

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menéndez

Polandizing the unions

A new round of labor problems spurred by the Communists is making government officials nervous.

Political groups opposed to the Mexican government have stepped up their activities during the past few weeks inside the labor unions affiliated with the governing PRI party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional). Mexico's most powerful union federation, the Mexican Workers Federation (CTM), and the teachers' National Education Workers Union (SNTE) are the main targets of these activities.

Government officials are increasingly worried because strikes, demonstrations, and bloody confrontations have broken out in various parts of the country.

Their concern is compounded by the possibility that Fidel Velázquez, the aged union chieftain who has kept the labor movement united under his personal control for the past several decades, could die soon without leaving a successor capable of holding the unions together.

His nephew, Luis Velázquez, is among those close to Don Fidel who reportedly confessed, in private, that there is no visible leader capable of replacing him.

Some people have mentioned Senate leader Joaquín Gamboa Pascoe, who could well be elected to the post, but all agree that there are many CTM leaders who do not trust him.

Another mentioned is Joaquín Hernández, the strongman of the oil workers, but nobody will bet on his being able to hold the union federation together.

Top officials confide in private that the government now laments that the old labor *cacique* (chieftain) system rooted in the CTM under Velázquez prevented the emergence of new leaders. The Communist Party's battle to take over the unions during the 1950s brought it into total confrontation with the old Velázquez-run labor machines, and provoked a violent reaction. Union leadership positions soon became filled by men more distinguished by their mafia-like methods than for offering positive leadership to the workers.

During the last few weeks, labor problems have taken on an unusual intensity. Dissident teachers gathered in the National Coordination of Educational Workers (CENTE) have gone on strike in the states of Guerrero, Hidalgo, Morelos, and elsewhere.

And last week at a meeting of dissident teachers, a teacher and a parent were murdered. So far it remains a mystery who did it.

The murders evidently mark a serious fissure in the teachers' union; many believe the "martyrs" could even become the "bloody shirt" of the dissident movement.

The dissidents, in fact, held a dramatic meeting in the presence of the coffins of the victims last Sunday, and speakers accused the official SNTE leadership of the killings.

The situation deteriorated to the point that Interior Minister Oli-

vares Santana publicly proclaimed that a peaceful solution would have to be found.

SNTE leaders, on their side, have repeatedly accused retired SNTE leaders Manuel Sánchez Vite and Jesús Robles Martínez of being the instigators of both leftist and rightist dissidents inside the union.

Another headache for the CTM is the union of Tremac, a large auto parts firm in the industrial belt of Querétaro, which booted out its CTM advisers and instead contracted lawyers from the Communist Party's National Democratic Lawyers' Front. Tremac's 4,000 workers make almost the entirety of the gear boxes used by the Mexican auto industry.

Fidel Velázquez's personal emissaries failed to convince the Tremac union leaders not to abandon the CTM, and even the labor chieftain himself intervened—but to no avail.

The Communist Party has also taken over about 30 percent of the mining and metallurgical section of the CTM. It is especially powerful in Mexico's biggest state-owned steel complexes at Altos Hornos and Las Truchas.

However, the leftist groups do not appear to be focused on pulling individual unions out of the big labor federations. Rather, what can be picked up by listening to their discussions is that their strategy is to keep the unions they control *inside* the federations, in order to pave the way for taking over the whole labor movement.

Some officials see important parallels between the Mexican dissident movement and early stages of Lech Walesa's Polish operation. And they haven't yet found any way to stop it.