

feature

Student protests: Mexican style

by Adam Newman

Last year Malony Dorame Alcantar missed a semester of studies. The University of Sonora student was busy walking towards the Mexican capital.

She and other students protested against a proposed tuition by marching 2400 km. over 3 months.

A native of Hermosillo, in the northern Mexican state of Sonora, Malony says it is important that post-secondary education remain free, so that it is accessible to the poor majority. Mexico has several public, autonomous universities, supported by the state, but largely independent of government intervention.

The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Mexico's first, was founded by the Catholic Church during colonial times in 1551. The state took control following the Independence of 1821. Mexico's universities were revamped by the 1918 Argentine Reform Movement which revolutionized universities in Latin America, improving their quality, making them autonomous, accessible, and increasing the role of student government. Free public education is guaranteed by the Mexican constitution.

"Students climbed the building and entered screaming."

The University of Guadalajara serves 200,000 students in a city of five million. But Mexico's commitment to higher education is often unable to provide for its rapidly expanding poor population. According to the *Britannica World Data Annual 1991*, only 5% of Mexicans age 25 and over have some postsecondary education; in Canada the figure is 44%.

Ten years ago the average tuition of a Mexican university was a token \$2-\$3. Today, in many places, it is \$200-\$300, a price which makes education inaccessible to many, says Hugo Aboites, Social Sciences professor at the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM) in Mexico City.

Tuition increases were forced when university budgets were cut as part of a Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Mexico following the debt crisis of 1982. Since then, the country has experienced economic reforms, such as the sale of inefficient state-enterprise to the private sector, with the goal of increasing foreign investment. Americans and Canadians are further urged to spend their dollars in Mexico under the terms of a Mexican initiative, the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement.

NAFTA promotes economic development based on the activity of transnational corporations. TNCs demand a workforce with certain skills. Many people fear that Mexican universities will become "skills factories", where only technical studies will be encouraged. An accessible, broad post-secondary education could cease to exist.

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About 5,000 students in Hermosillo attend the University of Sonora, the only public university in the state. Many people come from outside the city, says Malony. Others are too poor, and live too far away to attend. Sonora is part of the maquiladora zone, an area of great poverty and industrial activity near Mexico's border with the United States.

Students, staff and faculty representatives formed the *Consejo*

Administrativo, an administrative council composed of some 80 members. In November 1991, the state governor autocratically replaced the *Consejo*, justifying the action as a means to improve academic standards.

The new *Junta Universitaria* was composed of 12 people, nine of whom were from outside the university. One of its first actions was to propose a tuition fee of \$250.

Students formed a committee to protest the fee hike which many who were already paying for books, room, and board could not afford to pay. They organized marches, protests, and rallies in November and December 1991.

Their protests fell on deaf ears. So students asked the *rector*, or university president, Mario Antonio Valencia Arvizu, and his staff to leave. Students then occupied the administration building. Classes continued as usual. Because the university

is supposedly autonomous, it has its own set of rules, and police were prohibited from entering the campus. Students remained in the building for four months.

A campus radio program, *Rock en las Rocas*, was censored when students used it to air their beefs. Five students went on a hunger strike, lasting one week. A debate between students and members of Congress was broadcast in January 1992. "We showed a video of many people, the majority of the students in the university, marching towards the government buildings," says Malony, adding that "the members of Congress looked ridiculous on television."

Students then painted murals on walls surrounding the university. The

community joined them; professionals and artists added to the work. The authorities covered it with white paint at the end of February.

One day when the university was closed in April, the *rector* tried to re-enter. Accompanied by staff and riot police, he burst into the administration building, which was full of sleeping students.

"They broke chairs and tables, to make us look like vandals," says Malony. "Students climbed the building and entered screaming, 'Fuera, Fuera Valencia!' (Out, Out Valencia!)." He ran out with all the other people.

Students then marched peacefully

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