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Mexico

Six years of resistance by electricians

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Humberto Montes de Oca Luna is the Secretary for External Relations of the Mexican Union of Electricians (SME) and the one of the coordinators of the New Confederation of Workers (NCT). He was interviewed in Mexico City in October 2015 by Franck Gaudichaud and Fabrice Thomas.

The Mexican Union of Electricians (SME) has in recent years been at the forefront of the social and popular movement in this country. In struggle for more than six years against the closure of the public company Luz y Fuerza del Centro, which had 44,000 employees when the neoliberal government of Calderón (Parti Acción Nacional - PAN) decided to privatize the electricity sector in the Federal District of Mexico City, the EMS has developed mobilizations at all levels, both social, political and judicial. Since 2009 it has participated in many struggles, in particular those opposed to new privatizations and the destruction of the Labour Code. Its spirit of resistance and its capacity for mobilization, which is exceptional in recent years in the trade union movement in Mexico, give the SME a political responsibility that transcends the immediate demands specific to electricians. Today the members of the union (more than 16,000 of the 44,000 workers at Luz y Fuerza, the others having renounced the union in exchange for the liquidation of their contract) are faced with a dual task: on the one hand, to find a solution in terms of employment in the short term - and end six years of layoffs and insecurity - and, on the other hand, to help construct the tools that Mexican workers lack: a new combative and democratic union confederation, and a unitary anti-capitalist political organization.

These objectives are all the more fundamental since the Mexican people are confronted daily with a disastrous situation, particularly after the political crisis opened by the abduction and disappearance of 43 students at Ayotzinapa in September 2014. Massive mobilizations organized a few weeks ago on the occasion of the first anniversary of this terrible repression hatched by the political regime have shown that the caste who govern the country will inevitably face popular indignation and the requirement of truth and justice. But it has also revealed the significant dispersion of social movements (and the radical left) who, even if they agree on the denunciation of the neo-liberal government of Peña Nieto (Institutional Revolutionary Party - PRI), and of violence and generalized corruption, still fail to define the unitary path to an alternative political outcome.

We talked about these different challenges with Humberto Montes de Oca Luna, Secretary of External Relations of the EMS and the one of the coordinators of the New Confederation of Workers (NCT). Humberto is a trade union activist of long standing and one of the figures of the resistance of the EMS, both in Mexico and on the international scene. We met in October in one of the offices of the EMS in the heart of México City as an agreement was finalized with the federal government to put several electricity production plants in the hands of the EMS in the form of a workers' cooperative, in return for the liquidation of the collective employment contract of the Luz y Fuerza company. The first such plant is in Nexaca, in the north of the state of Puebla, where the first plant to provide electricity to Mexico City was created at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Humberto acknowledges, this solution is only partial and transient (only the current members of the union will be able to find work in the project being negotiated, a project which of course has many uncertainties and challenges for the EMS), but it constitutes a first victory after six years of tenacious resistance, and a glimmer of hope for the labour movement in Mexico.

Humberto, before addressing topical issues, we would like to know what have been for you the key moments in this long struggle that the EMS has had to engage in.

For us, the first objective throughout these six years has been to avoid the death of our union, which was the real objective of the neoliberal President Felipe Calderón, who wanted to finish off our organization, a historic trade union, one hundred years old. Our second objective was to keep our jobs. The third was to continue the fight against the

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privatization of the energy sector which is one of the reasons which has led to our collective mass dismissal – 44,000 workers - after ten years of rejecting privatisation of the sector and the defeat of at least two constitutional reforms of privatization.

What are you currently negotiating on to keep your union alive?

I must first say that the solution we have found is for us “partial and transient”: we cannot recover 100% of what was taken from us in October 2009. It is a political solution in the sense that, at the legal level, we do not have clear support which would give our fight a more long-term perspective. Another essential element is that the situation of the working class in Mexico is very difficult, the relationship of forces is totally unfavourable. The central government is imposing a whole set of structural reforms to aggravate the neoliberal model and there is no coordinated social movement, or a visible alternative policy to reverse this situation in the short term. We are therefore obliged to find a political solution which allows us to recover in part our jobs and the collective agreement that existed previously. It is very important to obtain the rehiring of the 16,599 workers, all the more so since for six years they have had no income.

You are resisting in very difficult conditions...

Yes, we live in precarious conditions, which are getting much worse, situations of family breakdown, disease, death and even suicides. There remains a core of resistance which has survived all the tests of this frontal assault against the Mexican state: there has been the complicity of the legislative power which abstained from intervening in the controversy against the decree of dissolution, passing the buck to the Supreme Court which has been associated with this dissolution and with the annulment of a measure of protection that we had been granted by a collegiate tribunal, which sanctioned our victory and offered a legal solution with the rehiring of workers and their right to collect unpaid wages. Our resistance has been able to go to the end with the solidarity of the social organizations that have supported us at the national and international level.

You will create a co-operative that will reinstate some of the workers who are members of the SME. How will you organize yourself concretely?

The government has a debt in our respect: the money from the provident fund which was registered in the collective agreement and belongs to the workers constitutes a liability of the company in dissolution. In fact, the company may not pronounce its dissolution if it does not pay these amounts to the workers: we have negotiated so that, instead of paying us this sum in cash, we are granted the management of fourteen hydroelectric plants that belonged to the company Luz y Fuerza del Centro and we will also be given a set of production centres with their land, their buildings and infrastructure, so that they are managed by the workers themselves.

At the political level, for some years you have argued for the need to create a political instrument to overcome the fragmentation of the popular classes: you have therefore called for the creation of the Organization of the People and the Workers (OPT). Up to now the development of the OPT has remained modest. What are the challenges facing this organization at a time when the government of Peña Nieto is collapsing and throughout the country brutal violence is spreading against those at the bottom?

Our fight has primarily been a struggle for the defence of jobs but it has been transformed into a mass social struggle against the privatization of energy, against the government and we have made a national political struggle. This is the reason for the creation of the OPT, an organization that aspires to represent politically workers in struggle and which is articulated with a set of social movements and left political currents of the left. The objective of the OPT is to fight for social emancipation, which means in an anti-capitalist perspective, of profound change of the power and

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economic relationships in our country. It wishes to contribute to the accumulation of strategic forces to finish with this neoliberal caste which exploits not only all the natural resources but also us, human beings.

At the tactical level, what is the position of the OPT in relation to the government and to the next presidential election?

Before 2012, at the beginning of the construction of our organization, we tried to obtain the “political party certificate” (issued by the Mexican electoral institute, which decides who can contest elections), but we were refused through the mechanisms in force in Mexico which prevent the expression of a class position of class in the fight electoral policy. Then there was a major event, just one year ago: the abduction and disappearance of 43 students of Ayotzinapa.

We currently have a debate in our ranks on the viability of the participation in the electoral political struggle. We believe that the Mexican state has been in a process of profound and accelerated decomposition which is notably expressed with the disappearance of our comrades in Ayotzinapa, a drama that highlights the responsibility of the local authorities, the police and the army. It is a proof of the existing connections between organized crime and the Mexican state, the neoliberal political class and the institutional political parties (which are very often funded by the drug cartels). There is an interaction between these two mafias: the political mafia and organized crime. That is why, in the last elections, we have called for abstention, spoiled votes and in places the active boycott of the electoral process.

With this terrible situation symbolized by the disappearance of the 43, we find that the violence in Mexico comes not only from the drug cartels but that there is also a widespread political violence against the leaders of social organizations and the popular classes. The number of deaths each year is terrifying. How do you see the situation of social movements in this conjuncture?

Social movements in Mexico are faced with a major challenge. It is true that there are a lot of actions to oppose the spoliations, repression, the challenge to established rights, the restrictions on democratic freedoms, but it is a resistance which is dispersed. These are regional or local movements that remain isolated in the national context, and articulating this resistance is therefore a major challenge. Some current processes are going in this direction, such as the construction of the National Popular Assembly and the National Popular Convention which have emerged from the mobilization for Ayotzinapa. This Convention has adopted a nine-point program which revolves around the claim that the missing students are returned alive, which obviously remains essential. But I think that we also need to broaden the range of the demands to include other questions that help precisely to achieve the unity of all.

Another objective, more difficult still, is to broaden the social basis of the resistance by offering national political alternatives. We need clear positions in the face of the political crisis in our country. We need to organize those without organization. One of the factors that contributes to the stability of neoliberal governments, in addition to the electoral process, is the politico-cultural and ideological domination of the people. The role of the media is overwhelming. The disinformation and the political control over the popular organizations are incredible. This hampers collective mobilization, reduces the spaces for discussion and slows down the entry into struggle of new sectors. Yet, if we do not manage to converge all these forces in the political struggle for power, we will have a lot of difficulty in getting rid of these neoliberals.

A further question: arising “from below and from the left” Zapatismo embodied a project of indigenous resistance which has shown a lot of rebellious dignity since 1994; and somewhere “at the top and to the centre left” there is the electoral project of Manuel López Obrador (former head of government of the Federal District) around the organization Morena (Movement of National Regeneration). Between these two poles

which have crystallized discussions on the left in recent years, how would you characterize the political situation?

So far as we are concerned, our project is a third option but we have good relations with our Zapatista comrades: we have known periods of distancing and rapprochement and we share a lot of ideas, but not all. In the case of Morena, we cannot say that it is a structured political movement with a clear perspective. It is rather a movement around a caudillo, Manuel López Obrador, with a quasi messianic project which aims to save the country but without Morena involving itself in social and popular struggles. What we want is to build a real alternative, an alternative which fight against neo-liberalism, an anti-capitalist alternative which is based on the role that must be played by the workers in the social and political struggle of our country.