

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menéndez

Díaz Serrano gets the kiss of death

Labor czar Fidel Velásquez has put a big dent in the Pemex director's presidential hopes.

The succession fight is heating up." This evaluation was issued last week by Fidel Velásquez, head of the powerful CTM labor federation and the country's kingmaker par excellence.

Since Don Fidel made that statement, the temperature in Mexico has in fact risen to asphyxiating levels. The fight to succeed President López Portillo has gotten red hot. The order of the day here in Mexico has been low blows, byzantine traps, and pre-emptive strikes.

Perhaps the best example is that of Pemex chief Jorge Díaz Serrano. Two weeks ago, he caught a political blow which almost knocked him out of the presidential race for good. Díaz Serrano is still being talked of as a strong contender, despite the fact that he is not in the cabinet, the usual steppingstone to the presidency. But the fact of the matter is that he lost ground sharply over the past weeks.

At the beginning of May, the head of the rightist National Action Party (PAN), José Antonio Conchello, declared that, since Mexico's future lies in oil, he thought that an oil expert would be best suited to become the next president. In case anyone didn't get the message, the PAN chieftain explicitly added that the choice could only be Díaz Serrano.

The press splashed across the headlines the PAN'S suggestion that Díaz Serrano be the ruling PRI party's presidential candidate. But

curiously, they buried his suggestion that Article 82 of the Constitution be changed.

Everyone in Mexico knows that would only open the presidency to Mexico City mayor Carlos Hank González, currently banned from the highest office because of Article 82's requirement that the Mexican president's parents both be native Mexicans.

Conchello's kiss of death to Díaz Serrano left the Pemex chief's supporters catatonic. Conchello is on record supporting the economic policies of Hitler's Finance Minister Hjalmar Schacht, a fact which can hardly help Díaz Serrano in the presidential sweepstakes.

The old labor fox, Fidel Velásquez, moved quickly to use these developments to deliver a coup de grace against Díaz Serrano, whose presidential aspirations the labor leader is thought not to appreciate. "I must commiserate with Mr. Díaz Serrano," Don Fidel quipped, "for having a partisan like Conchello. . . . He's good and screwed now."

This laconic but definitive declaration by Don Fidel was the strongest disqualification yet suffered in public by any of the major presidential contenders.

One thing, we are told, that Fidel Velásquez doesn't like about Díaz Serrano is his possible links to the despised Hank González. For example, Hank's journalistic mouthpieces Mauricio González de

la Garza and Margarita Michelena have lavished public praise on the Pemex director over the recent period.

Some think that this shows Hank wants to offer Díaz Serrano a deal: the Hank crowd would help get Díaz Serrano into the cabinet, in exchange for his helping swing the change in Article 82 that Hank so urgently wants.

But Díaz Serrano has apparently held aloof from the flirtation.

The ironic thing in all this is that some observers think that Don Fidel no longer retains his traditional decisive role in choosing the PRI's candidate for president. His CTM federation is becoming discredited, they argue, and the labor group's power is waning.

Many labor leaders, however, retort that the only way the CTM will be able to continue to keep Mexico's working-class population aligned with the government is through greater, not less, political power for the CTM.

Regardless of just how great Don Fidel's power is, it is unquestionable that Díaz Serrano felt the blow. Insult was added to injury for the Pemex director when he was sent on a month-long world tour to find new markets for Mexico's oil—during the precise time when no presidential hopeful wants to be away from the center of action for a minute, since the country's future is being decided in these very weeks.

Not that Díaz Serrano is wasting his time abroad. On the contrary, in Portugal he signed a deal for Mexican oil to be refined there for the broader southern European and North African markets. And he will be negotiating similarly important agreements in West Germany and the Soviet Union later this month.