

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menendez

Obregón won, not Zapata

The sacred cow of Mexican politics—the land tenure system—was modified last week.

The new agricultural law which passed the Mexican Congress the week before Christmas was the most controversial measure to be debated by that body in the course of the López Portillo administration.

The acrimony that surrounded the final, 20-hour marathon session in the Chamber of Deputies is an accurate reflection of the passion stirred by the land reform issue in Mexican politics.

The new law permits, and encourages, what is called the “association” of the several different forms of land tenure in the Mexican the radical demonstrators attacked privately held land, whose extension is theoretically limited by law, and the *ejido*, lands held “by the community.” *Ejido* lands can be farmed either individually or collectively, but cannot be bought or sold on the market.

In the years since these forms were established at the conclusion of the Mexican Revolution in 1917, the privately held “small plot” has frequently grown into large extensions known as *latifundia* through manipulation of land titles. The remaining small plots and much of the *ejido* land have suffered the opposite fate as successive generations of sons divide up their father’s land—the *minifundio*.

Previously, it was juridically impossible to bring these economically unviable parcels of land together for large-scale, productive use.

The new law not only allows for this, but specifically declares “intensive mechanization” of the land to be of “public interest” and thereby subject to special government incentives.

One might wonder why the new law kicked up such a storm, given Mexico’s profound agricultural crisis due to the inefficiency of its peasant agricultural sector.

The law brought to a head the conflict of two philosophies embedded in the revolution itself: the reification of “land for the tiller” in the movement of peasant leader Emiliano Zapata; and the nation-builder tendency of Alvaro Obregón, who saw in industrialization and efficient modern agriculture the future of Mexico. The law just adopted, under the president’s personal guidance, is a reflection of López Portillo’s commitment to Alvaro Obregón’s vision.

The gamut of Mexico’s left, going from the Mexican Communist Party to a few labor sector deputies in Congress from the ruling PRI party, took up the cudgels to defend the Zapatista conception. They sufficiently challenged the law so that it took a demonstration of PRI internal discipline to turn out the final vote of 282 to 27.

There is indeed the danger that the new law could facilitate concentration of land in a few hands; this will depend on its implementation. But it is incontrovertible that the present arrangements have reached

a crisis point that demands an intervention in the direction outlined by the law.

President López Portillo, angered at the left’s imputation that the president’s initiative was “reactionary,” called together the entirety of the PRI deputies immediately after the final vote.

“It’s not true, and I have denied this no matter how often stated, that this modality of organization [the new law] . . . is reactionary and privatizes agriculture. It’s not true!” he affirmed.

Turning his anger on the left, he stressed that it “is not the opposition parties” which are “writing the history of Mexico. It is we [of the PRI] who are writing it, with full responsibility, in the open, with well-founded initiatives.”

The president repeated once again his invocation of the “Bulgarian model” of productive agriculture, which he saw on a state visit in 1978. The key issue facing the nation is no longer further subdivision on minuscule plots, he has insisted over and over; it is the raising of productivity and solving Mexico’s increasing food deficits.

It is noteworthy that the new law reflects a setback for many of the theorists of the Mexican Food System initiative (SAM) launched in March 1980. The primary thrust of the SAM was to direct new support mechanisms to the more backward, peasant sector of agriculture. The role of mechanization was pushed into the background, under guidance of presidential adviser and SAM director Cassio Luisselli.

The new law puts mechanization back up front, and that is a very hopeful development for Mexico’s chances of pulling itself out of a serious agricultural crisis.