

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menéndez

A labor president?

Veteran national trade-union leader Fidel Velásquez has started to politically play his high cards.

One of those important events in Mexican political life took place Aug. 9, when 2,000 leaders of the ruling PRI party from all over Mexico gathered to close ranks around President López Portillo.

"Everybody who is anybody" was there—including the governors, state officials, congressmen, and peasant and labor leaders who make up the PRI's machine—so fears of not getting inside led to a few pushing matches at the door. One of these tussles even jostled one of the oldest PRI chieftains, labor leader Fidel Velásquez; however, he was not only unruffled, but in perfect control by the time he got inside.

The octogenarian labor fox has been the strongman behind at least five PRI presidential nominations. And from what I witnessed at this extraordinary event, Don Fidel will again have the strongest say—after that of López Portillo—in picking Mexico's next president for 1982.

Indicative was the fact that Velásquez was chosen to give the keynote address at the PRI gathering, on behalf of the three sectors—labor, peasant, and "popular"—which officially compose the PRI. Under normal circumstances, that job would have fallen to PRI party President Javier García Paniagua.

Velásquez used the occasion to align the PRI membership with the government's lightning counterattack against mounting foreign and internal assaults on national sover-

eignty, and to proclaim the party's total political support for President López Portillo. Velásquez said that the president was "the innate leader, the recognized and obeyed guide" in defending the party from "blind and unjust criticism" of administrative corruption coming from "conservative interests."

Velásquez had in mind the field day against the government that hostile commentators have had as a result of a major scandal surrounding Coahuila state Gov. Flores Tapia, who has been accused of large-scale corruption and graft. Flores Tapia was the only one of the PRI governors who was not present at the rally, and he was forced to resign the very next day. Sources close to López Portillo say that the governor's ouster is an example of the president's dedication to wiping out corruption.

The key word which echoed over and over in Velásquez's short address was "unity." Velásquez repeatedly called on all economic and political forces in Mexico to rally behind the "still unfinished" administration of López Portillo. He concluded that when the balance is made of that administration, "its acts, attitudes, and programs will have to be recognized to be totally far-sighted and dramatically revolutionary."

After the rally had evoked a maximum of patriotic and party identity in the PRI machine, Finance Minister David Ibarra and

Planning and Budget Minister Miguel de la Madrid closeted themselves with the governors to deal with the most difficult part of the administration's strategy for surviving the economic warfare barrage. The ministers briefed the governors on the new 4 percent budget cuts, and outlined to them the necessity for spending restraints in an election year, when every incumbent politician naturally has added constituency pressures.

Don Fidel's political weight had been increased a few days earlier, when it was announced that he would become president, for the next six months, of the Labor Congress, the powerful umbrella organization that includes not only Velásquez's CTM but numerous other non-PRI unions as well. Since its founding, Velásquez has allowed the presidency to rotate almost freely among various other labor leaders, and his personal assumption of controls is widely interpreted as a major consolidation and centralization of power, in the crucial few months before Mexico's new president is nominated.

So important was the occasion, that Velásquez returned to Mexico City to accept the post after only one day at a four-day AFL-CIO leadership meeting he was attending in Chicago.

Don Fidel will be inaugurated as Labor Congress head on Aug. 14, in the presence of López Portillo, and another major political event is being organized for the occasion. There is great expectation among political circles, because the Labor Congress will present the official position of Mexico's labor sector against the Reagan administration's package for dealing with undocumented aliens.