

feature

Mexico: Is signing really believing?

by Adam Newman

In November of last year I attended a continental meeting of students and young people opposed to the North American Free Trade Agreement. While the Mexicans I met do not want the deal, their government does. If NAFTA is to be implemented, it must be a democratic process.

In the car on the way from the airport to the hotel, we passed through downtown Guadalajara. In April, the city's sewers had exploded, killing over 200 people. There were allegations that corrupt government officials were aware of the danger but did not act to avoid the catastrophe. So it goes in Mexico where the same government claims to have been democratically elected for the past 63 years.

President Carlos Salinas de Gortari of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) claims to have won the 1988 federal election with 50.4% of the vote following a computer breakdown. Many of the ballot boxes were

never opened. Since then more than 140 community leaders, journalists, and members of opposition parties have been assassinated. The human-rights group Americas Watch has accused the US government of turning a blind eye to the abuses in its haste to negotiate a free-trade deal.

The Salinas administration established a National Commission for Human Rights in June 1990. By March 1991, they had recorded more than 1,000 complaints. High-ranking police and government officials were charged with human rights offenses. However, opposition groups and private human rights organizations were critical of the government's stipulation that the Commission be excluded from addressing cases relating to political campaigns or electoral processes. Amnesty International has acknowledged in its annual report that abuse of human rights is becoming less common.

Nevertheless, the PRI manages the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), and the National Peasant Confederation (CNC), among

others. It's hard to speak out against the government when they control popular organizations. So people are careful, and understandably not too outspoken against the NAFTA.

The car stopped in downtown Guadalajara. The driver, a Mexican student with a carload of *gringos*, recognized some of his friends.

"We've got some Canadians and Americans here opposed to NAFTA," he said.

"Hide them," his friends laughed.

THE PRESS LOVES THE PRESIDENT

Newspaper writers also feel the PRI's sting of repression. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica's World Data Annual 1991*, "Although (Mexican) newspapers are guaranteed freedom under the constitution and there is no official censorship, nearly all are muted in their criticism of the president and his policies."

When I was in Mexico on December 2, the front page of *El Nacional* reported that President Salinas enjoys an 80% rate of popularity, comparable only to Eisenhower's 78%, and the 83% popularity enjoyed by President Kennedy during his term in office. The PRI uses the press to boost their image, as they continue to oppress the Mexican people.

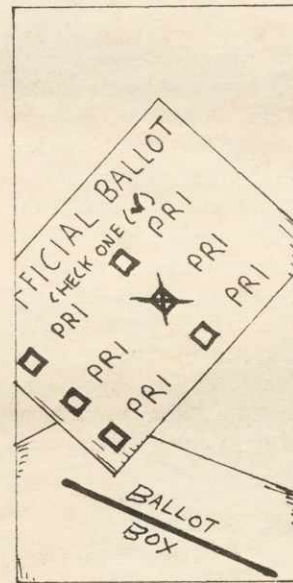
Government repression is met with resistance. Student protests were widespread in 1968. Mexico's political stability and "economic miracle"—annual growth rates averaging over 6% at the time—were cited as models for other developing countries. But industrial growth had left millions of Mexicans in deep pov-

erty, and government repression was at a very high level.

Students demanded the release of all political prisoners, disbandment of a group of soldiers who were harrasing them, and the dismissal of the chief of police of Mexico City. About 250,000 students and teachers went on strike, closing many schools. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets.

For the first time in forty years, an indignant crowd of Mexican citizens aware of their constitutional rights made its voice heard beneath the Presidential Balcony in the *Plaza de la Constitucion*.

The government panicked.



Mexico was about to host the Olympics, and wanted to make a good impression. On September 1, with the Olympics only six weeks away, President Gustav Diaz Ordaz warned that the unrest would be stopped "to avoid any further loss of prestige".

Government repression was already weakening the movement. By October 2, only 10,000 people had gathered on the esplanade of the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas* to hear the student speakers of the National Strike Committee. Approximately 5,000 Army troops and plainclothes police were also present.

Police and soldiers opened fire on the crowd. The government conceded that thirty-two people had been killed, but a more probable number was over three hundred. Two thousand people were jailed, and many more "disappeared".

Despite this history of brutality, mass protests are not a thing of the past. In 1986, at the National University in Mexico City, the University Council of Students (CEU) opposed reforms the rector, or university president, tried to make. 800,000 students protested. Faculty and staff went on strike for 15 days and shut down the institution.

Last year, some students marched 2400 km—it took them 3 months—to protest government intervention in education. The situation remains unchanged.

The night before I left for Canada, I stayed in the home of one of the student organizers of the meeting in Guadalajara. We went downtown, and were surrounded by old-looking buildings (by Canadian standards). "This is the Plaza of the Revolution," she said. "This is the Plaza of the Liberation. This is the Plaza of the Independence, and this is where we march each week and make speeches to the government."

Next week: Mexico's economic reforms, and Mexican students march for justice

Cocktails at seven

by Lilli Ju

The Third Annual Dalhousie Student Union Charity Ball & Auction in support of Alice Housing is being held on Saturday, February 6, 1993 in the McInnes Room, SUB.

The evening will begin with cocktails at 7 pm, buffet dinner and auction at 8 pm, and dancing from 9 pm to 1 am with the Aviators. Several businesses have generously donated great door prizes and auction items—a trip for two anywhere in Canada, hotel stays, dinners and lunches, cheesecakes and tortes, and the list goes on. As well, there will be a number of pieces of art from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and Alice Housing that will be on exhibit and for auction.

You are probably wondering what exactly is "Alice Housing". Simply put, Alice Housing provides safe and affordable housing for women and their children fleeing abuse.

However, Alice Housing is much more than just a basic housing program or shelter. Through Alice Housing, these women are able to develop life and job skills assisting them to make positive changes to their lives. This usually entails starting from nothing and achieving the independence and self-esteem to start a brand new life.

TIME TO HEAL

Established in 1983, Alice Housing is the first "second-stage" housing program in Nova Scotia, and is the second one in Canada. It was created due to a need arising from Bryrony House for a place where women could go after the "crisis" stage to begin picking up the pieces and getting on their feet.

Leaving the abusive situation is simply not enough. Women who have been abused lack trust, have insufficient life and job skills and suffer low self-esteem. Recovery from abuse is a very long and slow process.

Not only does Alice Housing provide housing for economically disadvantaged families fleeing abusive situations, it provides counselling, workshops, referrals for educational upgrading, employment opportunities, and many other community services.

Without such a second-stage housing, many women are forced to return to abusive and dangerous situations, putting their lives and the lives of their children at risk. As one woman stated, "I want my children to grow up without being afraid of the very person who is supposed to protect them from harm."

Two women are killed every week in Canada as a result of family violence. 60% of all murdered women are killed by their male partners. 24% of men in Atlantic Canada admit to having used physical violence against their female partners. 66% of abused women and 80% of abusive men experienced or witnessed violence in their lives as children. These are very grim statistics indeed.

In the past, Alice Housing had kept a low public profile for a very good reason. A real part of this program is dealing with death threats, stalking, vandalism, and so on. Just last year, Alice Housing acquired an office space from which it can better work with the public to address interests and concerns.

Tickets are available at the SUB Enquiry Desk. For more information please call 494-3527/1106.

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