

Dateline Mexico by Hugo López Ochoa

School privatization challenged

Salinas's effort to impose tuition at public universities has triggered a revolt of unpredictable consequences.

After 20-30,000 students at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the largest public university in Ibero-America, took to the streets of Mexico City, the government of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari decided to postpone until 1994 a project to impose tuition payment.

Salinas backed off on the plan, which would have virtually privatized Mexico's public universities, because his intelligence services realized that the student movement that had arisen around the tuition issue had the potential to become a focal point for challenging the entire economic austerity policy imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Mexico since 1982—up to and including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), currently under negotiation.

At a June 23 demonstration on the tuition fight, contingents appeared from labor unions, the unemployed, farmers, housewives, and even the middle class, reflecting a generalized discontent not seen since 1988. "It wasn't worth risking so much for so little," said an editorial in the weekly *Siempre*, merely for a "niggardly and myopic financial stance" that was unable to see that "the opposition was being given a more powerful, effective, and overwhelming cause than the Virgin of Guadalupe." The UNAM, the editorial concluded, "could have produced a chain reaction in the economic discontent that society has accumulated" in recent years, which "could reach the point of placing the economic policy of the current admin-

istration in the dock."

A note published in *La Jornada* of June 27 revealed that the privatization of Ibero-America's public universities is a demand of the World Bank, which is refusing to back program credits for educational reform if tuition equivalent to 30% of per student cost is not imposed.

Samuel Carlson, a World Bank official, cynically declared that the tuition fight loses relevance since poor students generally have no access to higher education anyway, since they stop their education before reaching university levels out of the need to work for a living. The starvation wages earned by the average Mexican worker—between 50¢ to \$1 an hour—makes it impossible to dedicate time to study, even if offered for free. "Free education has not meant greater equality of access to higher education," concluded Carlson.

A study recently published by the National Association of Universities and Institutes of Higher Learning reveals that the Mexican student population in the public universities fell dramatically, from 136,807 at the undergraduate level in 1986 (including at the national schools of professional study) to 110,882 in 1990. This demonstrates that the financial crisis the national universities have suffered is hardly due to an excess of students, but rather to lack of an adequate state budget due to the IMF's demands for foreign debt payment. In the past 10 years, state investment in education fell to a mere 1.5% of GNP, one of the lowest rates in the world.

The elements that have combined in the past two months to add to the national ferment range from the zig-zags of the Mexican stock market (with a clear downward tendency) to the bankruptcy of national agriculture and massive urban unemployment. To this can be added the discrediting of the government in the aftermath of the Guadalajara tragedy, where a vast sector of that city was destroyed when some 8 kilometers of the underground sewage system exploded due to a gasoline leak. In the center of the discontent is the collapse of the Mexican people's confidence in any treaty with the United States following the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling legalizing the kidnaping of foreigners, as in the case of Humberto Alvarez Macháin.

It is this general picture which defines the social powder keg in which the country finds itself. Neither of the two leading opposition parties, the conservative National Action Party (PAN) and the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), represents a challenge to the IMF or to NAFTA. Rather, they have served as accomplices of the PRI government, by proposing various amendments to NAFTA without ever denouncing it for what it is: a slave-labor treaty.

The new element introduced by the student mobilization is that, unlike the "party-ocracy" structure that rules in other fields of politics, the student movement is less controlled by the political parties. One national protest march, in which students and teachers from northwestern Sonora marched 2,000 kilometers (1,250 miles) to Mexico City, has served as the spearhead of student resistance to the privatization of education. Since December, the students at Sonora University (Unison) have festooned the main campus building with an enormous banner declaring, "Welcome to Unison, Inc., a Product of NAFTA."