

Mexico: Oil privatisation halted due to mass protests

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"The Adelitas have arrived/To defend our oil/Whoever wants to give it to the foreigners/ Will get the shit kicked out of him!" yodelled the brigades of women pouring onto the esplanade of the Mexican senate. The demonstration was to protest a petroleum privatisation measure President Felipe Calderon insists is not a petroleum privatisation measure — and which he sent onto the Senate for fast-track ratification at the tag end of the session this April.

Inside the small, ornate Senate, leftist legislators aligned in the Broad Progressive Front (FAP), some dressed in white oil workers' overalls and hard hats, were camped out under pup tents arranged around the podium for the eighth straight night. They paralysed legislative activities and demanded an ample national debate on Calderon's plans to open up the nationalised petroleum corporation PEMEX to transnational investment.

Sneak privatisation

The hullabaloo, which has been brewing for months, exploded when rumours circulated that Calderon's right-wing PAN party and allies in the once-ruling (71 years) PRI had cooked up a secret vote approving the privatisation measure.

Such covert manoeuvring is called an "albazo" or "madruguete" — a pre-dawn ruse to approve legislation in the dark when there is significant opposition, often behind locked doors and military and police barricades. Seizing the podiums in both houses of congress and the timely arrival of the Adelitas prevented a madrugete and derailed plans to fast-track the privatisation.

Under Calderon's "energy reform" package, building and operating refineries and pipelines will be opened up to the private sector — 37 out of PEMEX's 41 divisions would be subject to partial privatisation.

In an analysis anti-privatisers label "catastrophic", which Calderon sent on to congress to back up his initiative, the president pinned salvation of PEMEX on deep water drilling in the Gulf of Mexico that would necessitate the "association" of private capital.

Mexico's petroleum industry was expropriated from an array of oil companies known collectively as the "Seven Sisters" in March 1938 by then-president Lazaro Cardenas — an act that remains a paragon of revolutionary nationalism throughout Latin America.

But down the decades, PEMEX has subcontracted out important parts of its structure to transnational drillers and service corporations like Halliburton, now its number one subcontractor, that suck billions of dollars in profits from Mexican oil each year.

The appearance of the Adelitas and their male counterparts (“Los Adelitos”) is the latest gamble by the left populist leader Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) to monkey wrench the government’s plans to return PEMEX to the contemporary version of the Seven Sisters.

Organised by neighbourhoods and by workplaces, the Adelita brigades are the lineal descendants of the groups of AMLO supporters who came together after the stolen 2006 election in a seven-week sit-in that shut down the capital’s main thoroughfares. At last count, there were 41 registered brigades — 28 Adelitas and 13 Adelitos, about 50,000 citizens in all.

Operating in shifts, 13,000 “brigadistas” have been encamped off and on for a week in front of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies.

The brigades are named after significant political events — “18th of March”, marking the day Cardenas expropriated the oil — or to honor social activists such as Jesus Piedra, the long-disappeared son of left senator Rosario Ibarra. Women warriors like Leona Vicaria and Benita Galeana are similarly remembered.

Citizens’ army

The creation of so large a citizens’ army pledged to carry out civil disobedience to prevent the passage of legislation it thinks detrimental to the republic is unprecedented in Mexico’s political history.

Similar brigades, led by women, have invaded local congresses outside of Mexico City and one band of activists closed Acapulco’s busy airport last week. Shutting down Mexico City’s Benito Juarez International Airport is the Adelitas’ ultimate threat.

The Adelitas, like most of the weapons in AMLO’s arsenal, are drawn from Mexico’s revolutionary history. Las Adelitas were “soldaderas”, or women soldiers who fought shoulder to shoulder with the men in Pancho Villa’s “Northern Division” during the 1910-1919 revolution.

With their long skirts, broad sombreros, bandoleers strung across their chests, and toting .22 carbines, the Adelitas were emblematic of the many courageous women who participated in that epic struggle.

AMLO’s crusade has not been confined to one house of congress. On April 8, when Calderon sprung his initiative on the legislature, FAP members stormed the tribune in the Chamber of Deputies while lawmakers were preparing to grant Calderon permission to travel to New Orleans for the April 21-22 summit of the North American Security and Prosperity Agreement. Mexican presidents must solicit congress for permission to travel.

Calderon was eager to attend the summit with the re-privatisation of Mexican oil in hand.

Suddenly, the FAPOs unfurled a 60-foot banner that announced Congress had been closed and cast it over the entire presidium — trapping president Ruth Zavaleta in its folds. The ensuing chaos prevented her from calling for a vote on the President’s travel arrangements.

Eight days later, the tribune was still draped in the banner and FAP deputies had chained shut the doors of the chamber and moved the desks of the PAN legislators to the podium to

barricade themselves from attempts to take it back.

Zavaleta, a member of AMLO's Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) but not friendly to him, has called for the use of "public force" to remove the rebel lawmakers.

AMLO is the target of extravagant vitriol delivered by the media, reminiscent of the public lynching he was subjected to during the tumultuous 2006 presidential campaign. TV tyrant Televisa's coverage of the takeover of congress was so venomous that thousands of Adelitas, wearing bandaleros and wielding facsimile .22s, descended on the conglomerate's Mexico City headquarters, provoking one prominent PAN politico to label them "paramilitaries".

In violation of constitutional amendments banning "black" political hit pieces, a PAN front group "Better Society, Better Government", is running primetime Televisa spots comparing AMLO to Hitler, Mussolini, and Pinochet. The Empresarial Coordinating Council, the nation's elite business federation, takes out full-page ads blasting AMLO for staging a coup d'état.

PRD divisions

Despite the anti-AMLO media blitz, or perhaps because of it, Lopez Obrador remains the only figure on the Mexican political stage who is able to convoke tens of thousands of supporters, often with virtually no notice.

Three times since March 18, when he kicked off this crusade, AMLO has filled the great Zocalo plaza, the heart of Mexico's body politic. What makes the turnouts even more impressive is the fact that AMLO has built this massive movement while the PRD has been reducing itself to rubble.

In-fighting since a corrupted March 16 party presidential election has divided the PRD down the middle. The party is roughly split between an activist wing headed by Lopez Obrador and party bureaucrats who see the PRD as an instrument for political and personal advancement. The latter seek to demobilize the Adelitas.

The "Chuchus" (many of their leaders are named Jesus) eschew AMLO's rallies and sit-ins and instead conduct their own private hunger strikes to protest privatisation. The Chuchus portray themselves as the "reasonable" left and are only too willing to "dialogue" with Calderon — a president Lopez Obrador resolutely refuses to recognise, due to the fraudulent nature of his "victory" in 2006.

Whoever wins, the tussle over the bones of the PRD may be a moot one — after two years of grassroots campaigning, AMLO's base has grown wider than the PRD's.

Although Calderon's scam to fast track privatisation through congress was blunted by the Adelitas and the FAPs, the PAN and the PRI still have plenty of room in which to connive. Now the PRI, seconded by Calderon's right-wing minions, proposes an uninterrupted 50 day "national" debate to be restricted to the two houses of congress with a congressional vote by mid-summer.

Calderon's initiative can only pass if at least half of the PRI's 120-vote delegation goes along with the game. Even if the privatisation measure eventually passes, the legislation is bound to wind up in the Mexican Supreme Court the moment it clears congress.

Meanwhile, AMLO's people are clamouring for a very different kind of debate, one that would unfold over the next four months and be conducted inside and outside congress in every state and municipality with the prospect of a national referendum to decide the issue — one poll has 62% opposed to the privatisation.

Such grassroots decision-making would be a revolutionary step in the land of the albazo and the madrugada.

Out on the esplanade of the Senate, the Adelitas were shaking their bodies to "La Cumbia del Petrolío". "Are you tired, companeras?" the companera with the bullhorn asked and brigadista Berta Robledo, a nurse about to retire from the National Pediatric Hospital, came to her feet with a loud "No!"

"Sure the sun is hot but so what?", she responded to a gringo reporter's stupid question, "the sun can't stop us, the rain can't stop us, the cold can't stop us and you know why? Because we are right! We are fighting for our oil and for our country. This is the resistance. We don't get tired."

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