

## Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menéndez

### Zafarrancho in the Zócalo

*The fistfights which took place during this year's May Day march had many lessons.*

The contingent of marchers from the teachers' union (SNTE) began the clockwise circuit of Mexico City's giant central plaza, the Zócalo. Just behind came a contingent of dissidents in the union called the "Coordinadora." As the two groups came in contact, squads of thugs, known in Mexico as *porros*, poured out of conveniently parked buses. Armed with clubs, the thugs waded into a spreading mass of fistfights. It was a classic Mexican *zafarrancho*.

Police moved in to break up the melee. But a few minutes later, the scene repeated itself when another delegation of the dissident teachers reached the reviewing area directly below President Miguel de la Madrid's balcony in the National Palace.

The casualty total for the day, according to police, was 47 injured, 24 of them treated in the hospital. The newspapers the next day flowered with protests from left-wing unions, charging police repression. A number of papers published pictures of the police in action in the Zócalo, next to pictures of Polish security forces repressing May Day marchers in Poland.

For de la Madrid, the violence was a reminder of how volatile the labor situation is becoming as the International Monetary Fund's economic program destroys worker's living standards.

The labor movement's economists calculate that inflation for the first quarter of this year was 43 percent. The official figure is 20 percent. But the IMF-mandated salary adjustment

is 12 percent. Labor is demanding that that be quadrupled.

The incidents during the May Day march should not be misread simply as a sign of labor radicalization. They came amid a remarkable show of strength by longtime labor chieftain Fidel Velázquez and the CTM union, a pillar of the governing PRI party. The march was one of the largest in modern Mexican history. Estimates of the number of marchers range from 1 to 1.5 million. And it was Velázquez's own decision to allow dissident unions to march in the official parade (in previous years, the so-called "independent" leftist unions always marched a different parade route). His point was simple: that under the pressure of the economic crisis, the government should realize that the labor movement can unite as much as it can fragment. Velázquez announced in late April that he will embark on weekly tours to every part of the country—an extraordinary show of leadership from the 83-year-old unionist.

Though the slogans in the march were not openly anti-IMF, the CTM is systematically and successfully targeting the leading cabinet ministers responsible for implementing IMF policy. Two months ago the union slammed Commerce Minister Hector Hernández. The last week of April, it was Planning Minister Salinas de Gortari's turn, after he had turned in a laughably rosy quarterly economic report, in which he had asserted that the economic crisis is "under control." Velázquez charged that the "modera-

tion of workers demands" had solely served to help some private sector profits and help the government "meet obligations abroad."

In this context, it would be wrong to see the left-wing unions as an autonomous force, gaining strength as the IMF accords discredit the labor forces allied with the government. *Disloyal members of the president's own cabinet are using the dissident union groups as tools to weaken labor and protect the IMF program.*

An example is Labor Minister Arsenio Farrell Cubillas. In an early March meeting with the leadership of the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC), Farrell out of the blue declared that the group "is called upon to become the real representatives of the Mexican proletariat." The rest of the labor movement was left open-mouthed by the blatancy of the effort to pit the CROC—an established but smaller union current—against the CTM.

The mastermind of the disloyal government faction is Education Minister Jesús Reyes Heróles, a strong backer and masonic lodgemate of the IMF's chief collaborator in the government, Finance Minister Jesús Silva Herzog. From the first days of the de la Madrid government Reyes Heróles primed the dissidents in the SNTE to finish off that embattled union.

In recent months, the dissident "Coordinadora" group had been seen to be faltering. All that is now reversed with the *zafarrancho* in the Zócalo. The dissidents, now with the bloody shirt they wanted, have returned to life and have called a protest march for May 15.

No one quite knows who sent in the 400 *porros* who precipitated the clash on May 1. Some observers say they saw the words "Public Education Secretariat" on the sides of the buses.