Mexican Unions Enter the National Elections Deeply Divided

written by Dan La Botz | March 24, 2012

On the political front, the Mexican working class has never been more divided. Mexico's labor unions are mobilizing for the national presidential, congressional and gubernatorial elections on July 1, but they are doing so in support of a variety of rival parties and candidates left, right, and center. There is no incumbent, because Mexico's Constitution forbids presidential reelection after one six-year term, so President Felipe Calderón's name will not be on the ballot. His party is in any case out of favor with the voters following four years of economic crisis, leaving nearly half the country living in poverty, and with almost 60,000 people killed in the drug wars. Over the last several decades, 13 million Mexicans, more than 10 percent of the entire population, unable to find a good job at a decent wage in their own country, have left Mexico and now live in the United States.

Unlike U.S. labor unions, which despite their disappointment in Obama's first term, have almost without exception rallied to the president and the Democrats, in Mexico some unions are supporting the coalition of the left-of-center Andrés Manuel López Obrador, while others support Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and yet others back Josefina Vázquez Mota of Calderón's conservative National Action Party (PAN). The parties win union support in part by putting union officials on their slates as candidates for some of the seats distributed among the parties on the basis of proportional representation (seats called *plurinominales*). The Mexican House has 500 seats, 300 directly elected in specific districts, 200 elected on the basis of the size of each party's vote. The Mexican Senate has 128 seats, 32 of which are based on proportional representation. Union leaders desire those proportional representation seats for the status, the salaries, the perquisites of office, and to put forward the union's position in the Congress.

From the PRI to the PAN: Still a Mafia

For the 75 years that the PRI ruled Mexico as a virtual one-party state, leaders of labor and peasant unions—many of them put in power by the ruling party—turned out their members for every election, loading them up in buses, taking them to the polls, and giving them barbeque and beer in return for their loyal votes. Workers often felt they had little choice but to vote as told. Taking a job in industry or public employment meant automatic membership in a state controlled union and in the ruling party. Disloyal union members who supported other parties might be fired, expelled from their union, beaten, or, if there was a serious opposition candidate running, even murdered. Union officials who supported the ruling party got lucrative political positions, while workers could generally expect job security as long as they kept their mouths shut. So it was for decades.

With the defeat of the PRI in 2000 and the election of Vicente Fox, the old state-controlled labor federations began to splinter and many federations and unions went their own separate ways. Under PAN President Felipe Calderón, the fragmentation of the labor unions has only increased, though this does not necessarily reflect the real interests, opinions or votes of the working class. Where once it was the unions that got out the vote, today it is more often television advertising that does most to motivate voters, and the airwaves are dominated by the corporate media and conservative candidates. The newfound political independence of unions and voters seems to be more a reflection of the growth of the power of the media and the breakdown of the old state-party-union system than it is of genuine independent-minded voters or workers' class consciousness.

Off to the Polls with the PRI

A large section of the labor movement, most important the Congress of Labor (CT), the powerful Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), and the industrial unions, remains more or less loyal to the Institutional Revolutionary Party, and especially so this year with the PRI's Peña Nieto leading in the polls. Carlos Romero Deschamps, for example, the corrupt labor dictator who heads the Mexican Petroleum Workers Union (STPRM), will appear on the PRI's candidates list for Congress. These "official" unions—authoritarian, bureaucratic, and callous at best, gangsterized, violent and utterly corrupt at worst—negotiate the majority of the nation's collective bargaining agreements. Some 80 or 90 percent of those are "protection contracts" designed to protect employers from genuine unions. Many of these are "ghost" unions unknown to the workers they represent.

When it held national power, the PRI put these union's officers in the Congress, subsidized the unions with millions upon millions of pesos, offered them lucrative contracts, and used the Secretary of Labor and the Labor Boards to support loyal union officials against reformers and rank-and-file rebels in their unions. Wherever it holds state power the PRI continues to work closely with these so-called "official" unions. For many union officials, it's understandably hard to imagine that another party or candidate could beat a deal like that. Naturally many of them will be working to put the PRI back in power.

Some Unions Turn to the PAN

Yet, some major unions have opted to support the conservative National Action Party, having been won over by that party's blandishments during its 12 years in power. Most important among the unions which have swung over to the right is the National Union of Social Security Workers (SNTSS) headed by Valdemar Gutiérrez Fragoso. During the 1990s, the 350,000 member Social Security Workers broke with the political establishment, moving to the left and joining the new independent National Union of Workers (UNT) which tended to align politically with the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). But in the 2000s, Calderón succeeded in wooing Gutiérrez, supporting the union leader in his election as a Congressional Representative on the PAN ticket. So now in return Gutiérrez is supporting the PAN and its candidate Josefina Vázquez Mota. This is no small thing; his union members work in thousands of facilities of the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS) in large cities, small towns, and rural areas.

Gutíerrez Fragoso and the Social Security Workers are not the only ones supporting the PAN; several other labor federations and unions are doing so as well. The General Union of Workers and Peasants of Mexico (UGOCM), the General Council of Workers and Communities (CONSUCC), and the National Integrating Union of Solidarity Organizations and the Social Economy (UNIMOS) also support the PAN. López Macias, head of UNIMOS, will be a PAN candidate in the northern state of Coahuila. One of his close friends is reported to be Guillermo Velasco Arzac, head of the secret quasi-fascist organization, the Yunque.

The Erratic Political Path of the Teachers Union

Another major union, the Mexican Teachers Union (el SNTE) has had quite an erratic political career under the leadership of its powerful and opportunistic leader Elba Esther Gordillo. Following a rank-and-file rebellion in the 1980s, Gordillo—never a rebel herself—came to head the teachers union through the support of former President Carlos Salinas de Gortaria of the PRI. She remained loyal to the PRI and became one of the party's top leaders until 2006, when after a fight with another PRI leader she was expelled from the party. Not to be deterred in her quest for power, she formed an alliance with President Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party. This past year, however, as it became clear that the PAN was likely to lose the national elections, she changed sides

again, returning to the PRI.

Gordillo does not go to any party empty handed. Her Teachers Union has over one million members, the largest union in Mexico. Using her union as the base, in 2005 she also created her own New Alliance Party (PANAL), allowing her to run her own candidates but also to coalesce with other parties when it served her interest. With union locals and party committees in every state, city and town in the nation, her organizations are a potent political force allowing her to make big demands on her allies. This year, however, when she returned to the PRI, her asking price—expressed as the number of senators, representatives and governors she expected to be given—was simply too high, and once again they drove her away. So now Gordillo's PANAL party has put forward its own candidate, the well-known environmentalist Gabriel R. Quadri de la Torre. He appeared out of nowhere, with no democratic niceties, supposedly invited to become the party's candidate at a meeting of a book club Quadri had just joined headed by Gordillo's party front-man Luis Castro Obregón.

The Left Divided Too

Not only are the major unions divided between the parties, but even the unions on the left are at odds about how to go about supporting their favorite candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), the former Mayor of Mexico City. Some union leaders are joining López Obrador's new political organization, Movement for National Renovation (MORENA); others are working with the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution, while still others have joined with the Labor Party (PT) or the Citizen's Movement (MC), all of which taken together are called the Progressive Movement (MP). Others unions leaders, however, are supporting the new Political Organization of the People and the Workers (OPT) which also supports López Obrador, though independently. Each of these choices has its own particular political logic aimed at winning victory for some cause, or seats in the Congress for some union leader or would-be politician, or, in one case, intent on creating an independent workers' party. The choices also measure how happy with or how disappointed the unions are in López Obrador's past practice and his current campaign.

López Obrador is usually praised on the left as the Mexico City mayor who gave pensions to the city's elderly, but he also did much more. As Mayor, López Obrador worked to encourage private corporations and wealthy individuals to rebuild, modernize, and gentrify the city. Most famously he created a partnership with Carlos Slim, the multi-billionaire who is Mexico's and the world's richest man, to restore and gentrify the historic district of the city. He also offered tax breaks to large corporations to encourage them to build office and apartment buildings, leading to one of the biggest building booms in the country's history. To take on Mexico City's rising crime rates, he brought in New York's former mayor Rudy Giuliani, known for his attacks on organized and white collar crime, as well as for his strict handling of low level crime and people that the well-off perceive as public nuisances, such as the homeless and panhandlers.

López Obrador's Problematic Labor Policy

Most troubling to sections of the labor left was López Obrador's labor policy. While mayor of Mexico City, López Obrador permitted the Labor Board to continue to deal with phony unions and their corrupt lawyers and union officials, while turning a deaf ear to the demands of independent unions, union reformers and rank-and-file workers. Some of the city's 200,000 public employees found it impossible to have their independent labor unions legally recognized. Workers at the time said: whatever we have won we got by going to the streets—the López Obrador government gave us nothing.

Almost every day, López Obrador finds new ways to offend his intellectual, working class, peasant

and urban poor supporters. They are disappointed that among his closest advisors are men like Manuel Camacho Solís, also a former mayor of Mexico City who was among Mexico's pioneer neoliberals. López Obrador has most recently infuriated his left wing by accepting as a candidate of his Progressive Movement Manuel Bartlett Díaz, the man generally believed to be responsible for stealing the 1988 election. With the left nationalist Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas winning the election, Bartlett declared that the computer system had failed, and when the system came back online Salinas was the victor. Now Bartlett is backed by López Obrador. Once considered a radical, for the last several months López Obrador has been courting business, recruiting professional politicians with checkered careers, and wooing more conservative voters.

From the "Legitimate Government" to La Morena

Yet López Obrador hopes to bring his left wing supporters, some Mexican entrepreneurs, moderate voters, and all of the country's disaffected citizens together, largely through the new political organization he created on October 2, 2011, called the Movement for National Renovation or MORENA. The acronym and nickname of the party, MORENA, deserves some explanation. *Una morena* is a dark skinned woman, symbolic of Mexico's dark-complexioned working class masses. Months ago, López Obrador's organizations produced a video, accompanied by the group's official song, featuring a beautiful young woman of dark complexion, *una morena*, representative not only of the Mexican people but also of its youth.

After he lost the controversial and probably fraudulent 2006 election as the candidate of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), López Obrador, claiming to be the "legitimate president of Mexico," spent five years as a peripatetic perpetual candidate, visiting villages, towns and cities throughout Mexico and building his new political organization. During his wanderings, he spoke to crowds of millions in Mexico City, to tens of thousands in smaller cities, and to hundred or even scores in the villages, all in a tireless struggle to keep his name before the public, to undermine the legitimacy of the PAN government of Felipe Calderón, and to put forward his own increasingly moderate program.

The Loving Republic

The creation of MORENA proved necessary because of the factional divisions and corruption in the PRD and the weakness of the Labor Party (PT) and of the Citizens Movement (formerly Convergence for Democracy), the three parties that have supported him and his program over the last several years. At the same time, the establishment of his own party also responds to López Obrador's own character, politics and ambition. A charismatic caudillo, he wants his own political instrument, one capable of bringing together both his working class and poor people base and a section of the middle and business classes. López Obrador claims to have brought to MORENA from his years of wandering in the wilderness some 2,217 municipal committees, 37,453 local chapters and 179,000 local leaders of its four million officially subscribed members. This is his personal following and his political capital.

Since he founded MORENA, López Obrador has announced that he is attempting to create "the loving republic," a slogan that allows him to avoid talking about the serious issues of social class and political program. He has also made overtures to the Mexican business class hoping to win broader support on the right for his campaign. And he has attempted to win over the corporate media by arguing that he is not the fire-breathing López Obrador of 2006 whom the media constantly compared to Hugo Chávez, the radical president of Venezuela who calls for "Twenty-First Century Socialism," but rather a moderate who should be compared to Luis Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil, the recently retired president of Brazil who on the one hand brought social welfare payments to the country's poor, but also worked closely with banks and construction companies during his

presidency.

Some union leaders have simply joined MORENA. Bertha Luján, for example, a former co-president of the Authentic Labor Front (FAT), served as Secretary of Labor in López Obardor's "Legitimate Government" and now works as his regional organizer in her home state of Chihuahua.

The PRD, the PT and Labor

Candidates, however, have to run on the ballot line of the Progressive Movement, a coalition made up of the Party of the Democratic Revolution, the Labor Party, and the Citizens Movement. The PRD, founded in 1989 by groups which had left the PRI, the Communist Party which had dissolved itself into the PRD, and other leftist factions, has always been a congeries of rival leaders and hostile factions, with a few genuine idealists and many opportunistic politicians. Over the years, the PRD came to function as the voice in Congress of the independent labor federation, the National Union of Workers (UNT). Yet the UNT had no control and really very little influence over the party and its politicians. As the current election campaign has developed, labor union leaders like Napoleón Gomez Urrutia of the Mexican Miners and Metal Workers Union (SNTMMRM), Martín Esparza of the Mexican Electrical Workers (SME) and Francisco Hernández Juárez of the Mexican Telephone Workers Union (STRM), have been disappointed that the PRD, needing to reward its own party leaders, has declined to slate many of the independent union leaders, so they have turned elsewhere.

Given the PRD's failure to include them on its slate, some of these Mexican union leaders such as Esparza and Hernández Juárez, have turned to the smaller but more accommodating Labor Party (PT). The PT was founded in 1990 by a Maoist group and its satellite community, peasant and labor organizations, with the assistance of former President Salinas. Since 2000, the PT has been aligned with the PRD and the Citizens Movement, the three together constituting Mexico's parliamentary left. In addition to Esparza and Hernández Juárez, several other union, peasant and social movement candidates are looking to be included on the PT list.

An Independent Workers' Party?

Some in Mexico's labor left, however, reject working with the MORENA, the PRD, or the PT, because they hope to form an independent workers' party, something that has virtually never existed in Mexico. While there have been leftist parties—Communist, Maoist and Trotskyist—and several populist nationalist parties, such as the Mexican Workers Party (PMT) during the last 50 years, Mexico has never had a party which grew up as an expression of the labor unions and the workers' movements. Nothing like the British Labor Party, the European Socialist and Social Democratic Parties, or the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) ever took off in Mexico. Now there is an attempt at creating such a party based on the most active and visible Mexican union, the Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME).

From the beginning, the backbone of the OPT has been the Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME) led by Martín Esparza (who as mentioned above is also seeking to run as a candidate of the Labor Party – PT). The force propelling this effort is the more than two-year experience of the Electrical Workers fighting to get back their former jobs. In October 2009, President Felipe Calderón ordered police and army units to occupy the facilities of the Mexican Light and Power Company; he then liquidated the company and fired the 45,000 person workforce. Since then 16,500 SME members have taken their struggle to the streets and the courts, to the legislature and to international organizations.

Why the OPT? Different Motivations

That struggle led to the OPT. In August of 2011, a thousand delegates from 22 states, members of Mexican labor unions, social movements and political organizations—but most of them Electrical Workers—met in Mexico City on August 27 to form the Workers and Peoples Political Organization (OPT) with the goal of "driving from government those responsible for the national disaster." The OPT, like MORENA, is not a political party, but rather a political organization, a kind of proto-party, but its goal is precisely the creation of a workers' party in Mexico. (The Manifesto calling for the founding of the OPT can be found here.)

After trying unsuccessfully to win the PRI's support to get their jobs back, the SME turned to López Obrador, creating OPT to support his campaign. The SME's Esparza issued a public call for the creation of the new party, and in October 2010 at a rally of 60,000 people held in the Azteca Stadium in Mexico City. The OPT's founding documents emphasize the need for a new economic and political direction for the country, and mention the word socialism, though only as a distant goal. The documents focus on opposition to Mexico's richest industrialists, to the political establishment of the National Action Party (PAN) and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and to the role of the United States in Mexico. In early February of 2012, López Obrador at a meeting with the Electrical Workers' leadership and members promised to help the union win back the workers' lost jobs.

The Argument for a Workers' Party

The Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT) of Mexico, a Trotskyist socialist group, has been quite involved in the founding and promotion of this new proto-workers' party. The PRT has broader goals that go beyond winning back the electrical workers' jobs. They want to use the mass mobilization around López Obrador to build a workers' party. The PRT is pushing the OPT to bring in the miners, the dissident teachers, and all the other disenchanted and dispossessed. So far, however, the results of this campaign are unclear.

The OPT at this point is a rather weak organization, made up principally of many but not all of the 16,500 fighting electrical workers. Those are not many compared to the one million teachers, the 350,000 Social Security workers, or the couple million workers in the unions of the Congress of Labor and the Mexican Confederation of Labor who are being mobilized for other parties and candidates. But the PRT would argue, the Mexican Electrical Workers represent the real vanguard of the Mexican working class at this moment. They and the miners and the dissident teachers. And, they would argue, this is a genuine attempt to move to the left, to avoid a popular front style alliance with López Obrador, one that subsumes and subordinates the unions, and to create a truly independent workers movement. These leftists may in the end find it will be very difficult if not impossible to avoid being drawn into López Obrador's wake, but it is at least a serious attempt to address the issue. In the cacophony of labor's voices, the OPT seems hit a clear if not a very strong note. We will find out soon if anyone is listening.