

A NEW LIFE FOR MEXICO'S OLDEST UNION

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Interview with Mexican labor leader Humberto Montes de Oca by David Bacon
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*This interview forms part of a series of interviews with prominent Mexican labor leaders conducted by photojournalist, author, political activist and union organizer David Bacon. **These interviews are a collaboration between the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE), the Labor Center and the Center for Mexican Studies at UCLA.***

Humberto Montes de Oca is the Secretary for Internal Relations of the Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas (SME – the Mexican Union of Electrical Workers). He was originally a working-class art student who became active in the leftwing political movements of the period of Mexico's Dirty War (1970s to early 1980s). He joined the SME as a political act to become part of the country's radical working-class movement, and soon became one of its most important leaders.



Mexico City, Mexico. September 1, 2011. Humberto Montes de Oca is interviewed in Mexico City's main square, the Zocalo, on the day Mexican President Felipe Calderon gave his annual speech about the state of the country. The protest, called the Day of the Indignant, was organized by unions including the Mexican Electrical Workers (SME) because the Mexican government fired 44,000 electrical workers and dissolved the state-owned company they worked for, in an effort to smash their union. Humberto Montes de Oca is the international secretary of the SME. Photo by: David Bacon

In 2009 the Mexican administration of Felipe Calderon dissolved the Power and Light Company of Central Mexico, one of the country's two national providers of electrical power. He then declared the union non-existent and terminated the jobs of its 44,000 members. While other administrations had regarded the SME, one of Mexico's oldest, and most democratic and radical unions, as a political opponent, no government before had taken such an extreme step.

About half the union's members decided to resist the attack and began an effort that continues today to recover their jobs and workplace rights, including the union contract. They kept the union's structure and headquarters intact, and then set up an allied workers' cooperative to generate work and help members survive. The other members took the government's severance package and gave up their union and job rights.

In this interview with journalist David Bacon, Montes de Oca describes the current state of the union and its relationship with the progressive administration of President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. He talks about the way the union organizes and educates its members internally, and places the union in the current national and international context. The interview has been edited for clarity.

The Current State of Labor Reform

Today we are in a situation created by the 2019 freedom of association reform. To some degree that reform was forced on the government by the pressure of unions in Canada and the United States, as part of the negotiation of the new free trade agreement T-MEC (Tratado – Mexico Estados Unidos Canada). Pressure was put on Mexico to make changes in union representation because charrismo and the employer protection contracts were used to cheapen the labor of Mexicans. Workers in Canada and the United States were at a disadvantage. Capital investment comes to Mexico because of these more favorable conditions. It is a form of social dumping.

In Mexico, those unions argued, workers should have greater mobility, greater ability to defend their interests to increase their benefits and income. This reform was implemented using this logic. It requires all unions to show that they are legitimate representatives of workers, and to create legitimate collective labor contracts. These two elements are generating a new situation in our country. The corporate and employer protection unions opposed this reform because it goes against their interests. But they have also adjusted by inventing a strategy in which they go through the process, but everything actually remains the same.

The charros can legitimize themselves because they have control of the workers. They themselves organize the process and can manipulate them. Workers do not have information, they do not have training, and they do not have the initiative. It is convenient for politicians also that things remain the same since these charros can still produce votes.

It is true that North American and Canadian unions sought to integrate the labor chapter of the T-MEC with the labor reforms in Mexican legislation. But it is also true that in Mexican unionism there is a tradition of democratic struggle. In the seventies, eighties and nineties, tough battles were fought for union democracy in our country. Our very own survival as a union has been a fight for union democracy. Democratic unionism fought many battles for democratization, but it was not structured as a single force, that knocked on the door and said, "we want a reform." Democratic lawyers were among the most important promoters of the reform, because many of them participated in the democratizing movements.

But the reform created bodies, like the Federal Labor Registration Center, which exercise very arbitrary power in a way that does not correspond to the spirit of the law. They tolerate noncompliance by some unions and demand the strict enforcement of procedures with others. Who decides? There is a danger that unions themselves will lose their autonomy and the labor movement its independence.

Yet there are groups of workers who are taking advantage of the situation to free themselves from charro unions. The example of the independent union victory at the General Motors plant in Silao is the clearest. We can see that it is possible for workers, using this legitimation process, to displace charro unions and achieve authentic collective bargaining.



Mexico City, Mexico. November 9, 2018. The cooperative set up by the Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME). Humberto Montes de Oca, secretary for exterior relations of the SME. Photo by: David Bacon

So there are two kinds of outcomes. On the one hand, a sham process allows charro unions and protection unions to become legitimate through a fraudulent procedure. On the other hand, an authentic process makes it possible to displace the charros and create new democratic unions. This is happening in parallel. We celebrate the creation of the Casas Obreras (community centers that help workers organize) that provide information and training, and which disseminate knowledge of the law that can be used to trigger the democratization of unions. We support this and we must work to help it succeed.

Unfortunately, there is as yet no commitment to a widespread challenge by established independent unions to the old CTM structure (Confederacion de Trabajadores Mexicanos – the federation allied to Mexico's old ruling political party, the PRI). Democratic unions are fragmented. They do not have, with the exception of the new Central Obrera, any intention of promoting a widespread process of democratization. They exist in an enclosed world of their own, and have no plan to expand outside of it. This is a conservative policy – to conserve your resources within your own space, and not confront the charros.

These unions only think about “my problems,” “my demands,” “my conflict,” and don't get involved with anything else. In other words, they have no intention of generating a movement beyond what they conceive as their own space. At the same time, the left no longer talks about unions. It is losing its link with the workers it had in the past. That weakens the possibilities for democratic change.

The new Central Obrera, however, does propose a national campaign for the democratization of unions. Conditions are good for this because many contracts were not legitimized, and disappeared. This creates a void, and we have to know how to fill it. For that, we need a workers' movement that thinks of itself as a class, beyond individual sectors or branches. The National Democratic Convention of Workers is based on that idea.

We are not saying that everyone must simply join the new Central Obrera. We are saying the new Central, and organizations in other sectors who want a movement for union democratization in our country, should come together. We have common issues: freedom of association, union democracy, social security, pensions, retirements, salaries – the basis for generating a movement. In that movement there's room for many efforts, including the Casas Obreras, the new emerging unions and federations of unions, and the old pillars of democratic unionism such as the SME. Perhaps in the medium and long term there will be a regrouping. Even if some are not moving in that direction now, perhaps later they will be convinced that this is needed, and they can help to build that process.

Nationalizing the Energy Industry

We share with the government the idea of nationalizing the electrical industry. In the past, we defended the nationalized electricity industry, against the gradual privatization that took place in previous administrations. Once the law was changed to allow privatization by the oligarchy and transnational corporations, they imposed the law of the free market in the electricity sector.

Today we call for reversing the structural privatization reform of Enrique Peña Nieto, imposed in 2013. But we want to add a social dimension, the recognition of the human right to energy as a constitutional right, and the social management of this strategic area, with broad participation of technicians, workers, and energy users. We need researchers who can manage this public company and not turn it into a political instrument of the state and the party in power. This is what we've frequently seen in our country, in the case of public companies.

For us, it is not enough to nationalize or renationalize the energy industry. We need the social management of strategic industries for the common good, with the broad participation of society, of workers, of specialists, of the energy consumers themselves. The right to energy is an inalienable human right. The solution is not as simple as saying, "let it be made public and that's it." There must be social management with broad social participation. What we have now is the bureaucratization of the management — public officials who obey commercial logic rather than the general interest of society.

State capitalism was very strong in Mexico in the sixties and seventies, which allowed development of the model that led to neoliberalism. Now we have a government that intends to regain the stewardship of the state in the economy. But that does not guarantee that it is dismantling the structural reforms neoliberal governments imposed on us over the last 30 years. It has left them intact. It is not reversing the dependence and subordination of our economy towards the north, towards the United States mainly.

It is not reversing the forms of savage exploitation of capital either. In regulating outsourcing a small step forward was taken, but the exploitation continues to exist. For this to change, we need to do more than make companies public. The Federal Electricity Commission, the company that supplies electric energy, is a public company, but that does not mean that it has a social character. The company will still cut you off if you don't pay. It is selling a commodity. If you consume and don't pay for it, you're cut off, and your human right to energy is not recognized.

Socialism means social management. It is a myth that by strengthening the state we are moving towards socialism. This is a country where capitalism is dominant and where the state facilitates the accumulation of capital. So strengthening the state will not take us to socialism. The state regulates the economic process to regulate capital, or to redistribute it. In contrast to savage capitalism, this state's goal is to make it a regulated, decent, humanitarian system, without ceasing to be capitalism. So this government wants to impose certain regulations on the market, on corporations, on free trade and so on. But it is still the same. Deep down there is the capital relationship.

Difficult Relations with the Lopez Obrador Administration

AMLO (Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador) was running for office in 2010, during the hunger strike in which our union fought the attack meant to destroy us. On one occasion he came to be with us. At that time he considered himself the legitimate president because of the fraudulent election. He gave us a letter in which he promised that when he became president in the next election, he would reintegrate us into the workforce. To date, he has not fulfilled this commitment, and he has not given the union a hearing.

Instead, AMLO has supported the former leaders of our union, who in 2009 called for the capitulation of the SME. They wanted to collect severance pay, so they resigned from the union and tried to dissolve it, liquidating its assets and distributing the money among the workers. We did not agree. We made a commitment to resist, not to liquidate ourselves, and to mobilize and fight against the extinction decree. They abandoned this fight and yet, after we fought for 14 years, they are the ones close to the President.

Some officials, like presidential spokesperson Jesús Ramírez Cuevas and the director of the Federal Electricity Commission, Manuel Bartlett Díaz, are using these dissident groups to attack the union. They no longer belong to the SME, yet they threaten to take over our facilities by force and violence, and have mounted a media campaign of slander. At the end of the administration's six-year term, unpredictable things can happen. We are prepared to face any aggression by those former workers.

People in this government believe that the governing party should have unions that are useful, loyal and subordinate. To them, a corporatized SME would be useful. Since we have not expressed any subordination, and we safeguard our union autonomy, they don't like this.

Our organization has always been critical. We recognize that the President is making an effort to recover the country's energy sovereignty, but we also have criticisms of its labor policy. There are many unresolved conflicts and strikes, like the 3-year strike in Sur Notimex and the miners strike in Cananea. There is no solution for our colleagues of the National Coordination of Education Workers. In short, the regime's labor policy is not what one might hope for from a democratic government.

The current government has little dialogue with social movements, unlike the progressivism in South America, where presidents like Lula, Chavez and Evo Morales have had a lot of communication with them. Here many social movements that supported MORENA (the Movimiento para la Regeneracion Nacional – Mexico's current governing party) in 2018 feel disappointed because they have not seen their situation improve or attention to their demands. The government proposes a direct relationship with the population without intermediaries that demand solutions. In its view, a union, a neighborhood organization, or an organization of academics or researchers is an intermediary, which it doesn't need or want. Instead, the government supports the people through its social policy and assistance programs.



Mexico City, Mexico. November 29, 2018. Humberto Montes de Oca, the international secretary of the Mexican Electrical Workers (SME) at a meeting with U.S. union leaders to talk about the new government in Mexico after Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador took office as President. Photo by: David Bacon

This is a clientelistic electoral policy, and the proof of its unpopularity is that here in Mexico City, MORENA lost the majority of the mayoralities in the last election. The city has been the cradle of the left-wing social movement in Mexico, but there is not a good relationship between the government and its social movements. That was reflected in the vote. It is a policy that Andrés Manuel has had throughout his career. He was never very close to independent unions, and now as President, he has not generated dialogue or a close relationship.

The Status of the SME Today

Currently, we have a membership of approximately 15,000 active workers and 10,000 retirees, who come from the former company Luz y Fuerza del Centro. We have work in the generation plants recovered from that public company, and other economic ventures where we have collective contracts. We have a collective bargaining agreement with Generadora Fénix and a contract with the Portuguese company Mota-Engil, where we are part of the public limited liability company that generates electricity. We have the right to 50% of the company's profits. When the company was organized we established a co-participation agreement along with sharing the profits.

The hydroelectric plants this company operates are generating around 100 megawatts per day. The profit is distributed among all members of the union, whether or not they work for the company. All members have the right to enjoy it. Year after year we calculate the amount, we go to our general meeting and the general meeting decides what to do with it. We have at times made investments in other generation plants. In recent years with the Covid emergency and the needs of our colleagues, the assembly decided on a per capita distribution of all dividends. We also created a trust for our colleagues who die, to provide aid for their relatives.

We have other collective contracts with other companies, smaller agreements, which enable us to keep the national industrial registry of our union. We also have people working in the cooperative, LF of the Center, which is now in a transition period. So the union is made up of workers who work under a collective labor contract, cooperative workers who work in the union's social and solidarity economy projects, and workers who do not have a job.

We are incorporating the children of the workers in resistance as members, not only in terms of looking for a job, but also from the social perspective of creating spaces for our young people and children. We have groups for women and for pensioners and retirees. Under Mexican law, we have a legal and legitimately constituted leadership, democratically elected by personal vote, free and direct. We want to provide spaces for participation. Our statutory mandate says we must ensure the well-being, recreation, dissemination, and political training of our members. Our goal is to strengthen internal unity in the face of a great challenge – government orchestration of a coup against the union.

We have a strong presence in the central states of Mexico, with a union structure in Morelos, Michoacán, Hidalgo, the State of Mexico, and Mexico City. We maintain a strong strategic alliance with the users of electrical energy – the National Assembly of Electrical Energy – and we hold days of struggle on the 11th of each month. We go with them to demand a clean slate, a social tariff and the recognition of the human right to energy. We recently had our extraordinary general assembly, and took stock of the critical negotiation with a government that does not keep its word. Our objective is labor reintegration in the nationalized electricity industry. For users, we want recognition of the human right to energy. Users need a clean slate so their debts are forgiven, and they can sign a new agreement with the company without being charged large amounts of money.

We have very good relations with the unions in the United States and Canada. Trinational solidarity was very important in our case. We were able to present a complaint within the framework of the labor chapter of the old NAFTA because of help from the unions in both countries. That complaint helped us put pressure on the government of Enrique Peña Nieto to find a political solution to our conflict. We maintain those relationships, and there is a lot to share.

This link between unions is necessary to defend the interests of the working class in our three countries. We have very different situations, different cultural and historical experience, and even the laws under which we function. We believe that in the law there is actually greater protection and more freedom for workers in Mexico than in the United States, where union freedom and labor rights are very restricted. Article 123 of our Constitution and the Federal Labor Law are the products of our social movements. Paradoxically, however, our income levels are much lower, and unions in our country also operate on behalf of employers' interests and not those of the majority of workers. And there is no authentic respect for the autonomy of the unions.

We are part of the process of change in Latin America. We have scheduled several events bringing together international energy workers. We try to support the workers of France, who are defending their retirement system, and the Peruvian people who are being massacred. We have just signed a statement opposing the attacks on the indigenous, Zapatista communities by paramilitary groups linked to the political elite in the state of Chiapas.

Creating a Class-Conscious Membership

Our vision is defending the interests of workers and a democratic union life. To accomplish this, our organization has always tried to train its members politically, and in terms of our union's history and traditions. Before the government's attempt to destroy the union in 2009, we had a school for union activists with a general orientation, organized and operated by retired colleagues with a political background. Some left-wing activists had joined the union to contribute to the political and ideological training of our social base – our members and close allies. All union representatives had to participate in this mandatory training school. We had an escalating series of general modules, from the history of the labor movement and of our union to the study of political economy, historical materialism and Marxism.

When I held the position of departmental representative, I was a rank-and-file member in the underground cable department. I'm an underground distribution worker. As soon as I began to represent my colleagues, I immediately began to attend these classes in the history of the labor movement and our union.

The classes were given in short cycles, some in a course of four or six weeks, with two classes a week. There were also other training activities, such as seminars and conferences, organized by the union. I had to go to several, but I remember one in particular about geopolitics that was very interesting. Trainers came from the national university and other higher education institutions, like Alejandro Álvarez and Andres Barrera. We had workshops on organizational subjects and many forums on the human right to energy, and energy transition.

But it was often a very stuffy, dogmatic education. It was very rigid, in the sense that reality was interpreted with the eyes of the past. The aim was to frame reality in the perspective of yesterday.

The proof of the dogmatism was that the teachers who taught those classes were among the first to give up when the government attacked us in 2009. They betrayed the organization because they did not understand that attack or how to resist. When the coup was carried out, the teachers at the cadre training school called for us to liquidate the union. I think they were really pseudo-Marxists — bureaucratic, dogmatic people who could not generate creative ideas and a movement for resistance. They were left behind and in the end, they betrayed us.

What had to be done was to create theory and practice based on new challenges and conditions — a new situation with new goals. The challenge is to understand the reality we are living in and use Marxism as a methodological tool to interpret and change it. What happened 100 years ago can't just be duplicated now. There are many changes in the economy, in politics, in ideology, that need a contemporary analysis from a revolutionary perspective, trying to formulate an alternative.

When real existing socialism fell, it created a crisis for everyone, and we still can't get out of it. How do we interpret that failed experience, that historical defeat? How can we develop a revolutionary practice in the situation we are now experiencing — a deep structural crisis in capitalism, environmental devastation, and the intensification of exploitation and the growing precarity of work?



Mexico City, Mexico. September 1, 2011. Members and their families of the Mexican Electrical Workers (SME) protest in Mexico City's main square, the Zocalo, on the day Mexican President Felipe Calderon gave his annual speech about the state of the country. The protest, called the Day of the Indignant, was organized because the Mexican government fired 44,000 electrical workers and dissolved the state-owned company they worked for, in an effort to smash their union. Protestors also demanded jobs, labor rights and an end to the repression of political dissidents. SME members had been camped out in the square since May. Photo by: David Bacon

For some, Marxism remained stagnant in time, as if it stayed still in a photograph. But repeating the old phrases leads nowhere, repeating the old slogans leads nowhere. That's what I call dogmatism. We are capable of creating and recreating revolutionary ideas based on the needs of our time, the new conditions that place us in a situation different from that of years ago. There have been new developments in Marxism. For me, Marxism is a guide. A Marxist has to interpret events from his or her understanding of the present, using this method.

During the resistance to the 2009 attack, the formal school of political education was interrupted. Our priority was responding to the extinction of our source of work. However, although the school stopped functioning, we still had workshops, forums, conferences, and seminars, but not the school's study program. Now we are resuming union political training again. I have many years of training and I want to share it with my colleagues. I'm giving workshop courses to form a new leadership in the union.

We are going to reactivate the school for activists. I'm working with comrade Hugo Álvarez Piña, our secretary of education and propaganda, but we want to restructure it. We have to deal with the reality of generational change and make sure our leaders have the tools and knowledge that will allow them to give the right direction to our union.

We have scholarships for the children of workers who belong to the union. We call them the children of the resistance, the sons and daughters of the workers who resisted the extinction of our source of work and the forced dissolution of our union during the past fourteen years. We are incorporating them into our training program. They get an introduction about unions, and then an explanation of how our union was born and its history over 100 years. We talk about the most important moments of struggle, how we created a process of resistance to prevent its disappearance, and our perspective for the future.