

# Notes Toward a Vision of The Workers' Movement in Mexico

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TRANSLATED BY DAN LA BOTZ *To the memory of Dale Hathaway and Antonioin Villalba* IN ORDER TO EVALUATE AND UNDERSTAND the current situation of the workers' movement in Mexico as power has shifted from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) to the National Action Party (PAN), it is important to understand the character of the Mexican regime and its historical development. Does a change in the ruling party represent the beginning of a democratic transition and a change in the system? The Mexican system is a corporate state, and far from being democratic, not only at the parliamentary level, but also in the most important aspect of the life of each citizen, in the everyday life of the Mexican people. The Mexican state is far from being a welfare state, as is clear from the obvious lack of liberty, and social and political democracy. The system's social and economic benefits form part of the established mechanisms of the corporate state which exists for the reproduction of the labor force and for the establishment of the minimal conditions of the governability and functionality of the corporate system.<sup>1</sup> It was President Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928), who by way of the Mexican Embassy, copied the model of the corporate state from Fascist Italy. Officials associated with the Mexican embassy there copied and implemented the Fascist model not only in the official party but also in the labor unions. To develop this project, Calles took advantage of intellectuals who traveled throughout Europe studying models of party structure and mechanisms of maintaining legitimacy which would permit him to control the most significant social groups: independent unions and peasant organizations. The political operatives who carried out the transfer of Mussolini's model to Mexico were Manuel Y. de Negri and José Manuel Puig Casaunac, who, after serving as ambassadors to Italy, each occupied the post of Secretary of Industry, Commerce, and Labor. Another important agent was Abelardo L. Rodríguez, who traveled to Europe expressly to put the final touches on the Federal Labor Law (LFT), later served as Secretary of Labor, and finally as president (1932-1934). Rodríguez, who used the new corporate law against the independent unions, could count on the support of union officials such as Luis N. Morones, then Lombardo Toledano, and finally de Fidel Velásquez.<sup>2</sup> Representative Ezequiel Padilla, President Plutarco Elías Calles's man in the House of Representatives in 1932, and later Ambassador to Italy, spoke favorably of fascism, a system which had suppressed the class struggle and replaced it with class collaboration. He lauded the Fascist organizations called corporations in which "the worker was no longer isolated." The corporations, he pointed out, coordinated all of the unions, organizing them into a Council of Corporations, then a Ministry of Corporations, and finally enveloping them in the Fascist state. His eulogy of the Fascist system was greeted with a round of applause.<sup>3</sup>

## The Corporate System

CORPORATISM AS A POLITICAL SYSTEM implied the integration of the citizens of a country into the state apparatus by way of corporations, whether those be civic associations, neighborhood groups, merchants' organizations, labor unions, or employers' chambers of commerce, with the goal of maintaining the established order and guaranteeing the participation of the state as the means of assuring governability. In the world of work, the corporations are none other than the workers' unions and the employers' association. Corporatism uses these organizations as transmission belts that unite the individual with the state apparatus with the intention of guaranteeing the efficient application of the appropriate legislation in each sector, attempting to maintain social control over the entire population, and, as has been made evident, trying to keep wages as an economic variable

under control in times of economic crisis. In terms of ideology, all corporatist regimes have been founded upon nationalism. The nation is seen as the supreme reality to which other groups, classes, and individuals must submit. Consequently, every movement that demands its own autonomous space is considered to be an attack on the nation. That's why the legitimate right of indigenous communities to live autonomously is crucified. Internationalism is a sin against the nation, as is seen when during union struggles genuine unions are accused of being traitors to the country when they establish alliances with unions in other countries.<sup>4</sup> The Mexican corporatist regime attempts to include the totality of social reality; it becomes involved in questions of private morality and in matters of everyday life. The Mexican state, self-defined as the legal incarnation of the nation, demands unity and strength in the national leader, the president of the republic, and diminishes the judicial and legislative powers.<sup>5</sup> The Mexican state may or may not recognize class conflict, but it disciplines and subordinates such conflicts to the interest of the nation: No struggle outside of the legal framework. Nothing outside of the legal system designed to control the workers. Nothing that permits the autonomous action of citizens. And, if by some oversight some free space should be discovered, the state will legislate to contain it, as it is attempting to do today with Secretary of Labor Javier Lozano's project of labor law reform.<sup>6</sup> An important point: Corruption is part of the system. It is one of the props of the Mexican corporate regime even though it harms its image, and it is encouraged as a substitute for the ineffectiveness of the nationalist ideology as the sole pillar of the system. Corruption, constructed out of economic relations within the system, is converted into one more element propping up the system. Corruption is now part of the system without which it could hardly operate.

## **Company Unions and Corporate Unions**

PERHAPS THE GROUP MOST REPRESENTATIVE of *sindicalismo blanco* [white unionism], that is to say unions directly controlled by the bosses, is the Confederation of Mexican Union Groups (CONASIM), which, as they themselves recognize, has its roots in 1931 when it was established to administer provisions created and promoted by the Federal Labor Law. It was formally constituted in October, 2000 by the fusion of the Federation of Free Unions, the National Federation of Progressive Unions "José María Morelos y Pavón," and the "Cuauhtémoc y Famosa" Union of Workers. The latter was born on November 5, 1931, and became the paradigm for employer protection unionism controlled directly by the employers. Its principal area of operation is in the North of the country, with unions in commerce, bottling, packing, metal, auto, and claims 90,000 members.<sup>7</sup> If the corporatization of union and employer organization began legally in 1931 with the Federal Labor Law (LFT), the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM) has had an alliance between union leaders and [state] power since 1918, and was the product of a government initiated meeting. The Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) began in the same way in 1936, and though it developed within the framework of popular fronts, its corporate structure was refined and this confederation was converted into the formal pillar of the regime, charged with announcing the official candidates for president, and functioning in an efficient way to control the workers. When the Federal Labor Law itself is not sufficient, the CTM does the job through gangster practices such as the takeover of union halls at the point of a machine gun and the violent commandeering of union meetings in order to impose its flunkies. This practice produces new pack leaders who retake control of many workplaces, of course, with the sale of protection contracts. This upsurge also generates internal competition between the union mafias for the control of the union registrations handed out by the government, which by this time have been converted into real sales franchises peddling protection to the employers. Since 1952, internal groups have disputed the division of the franchises and reveal the competition for this "market in protection to the employers and the government." They separated from the CTM, but not from its practices, forming as the Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants (CROC) and the Revolutionary Workers Confederation (COR). In order to control this proliferation of confederations and unions, in 1966 the Institutional

Revolutionary Party/Government brought them together in the Congress of Labor which came to have 42 union organizations, most of the largest unions in the most important sectors of industry in the country.<sup>8</sup>

## **Employer Protection Contracts**

IN MEXICO DURING THE 1970S, the few authentic unions of that period such as the Welders League (LS), the Authentic Labor Front (FAT), the Union of Electrical Workers of the Mexican Republic (STERM), and the Independent Union Front (FSI), attempted to expand the principle of autonomy, freedom, and democracy but confronted on a daily basis a judicial labor court which impeded their growth as a legitimate current of worker organization. One of the most frequent practices of official unionism, gathered together in those years on the Congress of Labor (CT), consisted of establishing contractual relations with the bosses without the workers involved even knowing of the existence of those unions. In everyday language they were called “ghost unions,” that is, unions with a legal existence but absolutely unknown to the workers. In many cases they didn’t even rob the workers of dues because dues weren’t collected by anybody. When, after a long process of union organization, the workers succeeded in establishing their own independent and democratic workers’ organization, they would then attempt to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement. But often they found themselves stalled at the Board of Conciliation and Arbitration because there was already a recognized labor union and a collective bargaining agreement at that workplace with a contract signed on file, even though the workers knew nothing about it. At that moment, when the organized presence of the men and women who worked in the plant became visible to the company, the boss’s offensive to destroy the organization began: threats to the family, beatings, harassment, unjustified firings, blackmail, payoffs, kidnapping carried out by the police, and even assassinations such as that of Efraín Calderón Lara of the Independent Union Front of the FAT in Yucatán. If while they were organizing the workers had discovered the existence of the “ghost union,” and of the collective bargaining agreement on file at the Board of Conciliation and Arbitration, then they would demand the right to administer that contract. If — after many months of resisting the employers’ attack, the bureaucracy and corruption of the labor board and the Secretary of Labor, and after having the union representation election by voting out loud in front of management and the labor authorities — if finally the workers won, they got only the right to administer the existing contract, a document that gave them few or no rights and many responsibilities and obligations. To begin with such a contract was and is to begin with nothing, confronting official policies that restrict rights and benefits such as wage and benefit ceilings. This experience came to be called “*contratismo*” or “protection contracts,” that is, contracts that protect the companies against real labor unions. With the passage of time, a new term, somewhat imprecise but with an important social message, arose to describe the concept born from the democratic workers’ movement’s opposition to “*contratismo*”: Collective Contract to Protect the Bosses. Little by little, the concept drew the attention of labor scholars and of other unions which, as they grew, confronted this phenomenon, until there was an explicit recognition of this employer practice. The phenomenon is not new in Mexico. It was not born in the 1980s with the neoliberal policies, nor was it born with Arsénio Farel Cubillas who, as Secretary of Labor, gave out union registrations as franchises to his friends and to big shots.<sup>9</sup> Nor was it born during the 1950s when various dissident groups within the Confederation of Mexican Workers created new unions as their private businesses. The system was born when labor legislation converted the unions into “registered trade marks” and when the general secretaries [top officers of the unions] became their sole legal representatives. This gave rise to a kind of “imperial unionism” where nothing happened without the approval of “my general secretary,” the sole legal authority recognized by the state and the only one who could call or not call a strike. Union struggles and the strike in particular thus became a source of wealth, and labor peace and not striking were converted into a commodity coveted by businessmen, turning the union organization itself into a kind of merchandise and into a mechanism of control through the sale of protection contracts serving the

employers' economic interests. Protection contracts are characterized by the fact that they offer a professional service of protection against the independent organization of workers. They don't necessarily have to operate in a spectral fashion like ghosts, and over time they can even change their form to conform to new circumstances and to meet the needs of the employers. The protection union can, if the employers or the unions holding the registration think it prudent, even have some sort of labor union life, if only to justify the union dues that the officials either pocket themselves or use to pay their organizers, thugs, and contractors.<sup>10</sup> Protection contracts can be administered by unions which presumably oppose or criticize this kind of arrangement, but they can use it, if necessary for their self-interest, as has been done by the Union of the Metropolitan Collective Transportation system<sup>11</sup>, television Channel 40<sup>12</sup>, and the daily newspaper *La Prensa en Oaxaca*<sup>13</sup>. The most cynical case might be the Morelos Group of the Confederation of Mexican Workers which announces and sells its protection contracts over the Internet. Mexico's major unions, most of them in the Congress of Labor (CT), the umbrella organization of labor, have been in a state of flux. The Federation of Unions at the Service of the State suffered an abrupt fall with the withdrawal recently of 21 unions and the formation of a union of public employees, called the Democratic Union Federation of Workers at the Service of the State headed by Elba Esther Gordillo.<sup>14</sup> Among the national unions, the railroad workers union was dismantled by privatization, even though its leader continues to collect union dues from thousands of retired workers. The oil workers union leaders sold permission to lay off 170,000 workers. The withdrawal of the Federation of Unions of Goods and Services (FESEBS), the Social Security Workers Union, and others represents about half a million workers, such as aviation pilots, flight attendants, national pawnshop workers, technical and manual film workers, street car and telephone workers. The Mexican Electrical Workers (SME) continued to belong to the CT, even though it is a founder of the Mexican Union Front.

### **The Lozano Project of Labor Law Reform<sup>15</sup>**

Beginning in the 1980s, the Mexican economy's opening up of its markets placed it at a disadvantage in terms of global competition, both in terms of its need for a legal framework as well as its lack of a modern industrial plant. President Carlos Salinas (1988-1994) defined the conditions of economic growth in terms of the neoliberal model: economic stability, economic modernization, and finding investment resources by way of slimming down the state, together with the economic opening and legal changes in labor relations. Meanwhile, the vertical structure of Taylorism was being transformed: the specialized worker who received strict orders regarding his work activities was changed by the multi-tasked worker under the complete control of the work process and by the establishment of autonomous work teams responsible for the "total quality" of the product at each stage of the work process. This transformation began in the Toyota auto factory in Japan, which based its productive processes on the workers' flexibility and mobility with minimum specialization, more supervision, and with pay strictly tied to each worker's productivity. While the development of technology within the framework of globalization brought these changes to the production process, globalization led to competition for the new spaces in the world market, and led to attempts to lower production costs. The result was a production system made up of assembly plants in different regions of the world and based on lower costs of primary materials, transportation, and labor. These transformations required the active participation of workers in order to redefine working conditions in the new production model without which the firms' otherwise unilateral plans always run up against the obstacle of too little active and creative involvement which they require. According to the official reports of the World Bank itself, only real unions which are truly representative have the capacity to negotiate within the new legal framework of labor relations. To solve this problem there are two options. One can democratize the world of work so that there is a voluntary collective participation of workers in the new processes, with real economic benefits for them such as is found at MAHLE in Aguascalientes. At MAHLE, formerly Sealed Power, an auto parts factory, the FAT's steelworker affiliate STIMAHCS carried out a democratic discussion within the union and

negotiations with the company, leading to worker training and higher wages to achieve higher quality, and the plant became the first to achieve ISO 9000 certification. Or, one can take up the other option, which involves seeming to comply with the World Bank requirements but imposing the model of simulated contracts, an authoritarian imposition carried out in a unilateral way by the firm, masking this authoritarianism with what is called in Mexico, "the New Labor Culture." In order to push forward the authoritarian alternative, in February 2009 the government of President Felipe Calderón presented to the Representatives and Senators of the National Action Party (PAN), the Lozano Project for labor law reform with proposals that make aggressive assaults on labor rights. The Federal Labor Law (LFT) provides that employers can employ workers only on the basis of an eight-hour-day and a 48-hour-week with pay for 56 hours. Overtime work is not obligatory for the worker, and if he should work overtime the first nine hours are paid double and after that triple. The Lozano Project would eliminate the maximum of 48 hour, would eliminate the double and triple pay for overtime, and would make overtime obligatory. The right to strike would be impeded under the Lozano Project since the employer would have to authorize, previous to the [now legally required] strike notification vote, the list of workers, which would in practice be converted into a blacklist and firing even before the strike took effect. The Lozano Project would legalize outsourcing, while under existing legislation an employer who subcontracts is obliged to comply with labor rights. At present employers choose a union and sign protection contracts, but the independent unions have used a loophole in the law to fight for representation of a company's workers. With the Lozano Project, this possibility would be lost because it would require that the workers involved [in a representation election] previously recognized by the employer before substitution of a new union for a company union. This, in practice, would mean the immediate firing of the dissident workers, even before the election took place. When a worker is fired without cause, [s]he has the right to be returned to her job and to compensation equivalent to his lost wages during the period of legal proceedings. The Lozano Project would limit this right to just six months' lost wages, when in practice the legal process often takes as long as two years. This is a way of cheapening firings and of discouraging workers from fighting for their legal rights. The Lozano Project would also keep unions secret by not making available records of their legal existence, their members, or their collective bargaining agreements, maintaining present practices that keep members in the dark so that they don't even know if they have a contract or what union represents them. In conclusion, the Lozano Project, far from modernizing the legal norms on the basis of international standards, such as those of the International Labor Organization (ILO), would establish new legal controls to protect employers, the official unions, and the company unions. COUNTERPOSED TO IT is the strategic proposal for Labor Reform and Productivity of the National Union of Workers (UNT), which attacks the problem at the root by dismantling the corporate system.<sup>16</sup>The UNT proposal calls for:

- The open registration of labor unions and their jurisdictions. [That is not subject to government approval of the union or its officers.] The current legislation restricts the unions by industry or craft, activity or territory, making it impossible for them to grow or to be representative.
- Free, direct, and secret vote in union representation elections and in union officers elections based on valid voting lists and places and votes taken in safe conditions.
- A public registration of labor unions and collective bargaining agreements. At present the collective bargaining agreements are secret and they serve to protect the firms since most of them have been signed by corporate and corrupt unions which in addition to selling protection to the firms make it impossible for workers to exercise their labor rights. What is needed is transparency in the matter of registrations and in the administration of the unions themselves.
- The substitution of the Boards of Conciliation and Arbitration by Labor Judges from the federal, state and Federal District judiciaries. The powerful control of the federal or local executive over the boards and the presence of the corporate unions on them keeps these bodies from acting in a neutral fashion in resolving the issues that come before them,

especially collective issues, and consequently favors the existing system of subordination of the unions.

- Elimination of the “exclusion clause” used to expel members from the union or to force them to resign their employment, a measure often used against dissident members. This clause has already been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Justice.
- Elimination of the “orders of exception” which deprive workers in various sectors of their collective rights such as freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the strike. Workers at the Development Bank and public employees do not have the right to collective bargaining or the right to strike. Workers at the Autonomous Universities [state universities throughout Mexico] cannot form industry-wide unions, and workers in special government offices such as human rights and electoral services, for example, are restricted by law from the exercise of these elementary rights. Confidential employees also have in practice insuperable obstacles.
- The express prohibition of workers’ obligatory affiliation with a union of a particular confederation or with a political party. Participating in a union should not limit the workers’ free exercise of political rights.

## **The Reconstitution of the Workers’ Movement**

THE SYSTEM OF CORPORATE CONTROL in Mexico is suffering a readjustment to the new circumstances imposed by globalization of the economy, the standardization of production conditions, the competition for international markets, and now the global economic crisis. The productive processes have been adapted to these circumstances, innovating the forms and standards of production, redefining the form and function of the labor force. If at the beginning of the century, the rationalization of the productive processes gave birth to assembly line production, and to specialization and absolute subordination to the mid-level supervisors, today the administrative innovations in the productive forces also derive from the auto industry and in particular from the Toyota Motors factory in Japan, which introduced new productive standards and reorganized, once again, the role of the work force. This new model has been the promoter of the famous QS [International Standardization Organization — Quality Standards or ISO QS], job flexibility, the formation of quality circles and production teams responsible for different aspects of the productive process. The globalization of the economy, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and finally the free flow of capital in competition to find the best conditions for the exploitation of labor have opened up the borders and with that brought about the implementation of these measures, directly altering the stability of the work force and in the end demonstrating the inoperability of the existing system of corporate control. This is not a beneficial change for workers. On the contrary, if the old style of corporate control of the unions has been efficient until now, it is because the state acted to offer itself as the guarantor of capital, both foreign and national, in order to encourage investment in our country. The social security institutions, health and pension plans primarily, and the recognition of the right to a job and stability in employment are menaced by neoliberalism and more by the recent crisis. In this context, the Mexican workers’ movement must bring about a renovation of unionism, which implies recognizing the experience that as workers we can bring to the productive area, which has within itself the possibility of self-management in the future, as well as returning union organizations to the hands of the workers in order to achieve authentic, autonomous, and democratic unions.

## **The May 1st Inter-Union Coordinating Committee**

THE MAY 1ST INTER-UNION COORDINATING Committee (CIPM) — established by several union, social, and political organizations: the National Coordinating Committee of the Teachers Union (CNTE), the Independent Union of Workers of the Autonomous Metropolitan University, the Mexican Electrical Workers, the Authentic Labor Front, the Union of Workers of the National Autonomous

University, among others — represented an important effort at creating an independent union alliance. It was a project of working class solidarity developed in the Valley of Mexico beginning on May 1, 1995, originally at the suggestion of Route 100 workers and the Independent Proletarian Movement. Nevertheless, as it developed, those who came to dominate the discussion were not the unions themselves but rather the opposition union currents, not only within the corporate unions, but also in the independent unions. The CIPM lacked a structure that would have permitted it to work in an autonomous way with the various sectors, without neglecting the coordinating mechanism: the students discussed strategies and attempted to make decisions about union strategy; the political parties did the same with the students and the unions. All of the CIPM's work became drowned in discussions and speeches of the political sharpshooters until it disappeared by dissolving itself into the National Dialogue. The National Dialogue represented a failed attempt at unity promoted by the Nacional Union of Workers (UNT) and the peasant organizations in the Mexican Union Front.

### **La Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT) y el Frente Sindical Mexicano (FSM)**

SINCE THE DEATH OF FIDEL VELÁSQUEZ, the Confederation of Mexico Workers (CTM) has shown itself to be even more vicious and intolerant than it was forty years ago when in its gangster-style it threw itself into the task of retaking control of the big industrial unions — railroad workers, miners, petroleum workers — which since its founding had separated themselves from official control. With the coming to power of the conservative National Action Party, the new government, far from dismantling the control over the unions, has rather been very effective in re-establishing corporate relations. The CTM remains its fundamental interlocutor, without totally ruling out new spaces of discussion with the company unions and with the lawyers who facilitate the sale of protection contracts by noninstitutional means. As a result of the changes taking place both in the economy and politically in 1995, the Forum Unions Face the Nation (FORO) was established with two different tendencies within it. The first hoped to consolidate the organizational advance of the FORO, proposing the creation of a new labor federation which would engage in a frontal attack on the Congress of Labor. Some of the unions promoting this position were the university workers of STUNAM, the FAT, and some who continued to be members of the Congress of Labor, but decided to leave it and promote a new project. This was the origin of the National Union of Workers (UNT).<sup>17</sup> The other group decided to stay in the Congress of Labor and consequently they opposed the formation of the new federation. Among them were the Teachers Union (el SNTE) led by Elba Esther Gordillo, together with the Confederation of Revolutionary Workers (COR), the union of the fishing industry, the National Council of Workers, and the Mexican Electrical Workers (SME). At the beginning they tried to keep themselves together, taking the name the Little Forum [el Forito]. The alliance between Gordillo of the teachers and the electrical workers of the SME lasted until there was a change in the leadership of the latter. With the retirement of Pedro Castillo and the arrival of Rosendo Flores, the Electrical Workers Union joined with the university workers of SITUAM and others to form the Mexican Union Front (FSM). Thus by the beginning of the 2000s there were two independent labor formations, the UNT and the FSM. These two independent national options have maintained a relationship alternately drawing closer and moving away from each other, depending on the necessities of the situation at each moment. Alone, neither is representative of the real national labor movement. The FSM is completely dominated by the SME and its dynamic, by its being limited to the Valley of Mexico, and by the industrial necessities and the contract negotiations of the SME. Without a doubt the UNT, which represents a much more interesting option, has not been able to consolidate itself at the national level. Its largest union, the Social Security workers, is linked in any parts of the country to the PRI, and it has even marched together with the CTM in various parts of the country, such as Monterrey and Ciudad Juárez. Valdemar Gutiérrez, the general secretary of the union, without the knowledge of his members, signed away important rights linked

to retirement and pensions. At the local level in the Valley of Mexico, the UNT drags along with it the union of the Metro of Mexico City, one of the most corrupt unions and one of the greatest violators of labor rights. Nevertheless, some of the progressive characteristics of the UNT are important. Most notably, decisions are made by consensus, and there is collective leadership. Equity among all union members exists, as well as transparency in its plenums, even in front of the press. It has an international presence as well as a capacity for mobilizing, including the ability to form alliances with peasants and NGOs. Since its founding the Federation has not sought government recognition of its leadership through the legally required process called *toma de nota*, taking note. Its agenda has been brought into line with the national and international agenda on matters such as union rights, a change in the labor regime, protection contracts, and others.<sup>18</sup>

## **The Movement for Food and Energy Sovereignty, Workers Rights, and Democratic Liberties**

THIS MOVEMENT, AS IT'S CALLED, was formed in January, 2008 as part of the political alliance of the UNT growing out of joint actions around the defense of the state-owned petroleum industry and against rising prices and the loss of the purchasing power of wages. The movement brings together diverse social forces of the left, including unregistered political parties, non-governmental organizations, workers' unions and peasant and fishers' organizations. It aims at the restoration of constitutional legality as opposed to the actual neoliberal model and its social impact — unemployment, poverty, and the lack of freedom are constants to the detriment of the marginal classes and the majorities of the field and the city. The movement brings together many of the most active labor unions, peasant organizations, NGOs, and political parties. The Movement proposes calling together organizations of peasants, unions, social movements, citizens, and the people in general who are harmed by current government policies to participate in our plan of struggle; to construct a movement that extends to all of the states and regions of the Mexican Republic; to promote solidarity and linkages with like-minded international organizations; and to demand that the government at all levels act in accordance with their constitutional powers to deal with the proposals to solve the political and social crisis of the country.<sup>19</sup> The Movement represents without doubt a great advance in the policy of alliance constructed over many years. But it also presents serious difficulties with regard to the real change of the situation of workers and changes in the corporate regime. Unity of action is limited by the essential programmatic differences. For example, the electrical workers in the SME take the position that they want to maintain the existing labor regime, while the National Confederation of Peasants (CNC), a peasant bulwark of the PRI, holds the same position in the countryside. The National Coordinating Committee (la CNTE), the opposition in the teachers' union, pushes for a radical change in the regime but keeping intact the existing labor legislation. The FAT and the UNT stand for the establishment of a new democratic labor regime, with International Labor Organization standards as the foundation, together with an end to corporate control over the unions exercised by the state and the employers.

## **Urgent Task of the Independent Union Movement Today**

THE INDEPENDENT UNION MOVEMENT TODAY faces a number of challenges that present it with urgent new tasks, while at the same time fundamental tasks still remain. The movement will continue to demand adherence to the standards of the International Labor Organization's Conventions 87 (the right to join a union of one's choosing); 98 (the right to collective bargaining); and 169 (the rights of indigenous peoples). At the same time, the movement has to broaden the relations of the labor movement to include all progressive political forces in order to push forward democratic reform which includes autonomy, democracy, and union rights. The movement must also try to form a closer relationship to Andrés Manuel López Obrador [presidential candidate in 2006 who claims to have won the election and calls himself the Legitimate President of the Legitimate Government of



Mexico], whose movement has so far remained absent in the struggle for labor rights. On a regional level, the Mexican independent union movement must continue to fight for the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The movement must broaden solidarity concretely in order to strengthen organizing strategies, to respond to conflicts and strikes, and to give attention to problems of health and safety in the workplace in alliance with the networks which are active on the U.S.-Mexico border. The movement needs to push forward the formation of a union coordinating committee of North America as recently exemplified in the work of the Trilateral Coordinating Committee of Energy Unions in which the Mexican organizations SME (electrical), SUTIN (nuclear), and the FAT (confederation) participated. And, it must support the campaigns of social movements and NGOs of the NAFTA countries dealing with issues of workers' rights, immigrant workers' rights, wages, employment, and poverty. The movement must contribute through the building of bridges and networks to the development of positions and alternatives toward the process of continental integration in Central America and the Caribbean, and it must develop common strategies to push forward the Continental Social Agenda. At the global level, the movement must also develop multilateral international exchanges with union organizations in other countries in order to compare experiences and to construct common strategies and build networks of solidarity at the international level. In particular, it must coordinate international strategies in the energy, metal, auto and autoparts, textile, transport, and maquila sectors. The independent union movement of Mexico needs to work with European unions to monitor and develop common strategies to confront the transnational firms which have productive investments in Mexico, with the goal of improving workers' conditions. There is much to be done.

## Footnotes

1. "It is customary in our country to affirm that we are practically the inventor of social rights. . . . Our social rights are the expression of state control over the social force of the workers." Jorge Megia Prieto's interview with Néstor de Buen, *Fidel Velásquez: 47 años de historia y poder* (Mexico: Ed. Diana., 1981) p. 145.
2. To learn more about the Italian influence in the imposition of the corporate system in Mexico, see Robles, Jorge, "Los contratos de protección: un producto de la Ley Federal del Trabajo," in: Bouzas, Alfonso et al, *Contratación Colectiva de protección en México. In-forme a la Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores (ORIT)* (Mexico: UNAM-ORIT, 2007), pp. 49-95.
3. XXXV Legislatura, *Diario de debates*. 21 de octubre de 1932. Consultada el 30 de enero de 2009.
4. This was the case with the Duro Bag company in Tamaulipas where an alliance between the National Union of Workers and the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras attempted to unionize a group of workers. The Federal Board of Conciliation and Arbitration (JFCA) held its hearing in a hall covered with placards that accused the Authentic Labor Front (FAT) which was advising the union of having sold out the country and of being allied with U.S. labor unions. For more details about this conflict, see: Méndez H., Luís., "La respuesta obrera maquiladora en el entorno binacional," *El Cotidiano*, May/
5. June, 2005, (Vol. 20, No. 11) pp. 63-71.
6. In Mexico where labor issues are involved the courts are responsible not to the judicial branch but rather to the executive branch.
7. Lozano Proposal (Feb. 2009): Regarding cheapening firings and strengthening corporatism, see: [www.fatmexico.org/](http://www.fatmexico.org/).
8. CONASIM, "Sindicalismo con responsabilidad social".
9. Rendón, Armando, "Los reformismos en el Congreso del Trabajo," in *Confederaciones Obreras y Sindicatos nacionales en México*, ed. by Luís H. Mendez, Carlos García y Marco Antonio

Leyva. Eon ediciones. México 2005.

10. That's how Ramón Gámez began his union business.
11. The case of the Sindicato Progresista Justo Sierra de Ramón Gámez, at the company Zinc y sus derivados S.A. where the FAT was able to win back their collective bargaining agreement for the workers in 1997.
12. For more details see: López Laredo, Gustavo. "Democracia y corporativismo sindical. El caso de los trabajadores del metro — 1970-1987," Bachelor's Thesis, ENAH-SEP, Cuicuilco 2001, here.
13. The CTM union called a strike and carried it out in collusion with TV Azteca so that that television consortium could take over the channel. See: Gómez Leyva, Ciro, "La infame historia del canal televisivo secuestrado," *Etcétera*, August 18, 2005.
14. Federación de asociaciones de periodistas mexicanos A.C., "Agresiones a la libertad de expresión en el continente americano," June 2005.
15. Here.
16. Consultada el 8 de marzo de 2009.
17. See here. The Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME) holds that it is not necessary to change Mexico's labor laws, that enforcing them would be sufficient.
18. Nacional Coordinating Committee of the FAT, "Political Report," Documents of the XI National Congress November 1997, Oaxtepec, Morelos.
19. The first four are a contribution directly from the FAT based on its program and structure.
20. Canto, Manuel, "Perspectivas Políticas 2009," a presentation to the FAT on February 28, 2009.