Social Struggles in Mexico

Introduction

by Monty Neill and Johnny Machete

The debt is not our debt,
the people did not borrow abroad,
where then is the money,
the PRI ripped it off!
Chanted in demonstrations against the "Economic Solidarity Pact," Mexico[1]

Mexico has long been the scene of imperialist conquest: the Spanish over the Native Americans, the United States seizing half of Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century and repeatedly invading that country, most recently in 1916. Mexico has also suffered economic domination by US-based capital as well as European capital.

Conquest and domination has most assuredly not meant passivity by the Mexican working people. Most important of their many struggles was the Mexican revolution that began in 1910 and continued in waves through the 1930's, through which the workers won democratic rights, trade union rights, land redistribution, access to education and health care and more.[2] But as a joke in Mexico City puts it, referring to the streets one can drive to reach the downtown of the world's largest city, you take Revolucion to the end, turn right and you are on Reforma. Thus, as after all revolutions we know of, the struggle must, and does, continue. Despite the fruits of the revolution, the distribution of wealth and power remains extremely unequal, and has become worse in the crisis of the 1980s.

Mexico has become substantially industrialized, though it is by no means as industrialized as the U.S. or Japan. But Mexico has very low wages, even in sectors with modern technology and high levels of productivity, as in the maquiladoras in northern Mexico. As of April 1987, the minimum wage in Mexico was only one third of subsistence levels. That is only part of the story, for Mexico has undergone a devastating economic crisis (from which of course some have made fortunes).

From the early 1950's to around 1980, the Mexican minimum wage rose from approximately 250 to 900 pesos per month. At a stable exchange rate of 12.5/dollar, this meant an increase from $20 to over $70/month. However, as our interview about the struggles in Chiapas makes clear, the rise of oil revenues in the 1970's spurred inflation. The Mexican government borrowed enormous sums, ostensibly for development, much of which was exported to Swiss banks, etc., or consumed in lavish living by the ruling class. And after becoming the third most indebted nation (after the US and Brazil) and oil revenues collapsed, intensified inflation and devaluation ravaged the working class. In constant terms, the minimum wage in the nation fell to 500 pesos, or $40/month in 1985. For educators, a more middle-income position, the gain had been from about 600 in the early 1950's to a peak of around 1700 before falling under 1000 ($80) in 1984.[3]

Inflation, however, is only a part of the story. The peso that for decades exchanged at 12.5/dollar bottomed out in late 1987 at 2500/dollar, a two hundred-fold collapse in less than a decade. For the low-waged sectors of the working class, the crisis was compounded by the IMF-directed removal of subsidies on many basic products and increased prices on others. Remarked Guillermo Orozco, "One piece of bread, like a roll, was one peso. Now (10/86) it is 25. Tortillas have seen about the same increase. The subway went from one peso to 20, overnight. (In August 1987 it was 50.) Prices have more than doubled each year and wages have not kept up, not even close. I am sure many people are eating less. There are now beggars everywhere and many more of them."

The Mexican "middle class" also was hard hit and has shrunken greatly in size and wealth. "In some ways," observed Guillermo, "the middle class is most affected in terms of having to change their ways of living. The working class was already living on very little money. The Mexican middle class was living so high compared to others in Latin America. I went to Central America 12 years ago. With my Mexican pesos I could buy everything, as now you could buy everything with the dollar in Mexico. I could have the best dinner in town and pay a ridiculous amount, like one dollar. Before there was no difference between middle class people in the US and Mexico. No more. Seven years ago as a researcher,

I could make $1000 a month. Now I cannot make $150."[4]

Added Susan Street, "Before, upper middle class women did not work out of the house. What I notice a lot more is women making something, usually some sort of fried food, and taking it to sell on the sidewalks in front of their houses. There are a lot more peddlers, especially on buses and subways, and people singing for money. Even middle class women do this; before, it was just disabled people. Of course women, as elsewhere, do virtually all the work inside the house, but now they are also doing more work outside the house. In fact, everybody works more. There has been a vast increase in work."

The destruction of working class wages has been accompanied by a worsening of other conditions, such as health care and education, both guaranteed to much of the working class. Remarked H., with whom we talked in Mexico City, "Capital does not want the workers in Mexico educated. The major gains of the Revolution and the struggles since then are all being taken away." The working class' loss of income has materialized as the increased wealth of Mexican and multi-national capital.

The struggles in response to the crisis PAN (Partido Acción Nacional). Much were at first quite muted. The trade unions (as becomes clear in the pieces on the struggles of the teachers and the garment workers) are heavily bureaucratized and incorporated into the state and the PRI (the Partido Revolucionario Institutional which has governed since the 1930s), forcing the workers to fight against the unions, the dominant party, the state and private capital. In the context of the crisis, the right in Mexico, as elsewhere, has made significant gains in the electoral arena through the party of private capital, the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional). Much of the middle class, observed Guillermo, supports PAN. The left, however, has not been able to capitalize on the crisis, so that the "the real opposition is now between PRI and PAN."

In Mexico, as in the US,[5] the left essentially accepted the politics of austerity and scarcity. In 1981, the Communist Party merged with a number of smaller parties to form a Socialist party, PSUM, and in 1987 is merging with five additional groups to form the Mexican Socialist Party (PMS).[6] Despite the maneuvering, remarked Guillermo, "The left has been unable to build anything and they have not found a new strategy. They have lost credibility and they do not know what to do."

This did not prevent the left parties from attempting to take control over the mass movements that erupted in Mexico particularly after the devastating earthquake of September 1985. As all three pieces — on Tepito, the teachers and the garment workers — reveal, the efforts of the left parties have come to naught as autonomous struggles have developed in the forms of "cooperatives and peasant unions, organizations of housewives, popular fronts of squatters and poor urban dwellers, Christian base communities, independent unions and democratic currents within official unions, centers for popular education, committees of relatives of the disappeared [in the crisis, death squads have appeared in Mexico], ecologists, housing rights movements, etc. ['Street gangs' of youth are also increasingly organizing in overtly political fashion: *Boston Globe* 9/87.]...The new social movements are creating a political culture of self-government, based on the responsibility and democratic practices of participants. They develop horizontal links among themselves, building democracy from the ground up... The popular movement[s] today in Mexico ... do not form a homogenous bloc, but rather represent separate, multiple efforts that overlap in terms of their social composition (grassroots groups that share needs, workers that face similar problems), their goals (strengthening popular civil society), and their political practices (exercising direct democracy, independence from the State and political parties). What also unites them is their status as targets of repression and the need to defend themselves as well as their determination to confront the economic crisis and avoid the imposition of a 'modernizing' economic model in which the people are simply an obstacle.

The three articles we present are each representative of the autonomous struggles that have emerged in Mexico. Two relate specifically to the aftermath of the earthquakes of September 19 and 20, 1985. The earthquakes devastated downtown Mexico City, the part of the city built on top of the ancient Aztec capital and on what was for the Aztecs a lakebed. The old colonial structures were not damaged, but many newer buildings were. Most hard hit were more recent structures, the result, remarked a tour guide at the National Anthropological Museum, of bad architecture and corruption. Noted Guillermo, "A lot of primary schools were especially damaged. They were all built by the same company, part private and part government, and the construction was very cheap. Fortunately, the earthquake hit early in the morning before the children were in school." Other workers were not so lucky, as the story of *las costureras* will show.

After the quake, the workers mobilized to rescue thousands from the rubble. Within days, however, the army began to prevent self-organized rescue operations. The media, which had initially reported both these rescues and the corruption that resulted in the poorly constructed buildings that col-

Photo by Sharon Haggins Dunn

lapsed, began to report only on government relief efforts.

The government's efforts soon turned to capitalizing on the quake by attempting to remove tens of thousands of people from downtown Mexico City and relocate them to new housing on the outskirts of the city. This process, common to "urban renewal" everywhere, not only opens up downtown land to more profitable use but also eliminates community-based centers of working class power.[7]

But the working class refused to move. Where buildings were uninhabitable, people constructed makeshift aluminum structures on the sidewalks in front. They demanded that the government expropriate the damaged housing and build or rebuild housing in the shape and size and design that the community wants. Tepito represents a clear case of the continuity of these housing demands, the social base of the movements and their complex and varied efforts to obtain their demands. Pushed by popular power, the government responded with four programs, but attempted to dictate the form and implementation of the programs. The united popular organizations (CUD), however, forced the state to recognize a cooperative and neighborhood-based power over construction.[8]

If Tepito represents the efforts of communities to define their own existence, the story of las costureras in the aftermath of the earthquake represents the efforts of new sectors of waged workers to improve their working conditions. Of the three struggles discussed here, this one has been most hindered by the repressive and bureaucratic counterattack from employer, state and union. But workers can make headway against these forces, as indicated by the continuing struggles of the teachers in Chiapas.

Education struggles are not limited to teachers in Chiapas, or even to public school teachers throughout the country. In the winter of 1986-87, over 250,000 university students in Mexico City struck to demand a broadening of access to higher education (counter to the effort to limit access that the state had proposed) and democratization of the academic, administrative and governing structures of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). The strike forced the creation of a university congress in which students, academics, support workers and administrators are represented.

Workplace struggles are not limited to the schools. Massive strikes have hit Mexico, forcing the state to intervene to crush worker demands. The workers, usually moving independent of or in opposition to the official organizations, are seeking to block further IMF austerity programs, to increase wages, and to democratize the unions. Rural workers, such as the ejidatarios discussed in the article on Chiapas, have escalated their struggles on a national level. 20,000 campesinos from independent organizations (PRI has its peasant organizations, too) marched in Mexico City to commemorate the 68th anniversary of the death of Emiliano Zapata who helped initiate the Revolution under the slogan "Land and Liberty."

After the international stock market crash of October 1987, the Mexican government instituted the "Economic Solidarity Pact," supposedly the result of agreement among the government and labor, campesino and business sectors. It should have the effect of reducing wages to one-third of their 1977 levels. The pact has provoked mass demonstrations and expropriations, and led to formation of the "National Front of Resistance to the Economic Solidarity Pact." Among its demands are recuperation of lost worker and campesino incomes, reduction and control of prices, and immediate suspension of the foreign debt payments.[9]

In Mexico the crisis is not simply an "economic" crisis of an economy crippled by huge debt, foreign domination, runaway inflation (well over 100%/year) and increasing impoverishment. It is a crisis of the whole society that is simultaneously one aspect of the worldwide crisis.

On the one side, capital seeks to further clarify Mexico's integration into the international circuits of production (under the phrase "export promotion"). This effort has required the economic crisis that the Mexican working people have experienced, and the repression that has accompanied the imposition of austerity.

On the other side, faced with the irrelevance of the traditional left, the collapse of the ability of the PRI and its state institutions to mediate the struggle and exchange benefits for support, the growing power of very right wing, pro-US capital and its party, PAN, and the daily facts of the crisis, the working class has developed myriad forms of autonomous struggles and organizations which have had varying degrees of immediate success and ability to survive. Though a mass autonomous struggle and society may be emerging in Mexico, thus far the autonomous struggles tend to be independent of each other as well as of the structures of capital.

Marx thought that the new society would have to emerge from the womb of the old. The left has traditionally viewed this statement as a problem of the hangover of capitalism into socialism. But it has, in fact, a stronger meaning: the new society will emerge through the activities of an extremely heterogenous working class struggling against capital and within itself to create a new society.

The glimpses we see of this in Mexico are, we know, echoed elsewhere in the world. In Lima, Peru, scores of self-governing democratic communities have been settled and in Peru as a whole, estimated a high-ranking financial official, perhaps 90% of the economy is "underground."[10] In Chile, in the face of one of the world's most brutal regimes, the working class is constructing new communities and defending them against the state.[11] Observed the author of our piece on India in this issue, "In any Indian city one will find slumdwellers living and fighting just like the people in Santiago."

It is too early to know how thoroughly or how quickly these social forms can progress, how they can combine community and factory (including office and school) struggles, how internal contradictions (such as between men and women, income levels, or racial groups) will be overcome or will subvert the movements. But this much is known: if there is to be a future of working class power, these multiple, autonomous and overlapping movements are their primary form.

Footnotes

From interviews with Guillermo Orozco, Susan Street and H. *The Other Side of Mexico* #1, "Mexico's New Social Movements."

1) *The Other Side of Mexico* #4. (Available at $8 for 4 issues/yr., to Carlos A. Heredia/Equipo Pueblo, Apartado Postal 27-467, 06760, Mexico, D.F., Mexico.)

2) The best one-volume history of Mexico in English is James D. Cockroft, *Mexico: Class Formation, Capital Accumulation and the State,* Monthly Review.

3) "Mexico: Los Salarios de la Crisis," Arturo Anguiano (ed), et al, *Cuadernos Obreros,* AC (CDESTAC), Mexico: p 86.

4) Midnight Notes has concluded that the term "middle class" is frequently misleading in that it suggests that the largely wage-earning strata to whom labels such as 'white collar' or 'middle income' are applied are not working class. However, within the working class, type of work and level of wage substantially do define a hierarchy, one that capital attempts to use politically to ensure divisions within the working class.

5) See "Lemming Notes," *Midnight Notes* #7.

6) *The Other Side of Mexico* #1.

7) C.f., "D.C.: Spatial Deconcentration," *Midnight Notes* #4, *Space Notes*.

8) "After the Earthquakes," *The Other Side of Mexico* #1.

9) *The Other Side of Mexico* #4.

10) *Latin American Journey*, television show.

11) Leiva and Petras, *Monthly Review* 7&8/87.

LAS COSTURERAS

For a large number of women garment workers, las costureras, sewers, the earthquake and its aftermath was catalyst to a struggle to unionize and to obtain better working conditions and higher wages. Prior to the earthquake, they were working under terrible conditions and few outsiders knew of their situation. They worked in the basements of old, decrepit buildings for 8-10-12 hours a day, making less than the minimum wage, not receiving benefits they were legally entitled to, and subject to harassment from company goons.

The women started before seven in the morning, so that when the earthquake hit many were already working. Because each basement had but one door, the women could not get out and many were killed. It was a disaster akin to New York City's infamous Triangle Factory Fire of 1912 in which 146 women and children burned to death when the building caught fire and they could not escape. As in New York, so in Mexico: the terrible conditions and the tragedy spurred the workers' struggle.

At first, the public did not even know these women were there, and their families could not get any insurance money. Some of the bosses attempted to destroy the buildings quickly, to bury the women in the rubble and prevent anyone from knowing about them.

The surviving women organized themselves and formed one of the most democratic unions in Mexico, "Sindicato 19 de Septiembre." Las costureras set up tents in the area and insisted they would not move until the all the bodies of the workers were pulled out. They remained for weeks until all the dead were recovered. Meanwhile, they carried away the machinery before the bosses could get it, saying that after so many deaths they had the right to the means of production. The police came to the tents and threatened and pressured and beat the women to get the machinery back and to stop the organizing.

The women linked themselves to independent unions. Most unions are part of the state, both officially and practically, but there are a few independent unions and democratic tendencies in some of the official unions. These democratic groups have challenged the *charro* leadership that controls the vertical union structures and makes corrupt alliances with government officials.

Before the earthquake, there was either no union or one that had a "sweetheart" deal with the owners to protect the company from the workers, a deal negotiated by the Mexican Workers Confederation (CTM) that the workers usually were not even told existed. The women denounced the official unions because they never did anything for them. When the women organized, the official unions tried to absorb them, but las costureras resisted, ensuring the enmity of these unions.

The 19th of September Union was officially registered on October 20, 1985, just one month after the earthquake. The quick recognition was due in part to the massive support the women received as their story became known. Since then, however, the union has faced a difficult battle for the actual right to represent the workers. Employers have responded with mass firings, verbal, physical and sexual abuse, and forced overtime.

At union elections at one plant, "Comercializadora," workers from other factories were brought in to vote and CTM goons attempted to prevent workers from voting. Despite this, the 19th of September Union won the vote. However, the local Labor Arbitration and Conciliation Board refused to recognize the union's victory.

To protest, the union staged a ten-day sit-in in front of the National Palace. At two in the morning of May 1, 1987, the police drove the workers from the square to clear it for the official International Workers' Day March. (The state had been using the police to ensure that independent worker organizations were excluded from the March.) Finally, the government certified the PRI-controlled CTM as the "representative" of the workers at this one factory.

The union, in addition to continuing the fight for recognition at various factories, has moved in other directions. They opened a childcare center for 100 children of las costureras and started adult education and training classes for the workers. They began to develop contacts throughout Mexico and across the border into the southwestern US. They developed a tour of speakers and a film about their struggle that has reached out to US unions and groups of women, Chicanos, students and cultural workers.

Nonetheless, by the summer of 1987 the women had suffered substantial defeat in their ability to develop recognized unions of costureras. Within the union, many were now arguing that las costureras should not have tried to build an independent union but should have become part of the CTM and thereby entered into the efforts to democratize that union while insisting that the CTM do at least the minimum to ensure legal wages and benefits. The question is whether that sort of retreat, which would likely create despair, pessimism and a gradual withdrawal from union activity, would have ultimately been more disheartening and destructive than the clear cut defeat at the combined hands of CTM, employers and state that they suffered at Comercializadora and other plants.

In any event, and the matter is far from settled, the history of the union indicates the capacity of even the least powerful sectors of the class, very low-waged women, to organize autonomously. Las costureras put the state, the unions and the companies on the defensive and forced concessions from them, and they created international networks and independent organizations to meet their needs.

*[Information for **Las Costureras** came from interviews with Guillermo Orozco & Susan Street, the "International Bulletin" of the costureras, and discussions with supporters of the struggle. For information about the union, their tour and film, or to receive their "Intertional Bulletin" (in English and Spanish), contact Sindicato "19 de Septiembre," Apartad Postal M-10578, Correo Central, 06000 Mexico D.F., Mexico.]*

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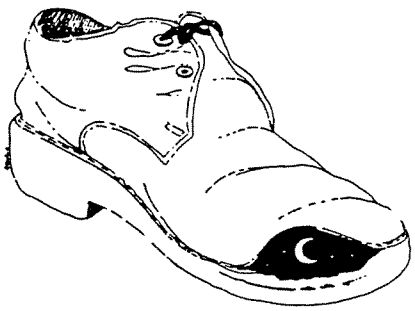

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