

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menéndez

Labor at a watershed

The pressure on union leaders to collaborate with the de la Madrid government's austerity program is mounting.

The first days of the new de la Madrid administration have already brought difficult times for this country's powerful labor confederations. Two days after taking power, on Dec. 3, de la Madrid called the leaders of the Congreso del Trabajo labor umbrella group to demand support for the economic austerity program he announced Dec. 1. It was clearly a very tense meeting.

Such tensions between labor and the government are a new experience for Mexico's labor leaders, who were courted by the López Portillo government until its last days in power.

Unions such as the Mexican Workers Confederation (CTM), the most powerful of the 34 confederations forming the Congreso del Trabajo, played a key role in the planning and implementation of many of the López Portillo government's development programs. Wage levels benefited from the country's prosperity.

Labor reciprocated by putting its political muscle behind the government. This support was the key to offset the campaign of Mexico's oligarchical forces against the banking nationalization and government exchange-control measures implemented by López Portillo Sept. 1.

López Portillo himself spent his last days in power reminding the country that the centerpiece of the political stability it has enjoyed in the last decades has been an alliance between the executive power and organized labor. In inaugurating new CTM head-

quarters here Nov. 27, López Portillo point blank said that "my regime would not have been possible without the CTM." Then in reference to the long-time head of the CTM, Fidel Velásquez, who has presided over this labor-government alliance for the last 50 years, López Portillo said that "Mexico's history cannot be understood without Fidel Velásquez."

The labor-government alliance was kept in the front pages of the press the next day when the Congreso del Trabajo offered López Portillo a farewell luncheon. Visibly moved, the outgoing President said, "if I did something which satisfied you, that will be my greatest prize, because it is your consensus which I care about." López Portillo was clearly sending a message to de la Madrid to do the same.

But, as seen in his meeting with the labor leaders, de la Madrid is not ready to compromise his commitment to impose austerity. In a public ceremony Dec. 6, de la Madrid's top advisor and Secretary of Planning and Budget Carlos Salinas de Gortari once again called for labor's support for the austerity package, in almost peremptory tones.

The Congreso del Trabajo and Velásquez have responded by saying that although they are willing to share sacrifices, they want to see what the government will do to control prices of basic goods. Tense bargaining is expected to continue for several weeks.

Fights are building not only in the economic area. A key component of

the Congreso del Trabajo, the Teachers Union (SNTE), probably the largest union in Latin America, is coming under fire from the new Education Minister Jesus Reyes Heróles. Reyes, the "intellectual" force behind several Jacobin groups, is expected to implement a plan to decentralize the education system which in turn could dismantle the SNTE control over teachers around the country. One press columnist extolled Reyes Heróles as just the man to "remove the fangs and cut the claws" of the SNTE leadership.

Some labor leaders have realized that their survival as Mexico's most powerful political force depends on breaking the intense austerity mentality being fostered by monetarist officials in the new government. Asked for his opinion on Finance Minister Jesus Silva Herzog's announcement Nov. 25 that the economy will not grow for the next few years, Fidel Velásquez told the press that "the obligation of all sectors of the population is to take care of what is at hand and not to think about this talk of not growing and not creating jobs."

There is also growing understanding that labor's hard times will not end by fighting domestic forces, be it the government or business groups, but by targeting the international forces which provoked the world recession in the first place, and joining an international mobilization to do this. A CTM delegation from the city of Monterrey is reported to be visiting several Ibero-American countries to build support for continent-wide action on the foreign debt crisis now hitting several countries in the area.

Such a mobilization would hook up Mexican labor with forces such as the powerful Colombian Workers Union (UCT) which is now gathering support for a proposal that several Ibero-American governments jointly renegotiate their foreign debt.