

The painting seemed to puzzle or disturb the Texas tourists as they followed their guide up the steps of the Ministry of Justice in downtown Mexico City. There, amid a panorama of murals describing the sweep of Mexican history, was a painting depicting a fat "capitalist" (complete with dollar sign) stuffing his workers into a meat grinder and squeezing out his profits. In the mural's background stood a smiling Karl Marx, beckoning other laborers to a bucolic scene of happiness and tranquility. The tour guide gamely explained that the mural "merely represents the outlook of the artist." But, he added, its presence in a government ministry did reflect the fact that Mexico is governed by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and continues to subscribe to the principles of its 1910-1917 Revolution. Later, when the same tourists would travel to the beautiful campus of Mexico's National University, they would see more revolutionary murals, some commissioned by the government, other more modest efforts painted by the university students themselves.

Should the group's tour bus have taken them behind the famed Chapultepec Park on that clear October day, past "Los Pinos," the Mexican president's official residence, they would have come upon a very different scene. For a distance of several hundred feet, propped against the walls surrounding the presidential palace, were beds, chairs, tables, and portable stoves, all covered by large

plastic sheeting supported by ropes and two-by-fours. Clustered beneath the flimsy covering were some 350 people—men, women, and a few children. They had been camped there, day and night, for three weeks, since the afternoon of September 28, 1977. A variety of banners adorned the encampment. One showed a clenched fist with the words "Tendencia Democrática" (Democratic Tendency) emblazoned beneath. Another declared, "Electrical Workers, Fired from Their Jobs, Demand their Democratic Rights." And still another, "President [José] López Portillo: You Know Our Problem. We Request Your Intervention on Behalf of Our Legitimate Rights."

The people staging the sit-in beside "Los Pinos" were electrical power workers (or, more precisely, former power workers) together with their families. The workers were members of the Tendencia Democrática, a rank-and-file movement within the United Union of Electrical Workers of the Republic of Mexico (SUTERM). Led by Rafael Galván—a former union president, national Senator, and long-time spokesman for leftist critics of Mexico's established labor movements—the Tendencia charges SUTERM officers with being corrupt, oligarchical, and unresponsive to the union membership. Galván and his supporters claim their movement transcends the SUTERM, representing thousands of disgruntled workers in unions throughout the country.

One year before, over 100 of these Tendencia workers had been ousted from their union and fired from their jobs at a Mexicali power plant. As one worker explained to me while his wife and two children looked on, "We've been out of work since November of last year [1976]. None of our petitions to the Federal Electrical Commission [the government agency in charge of the state-owned power industry] or to the Labor Ministry has done any good. Now we're trying this."

"How much were you making before you were dismissed?" I asked him.

"About 11,000 pesos [\$510] per month."

"And how do you and your family manage to live now?"

"We depend on contributions from other Tendencia members and from sympathizers. It hasn't been easy."

Clearly, these protesters did not come from Mexico's impoverished lower class. On the contrary, their salaries before they were fired were among the highest of any workers in the country. Even after a year of unemployment, they and their families were still well dressed. Like most of the more vocal and active dissident workers in Mexico today, they had emerged from the more skilled, higher-paid sector of the nation's labor movement.

The contradiction between the Marxist mural at the Justice Ministry and the encampment at the presidential residence says much about the current state of Mexican

labor and of the Mexican Revolution itself. Radical in its rhetoric, populist in its politics, the Revolution tolerates one of the most inequitable distributions of wealth in Latin America. The mere fact that the protesters were allowed to camp beside "Los Pinos," undisturbed for weeks, and could make their case through the nation's press, distinguishes Mexico's political system from neighboring Guatemala's or Nicaragua's.¹ At the same time, the failure of government agencies to respond to the fired Mexicali workers, and the eventual forced eviction of the protesters by the police, say something else about the nature of the Mexican Revolution.

Mexico's labor movement is among the largest in Latin America. Only Argentina has a greater percentage of its urban work force organized into trade unions.² In 1960, two political scientists surveying labor organizations throughout the hemisphere observed: "The trade-union movement probably has developed faster and gone further in Mexico than in any other Latin American nation... Mexican labor [is] big, powerful, and vibrant with activity."³ But current observers argue that the position of labor in Mexico is as weak as in most other countries of Latin America. The position of rank-and-file members of the established labor unions is especially weak. The experience of the Mexicali electric power workers sitting in at "Los Pinos" is indicative of the fate of most rank-and-file unionists who challenge the tight control of their leadership. Today, as Mexico faces an uncertain political and economic future, the nation's likelihood of developing a more responsive political system and more equitable economic distribution may hinge, in large part, on the ability of organized workers to form a more democratic labor movement.

The Origins of the Mexican Trade Union Movement

The development of capitalist agriculture, mining, and industry in Mexico and, hence, the earliest stirrings of the nation's labor movement, date to the late nineteenth century under the autocratic rule of General Porfirio Díaz. The "Porfiriato" (1876-1910) put an end to decades of internal chaos and brought local political chiefs (*caciques*) under central government control. Canadian, French, British and, particularly,

American capital was invited to build electric power stations, railroads, and other infrastructure, and to exploit Mexico's henequen, sugar, cattle, minerals, and oil. Foreign firms were guaranteed security of their investment, including iron-handed government repression of union organization and strikes.

In urban textile mills, however, and on the railroads, and even in such exotic locations as the movie theaters of Mexico City, workers



Tendencia Democrática sit-in at "Los Pinos."

clandestinely established mutual aid societies and unions. As in much of Latin America, the earliest union organizers were usually anarchists, often exiles from the Spanish anarcho-sindicalist movement. Their influence was shared with another important foreign influence, from the west and southwest of the United States. In the early twentieth century, workers returning to Mexico from the mines of Colorado and Montana brought with them organizing experience gained from the International Workers of the World (the IWW "wobblies") and other North American working-class groups. Despite repression by the Porfirista government, Mexico's underground labor movement grew gradually, with leadership centered in the anarchist-oriented Casa del Obrero Mundial.⁴

In 1910, when reform-minded middle-class groups, along with the repressed peasants of the state of Morelos and the cowboys of Chihuahua, rose up against the decaying Díaz regime, urban workers formed "Red Battalions" to join the ranks of the Mexican Revolution. As the struggle progressed, two tendencies emerged, reformist and radical. The reformist wing was led by the father of the Revolution, Francisco Madero, and later (after Madero's murder) by Generals Carranza and Obregón. Essentially representing nationalistic, middle-class, business and commercial interests, the moderates wanted limited, democratic, political reforms; the reduction of foreign economic domination; to break the monopoly of economic and political power held by Díaz's closed oligarchy, the traditional, land-owning elite, and foreign corporations; and to convert Mexico's semifeudal colonial economy into a more modern capitalist economic system. The second, more radical wing of the Mexican Revolution was centered in the rural sector and entertained different visions. Leaders such as Emiliano Zapata, chieftain of the Morelos Indian communities, and his more sophisticated urban advisers, were committed to land

redistribution and the entry of the excluded and repressed peasantry into the nation's political and economic life.⁵

Despite their radical anarchist ideological origins, the leaders of the nation's small labor movement cast their lot with the urban, middle-class moderates. Indeed, in Mexico, as in most of the Third World, the conflict of interest between city and countryside stood in the way of a working class-peasant alliance.⁶ Promised the right to organize and to strike (a guarantee later incorporated into the Constitution of 1917), labor aligned with Generals Carranza and Obregón. Rural leaders like Zapata and Pancho Villa lacked the political sophistication, ideological formulation, organizational skills, money, or guns to successfully carry through their would-be agrarian revolution. By 1920, with the rural forces defeated and Zapata dead, the moderates were firmly in control,⁷ although it would be another 20 years before the reformist character of the Mexican Revolution—the first in a century of revolutions—was firmly set. A brief radical interlude in the 1930s temporarily held back conservative forces. Ultimately, however, the Mexican revolutionary process came to stress political stability and orderly transition, economic growth and industrialization, mild economic nationalism, and the emergence of a self-satisfied entrepreneurial class. Redistribution of wealth, greater social mobility, militant anti-imperialist nationalism, and mass political mobilization—the hallmarks of later, more radical, Third World revolutions—were notably absent in Mexico.

1920-1940: Union Growth and Co-optation

Though not a central force in the revolutionary struggle, organized labor did emerge as an element of some importance in the victorious coalition. During the administrations of Presidents Calles (in the 1920s) and Cárdenas (in the 1930s), increasing numbers of railroad, petroleum, mining, and factory

workers were organized into the Mexican Revolutionary Labor Confederation (CROM) and other smaller union federations. Labor achieved its most spectacular gains from 1930-1940, when the number of unionized workers tripled from 294,000 (5.6 percent of the active work force) to 878,000 (15.4 percent).⁸

The nation's first popularly based political party (created in 1929 was expanded in the 1930s and renamed the Institutional Party of the Revolution (PRI). The PRI has governed Mexico with little meaningful opposition ever since. Essentially, the party embodied efforts by the nation's new political leadership to organize (or, perhaps more precisely, to control) the forces of popular participation in the city and countryside unleashed by the 1910 Revolution. Indeed, it was the first party anywhere in Latin America with some base in the nation's lower classes and a structured hierarchy for articulating and aggregating popular demands.⁹ Both labor (organized through the newly formed Mexican Confederation of Labor—CTM) and the peasantry were afforded institutionalized representation in the PRI. That most workers and peasants did not even know they were allegedly being represented in the nation's political system did not seem to impede the enthusiasm of PRI's labor and peasant spokesmen or of the nation's political leaders.

In 1934, Lázaro Cárdenas, a man who had entered politics as a young soldier in the revolutionary struggle, assumed the presidency. Undoubtedly the most radical of Mexico's presidents, Cárdenas undertook to carry out many of the unfulfilled promises of the Revolution. In 6 years he redistributed more land to the peasantry than had been given in the preceding 24 years. Educational opportunities, especially in the countryside, were greatly expanded and radical educators were given a rather free hand in organizing the nation's school system. In his most dramatic action, Cárdenas



President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940).

challenged the Yankee "colossus of the north" by nationalizing the foreign-owned petroleum industry, railroads, and portions of the electric power network.

In temporarily moving the political system leftward, President Cárdenas relied heavily on the trade union movement. His policies contributed greatly to the dramatic growth in union membership during the 1930s. Under his tutelage, labor briefly became the dominant sector of the ruling Revolutionary Party.¹⁰ In 1937, the President helped create the Mexican Labor Confederation (CTM), with which, in time, most of the nation's trade unions became affiliated. While the electrical power, railroad, petroleum, and miners unions remained outside CTM for various periods of time, they too were affiliated with the PRI and closely allied with Cárdenas. Under the fiery leadership of the CTM's Secretary General, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, organized labor became a critical force pressing for social justice, economic nationalism, and the redistribution of wealth. The CTM's official position, in fact, called for nothing less than "a struggle to achieve socialism." Its Marxist-inspired slogan demanded "a classless society." Moreover, working-class unrest played a central role in the nationalization of petroleum and the railroads. Reacting to protracted labor-management conflict in those two industries, President Cárdenas invoked a clause in the Mexican Constitution which permitted the

nationalization of foreign industries in the event of irreconcilable labor conflict. Thus, as Lázaro Cárdenas' six years in office came to an end in 1940, the CTM and the organized labor seemed to be at the height of their political and economic power.

Yet, labor's alliance with Cárdenas and the PRI had its costs. A trade-union movement which had initially been formed from the midst of the rank-and-file became increasingly controlled from the top. Indeed, the pattern of government-union relations Lázaro Cárdenas introduced to Mexico was subsequently replicated, in somewhat differing styles, by Getulio Vargas in Brazil and by Juan Perón in Argentina. Under these populist leaders, labor enjoyed tremendous organizational growth and substantial material gains only to find that it had become the unwitting pawn of its benefactor.¹¹ The price the CTM paid for its incorporation into the Center of the PRI was the loss of independent political power. As one authority noted:

From the early years of the Cárdenas regime, when the strength of the Party appeared to the President... to be too heavily dependent upon its labor support... great care has been exercised to prevent the development of effectively autonomous centers of political power outside the Party. This evolution has implied use of... labor unions as a means of communication from the President... and as a means of control, rather than as a means by which a dominant interest group controls the party and its policies.¹²

While Cárdenas was President, this loss of autonomy was scarcely perceived. Under his more conservative successors, however, the position of organized labor deteriorated sharply.

1940-1958: The Mexican Revolution Moves Right

Whatever may have been Cárdenas' basic intentions, he failed to alter the centrist orientation of the PRI and of the Mexican political-

economic systems. Cárdenista radicalism remained a strain within the PRI, but never again emerged as the dominant force. The administrations of Presidents Ávila Camacho (1940-1946) and Miguel Alemán (1946-1952) set the course for an economic development model which has persisted, with occasional variation, until today. Alemán, perhaps the most conservative of Mexico's modern presidents, argued that "wealth has first to be created before it can be distributed." Consequently, industrialization and the expansion of the country's gross national product (GNP) were nourished without concern for the distribution of that growth. The development of industrial infrastructure (electric power, roads, railroads, dams) was given priority over social infrastructure (schools, clinics, hospitals). The private sector—centered in Mexico City and the powerful Monterrey industrial clans—was given government support and a free rein for expansion. Finally, and most important from labor's perspective, capital investment by the private sector was encouraged by restraining the wages of the industrial work force.

The conservative economic policies of the 1940-1970 period had their intended effect.¹³ During the 1950s and the 1960s, GNP grew by 5-8 percent nearly every year. Thus, when development economist Walt Rostow wrote *The Stages of Economic Growth*, he cited Mexico as one of the few Third World nations at the point of "take-off into sustained economic growth."¹⁴ For the most part, however, the country's economic expansion did not bring about a corresponding increase in working-class standards of living. On the contrary, the real income of the industrial work force was lower in 1958 than it had been in 1939.¹⁵ Since 1960, some gains have been achieved in labor's real income. Yet, as a leading expert on Mexican politics noted in 1974, "it is still appropriate to cite a comment made nearly twenty years ago... that the

true hero of the Mexican investment boom is the Mexican worker whose... declining real income has, in effect, [subsidized] much of the nation's building."¹⁶

Indeed, the pattern of industrial expansion in Mexico is typical of the capitalist model pursued more recently in Brazil, Colombia, and other Third World nations: economic growth is accompanied by a deterioration in the distribution of wealth. In some cases, most notably Brazil, this has involved an actual decline in working class standards of living. In Mexico, between 1950 and 1969, the share of Mexico's national income going to the "bottom half" of the population fell from 19.1 percent to 15 percent (Table 1). At the same time, the richest 20 percent of the population increased its share of the national income from 59.8 to 64.0 percent.¹⁷

This economic development model required a reasonably docile industrial work force. At the rank-and-file level, labor passivity was facilitated by the rapid expansion of the number of industrial jobs. Between 1940 and 1970, the number of persons employed in manufacturing increased by nearly 350 percent from 670,000 to 2,205,000.¹⁸ Many of the new workers were recruited from the ranks of the nation's rural-to-urban migrants. Richard Adams and other anthropologists have noted that such migrants often bring with them a fatalistic outlook toward change, respect for authority, and a deferential attitude toward their *patrón* (their boss or other "protector").¹⁹ In addition, given that per capita income in Mexico's cities is four times higher than in the countryside, these new workers undoubtedly were enjoying a higher income than they (or their fathers) had experienced before migrating. In other words, while the average real income for the work force as a whole was somewhat lower in 1958 than it had been (for a much smaller work force) in 1939, for the many individual laborers of rural origin, life had improved in that time period.

Table 1
Distribution of Family Income in Mexico: 1950-1969

Income Group	Percentage of Family Income			
	1950	1958	1963	1969
Lowest 20%	6.1	5.0	4.2	4.0
30% below the median	13.0	11.7	11.5	11.0
30% above the median	21.1	20.4	21.7	21.0
15% below the top	19.8	24.3	24.3	28.0
The richest 5%	40.0	38.6	38.3	36.0
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: ILO World Employment Program Working Paper by Wouter van Ginnekan reprinted in *The Economist* (April 22, 1978).

Still, labor peace could not be guaranteed unless the militant union leaders nurtured under the Cárdenas administration were removed from positions of influence. Under President Ávila Camacho, government pressure helped oust Lombardo Toledano from his post as CTM Secretary General. He was replaced in 1943 by a far more conservative leader, Fidel Velázquez, who has ruled the Confederation with an iron hand ever since. By 1945, the CTM was pledging its "respect for private ownership," a far cry from its earlier socialist principles. In the same year, all the nation's major industrial unions signed the Pacto Obrero (Workers Pact) committing themselves not to strike for the duration of World War II. The CTM's earlier call for "a classless society" — with its invocation of class conflict — was dropped and replaced by the nationalist slogan, "for the emancipation of Mexico."²⁰

The early anarchist ideology of the labor movement and its later Marxist orientation (in the 1930s) were abandoned by the highly conservative new leadership. Like many of their U.S. counterparts, they emerged second to none in their cold-war vigilance against radical forces within society.²¹ Since most of the opposition to Mexico's current union leadership — emanating either from the rank and

file or from outside the unions in the nation's universities and intellectual centers — has been associated with the left, big labor's chiefs have adopted an increasingly rightist position. Thus, Fidel Velázquez and the CTM hierarchy have become bastions of conservatism within the PRI.



Fidel Velázquez, C & M leader.

That conservatism has been accompanied by increasingly entrenched, oligarchic, union government and the loss of rank-and-file influence. Corruption has become endemic as union bosses use sweetheart contracts and other dubious practices to line their own pockets. Many unions representing better-paid laborers (such as the petroleum workers) sell union memberships for under-the-counter payments of up to 50,000 pesos (\$2,200). Corrupt union leaders are commonly called *charros* (literally "cowboys") and their dishonest practices, *charrismo*. Many such leaders flaunt their ill-gotten gains. Jesús Díaz de León, a former railroad workers boss (whose fondness for horse shows led to the coining of the term *charro*) lives in the penthouse of a beach-front apartment house which he owns in Acapulco. Said Díaz to a newspaper reporter, "I feel it is an honor to be called a *charro*."²² Often these leaders employ armed guards and enforcers. Their opponents' bodies are occasionally found floating in rivers or are similarly eliminated.²³

Rank-and-File Unrest

For the Mexican working class, then, the apparent advantages of the nation's corporatist political system have been deceptive. Government sponsorship has, it is true, helped create one of Latin America's largest trade-union movements. More important, as one of three officially recognized sectors in the ruling PRI, organized labor has uniquely direct institutional links with the center of government power. In addition, officers of major unions often serve as Senators or Deputies in the national Congress, thereby offering labor further corporatist representation. Thus, to the superficial observer, organized labor in Mexico does appear "strong and vibrant," especially within the Latin American context.

Unfortunately, it is highly questionable how well union officials actually represent their membership. The prime requisite for holding office is not rank-and-file support but, rather, connections

within the government or the PRI. In extreme instances, aspiring union bosses have used police and federal troops to oust opponents from union offices or otherwise to repress dissenters.²⁴ Once in office, such labor chiefs are virtually immune to removal by their union's membership. Most national labor leaders are elected (and re-elected) at union conventions by officers of the union's locals. But the local representatives are not usually elected by their constituents; rather they have been appointed by the union's national leadership! Direct, rank-and-file election of national officers is very rare. Once in office, the union bosses have proved to be very amenable to government and private sector interests. Labor leaders abide by a series of unwritten rules set down by the government. One such rule prohibits any activity which threatens the government's grip on the labor movement. Another precludes strikes (or at least nationwide strikes) in basic industries (such as the railroads and electric power) which are critical to other sectors of the economy.

Several important exceptions to this pattern of union oligarchy have existed and these unions have served as centers of support for efforts at union democratization. The SME (Mexican Union of Electrical Workers), representing over 20,000 electric power workers in the Mexico City area, is perhaps the country's only major union which has regularly enjoyed direct rank-and-file election of all union officers, vigorously contested elections between incumbent and opposition slates, and the periodic unseating of incumbent officers. Its leaders, generally regarded as among the more honest union officials in the nation, have secured some of the highest working class salaries in Mexico for their membership. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the union actively opposed the CTM's hierarchy, spoke out against *charrismo*, and offered aid and comfort to several dissident union movements. In

recent years the union has maintained its record of honesty and internal democracy, but has been far less outspoken on national labor issues. The SME remains outside the CTM.



Rafael Galván, *Tendencia Democrática* leader.

The STERM (organized in 1960 from the FNTIE), another electric power union representing some 7,000 workers employed outside Mexico City, was even more outspoken in its opposition to the oligarchic union establishment. The union was led from its inception by Rafael Galván, a militant former Trotskyite who has long served as a spokesman for the beleaguered labor left. While Galván never faced serious electoral opposition as STERM's leader (indeed, his critics accused him of paternalism), internal union politics featured active rank-and-file participation, vigorous debate, and free criticism of leadership decisions. Like the SME leadership, STERM's national officers were noted for their honesty and vigorous pursuit of contract demands. In 1960, leaders of the two electrical workers' unions joined with several other left-of-center working class leaders in an abortive attempt to create an alternative labor federation to the CTM. More so than the SME, STERM saw itself as a center of anti-*charro* activity throughout the labor movement.

A final example of nontraditional union leadership emerged in the 1950s out of the union of elementary and secondary schoolteachers. During that period, Marxist militants were elected to leadership posts in Mexico City and several other important urban locals. Their tactics—wildcat strikes, sit-ins at the Ministry of Education—were more aggressive than those of the SME or STERM, and were highly unconventional by Mexican union norms. Like Rafael Galván, the radical teachers' union leaders saw their mission as extending beyond their own ranks. They took an active role in protest marches and related manifestations of support for rank-and-file insurgency movements in other labor organizations.²⁵

Unions such as these were atypical and have remained so. During the late 1950s through the 1960s, however, various outbreaks of rank-and-file discontent disturbed the surface of oligarchic union government. For one thing, the long period of decline in the real income of the working class began to take its toll. For 18 years (and 3 administrations) workers had been forced to tighten their belts so that capital investment could be intensified. Eventually, many began to wonder when they would reap some of the rewards of industrial growth. Second, the election of Adolfo López Mateos as President (1958-1964) gave anti-*charro* labor forces hope for more government support. López, the most liberal Mexican President since Cárdenas, came to the nation's top office after serving as Minister of Labor in the previous administration. In that position he had become known as a friend of the working man and an associate of progressive labor leaders such as Rafael Galván.

The most dramatic rank-and-file union revolt during the López Mateos administration took place in the railroad workers union (the STERM). The union's long-time Secretary General, Díaz de León, had alienated much of the membership through his dictatorial rule

and his failure to secure decent contracts. Dissidents within the union charged that the railroad workers' real income had fallen an average of 40 percent from 1948 to 1958.²⁶ In the closing months of 1958 and in early 1959, disgruntled insurgents gained control of various locals in the nation's south and southeast. Several railroads were hit by a series of wildcat strikes. Finally, in a rather unusual development, the national government sought to restore labor peace by holding democratic elections for national officers. The *charro* incumbents were swept out of office and Demetrio Vallejo, an insurgent leader who had risen out of the rank-and-file, was overwhelmingly elected Secretary General.

Once in office, Vallejo and his fellow Marxist-leaning colleagues refused to abide by the traditional "rules of the game" set for the unions by the Mexican government. Insisting that the contracts already received from some railroads must be extended to all railroad workers, and that workers fired in previous wildcat strikes be reinstated, the *vallejistas* called an escalating series of strikes in open defiance of presidential authority. These strikes culminated in a total shutdown of rail service during Holy Week, stranding thousands of holiday tourists. The *vallejistas'* actions challenged the President's right to set limits on union activities and broke the tacit ban on strikes that would paralyze the nation's economy. President López called in the armed forces, fired hundreds of striking workers, had many others jailed, and charged Vallejo and his closest colleague with sabotage and conspiracy. The two were eventually sentenced to 16 years in prison. Thus, the railroad workers' insurgency illustrated both the possibilities and limits of labor union dissent. On the one hand, given sufficient rank-and-file support and a progressive presidential administration (López Mateos; Echeverría, 1970-1976; and, possibly, current President López Portillo), dissident leaders can occasionally oust oligarchic officers.

Even under a more liberal President such as López Mateos, however, all union leaders must accept government guidelines or face the consequences.

Though insurgents have rarely been able to oust *charros* at the national level, through the 1960s there were a number of successful local movements. Members of unions representing telegraph operators, petroleum workers, miners, radio station employees, and auto tire workers tried, with varying degrees of success, to remove oligarchical or corrupt leaders. Similarly, pro-Vallejo forces continued to exercise influence in certain railroad locals even after the *vallejistas* had been removed by the government from control of the national union. In addition, many Mexican workers are only organized into unions encompassing a single firm rather than the entire industry. During the 1960s and early 1970s, more militant leaders were elected in a number of textile mills in Cuernavaca, at auto tire plants, the Volkswagen plant near Puebla, Adams Chiclets, and the Automex plant. During that period, as the nation's university campuses were increasingly radicalized, leftist students began working closely with dissident union groups. In some cases, university graduates joined the staffs of the more progressive unions (such as the STERM) or were elected to leadership posts in militant locals. Not surprisingly, the union of university custodians and workers was closely associated with the radical student movement and was one of Mexico's most militant unions.

The STERM Jurisdictional Dispute: Antecedents of the Tendencia Democrática

The roots of the Tendencia Democrática—the backbone of the "Los Pinos" sit-in described at the start of this *Report*—emanate from a somewhat different type of labor struggle. Rather than a rank-and-file revolt against *charro* officials, it involved a jurisdictional dispute between Rafael Galván's STERM and a competing union.

Since the 1940s, the STERM's position (or, more precisely, the position of the FNTIE, STERM's predecessor) had been threatened by the rapid growth of the competing National Electrical Workers Union (SNE). As the national government's Federal Electric Commission (CFE) expanded Mexico's electrical network outside Mexico City, it consistently recognized the government-sponsored SNE as the bargaining agent for workers in the newly constructed power plants. By 1965, the SNE had about 30,000 members, 4 times the size of STERM. From the perspective of its critics, the SNE was a subservient company union. Its dictatorial leader (for 32 years), Francisco Pérez Ríos, was almost always accompanied by armed guards and permitted no rank-and-file influence. While amassing a personal fortune, he signed contracts with the CFE that gave his union's membership lower wages than SME or STERM workers. Galván and his supporters on the left felt the government was out to crush the STERM, long a voice of labor dissent, in favor of the *charro*-run SNE.

The conflict between the two unions reached a head during the late 1960s when the CFE called for the creation of a single bargaining agent for electrical workers outside Mexico City.²⁷ Then, on October 16, 1971, the Mexican government struck a potential death blow to the STERM. The Federal Board of Arbitration and Conciliation (Mexico's all-powerful labor relations board) announced that it was recognizing the SNE as the sole bargaining agent for electrical workers outside the capital. Shortly thereafter, the Federal Electric Commission informed the STERM that it was no longer a legally recognized union. The event STERM's leadership had long feared was now at hand—the replacement of their militant union by a pro-government, “company union.”

In order to prevent their union's demise, STERM's officers decided to apply public pressure on the

administration of President Echeverría through a series of “Demonstrations for Union Democracy”—marches in cities throughout the country conducted by STERM workers and their supporters. From December 1971 through July 1972 some 100,000 persons allegedly participated in these demonstrations. Dissident workers in the petroleum, teachers, university custodial, and steel unions all offered support. Finally, reacting to STERM's moderate, yet effective, pressure techniques, the CFE announced in September 1972 that a merger would be effected between the STERM and SNE. Two months later, erstwhile enemies Rafael Galván and Francisco Pérez Ríos announced that their unions would merge over a period of four years. Unification would first take place at the local level. In each city with a STERM and SNE local (preceding in alphabetical order of the states), a single local would be formed. Regardless of the size of the previously existing locals, the united local would be temporarily governed by a board consisting of 50 percent STERM officers and 50 percent SNE officials. During the four year interim period, the new union—to be called SUTERM—would be headed by Pérez Ríos (leader of the far larger SNE) with Galván holding the second spot. In 1976, with the merger of locals complete, democratic elections would be held for both local and national office.

The Aftermath of Merger

Not all of STERM's militants shared Galván's conviction that the creation of SUTERM had been a victory. The most vocal opposition to the merger came from the STERM local in the city of Puebla. Throughout 1973, the Puebla local printed manifestos in the nation's major newspapers denouncing the November agreement. Since there had been no SNE local of consequence in Puebla, the STERM militants there had no intention of sharing power with the “*charro* union.” Instead, they demanded immediate direct elections of local officials. Other STERM sympathizers, both within and

outside the union, doubted the willingness of SNE leaders to face honest elections in 1976.

As for Galván and his associates, their decision to merge STERM with the larger SNE was motivated by both resignation and faith. On the one hand, given the government's overwhelming authority in a union jurisdictional dispute, and given the CFE's clear preference for dealing with the SNE, STERM leaders felt that their demonstrations had secured them the best deal they could get. Nor were they fatalistic about the merger. For one thing, they had secured 50 percent of all local union offices even though the SNE was much larger. More important, Galván indicated to me that he was optimistic about his ability to carry the 1976 election. Pérez Ríos was aged and in poor health. Moreover, since the SNE had never conducted rank-and-file elections, Galván felt he would be supported as enthusiastically in a free election by former SNE workers as by old STERM rank-and-file.²⁸

In order to protect themselves against Pérez Ríos forces within SUTERM, former STERM leaders sought to mobilize the same kind of worker demonstrations that had helped bring about merger. In the STERM's last convention (October 1973), Galván and his followers announced the formation of the Revolutionary Union Movement (MSR). Its stated objective was quite ambitious: to create a national federation of industrial and rural workers which would ultimately challenge the CTM. Beyond its goal of creating a broad-based, truly democratic labor union movement, the MSR expected eventually to be a force for socialist change in Mexico.

The movement's publication, *Solidaridad* (Solidarity), claimed broad support for the MSR among the nation's working class. Such claims tended to be couched in vague terms with little supporting evidence. However, impartial observers agreed that the MSR had the sympathy of more politicized and militant workers in a number of



Rafael Galván (center) and Tendencia Democrática leaders.

unions: university workers, teachers, some textile firms, *vallejista* railroad workers, telephone operators, steel workers, petroleum workers, brewery workers, and employees of the Volkswagen plant. Yet, the core of MSR support clearly lay among former STERM electrical workers. These activists (presumably along with some SNE sympathizers) formed a movement within SUTERM called the Tendencia Democrática (TD). While sharing the MSR's long-term goals, the TD's most immediate task was to protect rank-and-file rights in SUTERM and to mobilize support for the Galván faction in the 1976 election.

Conflicts between the Tendencia and Pérez Ríos' SUTERM allies developed quickly, centering around two labor contracts. In May 1974, workers at the Kelvinator electric equipment plant rejected a contract that had been endorsed by Pérez Ríos. With TD support, they staged a four-week wildcat strike which eventually won them more favorable

terms. The following month workers at General Electric of Mexico, working with the TD, also rejected a SUTERM-endorsed contract and went out on strike.

By late 1974 it was clear that SUTERM's merger honeymoon had never started. Galván and the Tendencia Democrática were at war with the old SNE leaders. But even with Pérez Ríos fatally ill at this point, Galván and his supporters found that TD and MSR demonstrations were not adequate to guarantee their survival in SUTERM. Neither CTM chief Fidel Velázquez nor Pérez Ríos' lieutenants had any intention of seeing their old critics and adversaries from STERM take over the electrical union. In March 1975, at a special union convention, Galván and all of STERM's former national officers were expelled from the SUTERM.

In the wake of their expulsion, TD and MSR met in the city of Guadalajara and committed

themselves to an expanded mobilization for union democracy. Out of the Guadalajara conference came a new political organization, the Nation Front of Popular Action (FNAP). Established in early 1976, the FNAP was designed to bring together university students, intellectuals and other sympathetic leftists into a support group for the MSR and the Tendencia, which claimed to speak for the former STERM rank-and-file. But the proliferation of organizations created by the old STERM leadership was more a sign of weakness than of strength. Internal divisions within the Mexican left and lack of real rank-and-file commitment outside the electrical workers membership crippled both the MSR and FNAP. Neither ever amounted to much more than paper fronts.²⁹ Thus the Tendencia Democrática locals in SUTERM were forced to rely on their own resources, such as they were.

Following a series of TD demonstrations against SUTERM's

officers, the movement's spokesmen announced plans to strike all the plants it controlled in July 1976. The plan was a desperate move by Tendencia leaders since a work stoppage would violate the government's clearly expressed prohibition on power strikes. President Echeverría and the Federal Electric Commission left no doubt that they would not tolerate a work stoppage. On July 12, the announced date of the strike, federal troops moved into the power plants to escort workers to their places. Galván and his colleagues, realizing that their position was untenable, announced that the strike had been cancelled. In the aftermath of the abortive strike, however, 150 Tendencia sympathizers in the Mexicali power plant were dismissed from their jobs. In addition, several hundred workers hired on a day-to-day basis (*eventuales*), who were known to be TD sympathizers, were not rehired.

It was these dismissals that prompted the September 1977 sit-in by the Tendencia Democrática at "Los Pinos." The protesters were permitted to camp outside the presidential residence for 38 days, but were finally ousted by police when their capacity to continue the sit-in was already waning. None of the protesting workers was rehired. Indeed, in an effort to avert further dismissals of their supporters in SUTERM, Tendencia leaders announced their movement was being dissolved though "the battle would continue through the MSR." While Galván insisted this was purely a tactical move, it clearly represented a defeat for his forces.

Nor did the TD's dissolution succeed in removing government and SUTERM pressure against its supporters. Former STERM militants in various plants were threatened with dismissal. The most dramatic action took place at the CFE's plant in La Boquilla in the state of Chihuahua. During 1977, two successive sets of democratically elected union leaders at that plant were suspended from the SUTERM and from their jobs.

Protests and walkouts by the electrical workers merely led to 30 additional suspensions at the close of the year. Finally, in January 1978, the Federal Electric Commission and the SUTERM announced they had agreed to close the entire installation. Shortly thereafter, two smaller plants (both organized by the TD) at Colina and Rosetilla were also shut down, allegedly depriving 5,000 peasant families (farming 75,000 hectares of the best farmland in Chihuahua) of badly needed irrigation. On February 8, a 7-hour electrical outage in Chihuahua (attributed to the plant closings) forced 3,000 miners in a neighboring mine to flee from the pits when their air pumps ceased functioning.³⁰

Following the CFE action at La Boquilla, 120 former plant workers and their families staged a sit-in at the electrical installation. Local peasant families brought them food and clothing. On March 5, 1978, Mexican soldiers occupied the installation and forcibly removed the workers and their families. As a result of CFE allegations that they were agitators, five high school teachers were fired and the local school (serving 150 students) was also closed. Students and workers then blocked a CFE bus taking SUTERM electrical workers to maintain nearby power lines. In an emotional mass meeting held in the town two days after the sit-ins were terminated, Galván announced that the MSR would continue the fight to regain the workers their jobs. But, at the time of this writing, the dismissed electrical workers, like their colleagues at Mexicali, had not been rehired.

Signs of Unrest in Other Labor Unions

As leaders of the Revolutionary Union Movement (MSR) fully realize, their hopes for challenging the CTM's hierarchy rest on expanding the movement beyond the electrical workers. In addition to scattered rank-and-file insurgency efforts at individual company unions, there have been two significant anti-*charro* efforts in major national unions in recent years.



Francisco Hernández Juárez, Secretary-General of the Telephone Workers Union.

In April 1976, workers in the national telephone operators union rejected a contract presented to them by their officers and staged a spontaneous strike in 40 cities.

Alberto Vásquez, one of the dissident leaders, was closely linked to Rafael Galván and the MSR. When insurgent leaders indicated to the national administration that they were willing to accept the government's ground rules and to go back to work if democratic elections were held in their union, government authorities ordered an election. The following month, the Democratic Committee of Telephone Workers (the insurgency slate), headed by Francisco Hernández Juárez, a 28-year-old student, swept the incumbent officers out of power with 86 percent of the 16,000 votes cast.³¹

Once in office, Hernández and his young, reformist colleagues sought to increase worker input in both union government and plant decision-making. One of their most interesting innovations has been the establishment of frequent departmental meetings in which workers, union representatives, and department supervisors discuss work conditions and worker grievances. Yet, the new union leaders have learned that not even they can anticipate and satisfy all grassroot discontent. In April 1978, women in the union (over half the membership) expressed dissatisfaction over pension rights in a proposed new contract. While Hernández Juárez and his fellow officers were still trying to renegotiate the contract, workers staged a 16-hour wildcat strike. After receiving assurances from union leaders that their demands would be met, the telephone operators returned to work.

A second, more limited, example of recent rank-and-file insurgency occurred in the highly oligarchical union of miners and metal workers. At the national level, the union has been headed since 1960 by Napoleón Gómez Sada, currently head of the Congress of Labor (the PRI labor section) and a PRI

Senator. Gómez Sada has faced no electoral opposition since taking office and is known as one of the nation's more corrupt and heavy-handed union bosses.

In May 1978, workers at the government-owned steel plants at Las Truchas and at Altos Hornos voted to oust the oligarchical leaders of their union local. New officers were elected who were younger, more educated, and more responsive to the insurgent workers. Not surprisingly, Gómez Sada suspended the new officers from the union. Under ordinary Mexican labor procedure, this would have required the government to dismiss the dissident leaders from their jobs (since there was a closed shop and these men were no longer recognized union members). However, a march of 5,000 steel workers in support of the ousted leaders convinced government steel managers that dismissal would not be wise. Indeed, since the two plants jointly produce 40 percent of Mexico's steel, labor unrest or a strike would seriously damage the nation's economy. Thus, while the dissident rank-and-file steel workers are not in a position to challenge or replace their national union officials, they have forced the government to ignore Gómez Sada's wishes at the two steel plants and have, in effect, been granted de facto recognition of their local leaders.

A Look into the Future

Rank-and-file efforts to democratize the unions and replace oligarchical or corrupt leaders remain relatively isolated efforts, certainly less indicative of imminent working class mobilization than either the MSR leadership or the Mexican left would like to believe. Still, they may be important portents of change in Mexican labor politics.

In the decades since Mexico began its postwar industrial expansion, the nation's labor movement has not been nearly as militant as the Chilean or Argentine working class. Nor is it likely, whatever Galván and his campus supporters may hope, that dramatic changes will take place in the labor front in the near

future. For one thing, most of the nation's working class—urban or rural—is still not unionized.³² Poorly educated, unskilled, and underemployed, these unorganized workers are almost universally lacking in political consciousness. Indeed, it was the Mexican urban poor who first served as the model for Oscar Lewis' "culture of poverty"—beaten down, powerless and aware of their powerlessness, the urban poor in developing (or "misdeveloped") capitalist economies such as Mexico's, Lewis argued, retreat into fatalism, live for the present, and lack any sense of class consciousness.³³ For most poorly paid or unemployed Mexican workers, flight across the border to the United States is a more realistic solution than fighting an entrenched political and economic system. Today, one in ten Mexicans lives illegally in the United States.³⁴

Those workers who do belong to unions and are regularly employed harbor few illusions about the quality of their union bosses. However, they are more likely to accept the inevitability of *charro* control than to mount a challenge to the establishment. As the Tendencia workers of Mexicali and La Boquilla can testify, those who cause trouble are likely to find themselves out of their union and out of a job. For those who are not easily deterred, there are goon squads and union thugs.

Even if a more progressive Mexican president and his administration wanted to democratize the labor movement—and there is no sign of such intentions at present—they would be unlikely to take on the CTM union hierarchy. Union leaders such as Fidel Velázquez and Napoleón Gómez Sada are virtual feudal chiefs with enclaves of baronial power within the PRI. Thus, while both Presidents López Mateos (1958-1964) and Echeverría (1970-1976) showed some sympathy for efforts at union democracy, they offered little concrete support. Faced with the prospect of opposing the CTM's powerful leaders and then having to deal with

Marxist-led insurgency movements, Mexican presidents prefer to let sleeping dogs lie.

The 1959 *vallejista* victory in the railroad union, short-lived as it was, and the successful insurgency of telephone operators in 1974, nevertheless indicate that under special circumstances union rank-and-file *can* oust entrenched officials. These "successes," though limited, will not be forgotten.

The characteristics of the typical dissident worker are also worth noting, especially in the context both of Mexico's population profile and projected industrial growth made possible by increased petroleum revenues. Union insurgency tends to arise from among the more skilled, better-paid workers in the more modern sectors of the economy. Dissident workers are generally below average in age and above average in education. Thus, as younger, more educated

workers filter into the Mexican labor force, it is likely that they will be more politicized, conscious of their rights, and more insistent on rank-and-file participation than has been true in the past. Moreover, as the country becomes more urban, traditional rural conservatism and fatalism will also likely diminish. In short, labor dissent will undoubtedly continue and almost certainly grow. The major question is, "how far and at what rate?"

(March 1979)

NOTES

1. Accounts of the sit-in and of subsequent events were covered extensively in the Mexico City daily, *Uno Mas Uno*; see also, *Siempre* (Mexico City) November 23, 1977.

2. See, Davis and de Miranda, "The Working Class in Latin America," in R. Miliband (ed.), *The Socialist Register* (London: 1967). Cuba is excluded from these figures as a special case.

3. Moisés Poblete Troncoso and Ben Burnett, *The Rise of the Latin American Labor Movement* (New York: 1960), pp. 97 and 107.

4. For brief histories of the rise of Mexican labor see: G. Rivera Marín, "El Movimiento Obrero" in *Cincuenta Años de Revolución* (Mexico City: 1961); Martín Moro *et al.*, *Control y luchas del Movimiento Obrero* (Mexico City: 1978).

5. For an excellent discussion of the Zapatista wing of the Revolution, see: John Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York, Knopf: 1968).

6. The oft-held, leftist myth that there is a natural political bond between the oppressed peasantry and working class in Latin America is criticized in Rodolfo Stavenhagen's brilliant "Seven Erroneous Theses on Latin America," in I. Horowitz and others, *Latin American Radicalism* (New York, Jonathan Cape: 1969).

7. Not until a decade later did Mao Tse-tung develop a sophisticated ideology and strategy for successful radical agrarian revolutions.

8. Rivera Marín, *op. cit.*, p. 278. The 1940 percentage of active work force in the labor movement was never exceeded.

9. See, Robert Scott, "Latin America" in G. Almond and J. Coleman (eds.),

The Politics of Developing Areas (Princeton: 1960).

10. Rivera Marín, *op. cit.*, p. 263; J. Ashby, *Organized Labor and the Mexican Revolution Under Lázaro Cárdenas* (Chapel Hill, 1967).

11. Indeed, Chile was one of the only countries in Latin America to develop an independent, grassroots labor movement which was not dominated either by middle-class political parties or by the government.

12. F. Myers, *Party, Government and the Labor Movement in Mexico* (Los Angeles: 1967), p. 142.

13. During this 30-year period, only the administration of Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964) deviated from the model described here. Under his administration, the volume of private investment grew at half the rate of the preceding administration while public investment (largely in social infrastructure) rose sharply.

14. Walt Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1971).

15. Richard Miller, "The Role of Labor Organizations in a Developing Country: The Case of Mexico" (Ithaca, New York: Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, 1966); M. Gollas and A. Garcia, "El Crecimiento Económico Reciente de México," (Santa Monica, California: Paper to the IV International Congress of Mexican Studies, 1973).

16. Evelyn Stevens, "Mexico's PRI: The Institutionalization of Corporatism," (Chicago: Paper to the APSA, 1974), p. 13.

17. While the *relative* position of Mexico's lower half is clearly deteriorating, experts disagree as to

whether the working class' real income has continued to suffer an *absolute* decline. A recent economic survey of Mexico indicates that since the 1950s the real income of the poorest 20 percent of the population has improved very gradually (at a rate of 1.2% annually) as opposed to a much greater 4.1 percent annual improvement for the richest 20 percent. See, "Mexican Economic Survey," *The Economist* (April 22, 1978), p. 16. A serious recession since Mexico's 1976 devaluation may well have eroded some of those small gains.

18. Moro *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

19. For a discussion of the alleged nonmilitancy of Latin American migrants see: Richard Adams, "Political Power and Social Structures," and Eric Hobsbawm, "Peasant and Rural Migrants in Politics," both in C. Veliz (ed.), *The Politics of Conformity in Latin America* (New York: 1967). For evidence that workers born in the countryside are more conservative than urban-born Mexican workers, see: Joseph Kahl, *The Measurement of Modernism* (Austin, Texas: 1968); and, Howard Handelman, "Determinants of Working-Class Political Ideology: A Mexican Case Study," *Studies in Comparative International Development* (Fall 1976).

20. V. Padgett, *The Mexican Political System* (Boston: 1966), pp. 93-94.

21. Indeed, the AFL-CIO contributes to the training of antileftist Mexican labor leaders at its "School for Labor" in Cuernavaca. Recent evidence seems to support long-standing suspicions of the Mexican left that the school has CIA links.

22. *Excelsior* (Mexico City) March 4, 1972.

23. *El Universal* (Mexico City) September 20, 1960. When I began research on Mexican labor in 1973, I was half-jokingly warned by an American sociologist who had done work in the field to "be careful you don't get knocked off." A leading Mexican sociologist offered me the depressing reassurance that "labor bosses here wouldn't shoot an American."

24. See: F. Gil, *Los Ferrocarrileros* (Mexico City: 1971), p. 150; Eveylyn Stevens, *Protest and Response in Mexico* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1974), pp. 104-107, for accounts of such practices in the railroad union.

25. There is obviously no inherent rule that radical or militant labor leaders in Mexico are more honest than most, or that conservative union officials are more corrupt. However, given the nature of Mexican labor organization in recent years, leftist militants (who face a difficult and unpromising future) are more likely to be motivated by ideological conviction than by material incentives.

26. Stevens, *Protest*, p. 108; M. Aroche Para, "A once años de la derrota ferroviaria," *Solidaridad* (Mexico City): June 15, 1970.

27. Since the CFE's jurisdiction at that time did not cover Mexico City, the SME was not affected. For a more detailed discussion of these events see, Howard Handelman, "The Politics of Labor Protest in Mexico," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* (August 1976).

28. The succeeding pages are based primarily on interviews with Rafael Galván conducted in June 1973 and June 1978; interviews with Rodolfo Peña, former editor of the STERM journal *Solidaridad*, conducted in the same time period; and issues of *Solidaridad*, 1973-1978.

29. Indeed, even Galván admitted to me that the FNAP was a failure, though he would not have said that of the MSR.

30. Accounts of the events in La Boquilla can be found in *Uno Mas Uno*, February 10, 11, and 21, and March 6, 1978.

31. See, *Solidaridad*: May 1978.

32. See, Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, *Democracy in Mexico* (New York: 1970) for data on the proportion of unionized workers.

33. While the characteristics of the "culture of poverty" are most clearly described in Lewis' *La Vida* (New York: 1965) — a book describing Puerto Ricans — Lewis discussed the concept earlier in *Five Families* (New York, Basic: 1959), a study of Mexican life. Lewis has erroneously been accused of blaming the poor for their poverty and of racism. In fact, in *La Vida* he clearly attributes the debilitating characteristics of the "culture of poverty" to a political-economic system which denies the poor control over their own lives. He sees the culture as endemic only to capitalist countries and argues that such values disappeared in revolutionary Cuba.

34. *Excelsior* (Mexico City): May 17, 1977; quoted from the *New York Times*.