in the form of forced evictions of squatter settlements, harassment of independent organizations, and persecution of dissident leaders. Such measures were directed most forcefully against groups in southern Mexico City (an area attractive to real estate investors because of its residential potential), Acapulco (where squatters constituted an eyesore to foreign tourists), and Monterrey (home to a repressive governor and some of Mexico's most rigid conservatives).

The austerity measures implemented by the de la Madrid administration beginning in December 1982 deeply affected the urban masses. They included a heavier burden in fees, combined with decreased public expenditures for social services, wage ceilings with no accompanying price controls, eviction of squatters and renters, and increased police control to prevent this social misery from exploding into social upheaval. When Congress added to the load by passing a new law to increase taxes, CONAMUP undertook a campaign to have it repealed.



In May 1983, at its 4th national meeting, CONAMUP built on past experiences to come up with a broad new program of unified struggle against de la Madrid's austerity policies, including participation in the first National Day of Protest. This meeting also redefined CONAMUP as a *coordinadora* for all mass organizations — not simply for those with political orientations. Asserting its autonomy from political organizations, CONAMUP reaffirmed its determination to fight for the urban sector's economic, political, and democratic demands in order to build a new society governed by urban and rural workers, a society which addresses their interests and needs, a society without poverty, exploitation, and injustice.

CONAMUP members suffered greatly from the increase in repression following the national civic strike in October 1983. Such repression is part of the present administration's offensive leveled against mass-based democratic independent movements. It includes tactics such as the refusal to recognize leftist electoral successes, including the triumph in Juchitán, Oaxaca; intransigent responses to striking unions; the dissolution of companies in which independent, aggressive labor organizations have gained a foothold; the imposition of puppet labor leaders; budget cuts at democratically-run universities; additional price increases for basic consumer goods, such as milk, eggs, sugar, and gasoline; and intolerably high levels of unemployment.

A combination of deteriorating standards of living, growing popular discontent, and government obstinacy defined the context in which the urban popular movement had to function. A viable popular response to this situation would require that the popular movement consolidate itself through an extensive program of political education and an organizational drive aimed at unifying all independent movements, as well as those sectors under the control of the official corporative apparatus, into the democratic revolutionary movement.

### **The "Plan de Ayala" *Coordinadora***

Incited by a crisis in the countryside which first erupted in 1965, Mexico's peasants and small-scale agriculturalists threw themselves into an all-out struggle for survival between 1970 and 1975, a struggle which by 1973 had attained a broad national character. While at first land reform was the rural population's principal demand, these dissidents subsequently linked this demand with others, including a halt to corruption and authoritarianism in rural governmental agencies; democratic governance and the provision of adequate services at the level of the *municipio*; improved credit and marketing facilities; controls on real estate speculators; and an end to repression.

After 1976, the movement faced government opposition of such magnitude that rural activists had to abandon their offensive stance in favor of a defensive one. Realizing that the sources of this repression were not simply conjunctural, the movement fell back on its independent regional-level organizations so as to continue its protest activities despite being on the defensive.

Confronting the government's nationwide policy of hostility toward them, independent peasant organizations recognized the inadequacies of local- or regional-level struggles and realized the necessity of national organizations. Most local-level peasant movements had arisen from heated land disputes; of these, many evolved into stable and authentic popular organizations, independent of the state and adhering to socialist, anti-capitalist ideologies. These were the organizations that spearheaded popular struggle in the Mexican countryside throughout the 1970s and in 1979 created the National "Plan de Ayala" *Coordinadora* (CNPA).

The CNPA, a *coordinadora* of peasant organizations independent from both the government and the bourgeoisie, unites a broad range of rural Mexicans around the principles and tradition of struggle begun by Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. Its principal weapons are mass demonstrations and legal battles. In keeping with the spirit of Zapata's "Plan de Ayala" land reform proposal advanced during the Revolution, the CNPA's goals include the restitution of land to poor peasants; the destruction of large landed estates; the recovery of natural resources traditionally belonging to rural communities; collective, independent organization of rural production and marketing; increases in guaranteed prices; the strengthening and support of ethnic cultures; and full recognition of the rights of rural women.

Based on the premise that previous land struggles have only brought about the present system of exploitation, the CNPA has proposed a fully articulated, autonomous force of poor peasants. This goal implies the necessity of political and ideological education, as well as efforts to join with other organizations of peasants in taking concrete actions toward common goals. The organizations which comprise the CNPA are both national and regional and include indigenous communities, ejidos, ejido unions, agricultural workers, and petitioners for land, all with equality of rights and duties. All these groups retain autonomy with regard to their forms of organization, as long as they permit the participation of rank-and-file members in the making and execution of decisions. Both the CNPA and the organizations that comprise it are required to remain independent of all political parties, but individual members retain their right to political militancy.

*Origins of the CNPA*

In 1979, the National "Plan de Ayala" Movement (led by Mateo Zapata, son of the renowned revolutionary leader) organized the First National Peasant Congress, which brought together numerous peasant organizations, some affiliated with the PRI, others independent. In October of the same year, these organizations met once again, this time at the First National Meeting of Independent Peasant Organizations, and there agreed to create the National Plan de Ayala *Coordinadora* (CNPA).

The first action of the nascent *coordinadora* was to prevent the transfer of Emiliano Zapata's remains to the Monument to the Revolution in Mexico City. The group held that as long as the Plan de Ayala land reform proposal remained unfulfilled, Zapata's remains should stay with the peasants, rather than on the side of his assassins. In addition to this dramatic action, the group named an executive committee, which set as the CNPA's initial goal the consolidation and mutual support of all organizations active in the peasant movement, while assuring the autonomy of each member group.

At its second national meeting, held in Michoacán in 1980, the CNPA formulated a response to the administration's agrarian policy: it rejected the Sistema Alimentario Mexicano (SAM) as a production strategy, criticizing the program for its failure to address either the problems of peasants or the fundamental problem of the Mexican countryside — the regularization of land tenure; it denied as well the Mexican government's allegation that land reform had, in fact, been accomplished; and it made advances toward defining courses of action with regard to the struggle for land and against government repression, the role of women within the peasant movement, worker-peasant alliances, etc.

Subsequent to this meeting, a bifurcation occurred in the rural movement. On the one hand, regional meetings began multiplying as activists sought to learn lessons from the experiences of others; on the other, government-sponsored organizations, unable to accommodate the CNPA's political stance, began dropping out. These trends led up to the movement's third national meeting, held at Vega Chica, Veracruz.

This third reunion produced two major outcomes: first, the assembly denounced the government's Agricultural Development Program (which virtually handed ejidos and rural communities over to private and state capital, thereby converting peasants into wage workers on their own lands); secondly, the meeting proposed a march on Mexico City on May 12, 1981. Including participants from 315 rural communities in 18 states, the march demonstrated both the CNPA's geographical reach and its ability to attract other popular sectors — such as the teachers of the CNTE, who officially joined in the action. Following the march,

government repression increased still further; the CNPA answered with hunger strikes to obtain the release of 57 of its *campesino* members imprisoned by the government, and it called for a national day of protest against repression in rural areas. The results were uneven: although some of the jailed peasants gained their freedom and the state was forced to admit the existence of *campesino* political prisoners, the mobilization did not stop the wave of repression, as many more were arrested.

The CNPA's 4th national meeting, held in August 1981 in Juchitán, Oaxaca, was marked primarily by fragmentation and indecision, not among the *coordinadora's* mass organizations, but among the political bodies that influenced them. Little was accomplished by the assembly: attempts to formulate a plan of action and declaration of principles stagnated, and plans to stage simultaneous mobilizations failed to jell. In this situation the group decided not to attempt to influence Mexico's upcoming national elections.

However, the scene changed dramatically the following year. In June 1982, the CNPA held its second national march, which assembled some 5,000 peasants from 19 states. At about the same time, the idea that the organization should broaden the struggle by including demands related to production and marketing began to gain strength. By July 1982, their momentum had built sufficiently to permit the adoption of a Declaration of Principles and Statutes, which laid a solid groundwork for elaborating a Plan of Action. The CNPA also resolved to build closer ties to other mass-based *coordinadoras*.

These successes, however, were short-lived. Two congresses held during 1983 failed to streamline the organization's internal mechanisms and program of activities. These events led up to the CNPA's last major mobilization at the time of this writing, an April 1984 march in which thousands of *campesino* members of the CNPA converged on Mexico City on the 65th anniversary of Emiliano Zapata's assassination. Installing themselves in the Zócalo, Mexico City's central square, the CNPA did at least obtain public empathy and national attention.

#### *The CNPA vis-à-vis the Crisis*

The year 1965 had marked the beginning of the breakdown of the "Mexican miracle" in the countryside; by 1970, Mexico's government had been forced into making large-scale purchases of expensive imported grain in order to feed its population. This situation persisted through the administrations of Luis Echeverría and José López Portillo (1970-1982), and the inauguration of Miguel de la Madrid as president in 1982 only served to reinforce a government policy of supporting the rural bourgeoisie at the expense of *campesinos*.

In the main, government efforts to stimulate integrated rural production have taken the form of technical support benefiting commercial farmers rather than peasants. These efforts, however, have been stymied by the economic crisis, which has reduced public investment in rural credit, infrastructure, etc. This decrease in financial resources has devastated small producers and paved the way for foreign capital to penetrate the Mexican countryside.

Even though agriculture is a primary component of the Mexican economy, it receives only 2% of available public-sector credit; and even these limited resources support export agriculture rather than basic crop cultivation. In addition, guaranteed prices for agricultural products are so low that *campesinos* cannot cover production costs or provide for their families. Added to these economic burdens are the legal and bureaucratic entanglements — and repression — by which peasants are relieved of their landholdings. In Chiapas, Oaxaca, Zacatecas, Guerrero, and the Huasteca region, peasants have been driven from the land, many of them after years of working it while in the process of trying to legalize their titles.

The structural conditions which gave rise to the peasant movement in the 1970s have persisted to the present, becoming steadily more critical. Many groups who were appeased by land distribution efforts are becoming combatants once again over the issue of adequate subsidies, now realizing that the struggle for land includes making the land productive. The varied but complementary elements related to the struggle for land — improved production and marketing, a fair wage for day laborers, etc. — are all expressions of the subsistence needs of the *campesino* family. A majority of *ejidatarios*, moreover, are dependent on credit — not to accumulate capital, but simply to maintain a minimum level of subsistence.

#### *Prospects for the Future*

With the renewal of the peasant movement, the CNPA and other independent organizations, albeit from a defensive position, have demonstrated the vitality of the struggle for land. They have thereby forestalled government attempts to declare an end to land redistribution, but they have been unable to modify the predisposition in government agricultural policy to support the interests of large landowners. If it is to survive in the long run, however, the movement will undoubtedly have to move away from political mobilization and toward formal negotiation with the government. With over 600 land petitions awaiting review by Mexico's Ministry for Agricultural Reform, a legal test of *campesino* demands is inevitable. No agrarian organization can expect to survive and favorably resolve its demands without systematically pursuing legal courses of action.

In this regard the CNPA is very weak. The great majority of the *coordinadora's* component organizations are extremely careless on this front, although some are better than others; each organization has its own way of making its relationship with the government concrete. The CNPA has never been able to develop a legal corps to litigate the broad range of problems confronting the organization; many of its member organizations with issues on the docket fail to attend monthly hearings, while others do not go through the CNPA to resolve this type of difficulty.

A number of other peasant organizations remain outside the CNPA, many because they are too weak to join a national effort. Others, such as the CIOAC and the UGOCM-Roja (Unión General de Obreros y Campesinos de México), organizations (sponsored by the PSUM) which in the early 1980s allied with the CNPA in several actions, emphasize the plight of agricultural day laborers rather than the peasant struggle per se. Still others (such as the Union of Unions in Chiapas and the Yaqui Valley Coalition of Collective Ejidos) are aimed at building productive apparatuses and credit structures and therefore wish to avoid head-on conflict with the state. Thus, despite its successes and its survival as an organizational force, the CNPA does not yet represent the totality of Mexico's *campesino* poor.

### **The Left Responds to the Crisis**

Aside from the differences in perspective emanating from historical organizational divisions, the Mexican left has developed three distinct conceptions of the role of the mass movement and the *coordinadoras* in confronting the current economic crisis. The first of these programs rests on the assumption that clashes between popular groups and the state will eventually create the revolutionary preconditions for overthrowing the present power structure and replacing it with one controlled by workers. From this perspective, the movement must centralize and concentrate popular organizations for the purpose of mounting continuous frontal attacks against the state, without regard to differences in organizational strength, the pace of popular struggle, or levels of consciousness.

The second proposal holds that social change rests on the ability of democratic forces to occupy positions within society and the government. By competing for legislative offices and joining the struggle for political reform, the left can effect a change in the balance of political power and pursue a "democratic resolution of the crisis." Adherents of this view would strengthen the state, based on the premise that greater state involvement will automatically and inevitably benefit democratic movements; later, according to this reasoning, they would take control of the state so as to promote social change.

The left's third project views the popular struggle as a lengthy and continuous process of accumulating political strength, in which democratic forces slowly but surely win the nation away from the enemy; that is, they will unite the exploited and oppressed into a power bloc of mass organizations which will constitute a powerful alternative to bourgeois hegemony. In this view, the movement's goal is not to change the balance of political power through confrontation with the state; rather, such confrontations should occur only when necessary and only when they will strengthen the mass movement. While some battles will be inevitable and must be faced, others which would weaken the movement can be avoided and undertaken under more propitious conditions.

#### *The Origins of the Popular Fronts*

At the height of the crisis in 1982, while seeking an organizational structure to unite Mexico's numerous democratic and leftist organizations, the CNTE issued a call for the formation of a broad popular front to unify mass action on the most urgent demands of the Mexican people. By October of that year, the CNTE had its response; at an assembly with over 100 organizations in attendance, the National Front in Defense of Wages against Austerity and Measures in the Cost of Living (FNDSCAC) was formed. The front demanded protection for wages and employment, improved standards of living, democratic freedoms, an end to repression, and the resolution of *campesino* demands. A broad front with the ability to reinforce solidarity and to perform the umbrella function of coordinating disperse and isolated struggles, FNDSCAC unified the popular movement under a broad grouping on the masses' principal demands and on respect for different political agendas. It focused on basic popular demands and unwavering opposition to the administration's austerity policy.

Soon thereafter, a second front supported by the PSUM was formed as a response to the bank nationalization. Called the National Committee for the Defense of the Popular Economy (CNDEP), the new front strongly defended the move to nationalize the banks as a step toward redirecting the country's strategy for economic development. As part of the same political logic, the front looked forward to future opportunities to use the profound political contradictions of the time to open negotiations with the state aimed yet again at a "democratic resolution to the crisis." This logic governed the way in which the CNDEP set priorities and gave content to its actions; it also helps explain the strikes by the SUTIN-SUNTU-STUNAM coalition, which sought to draw a line of confrontation with the state that would define a practical convergence between the mass movement and the policies of the CTM. In this way, they assumed, they could

alter the balance of political power in such a way as to change the direction of state policy.

The CNTE and most other member organizations of FNDSCAC, meanwhile, were unmoved by the illusions created by the nationalization of the banking system and were not deluded by the notion that the intervention of certain government actors or union bosses might succeed in reversing the anti-popular policies of the state. FNDSCAC continued to concentrate its efforts on coalescing political forces independent from the state into a broad popular base which would oppose government austerity and repression and, in the long run, consolidate itself into a revolutionary political front. The various lines of political logic defined by the popular movement encountered their inevitable moment of intersection during the strikes of June 1983. The administration's response — which was to defeat the strikes — spelled the end of CNDEP efforts to seek political convergence "at the top." However, because of the inevitable overlap of activities between the CNDEP and the FNDSCAC, the response meant defeat of the latter as well. Placed on the defensive, the FNDSCAC found itself unable to defend its leading sectors.

During its first six months in office, the de la Madrid administration followed a policy of pressuring and systematically harassing the popular movement, but it had carefully avoided escalating repression to the point of causing the unstable equilibrium to explode into social crisis and uncontrollable political militancy. After the June strikes, however, the administration felt much more secure in escalating repression, even of the most stable and secure nodes of the popular movement, in an attempt to enervate its capacity for taking the offensive, for building core groups, and for outreach — a policy aimed in the long run at the movement's definitive destruction.

Thus, from June to December 1983, the administration undertook a multiple offensive — not necessarily orchestrated by a "control center" — against the popular movement and the left. The consequences of this policy are unambiguous: repression at the National Teacher Training College; the elimination of a leftist municipal government in Juchitán, Oaxaca and repression of the popular political organization behind it; the strangulation of a democratic movement at the Autonomous University of Guerrero; preemptive attacks against left-wing attempts to win local elections; and widespread repression, from Monterrey to Acapulco to Mexico City itself. The objectives of this policy are clear: first, it neutralized or at least impeded the possibility that the depth of the crisis might cause popular discontent to congeal into a form such that the strength of the movement could be directed against the state; secondly, it demonstrated to the bourgeoisie that the state, in clear control of the national situation, merited their confidence (and that it need not therefore seek



political alternatives); and it prepared the way for an overall restructuring of Mexico's political economy.

Virtually since its formation, the FNDSCAC had been wracked by internal problems. The numerous projects sponsored by its membership impeded joint action; the juxtaposition of inchoate groups and powerful, proven organizations made decision-making into a tortuous process; and the inclusion of groups with broad-ranging critiques of state policy tended to undermine specific demands and the possibility of settling them through negotiation. Moreover, the participation of some organizations was essentially an undertaking of leaders who did not have the complete support of rank-and-file members. Primarily for these reasons, FNDSCAC membership entered a period of precipitous decline. From 70,000 demonstrators in September 1982, the front's mobilizing capacity declined to 5,000 by March 1983; on several occasions, meetings of the front's coordinating commission had to be postponed for lack of a quorum; and within the CNTE, several important groups withdrew their support because they considered the organization elitist. The front had demonstrated very little real ability at coordinating the movement, as ideological disputes bottled up the organization's energies, deflecting them away from concrete problems of organization. Organizational dynamics were characterized by the formulation of plans of action that included innumerable short-term goals which were assigned no particular priority or mechanisms to assure that they would actually take place. The leadership of the front was always out of phase and never discovered the rhythm it needed to synchronize the struggles of its participant organizations at critical conjunctures. Moreover, its slow and clumsy dealings with other left-wing organizations contributed to the inability of FNDSCAC to formulate broad, general responses to government policy. These limitations within FNDSCAC — basically a reflection of inexperience within the coordinating groups themselves — also existed within the CNDEP, which in early 1983 entered into a period of rapid decomposition from within.

It was also in early 1983 that the possibility of fusing the two popular fronts was first aired. The FNDSCAC immediately rejected a union with CNDEP as an unnecessary liaison with reformism. However, the proposal gradually resurfaced, as the massive democratic infiltration of the official May Day parade and the successes of democratic teachers in their confrontation with union bosses revealed the capacity for struggle of independent organizations and the enormous potential of unified action.

#### *The National Civic Strike*

On February 5, the UOI proposed the organization of a national civic strike. Despite the opposition of various organizations that wanted nothing to do with UOI, the proposal was

considered and approved by the CONAMUP, FNCR, and the CNTE. By the beginning of June, these organizations had reached preliminary agreement regarding the date, style, and coordinating mechanisms for the strike and had agreed to call a major National Worker Peasant Assembly (ANOCP) for June 25. At the last minute, the UOI withdrew and negotiated separately with the government for its survival, citing its opposition to the participation of political parties in the ANOCP.

The withdrawal of the UOI, the defeat of workers' actions during the month of June (especially the blows suffered by nuclear-industry and university workers), and the inability of the CNTE to mobilize that month combined to dilute the spirit of unity. The weakness of the mobilizations which preceded the civic strike (scheduled for October 18) reflected the dissipated spirit of the movement, and not until the October 3 march in the Valley of Mexico (in which over 80,000 persons participated) did momentum begin to build again.

The ANOCP did successfully carry out the civic strike two weeks later, but it has not been able to develop new forces in the mass movement, nor even to prevent the demise of others that already existed. Moreover, the *coordinadoras* have had little role in making policy, and some contingents haven't even been involved in the decisions or work of the movement, both of which suffer from elitism. However, the shortcomings of the ANOCP should not conceal its virtues; despite the absence of elements as important as the democratic miners, the UOI, certain peasant organizations, and the unions belonging to the PAUSS, the ANOCP has become the broadest and most representative organization of the Mexican left to emerge in recent years.

Any worthwhile evaluation of the outcome of the civic strike must begin by asking what the ANOCP hoped to achieve with this event. Its primary goal was to stage the first mass protest against the administration's austerity program. Only dreamers saw it as a definitive test of the strength of the masses vis-à-vis the regime, through which the former could change the government's economic policy. The strike also sought to incorporate those who were suffering the impacts of austerity into the active ranks of protesters so as to build the forces in the democratic camp.

In terms of its own objectives, the strike was highly successful. It brought together over 100 organizations of the Mexican left — organizations which not only often fail to cooperate, but frequently quarrel among themselves. Over a million Mexicans from 100 communities in 28 states participated in the October 18th demonstrations. Although small relative to a total population of 70 million, this figure is larger than total electoral support for the registered left-wing parties (PSUM and PRT). Furthermore, the event marks the left's first successful

mobilization of this size to protest government policy; this success occurred despite an all-out government campaign of propaganda, intimidation, and repression aimed at limiting popular participation. The size of the action, in combination with the absence of significant leftist elements — such as the UOI, STUNAM, SUTIN, various other university-based organizations, and the majority of the CNTE — suggests a reincorporation of the left which sets the stage for a possible shift in the balance of Mexican political forces in the not-too-distant future.

A significant advance in the left's ability to undertake unified action, the civic strike demonstrated the broad appeal of the popular fronts; at the same time, however, it revealed the left's limitations and the difficulties of attracting to the struggle those popular sectors which, although discontent with the administration's austerity policy, are not directly influenced by the left. The strike nonetheless raised the consciousness and organizational sophistication of many groups, whose activities had never previously transcended union-style economic battles. It also represented a radicalization of popular responses, without inviting repression, through the takeover of land and public buildings and the disruption of commerce and transportation services. Furthermore, the organization of numerous regional activities enabled the left to reach many areas and many groups that would not have participated in a single, great centralized mobilization.

With regard to publicity, the strike suffered a deliberate suppression that can only be described as an "informal blockade," which could have been broken only in a very limited way. The organization actually behind the strike, the ANOCP, went almost unnoticed in the media, as did the principal institutional actors, the mass *coordinadoras*. In their place, the media focused on certain personalities and political parties which in reality had little role in the mobilization.

In summary, the civic strike did not succeed in stopping the government's offensive against Mexico's working population, nor did it accelerate the clustering of forces around the popular movement. It obviously did not reverse the politics of austerity. On the other hand, the action did deepen and strengthen the unity of the left, at the same time as it increased the politicization of social organizations and synchronized the rhythm of the struggle.

Given the unified political will and the consolidation of social groups behind the ANOCP, its chances for survival seem better than those of other popular fronts. That will depend, however, on its ability to regain the energy of the original Assembly and to bring rank-and-file members of its component organizations into the decision-making process. If the left succeeds in constructing broad unifying mechanisms and in defining

effective policy options, the ANOCP will survive and grow. However, if these conditions are not met, it will become another failed attempt to revive the weak and factionalized Mexican left.

### Some Final Observations

The crisis which Mexico faces today will test the mettle of the *coordinadoras* and, more importantly, of the revolutionary left social and political groups which gave them birth. It will transform the present populist-corporatist state into a more modern, centralized, technocratic government able to meet present demands for capital accumulation and to represent a new, hegemonic bourgeoisie. Modifying the traditional alliances on which the Mexican state was built, the economic crisis will lead to the creation of new structures for mediation and control and ultimately decrease the political space of partners in the original alliance.

In this context, the popular movement can obviously do nothing in the short term to effect any reversal in the administration's economic policy. If the movement is to have an impact, it must seek the means to broaden its efforts at raising political consciousness and to spread political action to additional sectors of the population, with the long-range goal of restructuring the balance of social and political power. And this, in turn, requires that the *coordinadoras* overcome their economic-corporatist limitations and join the struggle for a new power structure. Such efforts to unify the popular organizations must strive to build a solid social fabric based not on the efforts of minorities or leadership cliques, but on the involvement of actors at all levels within the organizations.

Some view the multiplicity of political endeavors pursued by the national-level *coordinadoras* as a debilitating weakness; however, experience has shown that in pluralism lies development. The intense ideological debates now occurring within the *coordinadoras* may signify a new beginning. The *coordinadoras* have become the cauldron into which Mexico's revolutionary movement has moved. If the *coordinadoras* are able to persevere in the arena of day-to-day social struggle, they may ultimately prove to be a force of sufficient strength to build a popular revolutionary bloc.

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