

Mexican Teachers Union Leader Jailed For Stealing Union Funds

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In a major event that will have a serious impact on Mexican politics and labor unions, Elba Esther Gordillo, who for more than twenty-five years has led the Mexican Teachers Union (el SNTE), was arrested on Feb. 26 on the charge of embezzling millions of dollars in union funds which she reportedly deposited in banks in Europe and spent on real estate. Mexican Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam charged Gordillo with money laundering, saying she used the union funds to pay for airplanes, pilot training, her plastic surgeries, and purchases of luxury items in the United States.

The attorney general said the arrest was based on information provided by the Financial Intelligence division of the Mexican Treasury Department. She reportedly spent in the last three years more than US\$2.2 million at Neiman Marcus stores alone. President Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) reportedly followed the attorney general's investigation and arrest of Gordillo closely, and justified the arrest by saying that the government was protecting union members' funds.

The arrest of Gordillo follows President Peña Nieto's success in pushing through the Mexican Congress and the state governments an educational reform intended to weaken the Mexican Teachers Union. Gordillo and her union opposed the reforms, but proved incapable of stopping them from passing. The arrest of Gordillo by the PRI government is a signal by the President and his party that they will not tolerate opposition to their program from the labor unions or any other sector of society. Other corrupt union leaders—and there are many—have been put on notice that they had best not oppose Peña Nieto and the PRI or they will pay the price. Gordillo's arrest is particularly aimed at intimidating Romero Deschamps, the head of the notoriously corrupt Mexican Petroleum Workers Union, who has opposed Peña Nieto's plans to privatize the Mexican Petroleum Company.

Deschamps, who is a PRI legislator in the Congress, has much to fear, not only because of his own history but also because of the way the government has dealt with his predecessors. When Carlos Salinas de Gortari of the PRI became president in 1988, he moved quickly to intimidate the Petroleum Workers and the Miners Union. On January 10, 1989, only a few days after taking office, Salinas sent police and army units to attack the Petroleum workers' union headquarters with bazookas, blowing the doors off and arresting the union's leader Joaquín Hernández Galicia, known as "La Quina," on charges of illegal possession of weapons. Salinas then chose Sebastian Guzman Cabrera to head the oil workers union and he in turn was succeeded by Deschamps in 1993.

Independent union leaders have also been put on guard. Presidents Vicente Fox (2000-2006) and Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), both of the National Action Party (PAN), brought charges of embezzlement of union funds against Napoleón Gómez Urrutia of the Mexican Miners and Metal Workers Union (SMMRM). The Fox administration brought the charges against Gómez Urrutia after he accused the government of "industrial homicide" in the mine disaster at Pasta de Conchos on Feb. 19, 2006, that left 65 miners dead. More important, however, may have been Gómez Urrutia's attempt to take over leadership of the Congress of Labor (CT), the umbrella organization of Mexico's "official" unions which generally subordinate themselves to government policies and employer interests. When he took office in December of 2006, Calderón and his administration continued the attempt to persecute the miners' leader and to weaken the union.

The struggle revolved principally around Local 65 of the huge and historic Cananea mine in the

northern state of Sonora. After many labor conflicts and altercations with government authorities, finally on June 6, 2010, Federal police stormed the mine, violently removing miners, their family members and supporters. Despite the Calderón government's violent attempts to suppress the miners, Gómez Urrutia continued to lead the mine workers from Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, while the miners continued to use job actions and strikes to win the best contracts in Mexico in mines and steel plants.

On the legal front, the Second Chamber of the Mexican Supreme Court ruled 3-1 that the Mexican Labor Secretary had acted illegally when he withdrew legal recognition from Gómez Urrutia as General Secretary of the National Union of Mine, Metal and Steelworkers (Los Mineros), in 2008. Gómez Urrutia and the miners received strong support both nationally and internationally. Investigations by the international labor movement found the government's charges to be false. Last spring, another Mexican court threw out the last criminal charge against Gómez Urrutia, who has lived in Canada with support from the United Steel Workers since 2006.

What these various cases show is that the both the PRI and the PAN have been prepared to use the state to attempt to break the power of unions that stand in the way of their policies and their plans. Many other cases could be mentioned where the state uses its knowledge of union corruption or other illegal acts to bring charges against union officials, and then holds those charges over the union officers' heads as a way of forcing them to adhere to the ruling party's political line. In other cases, evidence and charges can be fabricated to bring a union to heel. What is happening now against Gordillo represents just one event, though a very important event, in the long history of state manipulation of Mexican unions.

Perpetual leader

Only last October Gordillo, who has led the union since 1989, was once again reelected to be its chief. In a union where her political machine controlled virtually every office, she received 3,205 votes in her favor with no opposing candidates, at a closely controlled convention with 3,287 delegates in attendance. While there are entire states where rank-and-file teachers have taken control and where tens of thousands regularly march and demonstrate to oppose her policies, the union opposition is regularly shut out of the national conventions.

Gordillo's domination of the union goes back more than a quarter of a century. When, in 1989, teachers throughout Mexico rebelled against their union's then dictatorial leader Carlos Jonguitud Barrios, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari intervened, and with no legal basis for doing so, appointed Elba Esther Gordillo to head el SNTE. Gordillo, taking up the rhetoric of the rebellious teachers promised that the union "would never again be controlled by such a dictatorial political boss" as Jonguitud. Yet today, at age 67, Gordillo has become just such a boss. She is one of Mexico's sempiternal leaders who once in power hold on until either they die or another president comes along to remove and replace them.

Gordillo's evolution should not be surprising. She began her union career as a loyal member of the Revolutionary Vanguard caucus headed by Jonguitud Barrios, a corrupt and violent bureaucrat who colluded with the Secretary of Public Education (SEP) to suppress critical voices and dissident. Barrios was, of course, loyal to the PRI, the party that had ruled Mexico from 1929 until 2000. His union served as the most important component of the PRI's electoral machine, able to mobilize its one million members to turn out and vote. He was accused, though never convicted, of having opposition teachers murdered.

Never part of the union opposition movement, not even during the democratic upsurge of 1988-89, Gordillo had remained loyal to the Revolutionary Vanguard machine. She never spoke out

against Jonguitud, never joined the dissidents, and did not become the union's leader through a democratic political process, but was rather appointed by recently elected President Salinas, with the understanding that she would head off the democratic rank-and-file rebellion in the union and keep the union structure and the PRI's political machine intact. She proved more than up to the job.

Gordillo used all of the resources of the Mexican state to reconstruct a political machine in the union. Like her predecessor, she colluded with the SEP. That provided her with economic resources: lots of money, jobs for her loyalists, and the power to discipline dissidents by having them fired. Hundreds of SEP ghost employees (they're called "aviators" in Mexico) worked for Gordillo's union machine rather than in the schools teaching children. Advancement in the workplace, in an educational career, and in the union depended on Gordillo's approval. Several of those who served in union leadership positions were her relatives and in-laws.

Gordillo also worked closely with the Institutional Revolutionary Party which she had joined in 1970, during a period when the one-party-state was engaged in violent repression of the country's labor and social movements. She became a leader of one of the PRI's most important labor unions, served the PRI as Secretary of Organization of the National Executive Council (1986—1987), General Secretary of the Council of National Popular Organizations (1997—2002), and General Secretary of the National Executive Council, the second highest office in the party.

As a PRI Congresswoman, she headed up the PRI delegation in the lower house until the early 2000s, when Gordillo clashed with the PRI leadership. She then turned in the direction of the National Action Party (PAN), becoming a supporter of PAN presidents Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón. In 2005, when she was on the outs with the PRI, her union also created its own political party, the New Alliance Party (PANAL), as one way to exert political pressure on the other parties. When Calderón's fortunes began to decline, Gordillo veered back in the direction of the PRI, becoming a tacit supporter of Enrique Peña Nieto who was recently elected president.

Beating Back Dissent

Though her union's constitution has a clause, typical of Mexican unions, prohibiting reelection, it has been ignored. She has not ruled the union without opposition. During her 24 years in office, she has been constantly opposed by the National Coordinating Committee (la CNTE), an independent, democratic, and militant opposition within the union, as well as by other opposition groups. The dissidents generally control the union in the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, and some Mexico City locals, and more recently in Michoacán, as well as having a significant presence in several other states. Yet despite the opposition's remarkable organization and mass mobilizations of tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of teachers in protest marches, strikes, and mass occupations of state capitals and often of the Secretary of Education building and surrounding streets in Mexico City, they have been unable to build a majority movement that could unseat her.

Gordillo has used her tremendous political power to beat back the opposition. She and her loyalists control virtually all of the top offices in the national union and fill all of the union staff positions. When it comes time for national meetings or conventions, the location is usually changed at the last moment to make it difficult for the dissidents to attend or protest. Sometimes, as in the national convention that has just reelected her, the convention site is changed to a remote resort locations such as Playa del Carmen in the state of Quintana Roo on the Yucatan Peninsula far from the dissidents in Mexico City or the states of central, western and southeastern Mexico. Those few dissident teachers who did show up are kept away from the event by the state police and private guards. The convention delegates, virtually all Gordillo loyalists, have been each year rewarded with expensive toys, one year Hummer automobiles and last year a computer for every delegate.

Speaking to the convention, Gordillo told the delegates, "Friends, there is no doubt about it. This union is a democratic, pluralistic union, a strong union, the strongest in Mexico and throughout Latin America." With the Mexican Congress debating a reform of the country's Federal Labor Law, including proposals to make unions more transparent, she announced that the convention had approved new statutes that would create an oversight committee and establish full transparency. "We have nothing to hide," she said. She promised the convention that if they worked hard they could have everything done by Saturday and rest on Sunday at the beach.

Despite the union constitution's prohibition of reelection, or to bypass it, Gordillo has until now held the position of "president for life." At the last convention, Gordillo created a new leadership body called the Supreme General Council that stands above the union's other leadership bodies. The new leadership Council was reduced from 12 to 8 members, and she gave up her old title of "eternal leader" to become the union's general secretary, the top officer. The national executive committee has 43 officers, all of whom are her loyalists. At the same time, the terms of all union positions were increased from four to six years. She justified these changes saying, "We're going for a horizontal union, completely horizontal."

And now she has been arrested throwing into disarray Mexico's labor movement and politics.