

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menéndez

The ghost of 1968

Eight universities are out on strike, and authorities are thinking back to the blowup 15 years ago.

The largest union of teaching, administrative, and custodial personnel at the National Autonomous University (UNAM) of Mexico City went out on strike on midnight May 30, together with unions in seven other universities across the country.

The strike is a particularly delicate one for several reasons.

First, the leading union, STUNAM, and most of those that have followed in other states, are controlled by the PSUM (Unified Socialist Party of Mexico, formerly the Communist Party of Mexico). At issue is the role of the so-called independent unions (almost all leftist, in fact), that have been making gains against the government-aligned CTM-led labor organizations.

The entirety of the CTM apparatus was set to go out on strike May 30, not just the STUNAM. CTM leader Fidel Velásquez was threatening a general strike, then pulled back after he won a 25 percent wage increase for the confederation and other concessions from the government.

However, inflation is running at 36 percent so far this year by official calculations and is closer to 50 percent according to independent studies.

The STUNAM is calling for a 40 percent increase, hardly an unreasonable amount under the circumstances. The official union structure is consequently ambivalent. On one hand, it would appear that Velásquez is giving at least tacit support to the strike, in order to keep broader pressure on the government faction which is insisting on the wage-gouging guidelines of the International Monetary Fund.

Emerging from an unusual June 7 meeting with the veteran CTM leader, STUNAM secretary general Eleizer Morales told the press that Velásquez had indicated he was opposed to seeing the strike declared illegal by the government Board of Conciliation and Arbitration and had assented to a full meeting of the Labor Congress umbrella organization to consider a STUNAM petition of support.

But the CTM groups do not want to give too much credibility to the PSUM-linked leadership of the strike. Hence the statement by Labor Congress president Napoleón Gómez Sada the next day after the full Congress session: The strikers have the Labor Congress's support, "as long as it is a labor, and not a political, question."

Similarly, when the Trotskyist PRT (Revolutionary Workers Party) leadership met with President Miguel de la Madrid on June 6, a PRT leader who is also on the executive committee of the STUNAM was not there. Her presence "could have been misinterpreted," was the diplomatic formula accepted by the PRT.

Just how fine a line it is was demonstrated on June 9, when somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 strike supporters marched through Mexico City, and upwards of 100,000 schoolteachers around the country, members of the dissident teachers' Coordinadora, stayed off the job for a day. All the participants in the support actions came from the independent trade union movement.

Education Minister Jesús Reyes Heróles is giving under-the-table support to the Coordinadora in an effort

to break the power of the parent union, the CTM-allied SNTE.

But the real tension comes from the danger that the strike could serve as the background for a resurgence of student confrontationism à la 1968, when student mobilizations eventually provoked the bloody official repression of Tlatelolco. The intensity of Mexico's current economic collapse has considerably lowered the threshold for student action—and for combination with other forces in the country.

A sign of the times was an incident in a high school in Mexico City, the Prepa of Tacuba, on May 9. Rival gangs of thugs, parading under pseudo-left designations like the National Federation of Bolshevik Organizations, invaded the school and began a shoot-out. The toll was two dead and 14 wounded.

The police did not intervene. In a press report subsequently confirmed to me by several sources, it was noted that Mexico City police chief Gen. Ramón Mota Sánchez had not moved in because he wanted "to avoid situations like those that occurred in 1968," when uniformed police were injected into similar gang warfare and ended up the object of student hatred.

Fear of provoking another 1968 was not the only motive for the police chief's seeming passivity. Everyone knows that the *porros* roaming the schools are the paid thugs of higher-ups in the political system, and any competent law enforcement officer has to disentangle "who owns the dog," as a Mexican expression goes. It looks like police officials may be getting the intelligence they need, because the Tacuba violence has fallen off.

But the incident is a useful reminder of how much the unfolding student issue is being shaped by memories of 1968—on all sides.