

**Mexico's Frente Auténtico del Trabajo:  
Organizing  
Beyond the PRI and Across Borders**

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## Introduction

This paper is a case study of Mexico's Frente Auténtico del Trabajo. It seeks to provide information about an important labor federation which, to this point, has received very little scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> The case also illuminates the constraints imposed on labor unions by the official system of labor regulation in Mexico. It also highlights the importance and possibility of transnational labor cooperation.

The very name of the Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT)<sup>2</sup> implies a contrast with unauthentic labor organizations. From its beginning in 1960 the FAT has insisted that it would work to authentically represent the interests of workers. In contrast, unions linked to the *Partido Institucional Revolucionario* (PRI) have controlled its affiliated workers as a base of electoral support and as a labor force compliant with PRI-determined economic policies. Leaders of PRI-linked unions including those of the *Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos* (CTM,) the *Confederación Revolucionario de Obreros y Campesinos* (CROC,) the *Confederación Regional de Obreroes Mexicanos* (CROM,) and others grouped in the peak organization the *Congreso del Trabajo* (CT or Labor Congress,) have received numerous benefits from their relationship with the PRI including political appointments, seats in governments at all levels, the ability to distribute benefits such as government subsidized housing to their members, and an easy tolerance of corruption. Challengers to this cozy relationship have most often been coopted when possible, repressed when not. This system of PRI-dominated labor unions has been well documented by other scholars. (Hellman, 1983; Middlebrook, 1991; Ponte, 1991; La Botz, 1992; Williams, 1992; Barry, 1992; Centeno, 1994; Russell, 1994; Sanner Ruhnke, 1995; Middlebrook, 1995)

Many Mexicans familiar with the FAT feel that one of its chief accomplishments has been simply to exist for all these years. This paper will argue that due to the nature of Mexico's labor relation's system the FAT has had to rely on resources beyond the dues of its members, frequently beyond the boundaries

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<sup>1</sup>The FAT has been mentioned in footnotes, paragraphs, asides, and an occasional page or two. The longest article I have found to date is that by Méndez. (Méndez, 1991)

<sup>2</sup>This and the other numerous but necessary abbreviations are listed for easy reference at the paper's end.

of the country in order to survive. This steady communication with outside labor movements has not only allowed the FAT to survive and to function with some autonomy within Mexico, it has also positioned the FAT to be the union most involved in facilitating transnational labor organizing that is of increasing importance in the contemporary global economy.

### **Analytical Framework**

While this paper is primarily guided by a simple commitment to historical narrative--as is justified by the FAT's relative but undeserved obscurity--the narrative is focused by two analytical concepts: resource mobilization and political opportunity structure. The concepts are from the social movement field, because the FAT has as many characteristics as a social movement organization as it does as a union organization. After the historical record is laid out here, a more thorough analysis will be in order in future work.

A concern with resource mobilization suggests that in order to act, actors need resources. As Jenkins puts it, "Organizational resources and the changing power position of the aggrieved, not sudden increases in their grievances, are the major factor leading to the outbreak of disorders." (Jenkins, 1979, p. 224) While labor unions generally draw their resources from the dues of their members, this has rarely been an adequate base of support for the FAT. This, it will be demonstrated, is a result of the oppressive nature of the official labor relations system within Mexico. Without outside support, an oppositional movement could not long exist on the pittance available from Mexican workers who could only rarely be organized into a consistent membership base. Indeed, even the official unions of Mexico survive not only on the resources from their members, but also from various types of patronage from the state. We shall pay attention to "the variety of resources mobilized, the linkages of social movements to other groups, the dependence of movements upon external support for success and the tactics used by authorities to control or incorporate movements." (McCarthy, 1977, p. 1213)

The behavior of a social movement organization is determined, not only by the amount and kind of resources available, but also by the source of the resources. We will see that the FAT initially arises out of resources devoted by organizations related to the Catholic church. Thus, it is not surprising that there is a decided coloring given to the ideology of the FAT by its first promoters. However, over time, the FAT moved away from the church as a base of support and came to rely

more on labor unions as well as political organizations and foundations from Europe and North America as it's source of support. These new allies shared the more class conscious, socialistic or social democratic ideology to which the FAT had moved. This transition demonstrates that the FAT was able to manage its own evolution rather than being limited by dependence on its initial source of resources.

Attention to changing political opportunity structures directs our attention to the environment in which a social movement moves. Tarrow observes, "Movements are organized, take fire, and occasionally succeed as a function of political opportunity structure and not...as a direct function of deep-seated frustrations...." He suggests we examine "the openness or closure of formal political access, the stability or instability of alignments within the political system, and the availability and strategic posture of potential alliance partners." (Tarrow, p. 27,28) Some times are more propitious than others. A social movement organization which endures over as long a time as the FAT has (1960-present) must change in order to survive. This the FAT has done successfully, but we will find that most of its original purposes still guide its present actions.

This study will focus on three distinct periods. The early years (1960-67) focus on movement building. Resources come almost entirely from church related organizations. Government policy was hostile to independent labor unions, as it is in all three periods. Government economic policy, import substitution, was devoted to stimulating development of the domestic economy by protecting domestic manufacturers and farmers and by allowing a general rise in the wage level of workers. Social movement activity was relatively limited after major upheavals were repressed in 1959.

The second period (1968-82) is one of transition. It includes two waves of intense social movement activity, the first ended by repression, the second by repression and economic cooptation. The global political environment is energized by the 1968 general strike in France, anti-war/anti-imperialist/anti-corporate/pro-Mao/pro-Allende/etc youth movements. The economic policy of import substitution runs into trouble and is jettisoned completely by 1982. The discovery of huge new oil deposits in 1977 allows temporary accommodation of workers and peasants. During this period the FAT moves ideologically to the left and gradually breaks its ties with church related organizations and builds ties with Europe and Canada.

The third period (1982-present) is one of economic crises. Our focus will be primarily on the 1990's. During this period government economic policy is neo-liberal. It's goal of attracting international capital by offering cheap and controlled labor leads to falling real wages. Accommodation with independent labor unions is unacceptable, but the role of official unions in administering lower wages increases popular desire for labor reform. The integration of the North American economy leads to increased alliance opportunities for the FAT in both the US and Canada. While the economic collapse of the early eighties has a depressing effect on social movements, the January 1994 imposition of NAFTA provoked the widely popular uprising of Zapatistas in Chiapas, and the peso collapse of December '94 called forth a new wave of social movement activity which is still increasing. The FAT is broadly active on all fronts.

## I.

### **The Early Years**

The FAT was born out of a group of workers in Mexico City, who, with the backing of the Social Secretariat of Mexico (SSM), formed *Promoción Obrera* in 1958. The SSM is an outreach organization of the Catholic church created in the wake of the Revolution to circumvent the constitutional restrictions on the operations of the church in civil society. The first Catholic Social Secretariat was formed in Belgium, and the political influence of Western Europe through the founding ideas and through occasional leadership from Europe has often made the SSM a progressive force within Mexico. However, the SSM has also served reactionary purposes as when it encouraged the Cristero Revolt or when it promoted the class-collaborationist anti-communist *Obreros Guadalupanos* movement ("VIVA CRISTO REY! 1979; Robles, 1996b).

*Promoción Obrera* was an expression of the progressive side of the SSM. It promoted group study and reflection that would lead to social action to resolve the problems of workers. Some of the literature studied by this group was generated by the Latin American Christian Union Confederation (CLASC.) ("25 Años de lucha por la Democracia", 1985b) In 1959 the group made a formal affiliation with the CLASC, and in October 1960, taking advantage of the visit of a CLASC worker from Venezuela, founded the *Frente Auténtico del Trabajo*.

The context of labor relations in the late 1950's helps us understand the meaning of the FAT's initial declaration of autonomy from any political party. During 1958 and 1959 rank and

file movements appeared to challenge *charro* leaders in education, telegraphs, telephones, electrical power, mining, and petroleum unions. But the most dramatic challenge to the power of government control of the unions emerged in the railworkers' union, home of the first *charro*.

In the early years of the cold war, Mexico, much like the US, moved to rid its unions of Communists. Anyone accused of being a Communist could now be purged. Fidel Velazquez, then and now the head of the CTM, used the excuse of communism to eliminate potential rivals. In 1948 miners, railworkers, and oilworkers unions withdrew from the CTM and formed their own federation. Railworkers went out on strike for back pay and wage increases. The government acted swiftly and forcefully. Using both police and military troops they forced the railworkers to name a new Secretary General of their union, Jesús Díaz de León (La Botz, 1992, p. 66-67).

This incident shows the fundamental nature of government control of the labor movement through the leaders of its official unions. It also gives rise to a term that is central to understanding Mexican labor relations. The term is *charro* or sometimes, *charrismo*. Jesús Díaz de León enjoyed dressing in the elegant clothes worn today only by mariachi musicians. This taste for dandified class distinction, while having nothing to do with the working class solidarity one might hope for from union leaders, has everything to do with the corrupt, politically servile leaders of most official unions since that time. To this day corrupt union leaders are known as *charros*.

Ten years after the installation of De León, railworkers rebelled. Wages had not kept up with inflation, and workers demands led to the creation of a Grand Commission for a General Salary Increase. When delegates to this commission began to champion the cause of the workers despite the best efforts of their union leaders, the union's secretary general called in police to dissolve the commission.

In July of 1958 a rank-and-file leader, Demitrio Vallejo, emerged with a plan. He called for a wage hike of 350 pesos per month and a series of escalating strikes until the raise was granted. Within three days President Ruiz Cortines intervened and proposed a settlement of 215 pesos a month. Railworkers accepted and celebrated their victory by electing Vallejo and his supporters to head the union.

The railroads and the Secretary of Labor refused to recognize Vallejo's leadership. Vallejo called for new strikes.

This time railworkers were joined by striking electrical workers and by public support by insurgent sectors of the national teachers union. Within days the government intervened again, this time with a different sort of solution. Police and soldiers were sent to raid union halls. Vallejo managed to escape to a railyard in Mexico City where he called a work stoppage that became nation-wide within hours. The government agreed to hold new elections on August 6th. Despite the best efforts of deposed charros to buy votes, Demitrio Vallejo and his supporters won control of the union by a vote of 59,759 to 9. Claiming that no party owned the union, Vallejo promised to restore workers' rights (Ortega, 1995).

Contract negotiations in early 1959 did not go well, and Vallejo called for new strikes in March. Meanwhile, Mexico had elected a new President, Lopez Mateos. He decided to solve the problem once and for all. With little pretention of legality, Lopez Mateos sent in the army to raid all union halls and to arrest all union leaders. Several workers were killed. Over 10,000 railworkers were taken prisoner as were many supporting petroleum workers, teachers and students. Vallejo was locked away as a threat to the nation. He was not released until 1974. (La Botz, 1992, p. 54, 69-71; Luna Arias, 1995)

Because of its nationwide scope, its militancy, its frank challenge to the authoritarian system of PRI/charro denial of basic democratic rights to workers, and because of the overt repression used against it, the railworkers movement of 1958 and 1959 was the central focus of Mexicans concerned for labor rights, for better wages, and for more democracy. Major strike movements also occurred in unions supposedly representing workers in the petroleum industry, in telephones, in telegraphs, in electricity, in aviation, and in education. In each case movements within the unions demanded more democratic representation and a better deal for workers. These movements drew support from idealistic university students and frequently from teachers. In each case they met repression. For much of 1958 and 1959 the nation was in turmoil over workers' rights.

It was in this context that the workers of *Promoción Obrera* met and eventually decided to form the FAT. The October 18, 1960 Declaration of the Constitution of the Frente Auténtico del Trabajo read as follows:

" Conscious of our rights as workers and of our social responsibility, we signers declare a firm decision to undertake the organization of Christian unionism in Mexico.

The principles that will guide our course at all times will be a) (*la libertad sindical*) union liberty, b) (*democracia sindical*) union democracy, c) *la independencia ante los partidos politicos*) independence of all political parties, d) (*la autonomía sindical ante los gobiernos y los patrones*) autonomy from government and employers e) (*la lucha constante por la elevación material y espiritual de la clase trabajadora.*) the constant struggle for the material and spiritual elevation of the working class.

Based on these principles we found the *Frente Auténtico del Trabajo*, that will unite and train unions and workers in a new central.." ("25 Años de Lucha por la Democracia", 1985a)

Two things stand out in this document, the commitment to autonomy and democracy which were championed by the broad struggles of the late fifties, and the influence of the church. It is important to make clear that from the beginning, while the FAT used the language of Christianity, in sharp contrast to the Obreros Guadalupeños, it specifically avoided any religious practices, and it clearly declared that all workers were welcome regardless of their religious inclination (Medina, p. 7).

Poor workers, determined to oppose the labor policies of the government, obviously could have done very little without access to outside resources. CLASC provided literature, training--both within Mexico and abroad--and some funding for the initial efforts of the FAT. The SSM provided more funding as well as access to the infrastructure of the Church. The FAT was founded on church property. Initial meetings in many locations were held at churches. Another creation of the SSM, the *Joventud Obrera Cristiana* (JOC), a working class youth group, was a key source from which many young workers were recruited.

The ideology of the CLASC was "*social cristiano*." It defined itself as clearly anti-communist, and it was not hesitant to assert that "The only doctrine that sustains a true conception of humanity and the world is Christianity." Yet explanation of what this meant leaned to the left.

"Authentic Unionism should base itself entirely on the search for social justice....We should spread the word that the earth is the birthright of all people, and not the privilege of the few who have



illegitimately appropriated all of its riches. God created the world for all people....Authentic Unionism defends the right of private property, but it energetically condemns the abuses which capitalism daily commits....all men are brothers...we cannot accept exploitation of some men by others with the resultant suffering of millions of men that are also sons of God and rightful inhabitants of the world He has created." (Medina, p. 7)

### **Organizing in León**

Despite the support of the Church, workers initially had no success organizing unions in Mexico City. Most of the workers involved in *Promoción Obrera* were originally from León and did not have sufficient familiarity to accomplish the clandestine work and grass roots organizing necessary to form a union against the wishes of the official system. In 1962 a decision was made to focus efforts in León and in the surrounding cities of the Bajío region.

Trusted workers--most of them shoemakers and most of them members of JOC--were invited to a weekend seminar. The course addressed such fundamental questions as, what is a union? how does one form a union? and what is a collective contract? The seminar included most workers' first exposure to labor law and labor history. It informed these workers that they were part of an international effort of unions seeking to respond to injustice. The weekend ended with a party and with the determination to create, not only a union, but a federation of new unions in their state of Guanajuato.

The initial group of 15 workers educated more workers and by late summer they were ready to act. The young FAT workers knew the formal process called for in the law, and they followed it precisely. When they filed their documents with the Local Labor Arbitration and Conciliation Board, the Board could think of no alternative but to follow the law. On August 16th, 1962, the Board granted them a registration for the first FAT union, the Liberational Union of Shoe Workers and Related Trades. Evidently the Labor Board had been taken by surprise.

However, when the union tried for its first contract later that year, the employer fired all of the workers. When they set up a picket line in front of his business, he drove his pick-up truck through them. It was not until 1964 that FAT workers were able to negotiate their first union contract. When they went to

file the contract their papers all seemed in order, but the Labor Board claimed that there was no record of the union ever having received the registry it claimed to have received in August of 1962. It took weeks of effort with marches in Leon and in the capital, Guanajuato, before a court would issue an injunction--based on the legal copy of registry the union had retained--to restore the union's registry.

### **Organizing in Chihuahua**

After the initial success at organizing workers in León in 1962, with the support of the SSM, the FAT convened a national seminar on union organization and action. The seminar was followed immediately by FAT's first national assembly of workers which adopted the first work plan for FAT. The plan established the following objectives: 1) Constitute a federation of unions that is democratic and independent -- of bosses, government, political parties and churches-- formed by workers, peasants, employees and technicians. 2) Within twelve months structure this federation with a) it's own unions, b) regional federations with at least 5 unions as their basis c) the national federation formed of at least five regional federations. 3) Create a weekly magazine and a radio show to help make FAT better known. 4) Create a National Institute of Union Studies to develop and carry out both technical and ideological education of workers ("25 años de Lucha por la Democracia", 1985c).

While the weekly magazine, the radio show, and the National Institute did not endure, their mention shows the resources which FAT felt it could call upon. What did come out of this event were some new bases of effective organizing, especially in Chihuahua.

The JOC and the Obreros Guadalupanos had responded to the call and sent workers to the national seminar and assembly. When they returned to Chihuahua they established a labor training center there. Through the networks of the Guadalupanos and the JOC the center attracted a core of committed working class activists determined to improve the situation of workers in the region. These activists worked quietly within their factories to identify trusted colleagues that could constitute the core of a new union. (Dominguez, 1996)

The first organizing success would come in 1963 at the Pepsi Cola bottling plant. Again, the FAT took the local Labor Board by surprise. Organizers who had been working quietly within the plant each invited trusted workers to a Sunday morning meeting. This meeting constituted a legal assembly of the workers. Officers were elected and forms were signed. On Monday FAT filed

for registration of the new independent union. The astonished Board complied with the law and granted the union's registry.

Within two years FAT went on to organize unions at Ropa El Diamante, Ropa la Paz, Mercado del Real, Transportes Urbanos, Industrializadora de Cerdo, and Triplay de Parral. The process was harder now. The plywood workers from Parral, 300 kilometers away in the mountains, had to make a march to the Chihuahua demanding their right to unionize be respected. The clothing factories, Diamante and La Paz, both already had CTM unions which they renounced in order to affiliate with the FAT. (Méndez, 1991, p. 39)

When workers from Industrializadora Cerdo, the pork packing plant, took their paperwork to the Labor Board, they were refused a registry as an independent union. As a fall back strategy, the workers decided to affiliate with the CTM and later to become independent. They were given their registry with the CTM without any further problems. The CTM then invited the new union's Secretary General to attend a training course in Cuernavaca, Morelos, just south of Mexico City. According to Antonio Villalba, one of the original officers at the Pepsi union, the CTM course provided thorough training in "wine, women, and song." When he returned to Chihuahua this new leader no longer had an interest in leading his workers to independence from the CTM. For his ability to appreciate the ways of official unions this young leader rose steadily and is now a state leader for the CTM.

What FAT had gained by surprise was soon challenged in a counter attack. At the clothing factories, El Diamante and La Paz, all of the workers were fired. New workers were hired and a CTM union was formed. At Transportes Urbanos enough of the workers were fired to allow the formation of a CTM union. At Triplay de Parral all of the workers were fired. At Mercado Real just the union leaders were fired. And finally, in 1969 Pepsi Cola fired all of its workers. In all cases a new CTM union was established. The process was not a tranquil one, but whenever they needed support from the Labor Board or from the police, employers were able to get it. From this experience the FAT learned all too well what they call the infernal trilogy: "*Charro, gobierno, y patrón, son el mismo cabrón.*" (The charro, the government, and the boss are all the same bastard.) (Villalba, 1996)

Some of the organizational base that the FAT had established in Chihuahua lived on after these initial defeats. It would soon serve as the basis of much large social struggle that spread throughout the state in the wake of the upheavals of 1968.

## II.

**Transition: 1968 to 1982**

The period of 1968 to 1982 is a period of tremendous transformation for both Mexico and the FAT. Beginning with the student movement of 1968, movements of political opposition within Mexico take on a more decidedly leftist orientation. During this period the FAT moves left and eventually breaks its ties to church-linked organizations. The economic policy of Mexico changes from one of "stabilizing development" aimed at building the domestic economy to its current policy of export-led, global market oriented development. For workers this means a change from a period of growing real wages--they peak in the mid 70's--to one of increasing poverty. For the FAT this means that work place organizing becomes still harder while political organizing maintains a critique of charro control but comes to include more attacks on overall government economic policy.

The student movement of 1968 is well known.<sup>3</sup> It will not be described here. Some of its more unique attributes are worth noting. It developed within a global climate of protest which was both anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. As such it encouraged an awareness of both global political consciousness and left-wing political analysis, rhetoric, and action. The student movement was moderately successful in forging ties with industrial workers. The brutal repression of the student movement--the massacre at Tlatelolco--convinced many that to resist the Mexican state might require weapons. Many of the several armed insurgent groups that emerged in the 70's had student roots but claimed to be fighting in the interests of workers and/or peasants. The climate in which opposition to government policy on labor took place, then, was one of high stakes, frequent repression, and revolutionary passion. Many students moved into political work during this time. While the Young Catholic Workers group, JOC, was still an important source of new militants early in this period, the student movement was equally important.

Another force for change during this period, occurred within the Catholic church itself. While the encyclicals of Pope John Paul and his Vatican II reforms took place in the early 60's, they stimulated the subsequent evolution of a new force, "liberation theology," which transformed the left-wing of the church into a force with more radical influence on secular

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<sup>3</sup>A very accessible a reasonably complete brief account is given in Hellman, 1983, pp.173-186.

politics throughout Latin America. Within Mexico the book *Marx y la Biblia* (Miranda, 1974) appeared and encouraged many to drop their fear of Marxism and to see a variety of communist political movements as viable options. Thus the waves of political movement to the left, from both the student movements and from within sectors of the Catholic church, made it natural that the FAT would move to the left as well. In the early 70's its sponsoring organization, the CLAT<sup>4</sup>, had criticized the FAT as becoming communistic. By the late 70's the FAT, secure in both its ideological orientation and its determination to survive without CLAT funds, moved to break its ties to CLAT.

Real wages for industrial workers had grown by over 40% during the 1960's, and they continued to rise from 1970 to 1976 gaining another 30% (De la Garza, 1991, p. 161; Barkin, 1997, p. 23). President Luis Echeverria, the man who had administered the slaughter of 1968, sought to defuse political tensions by calling for a democratic opening. The political radicalization of the late 60's, combined with an era of economic growth for workers, was the ideal political opportunity for worker' mobilization. Strikes for the democratization of the workplace, for shorter hours, for improved safety and a better workplace blossomed when they had barely existed before. The 70's and early 80's were a period of worker insurgency. De la Garza documents two waves of strikes for union democracy with peaks in 1976 and 1982. (De la Garza, 1991, p. 163) The FAT was at the center of those movements.

The Presidency of Lopez-Portillo (1976-1982) was one of changed political opportunity. The economic policy of stabilizing development was gradually jettisoned. Yet with the discovery of new oil, money was available to defuse some political tensions, and to coopt some political challengers. At the same time, economic uncertainty served as a conservatizing force. In 1977 Lopez-Portillo imposed the *Alianza para la Produccion*, the first of many pacts between labor business and the government which had the effect at limiting wage growth to less than the rate of inflation. Wages were flat from '76 to '78. They then went into steady decline only to fall more precipitously after 1982. Struggles continued within the workplace, but the social movement aspects of those struggles steadily faded.

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<sup>4</sup>CLAT, the Central Latino Americano del Trabajo, had, in an ecumenical spirit, changed its name from the CLASC, Confederacion Latino Americano de Sindicatos Cristianos, the name it had when the FAT was founded.

The period of 1970 to 1976 has been called the period of *Insurgencia Obrera*. The period begins with the expulsion of the relatively democratic electrical workers union, STERM from the Labor Congress (CT) and the release of rail union leaders, Vallejo and Campa, who had been jailed since 1959. Vallejo and Campa begin immediately to try to retake their positions at the head of their union, the STFRM. They gain control of 29 of the 36 union locals. The government refuses to accept this, so, in 1971 Vallejo forms the oppositional Railworkers Union Movement (MSF.) Also in 1971 the Federal Labor Board (JFCA) strips electricians of their right to sign labor contracts and awards all current contracts to a compliant charro union. The FAT joins with the MSF and the STERM to call for the *Primera Jornada Nacional por Democracia Sindical* (First National Day for Union Democracy.) Demonstrations are held in more than 40 cities. In 1973 the FAT, the MSF and STERM form the short-lived National Union of Workers (UNT) and hold the second and third National Days for Union Democracy. This struggle, fought in public and on a national stage, is one for democratizing unions and for challenging directly the controlling power of the state. In this atmosphere the Revolutionary Teachers Movement (MMR) calls for a national strike. Both bank workers and university employees--both staff and faculty--begin struggles to organize.

The struggle against the state continues. Railworkers begin to physically occupy union locals and armed battles are fought in at least three states. By 1975 Vallejo is placed under house arrest. Stripped of its contracts, STERM tries to merge with the charro electricians and work as a *Tendencia Democratica* (TD) within the new SUTERM. In 1975 at a hastily called union congress presided over by Fidel Velazquez, TD leader Rafael Galvan and his supporters on the union executive committee are expelled. A TD called demonstration draws over 150,000 in Mexico City with participation by independent unions, teachers, students and neighborhood organizations. Within months, remaining TD supporters are purged from leadership positions. Rank-and-file members respond by calling a strike at generating stations. The army intervenes to crush the strike. The TD calls its supporters within the FAT, within remnants of the MSF, within the teachers' MMR and other participants in the workers' movement to the First National Conference of the Insurgency. This conference in turn, constitutes the National Front for Popular Action (FNAP) and mobilizes demonstrations in 19 cities. Yet when TD supporters in both Puebla and Guadalajara sign agreements with the charros, the TD movement is broken. Vallejo supporters in the MSF decide no longer to contest control of union locals but to form a new union. They are unsuccessful in this task. This wave of *insurgencia obrera* comes to a close.

Within this first wave of worker mobilization the FAT is also active in a movement that is eventually taken over by the *Unidad Obrera Independiente*, (UOI.) The UOI is an organization of new labor unions independent of older charro unions and with at least some commitment to internal union democracy. The UOI is quite different from the *insurgencia obrera* movement in that its aims are much more contained to issues within specific workplaces. It can rightfully be seen as a subset of the broader workers insurgency, but--pausing less of a threat to the state--it endures longer. The UOI comes into existence in 1972 and by 1976 it has 86 affiliated unions.

In 1972 FAT catalyzes a struggle for union independence at several plants near Cuernavaca, just south of Mexico City. It helps democratize unions at Industria Automotriz de Cuernavaca, Hilados Morelos, y Rastro. It participates in the strike at RIVETEX and in the democratization of the union at Nissan while it leaves the CTM (Méndez, 1991, p. 38). FAT is becoming nationally known as an advocate for autonomous unions. FAT wins the loyalty of many of the most militant workers of these plants, but in the midst of the effort to establish truly independent unions it comes into conflict with the UOI. By 1975 UOI has control of the Nissan plant and purges many FAT loyalists. At this time FAT is also involved in a strike at SPICER, an auto parts company.

In a remarkable demonstration of the PRI's efforts to dictate the shape of the labor movement, Secretary of Labor, Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, calls FAT leader, Alfredo Dominguez, to a private conference. He suggests FAT forget its efforts to organize in strategic industries such as auto. Those are reserved for official unions and for the UOI. He suggests that FAT should also stay out of university organizing. However, if FAT would content itself with smaller industry, such as shoe making, it would be welcomed within the Labor Congress, and things would go much better for it (Antonio Villalba, 1996; Robles, 1995, p. 111).

We have seen that in this period the FAT involved itself in many alliances with other union movements. In these efforts the FAT was more a political social movement actor than a traditional labor union. Its goals have always focused as much on the total transformation of labor relations as on the formation of specific union locals. In an official FAT document analyzing Mexican labor history from 1958 through 1979 the writer concludes that what is most necessary is the formation of "class-based organizations that in an organic manner link all of these struggles and

movements." (FAT, 1979, p. 29) We shall now move from consideration of these broad, coalition-building efforts to the analysis of a few specific, union building struggles of the FAT. We shall see that in this period of intense movement activity, even these more traditional efforts involved ties to other movement allies.

## **FAT Union Struggles**

### **Chihuahua**

In 1969 Pepsi of Chihuahua fired all of its workers in order to rid itself of its FAT union. The local labor board then immediately recognized the CTM as having jurisdiction at the plant, and Pepsi hired new workers.

The firings provoked a massive response from throughout the mobilized sectors of the region. Radicalized students and members of Christian base communities joined the FAT in holding sit-ins and in organizing a boycott of Pepsi products throughout the state. Organizing was so effective that it became the base of a political coalition called the Frente de Solidaridad Popular. The local sections of the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) and the much more conservative National Action Party (PAN) also became members of the popular front.

After destroying much of the local market for Pepsi this group faded out of existence, but many of those who had been a part of it remobilized in 1972, becoming the Comité de Defensa Popular. This group came into existence in response to local police treatment of a group of radical leftists who had been accused of robbing the banks. The police had avoided a political trial by simply releasing the prisoners in the countryside, telling them to run, and then shooting them in the back. When this group achieved the firing of the local police chief the group tasted the first concrete victory of the social movement. (Villalba, 1996)

The mass mobilization by the Comité de Defensa, along with worker mobilization in other states established a climate in which the FAT was able to organize more local unions. In 1972 they organized workers at the Chihuahua City Water Department, the Pearl tungsten mine, the Sawmill of Las Palomas, and a broom factory. The social mobilization led to strong support for organization and made it difficult for the local labor board to do as it wished--to simply refuse to cooperate with the FAT.



Success did not last long here, however. Within a year the broom factory fired all of its workers and brought in a CTM union. In 1973 the Water Department, which had previously had no union, organized an election for workers to choose between affiliation with the FAT or the CTM. The CTM won the fraudulent election by only allowing office workers to vote, thus avoiding the FAT's strongest supporters, those who worked in the field away from the steady influence of political bosses. The CTM then followed up its victory by firing all known FAT supporters. In 1975 tungsten ran out at the La Perla mine, and in 1976, the sawmill at Las Palomas closed (Robles, 1995, p. 89, 99; Bertha Lujan, 1996; Villalba, 1996).

## **Saltillo**

In 1974 in Saltillo a huge strike broke out at CINSA and CIFUNSA the city's two major industrial plants, both owned by the same family. The plants had been organized as on CTM union local. Discontent had been growing at the plant partly because salaries were not keeping up with those of newer plants, and partly because of the harsh working conditions in CIFUNSA's foundry. But another condition leading to the unrest was the general climate of labor unrest in the country which led workers to feel that they had rights to make demands on their patriarchal employer, and that they should not be content with charro union bosses. Some of the workers had been studying labor law at workshops held by the FAT which had been organizing in the area--with limited success--for five years. When word got out that union bosses had signed an inferior contract with the companies without even consulting the workers, the rebellion was on.

Workers spontaneously called an assembly, and all work was stopped at both plants. The 5000 assembled workers demanded a reading of the new contract, voted to reject it, and then elected new officers for their union. The workers called in FAT advisors for help on how to make legal what they had just done with their sudden outburst of democracy. The next morning the new executive committee, FAT advisors and a large group of workers (estimates range from 300 to 2000 workers) marched to the Local Labor Board offices to demand recognition of their new union leadership. Given the mass of workers who refused to leave without recognition, the Board soon gave recognition. The executive committee with their advisors then asked to negotiate with the company leaders. The company refused to negotiate if FAT was advising the workers. They explained, "It's not because

we wanted to take a hard position, but because *nos tocó bailar con la más fea* (we were asked to dance with the ugliest one.)

The company felt they had good reason to fear the FAT. We can see that from as early as 1970 the national business classes were seeing the FAT as a threat and preparing to resist them. In 1970 the head of the Leon Local Labor Board responded to a Mr. Gonzales of Monterrey who had asked for information on the FAT. The letter reports that while the goal of the FAT is socialistic social transformation, the FAT negotiates fairly ordinary contracts; however they then seek to gain control of the business or to destroy it. It reports that the majority of firms that have signed with FAT had failed. It warns that when FAT can't set up its own unions it seeks to penetrate others, and that its training in both moral and technical matters leads to fanaticism. (Ramírez Martínez, 1970) The FAT was clearly to be avoided.

The Saltillo workers filed to go on strike and the Labor Board again accepted the union's paper work, making the strike legal. The strike lasted from April 16th to June 3rd. Here we will focus only on the resources that sustained the strike and what can be learned by the way the strike was ended. The FAT devoted resources to a workers school that met daily during the afternoons and which was attended by up to 500 workers at a time. FAT also provided legal advice as well as assistance on propoganda and on organizing marches and demonstrations. As the strikers had no strike fund on which to draw, many unions affiliated with the FAT contributed funds to the workers as did workers in sympathetic locals of the electricians and members of other unions in the region. The call for a national day for workers' democracy set for the 10th of June, may have led to the strike's precipitous settlement on June 3rd. Students at the local university were a tremendous source of support. They collected funds and food door-to-door in town, and they also contributed much energy to demonstrations supporting the workers. The local church was also mildly supportive giving some encouragement to the workers and urging a settlement that would provide "justice." (Camacho, 1975, p. 25-26)

The strike moved towards settlement when workers marched to San Luis Potosi to bring their problems to President Echeverria. The President urged the business to negotiate in earnest, which it began to do. However, COPARMEX, the national employers confederation attacked the idea of settling with the FAT, and negotiations stalled. They portrayed FAT as an

embodiment of the *insurgencia obrera*, and thus an enemy of all business owners as well as a threat to the official unions and to the Mexican state itself. Negotiations resumed when union leaders decided--without consulting the workers--to denounce the FAT and break all ties to it. The union leaders then won a better than average contract settlement (Camacho, 1975, p. 31-36). However, the next year both CINSA and CIFUNSA conducted massive firings of workers that had been identified as militants in strike. The union had no power left to resist it. (Robles, 1995, p. 110)

The Saltillo strike shows the importance of the leadership and political resources that the FAT could bring to the strikers as well as the network of support able to be tapped into from both students and from other unions during the uprising known as *insurgencia obrera*. It shows us the willingness of both the state and national governments to concede worker gains when mobilization was high, and it shows the resolve of COPARMEX to resist any gains by the FAT or other sectors of the most militant workers.

### **The Spicer Strike**

A longer discussion of the period would detail the formation of the FAT's first nation-wide union, SNTIHA, a metal workers union which was formed in 1973 with locals in the states of Mexico and Guanajuato as well as any number of other smaller struggles. But the last event we shall examine here is the long strike at the SPICER autoparts factory in the state of Mexico. This case reveals important information about FAT's internal and external sources of support as well as more evidence on FAT's interaction with both the business class and the Mexican state. It is also an important point in the articulation of the FAT's ideology.

Spicer was a Mexican-owned auto parts company with three US nationals on its board of directors and a license to produce axles patented by a US corporation which was owned by Manufactures Hanover Trust Company of New York. In short, it was a transnational in a time when foreign corporations faced significant restrictions on what they could own in Mexico. While the workers had many complaints against Spicer their first goal was "AN INDEPENDENT UNION ...to have a real weapon to use in our

struggle against the despotism of the boss and the charros."<sup>5</sup> They sought to affiliate with FAT's new SNTIHA union.

The 121 days of overt struggle began with a 39 day strike in the summer of 1975. The strikers held marches in the midst of Mexico City and for a while occupied space at the Polytechnical University. They gathered material and political support from 120 union organizations throughout the country, from students, and from people in the streets. They also drew material and political support from the CLAT in Venezuela and Costa Rica, from the associated Catholic labor organization the *Confederacion Mundial de Trabajadores* (CMT), from a CMT affiliate in Canada, and from CMT affiliates and a metal workers' union related to Spicer in Belgium and Holland.

The broad support mobilized by Spicer workers led to a partial settlement of the strike after 39 days. Yet when workers returned to the plant Spicer fired 150 of the 800 workers. A work stoppage soon led to a lockout and an occupation of the factory by scabs and gunmen. The struggle then continued for several months until a draw was reached. Workers were given the option to receive a buy out or to return to work without the FAT union.

The struggle was widely known due to its militancy, its location in Mexico, and the broad network of support which was established to support it. It was also remarkable for the development of the practice of *autogestion*, or workers democracy through self-management. The workers really did take decisions and carry them out within different divisions of the plant or different committees of the strike, with decisions being coordinated through a general assembly. Power was remarkably well decentralized, in sharp contrast to the Saltillo strike where a few leaders cut a deal to end the strike. The FAT's understanding of and commitment to *autogestion* increased greatly during this strike.

The strike demonstrated the availability of material and political resources due to the broad Mexican workers' insurgency as well as the important role that international support through the CMT could play. The ties established in Canada and in western Europe at this time continued beyond the time of affiliation with the CLAT. Unfortunately, the determination of the state not to give in to the FAT--it was during this strike that the Secretary of Labor warned FAT it could play no role in the auto industry--proved decisive. In addition to tolerating

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<sup>5</sup>Workers' flier of August 1974.

repression by official union thugs and employing it directly in containing demonstrations, the government eventually waved import restrictions to allow the import of axles to replace those normally made by Spicer workers.

## Summary

During this period of transformation the FAT becomes sufficiently radicalized that it no longer fits within the confines of its original relations to church-linked organizations, the SSM, the CLAT and the CMT. Forces from the student movement of 1968 and the effects of liberation theology cause the people within the FAT to be open to a more Marxian view of the world. At least one FAT leader did travel to both the Soviet Union and Cuba during this time. Having said this, the FAT should not be seen as far left during this period when both urban and rural guerrilla groups abounded and a variety of extreme Marxist sects proliferated. In fact, at one point the FAT had to resist a Maoist take over of its SNTIHA union by the *Organización de Izquierda Revolucionaria-Linea de masas (OIR-lm)* (Robles, 1996a, p. 6). Journeys to Eastern Europe and an awareness of the struggles of Polish Solidarity workers immunized FAT against a left authoritarian approach.

Ties to CLAT were strained throughout the period. They finally broke over a solidarity alliance the FAT signed supporting rebels in El Salvador and over their strong support for the Sandinistas. Liberation theology or not, the CLAT was still anti-communist. The training, the travels, and the economic support provided by the CLAT and the more global CMT were essential to FAT's growth during this period. FAT's evolution, within the Mexican political context, made those ties obsolete. Yet many of the international links established during this period have continued to play an important role since then.

FAT entered the transition period with the moderate slogan "*Justicia y Democracia Sindical*" (Justice and Union Democracy.) Reflecting both its movement to the left and its commitment to direct worker democracy, it ended the period with the slogan "*Autogestión Proletaria*" (proletarian worker self-management.) With this greater independence the FAT was ready to play an important role in confronting the globalization of the Mexican economy.

### III.

#### **The Neo-liberal Period: 1982 to present**

While many aspects of the neo-liberal period begin in the presidency of Lopez-Portillo in 1976, President De La Madrid (1982-88) under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, makes a wholesale commitment to transforming Mexican economic policy.

Given the massive borrowing of Lopez Portillo and the subsequent collapse of oil prices, De La Madrid is forced to undertake drastic measures to pay off Mexico's enormous debt. His first goal is the generation of foreign exchange. The IMF and his planning minister, recent Harvard graduate Carlos Salinas de Gotari, convince him that to generate foreign capital he must increase exports. The way to do this is to attract foreign investment. The way to attract foreign investment is to offer low-wage docile labor. Thus, the policy of import substitution/stabilizing development, which sought to build the domestic market and saw growing wages as a stimulus to domestic consumption, is abandoned for a policy of export promotion which sees rising wages as a problem. During this period economic growth is often accompanied by falling wages. A series of tri-partite agreements are adopted which require that employers and unions hold the growth of wages below the rate of inflation. Government favored unions, especially those of the CTM, agree to carry out this policy.

Another policy change promoted by the neo-liberals is privatization of government owned enterprises such as banks, telephones, airlines, railroads, and electricity. Unions in these industries organize FSTSE, a federation of businesses in the service of the state. They question the policy of privatization. President Salinas favors Francisco Hernandez Juarez, the head of the telephone union, and telephones are privatized while the fame and influence of H-J rise.

The general populace of Mexico is opposed to the policies they experience under De la Madrid. They call the period "*la crisis*." They appear to give the anti-neo-liberal campaign of Cuauhtemoc Cardenas a majority of the votes in the election of 1988, but--after a breakdown of the computer system--Salinas is declared the winner (Barry, 1992, p. 27). Salinas does manage to attract foreign investment, and the economy seems to recover. Wages rise for some industrial workers. Salinas negotiates the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), enshrining his neo-liberal policies at the level of

international treaty. As the treaty goes into effect in January of 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) attacks in Chiapas. Despite political chaos (assassination of PRI candidate Colosio--presumably by a PRI faction,) the second PRI candidate, Yale economist Ernesto Zedillo, wins the election of that year and pledges to continue the policies of his predecessor. In December of '94 the economy collapses, the peso loses over half its value, and *la crisis* returns.

This final segment focuses primarily on the later part of this period of neo-liberal crisis.

### **FAT Alliances in the NAFTA Era**

The government's policy of offering up Mexican workers to global investors as both cheap and docile required careful control of workers through their unions. Throughout the period official unions signed salary cap pacts, though they also complained about them. New investors were often able to sign a "protection contract" with a CTM union before opening their new factories. These contracts established reliable CTM control but often did nothing for workers. In this context only independent unions such as the FAT were able to openly oppose government policy.

### **REMALC**

When it became apparent that NAFTA would be proposed as a follow up to the US-Canadian free trade agreement, FAT began to look for allies in the two countries to the north. FAT's contacts in the US had been limited to ties it had had with the United Farm Workers Union in the era of Cesar Chavez. The AFL-CIO had limited its ties in Mexico to official unions within the CT. Yet FAT did have good contacts with Quebec's CSN labor federation. The CSN had left the church-linked CMT during the same period when the FAT broke its ties. They had stayed in touch. The CSN had already been working with other Canadian labor federations and NGO's in opposition to the bi-lateral treaty between the US and Canada. This broad coalition had already established ties to concerned unions in the US. Based on these links, the basis for tri-national cooperation grew. Discussions within Mexico and among unionists of the three countries developed throughout 1990. Because the FAT was the leading Mexican industrial union able to openly oppose government policy, many of the unions in the US and Canada became interested in the FAT.

In April 1991 the FAT played a key role in helping to found REMALC, the Mexican Network Against NAFTA. This network

included several FAT unions, unions from various universities, environmentalists, women's groups, academics, the National Democratic Lawyers Front, and labor representatives from two political parties, the PRD and the PRT. The group proposed to enter into the NAFTA negotiation process then being conducted only by elites. From the beginning they insisted that they were not flatly opposed to the concept of a tri-national treaty on commercial relations, but that the treaty needed to reflect the needs of the majorities of working people, not just the interests of business classes.

By late April REMALC convened a meeting of unionists from the three countries that issued a joint statement declaring their intention to influence NAFTA negotiations. In October of 1991 REMALC was able to convene a tri-national labor event timed to coincide with a meeting of economic ministers being held in Zacatecas. At the meeting they tried to introduce their ideas to the ministers, but they were roundly rebuffed. Over time REMALC developed its media skills and its analytical abilities and they were able to get enough attention to get their ideas presented to the negotiators. More importantly, they were able to present their ideas to the media as an alternative source of ideas and information. REMALC has continued in this role ever since, establishing itself as an important and credible source of alternative economic data and policy ideas in Mexico. REMALC currently has over 100 affiliates in Mexico. Its executive committee meets weekly at the FAT offices in Mexico City, under the coordination of its Secretary, Bertha Luján, who is also one of the three national coordinators of the FAT.

#### **FAT-UE Strategic Alliance**

At the Zacatecas meeting REMALC held in 1991, FAT leaders met the political action director of the US based United Electrical Workers Union (UE.) A friendship and a strategic organizing alliance developed. The UE, like the FAT, is relatively small. Like the FAT, the UE has a history of political autonomy--it was expelled from the CIO for refusing to fire its left-wing personnel in the late forties. It also has a commitment to internal union democracy and to international labor solidarity.

The UE was concerned that a number of its union locals faced companies that were closing or threatening to close plants and moving operations to Mexico. They wanted to do what they could to slow up the flow of jobs to Mexico. They also sought a way to bargain collectively with Mexican workers who



were dealing with the same employer. A REMALC statement reflects the views of the FAT.

The best way to defend jobs in the United States is to work together to elevate the level of salaries, and workplace and environmental conditions in Mexico, so that our misery stops being the way we compete with our fellow workers to the north. We Mexican workers are not enemies but strategic allies for workers north of the Rio Grande (Arroyo, 1996, p. 24).

UE and FAT agreed to support each other in an effort to organize plants along the Texas-Mexico border, with a special focus on companies where the UE already represented sister plants in the US. This resulted in organizing campaigns in Ciudad Juarez at a GE plant, and in Ciudad Chihuahua at a Honeywell facility. Workers eventually lost both of those struggles due to illegal tactics employed by the companies and by the Mexican government. At the Honeywell Plant all workers involved in the initial phase of organizing a union were fired. At the GE plant, the FAT's petition to strike for recognition and a contract were denied by the Labor Board and by the state government.

After several rounds of visits to state officials, the Secretary of Government, the second highest political official, seemed to level with Benedicto Martinez, head of FAT's organizing effort. As Martinez tells it the Secretary said, "Look, this is not a legal question. It's a political question. We know who you are. We know your history of independence. There is no legal out for you. We won't allow you to organize a maquila. We can't risk the jobs. If we did, the business might leave. Others wouldn't come. We can't allow it." Martinez was then offered an election for recognition. This was not what the workers had asked for nor what the law allowed. however, after negotiations established a set of ground rules, the FAT prepared for the first secret ballot labor election to be held in Mexican history. At the last minute GE violated ground rules and swung the election in their favor (Benedicto Martinez, 1996a).

The FAT, with the help of the UE, and in the case of Honeywell, the Teamsters, filed the first complaints with the National Administrative Office (NAO) established under the NAFTA Labor Side Accords. In both cases, the companies' ability to present documents that created the appearance of legal compliance resulted in dismissal (International Brotherhood of Teamsters, 1994; United Electrical Workers, 1994; Sanner Ruhnke, 1995). This cross border collaboration of FAT with the UE and the Teamsters failed to give the benefits for the workers that had seemed very

close in the GE case, but they did accomplish the complete delegitimation of the labor side accords in the minds of most labor activists in the continent.

A small but very tangible victory resulting from the FAT-UE Alliance was the organization of a union at a small foundry in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. UE had been trying with limited success to organize the mostly Mexican-expatriate workforce. When FAT sent an organizer to explain to them that--like the FAT--the UE was not a corrupt charro union, the workers quickly signed up and went on to win a contract.

In the wake of the defeat at the GE plant, the FAT and the UE collaborated on the opening a workers education center in Ciudad Juarez. The center, opened in September 1996, is aimed at laying the groundwork for future organizing campaigns. (Hathaway, 1997) The UE also has a "Sponsor an Organizer" campaign through which it encourages union locals and other labor supporters to contribute the salary of a FAT organizer working in Mexico.

### **Autoparts Alliance**

In March of 1997, building on ties established through REMALC and UE, the FAT took part in the creation of a new alliance uniting seven unions from the three countries of North America that all have or seek contracts with one (here unnamed) autoparts manufacturer. At the end of a two day conference in Chicago participants agreed to exchange information on their contracts, their working conditions, and flow of materials from one plant to another. They agreed to work towards common negotiating language and to support each other during negotiations. The workers were tremendously encouraged by the establishment of communication between them and by their determination to overcome divide-and-conquer tactics.

Since this was the first meeting of the coalition there is not much action to report. Yet the mere existence of this coalition is a historic breakthrough in inter-union and international labor cooperation. It suggests the possibility of many such coalitions in the future. Since the FAT has always sought to build coalitions and since the FAT is uniquely available for international labor organizing, we should expect to see them in other such efforts in the future.

### **The FORO**

Officially known as "the Forum (*Foro*) of Unionism Facing the Nation and the Crisis," the Foro came into existence in 1995 in response to two issues: the economic collapse of the nation, and the government's policy of privatization. The initial impulse

for the Foro came from the electrical workers union (SME) that provides power to Mexico City. They were opposed to having their government-owned company privatized. In coordination with the Esther Gordilla of the teachers union (SNTE) and the small but broad based Revolutionary Confederation of Workers (COR), SME called the first Forum into being. Eventually other FSTSE unions joined as did FAT's metal workers union, STIMAHCS, and other independents, primarily university unions. Currently the Foro consists of 10 unions that belong to the official Labor Congress and 15 independents. All are united in their criticism of the government's neo-liberal policies that have hurt workers in a number of ways. They are united in seeking to prevent further damage.

An analysis of the FORO would be very complex, worthy of its own paper. Here let us only remark two conflicting tendencies. On the one hand both Professor Gordilla, and Hernandez Juarez of STRM, the telephone union, have a history involving very close ties to former President Salinas and apparent ambitions to climb higher within the power structure of the PRI. Gordilla from the beginning has been a key voice shaping new directions for the FORO. Hernandez Juarez has encouraged the media to portray him as spokesperson for the Foro despite the Foro's general commitment to avoid concentrating power in any official leaders and their specific and repeated efforts to chastise him for his tendencies towards *liderazgo*. On the other hand, there has been a concerted effort to redefine the structure of labor relations in Mexico by breaking the corporatist structures which the state, through the PRI, has used to control labor.

The FAT's role within the FORO have all been within the latter tendency. Interesting work has been done developing documents explaining the purpose, the goals and the methods of the FORO. Representatives of the CT member unions spoke of the need to recover the role they had had as spokesperson of the working class in negotiating labor policies with the government. They saw the Foro as a way of gaining power within the tri-partite, Pri-dominated process. They were upset because they were not being consulted in the neo-liberal era. The response of the FAT to such statements was a rejection of their role of bargaining on behalf of workers with the state. Rather, they asserted the need of workers to gain the power to meet their needs directly in their workplaces and their communities without the interference of the state. They advocated change towards *autogestion proletaria*.

At least on paper, the FAT has won many ideological struggles within the Foro. Position documents have changed

dramatically. Additionally, early in 1997 Benedicto Martinez, Secretary General of STIMHACS and one of the three national coordinators for the FAT, was chosen to be one of the four members of the executive committee of the Foro as it approaches momentous decisions. While it is clearly too early to say which of the competing tendencies will win out, it is clear that at this stage neither has been eliminated.

### **May Day and Beyond**

Mexico's labor day is celebrated on May 1st and has always featured a large march. The march had traditionally led legions of official union members in a parade past the President's balcony at the National Palace in order to thank the President for his defense of the working people of Mexico and of its glorious Revolution. Given the massive discontent and political organization spurred by the entry into NAFTA and the collapse of the peso, in 1995 the CT decided it would be wise to cancel the march.

This left a political space open to address labor issues. Given short notice the diversity of groups interested in protesting the government's labor policies were unable to agree on one coherent plan, but all agreed that the day should be celebrated by any and all protest groups. Many groups marched at various times and places and with various themes in a massive display of discontent. One of the groups to emerge from May 1995 was the *Coordinadora Intersindical Primer de Mayo* (May 1st interunion coordinator) a diverse group of left-wing labor and associated activist groups.

In 1996 the CT also canceled its May Day parade. Both the *Foro* and the *Intersindical Primer de Mayo*, called marches. They agreed to have them at different times since they were not willing to agree on a common message. The FAT marched in both parades and was the only organization to do so.

At the end of January 1997 the Foro and the *Intersindical* convened the National Union Encounter. Representatives from more than 80 unions attended. Discussion moved towards creating a new labor federation independent of the CT and in a context critical of current economic policy and of the corporatist system that has been used to keep labor controlled. A decision was made to work towards creation of a new federation sometime after this year's major elections in July. In the meantime those in attendance agreed to support each other in whatever conflicts may develop and to hold a joint May 1st march. When the CT declared that it would resume its official march this May, a potentially violent

confrontation seemed likely. However, by late February the CT had again decided not to march.

### **FAT in the Factories**

Since 1982 the FAT has suffered a number of defeats as well as many victories at the shop floor level. Many of the FAT's unions were in small and medium sized businesses which were hit hard by the economic crises of the two decades and by the decision to favor transnational capital even at the expense of domestic employers. For instance, in Leon, where FAT's base was built in small shoe manufacturing shops, many businesses failed. Others adopted new methods to rid themselves of unions and to make organizing more difficult. As a result FAT no longer has any contracts in shoes. It's best contract in town is with a German transnational, KSB, a contract which they have had since the late sixties and which pays relatively good wages and benefits.

One of the more interesting struggles in this period was with the auto parts maker Sealed Power, a business owned by a huge Mexican conglomerate that sells most of its product to Ford Motors. In 1979 workers at Sealed Power's plant in Mexico City broke away from the CTM and joined the FAT. The next year the business began looking for land to relocate, away from their union. They bought land in 1981 and opened the new plant in 1985 in distant Aguas Calientes, and they signed a protection contract with the CTM. Through clever covert organizing the FAT was able to organize the plant and win the contract away from the CTM in 1989.

The Sealed Power plant is notable for its modernity, its profitability and its very strong union. Producing for Ford requires a quality assurance program with worker "participation." Working with the company on Quality Circles and multi-skill training is "like walking on a razor's edge," says Benedicto Martinez, originally a Sealed Power line worker and now head of STIMAHCS. "One needs good relations with the employer, but not to the point of getting abused. We tell them that the key to quality production is treating the employees as quality." What is clear from walking the Aguas Calientes plant with Martinez is that workers while producing at high quality seem relaxed. They showed no fear of stopping work to talk to their union leaders. And discussions at the union office at the plant showed that union leaders were concerned to listen to and to serve the needs of their members. Negotiations with the personnel manger on multi-skill training showed union leaders not willing to roll over for their boss. FAT's success at state-of-the-art manufacturers like Sealed Power and KSB seem to demonstrate that FAT is not as detrimental to a company's health as many employers assert.

Relations in the plant also show that FAT takes its talk of autogestion seriously.

FAT is also involved with marginal businesses like the ZINC factory it just organized in Mexico City or the Morales Brothers Print shop--on strike since last June--that simply stopped paying its workers. It has made recent gains in organizing textile plants in Tlaxcala.

FAT is also active in what it calls "para-sindical work" giving support to members of other unions. A November training session on preparing for collective bargaining was attended by delegations, the majority of which were from non-FAT unions. FAT legal assistance is also given to workers regardless of their affiliation at offices in several cities. Not touched on in this discussion is the work FAT does in its related sectors serving credit unions and cooperatives, *campesinos*, and urban neighborhood groups.

## Conclusions

Since its founding in 1960 the FAT has declared itself to be an autonomous organization of, by, and for working people. To survive in a political environment that has sought complete control of labor organizations has been a constant struggle. We have here examined how the FAT has waged this struggle by adapting to various political climates and by utilizing, but not being limited by its resource bases.

By now it has been made clear that the FAT has not been able to support itself solely from a base of affiliated union members. This is due in part by the often repeated policy of the government not to allow the FAT to establish a strong foothold in major industries. It is also true because FAT's goals have always been larger than merely forming unions. Because its goal has been to form unions that are democratically run, free from government influence, and devoted to working class interests, its goal has also been the transformation of Mexico's political and economic structures. That was too much for a few shoe makers to fund on their own. It has never been too much for them to aspire to or to work towards.

FAT owes its beginning in large part to the SSM, the CLASC/CLAT, the JOC, and even to the initially reactionary *Obreros Guadalupanos*, all social outreach organs of the

Catholic Church. These groups provided the initial organizing impetus, salaries, places to meet, training, and an initial source of recruits. Yet to say that the FAT is a creation of the Catholic church would be to suggest that workers did not yearn for better wages and better unions before they were recruited by the church. Many of the social values motivating the SSM were shared by those in secular movements for labor rights as church members began to discover in the 1960's when they were urged to read both Marx and the Bible.

As the sixties and seventies pushed the FAT to the left, FAT workers saw themselves more clearly in the context of a global struggle of workers confronting capitalism. Connections with the CLAT and the CTM allowed them to travel, to form links to and to receive support from labor groups in Canada, Europe, and other Latin American countries. Expressions of solidarity with workers in Chile, Nicaragua, and El Salvador eventually led to the rupture of relations with FAT's original base of resource support. By the time that break took place FAT already had experience generating support directly from mass movements within Mexico and from unions and foundations beyond Mexico and beyond the church.

In the era of NAFTA, the FAT has been uniquely well situated to work with unions from the United States and Canada. It has received some support from those unions because offering such support appears to be clearly in the interest of those unions.

Throughout decades of change the FAT seems to have maintained its integrity remarkably well. Of the five principles stated in the founding document only the fifth one might be modified, changing "spiritual elevation" simply to "human dignity." In addition to receiving support, the FAT has given and continues to give support. FAT provided material and political support to Central American workers in the 1980's. It continues to give support to non-member workers and to non-affiliated unions. And it is a key actor in political movements such as the Foro and REMALC which seek to serve all workers.

As a part of its strategy the FAT has always pursued coalitions. Its early ties to insurgent railworkers and electricians are echoed in its current efforts to rally a multitude of unions to break out of the state dominated Labor Congress. It is also active with the Civic Alliance working for cleaner elections and denouncing neo-liberalism. It serves as an advisor to the Zapatistas on labor issues. Its efforts,

joined with those of many other Mexican workers in these coalitions, may play a vitally important part in the democratization of Mexican politics and the political economy of Mexico.

Given the history of defeats suffered at the hands of the state and the corporations this sometimes seems too much to expect. The government has made it clear that it does not intend to allow the FAT any major successes. Nonetheless, it continues to attempt to organize maquiladoras where it is not welcome and to push for freer unions and more democracy. "Sometimes it feels like we are banging on a brick wall," Benedicto Martinez says. "But we will keep banging, and someday it might just fall." (Benedicto Martinez, 1996b)

If our focus on resources and political opportunities allows us to conclude anything, it is that the present moment is at least as favorable for progress as any moment since the early 70's. International ties providing economic and political resources are steadily increasing due to shared interests of many labor unions. Domestic pressures and mobilization for change have been building steadily since 1994. Yet significant change would require a regime change--the end of the PRI (or any other party) controlled system of labor control. This would require both an electoral defeat of the PRI--a distinct possibility--and sufficient continued mobilization to force any new governing coalition to dismantle a system that has served not only the PRI, but transnational capital as well.

Regardless of the odds, the FAT will keep banging on the wall. Perhaps that is one of the legacies of its faith-based origins.



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## Abbreviations

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations; largest US Labor Federation
CLASC	Latin American Christian Union Confederation
CLAT	Latin American Labor Congress; sucesor to CLASC
CMT	Confederacion Mundial de Trabajadores; global Catholic labor federation, includes CLAT
COPARMEX	Mexican Employers Confederation
COR	Revolutionary Confederation of Workers
CROC	Revolutionary Confederation of Workers and Peasants
CROM	Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers
CSN	<i>Central National Syndical</i> ; Quebec labor federation
CT	<i>Congreso del Trabajo</i> ; Labor Congress
CTM	<i>Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos</i> ; Mexican Workers Federation, most powerful union federation
D.F.	Districto Federal; Mexico City
EZLN	Zapatista Army of National Liberation
FAT	Frente Auténtico del Trabajo; Authentic Labor Front
FNAP	National Front for Popular Action
Foro	Forum of Unionism Facing the Nation and the Crisis
FSTE	Federation of Workers in Service of the State
JFCA	<i>Junta Federal de Conciliacion y Arbitraje</i> ; Federal Labor Board
JOC	<i>Joventud Obrera Cristiana</i> ; Working Christian Youth
MMR	Revolutionary Teachers' Movement
MSF	Railworkers Union Movement
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NAO	National Administrative Office of US Dept. of Labor
NGO	non-governmental organization
OIR- <i>lm</i>	<i>Organización de Izquierda Revolucionaria-Linea de masas</i> Left Revolutionary Organization-mass line
PAN	National Action Party; conservative opposition
PCM	Mexican Communist Party
PRD	Revolutionary Democratic Party; contemporary left
PRI	Revolutionary Institutional Party; ruling party
PRT	Revolutionary Workers Party
REMALC	Mexican Network Against NAFTA
SME	Mexican Electrical Workers Union; contemporary in D.F.
SNTE	National Union of Educational Workers
SNTIHA	National Union of Workers in Iron and Steel Industry; FAT's first national union
SSM	Social Secretariat of Mexico; Catholic social outreach
STERM	Union of Electrical Workers of the Republic of Mexico
STFRM	Union of Railworkers of the Republic of Mexico
STIMAHCS	Union of Workers of Metal Industry, Steel, Iron, and Related Fields; FAT national union, in Foro
SUTERM	Only Union of Electrical Workers of the Republic of Mexico; result of government-forced merger
TD	Democratic Tendency; within electrical workers union

UE United Electrical Workers Union of America  
UNT National Union of Workers  
*UOI* *Unidad Obrera Independiente*; a federation of  
independent unions