Mexican Government Prepares to Seize Mexico City Power Plants to Break Power of Electrical Workers Union

written by Dan La Botz | September 30, 2009

The Mexican Preventive Police (PFP) are preparing to occupy the facilities of the Central Light and Power Company in Mexico City in an attempt to break the militant Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME), according to a union press release. The union warns that the quasi-military occupation of the plants could come within a week. The PFP have been used in the last three years to attempt to break strikes of miners and steelworkers as well as to try to crush popular social movements. Mexican police have previously been used to occupy the facilities of telephone workers and others to break strikes. The Mexican government used the police or army to crush militant movements of workers in 1959, of students in 1968, and of electrical workers in 1975. Government Attack on Electrical Workers This current threat is the latest in a series of attacks on the union by the government of Felipe Calderón. The Felipe Calderón administration, having spent three years trying to destroy the Mexican Miners and Metal Workers Union (SNTMMRM), has now opened a new front in its war on the working class. In September the government launched a multifaceted attack intended to destroy the Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME) which has been at the center of resistance to its neoliberal programs. The government's attack has several elements. First, the government is supporting a small dissident faction within the union, using that as an opportunity to meddle in the union's internal life with the goal of breaking its militant leadership. Second, the government, which is also the employer, has reduced the budget for the state-owned Central Light and Power Company (LFC). Third, the government is also calling for a change in company management and for the complete restructuring of the company. The "Union Transparency" Dissidents The Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME), has a long history as a rarity in the Mexican labor movement: a union which is both independent and democratic. Historically, union elections have often been contested, rival factions argue out their differences within the union, and then later they come together to fight the company and the government which stands behind it. All of this changed earlier this year when, after a contested union election won by incumbent Martín Esparza Flores, the dissident group which calls itself Union Transparency led by Alejandro Muñoz Reséndiz took its complaints to the Secretary of Labor (STPS), opening the door to government involvement in the union. The Secretary of Labor, Javier Lozano Alarcón who has led the attack on the Miners union, has now, through a procedure known as "toma de nota" (taking note) refused to recognize Esparza Flores as head of the union. The Secretary of Labor through the toma de nota procedure may not only refuse to recognize the union's officers, but may also declare the election invalid. In practice, these administrative procedures (which are nowhere found in Mexican labor law) are used against independent or democratic unions or against unions opposing government policies, and almost never against government backed, employer controlled or gangster-run unions. Without government approved and recognized officers, the union officials cannot engage in collective bargaining or other union activities, leaving the union officially leaderless. Violent Attack on the Union by Dissidents On September 23, according to the elected SME leadership, Muñoz Reséndiz and between 20 and 30 other Union Transparency members, together with about 150 other persons who were not members of the union, some of them armed, attacked the union headquarters in Mexico City. The attackers robbed the union, taking money, checkbooks, and records. A union press release on that date declared Union Transparency to be a pro-government group backed by Secretary of Labor Javier Lozano Alarcón. The union leadership pledged to defend the union hall and called upon other union groups, social movements and political parties to take note of these

developments. In a press conference held a couple of days later, Esparza showed security camera videos of the attack. The union also filed legal charges against Muñoz Reséndiz and others involved. Afterwards at a union meeting that lasted several hours, members voted to remove Muñoz Reséndiz from the office of union treasurer and to expel him from the union. Cutting the Budget, Restructuring LFC The Calderón government proposes to gradually reduce the Central Light and Power Company (LFC) budget, with 641.7 million pesos for 2010; 486.2 million in 2011; 464.3 million in 2012; 162.9 in 2013; and 164.7 million in 2014. The SME leadership argues that this will gradually starve the LFC, leading to blackouts in the region it serves: the Federal District (Mexico City), and the states of Mexico, Morelos, Puebla and Hidalgo. During the later years of the Institutional Revolutionary Party governments, from 1980 to 2000, there were constant battles over the budget and over the reorganization of the country's nationalized electric power industry. The PRI presidents would have liked at times to have combined the LFC with the Mexican Electrical Commission (CME), the company which serves the rest of Mexico. That would have forced the independent SME to merge with the government-controlled Sole Union of Mexican Electrical Workers (SUTERM). Now, the issue is somewhat different, though the process could also lead to the dissolution Light and Power and its merger with the Mexican Electrical Commission. Calderón's administration has two motives in its attack on the SME. First, it wants to break the SME because it has been the center of so many movements resisting the Calderón government, its neoliberal policies, and particularly its plans to privatize the petroleum and electric power industries. Second, Calderón wants specifically to privatize the electrical industry, including the Central Light and Power Company, and to do so it must break the power of the SME. An Attack on SME is an Attack on the Labor Movement The government's attack on the Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME) represents an attack on the entire labor movement, because it is an attack on one of the labor movement's strongest pillars. The SME created the National Front Against Privatization. The SME joined with the National Union of Workers (UNT) and other worker, peasant and social organizations to former broader front, including the so-called Frentote that brought together virtually all progressive organizations. The SME, at times working with the UNT, took positions on legislative issues before the Congress. One could argue that SME has represented an important part of the vanguard of Mexican labor, a catalyst for broader coalitions, a union that fought not only over its trade union issue, but also over social and political issues of concern to many other unions and to the working class and the Mexican people as a whole. Only a few other union organizations — such as the Authentic Labor Front (FAT), the National Coordinating Committee of the Teachers Union (CNTE) — have played such a role. The breaking of the back of the SME would be a tragedy for the entire workers' movement, for the social movements, and for the left. Clearly, this represents one more step in rightward and authoritarian direction in which the Mexican state is moving. When seen in the context of the militarization that has accompanied the war on drugs, the attempt to destroy the Miners Union, the current budget and tax proposal, and the appointment of Arturo Chávez Chávez to the office of Interior Secretary, one has to recognize that the Mexican state has moved far toward becoming a kind of neoliberal authoritarian state. The Calderón administration, having spent three years trying to destroy the Mexican Miners and Metal Workers Union (SNTMMRM), has now opened a new front in its war on the working class. In September the government launched a multifaceted attack intended to destroy the Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME) which has been at the center of resistance to its neoliberal programs. The government's attack has several elements. First, the government is supporting a small dissident faction within the union, using that as an opportunity to meddle in the union's internal life with the goal of break its militant leadership. Second, the government, which is also the employer, has reduced the budget for the state-owned Central Light and Power Company (LFC). Third, the government is also calling for a change in company management and for the complete restructuring of the company. The "Union Transparency" Dissidents The Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME), has a long history as a rarity in the Mexican labor movement: a union which is both independent and democratic. Historically, union elections have often been contested, rival factions argue out their differences

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