Abstract:
In spite of the triumph of the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional—PAN) in Mexico’s presidential elections, the National Union of Workers in Education (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación—SNTE) maintains a corporatist structure; it also enjoys the consent of the political authorities to intervene in the educational system and to use public resources in electoral campaigns to favor its allies. The explanation is that the union performs a strategic function for governance in the educational setting: control over workers. Union leaders have a pragmatic attitude toward the executive branch and political parties: the union approves presidential proposals in exchange for state toleration of discretionary union government and the preservation of power in the educational system. The union supports parties that guarantee positions of power. The purpose of this article is to explain the institutional factors that enable the SNTE to exist as a pressure group in the national educational sector, as well as the factors that make it a political actor.

Keywords unionism, teaching profession, power, educational policy, Mexico

Introduction
The National Union of Workers in Education (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación—SNTE), in legal terms, is the organization that represents approximately 1.3 million workers employed by the Secretariat of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública—SEP) and by the educational systems in Mexico’s thirty-one federal entities. The union shares the representation of teachers and administrative personnel in public elementary and secondary schools with other organizations, which have a marginal nature in their territorial scope and number of members.

Besides being practically a monopoly in representation and number of members, the SNTE—in contrast with the rest of the “national” union organizations that depend on the federal government or even the private sector—is involved in the administration and control of resources in its political/administrative location. From that perspective, and in an attempt to understand the particular characteristics of the SNTE and the different strategies it has developed throughout its history, this article will study the union’s performance from three analytical perspectives:

In first place, as a “corporatist union”; in other words, a union that practically has a monopoly on representing its members because, according to the corresponding law, they cannot resign or change unions.

In second place, as an “organization with an oligarchic nature” since its national leaders tend to construct leadership that remains in power for long periods of time. They perform as a closed group because they are officially recognized by the labor authorities and the educational sector (in exchange for control, institutional loyalty, and political/electoral support) or because they are able to restrict and handle the competition for the principal positions of union representation due to incentives from labor law and other factors.

In third place, as an interest group that in centralized and decentralized form resorts to diverse strategies to pressure the educational authorities for wage increases and benefits, as well as for maintaining its control in the national and state educational sectors. Such strategies are listed below:
Protected by the norms of SEP-SNTE labor relations, such as the General Law of Education, the General Working Conditions, the regulations of the Escalafón promotion system, and the guidelines of the Carrera Magisterial program, the union leaders have “colonized” the educational apparatus in two forms: by placing their teams in salaried administrative positions, and by handling all position assignments, as well as promotions and transfers.

Mobilization that implies work stoppages, taking control of the physical plant, and protests in the public thoroughfare with the support of social organizations of a diverse nature.

The construction of political alliances with the ruling party at the federal and state levels, a circumstance in which the SNTE acts as a “party-aligned organization”, meaning that some of its leaders, in exchange for being nominated as candidates to run for positions as federal or local deputies, use a certain number of union members to help on the respective campaign, in addition to investing union resources in encouraging voter turnout.

A coalition or electoral alliance through the SNTE party, New Alliance (Nueva Alianza—Panal), an agreement that is developed according to the same terms of action as a party organization.

Appointment of SNTE legislators to education and budget commissions with the support of the majority parties; from these positions, in agreement with local or national union leaders, they turn to diverse practices of lobbying and exchanging support in order to veto, stall, or promote bills that could affect or improve their political/administrative position in the educational sector.

The national union leadership, with the potential backing of the strategies defined in the framework of “corporatist” control and “oligarchic” leadership, attempts to negotiate an agreement with the president of Mexico in office with regard to structural affairs, such as reforms in the educational sector or current issues like salary increases or the budget for education.

Based on these analytical considerations, the purpose of this article is to explain the institutional factors that enable the SNTE to exist as a pressure group in the framework of the national educational sector, along with the factors that situate it as a political actor interested primarily in gaining positions of “power”, whether in the setting of public administration or popular representation. In this sense, the article attempts to explain and analyze the strategies used by this union organization in both facets, emphasizing that in spite of its occasional deviation of resources to act as a pressure group or political actor, most of the union’s actions are concentrated on mediating between workers and political authorities.

The document’s central argument establishes that because of the functions of control and negotiation/intermediation performed by the union (in the framework of an educational system organized in a pyramidal/corporatist yet federalist system), its leaders are obligated to function in both the political and educational systems in simultaneous fashion. In the political arena, incentives are generated to strengthen the leaders’ internal authority and cement their legitimacy as spokespeople before outside actors, particularly in the case of political parties and the state and federal governments. In the educational sphere, incentives are structured to enable the control of workers in a corporatist sense, while especially favoring their loyalty to the union and to the system as a whole, which in many circumstances overlap. In other words, obeying union orders, whether of a regional or national type, implies recognizing the authority of the educational system and rejecting or ignoring the intrusion of outside agents that are either social or political actors.

This article is divided into two sections. The first explains why the SNTE is a “corporatist” union and how this form of structuring the union has given rise to the presence of “oligarchies”—groups that have been able to build leadership with a degree of autonomy, but whose strength depends primarily on
the support they receive from the political authorities, particularly from Mexico’s president in the case of the union’s national leadership.

This same section explains the terms in which the SNTE is a pressure group, and the circumstances that in centralized or decentralized form allow the union to act “institutionally”; i.e., as an administrative negotiator of labor matters in authorized channels, or as an actor that exerts pressure from the spheres of public opinion and political institutions, or even as a type of “social movement” that favors work stoppages, the taking control of physical plants, and typical street protests.

The second section explains the SNTE’s characteristics as a political actor. It also gives the reasons the SNTE, in contrast with other union corporatist organizations, was able to construct and maintain an alliance with the government of the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional—PAN) and then with that party’s structure, although the union’s main political ally, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional—PRI), lost the presidency in 2000. The explanation is that diverse factors of an institutional type and other factors of a situational nature enabled the SNTE to replace the PRI with the PAN as its political ally. On the government’s side, the corporatist characteristics of this union have guaranteed control and stability in the educational system—control and stability that are fundamental for a party without governing experience at the federal level; in addition, the vertical, oligarchic, and corporatist structure of the SNTE (now with the support of the new party of the teaching profession) functions as a “winning” electoral machine that compensates for National Action’s organizational deficiencies in electoral struggles. On the other hand, the union not only has maintained the PAN’s control in the educational sector, but also has broadened that control significantly, in addition to improving its electoral results and its ability to influence the legislative agenda in areas relative to its jurisdiction: the SEP’s budget, social security that is dependent on the federal government, and matters related to normative changes in education.

The Pillars of Corporatist Control

The SNTE was created in 1944 under the auspices of the Mexican government, which called for the unification of the existing teachers’ organizations to form a “national” organization that would group workers from elementary and secondary education from each state and municipality. Thus the SNTE is the sole union organization that represents workers in public education at the national and state level (SNTE, 1989). This union defines itself as:

The national unitary organization of workers in education, which promotes the defense and continuous improvement of the economic, social, employment, and professional conditions of its members. It is formed by workers at the service of education, dependent on the Secretariat of Public Education, the state governments, municipal governments, private-sector companies, decentralized organizations, retirees, and pensioners of educational service in the named entities (SNTE, Declaration of Principles, 2004, Article 5).

Since the SNTE is part of the corporatist constellation of the organizations of public-sector employees, it was a member of the Labor Congress, the leading organization of organized workers, and a member until 1989 of the popular sector of the PRI. As the representative of the workers in the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP), until 2004 it formed part of the Federation of Workers at the Service of the State (FSTSE), but on February 27, 2004, it joined the Democratic Federation of Unions of Public Servants.1

The corporatist force of the SNTE is rooted in the fact that the labor legislation that regulates the union activities of public employees in Mexico establishes that no other union can exist within the SEP;2 therefore, the SNTE has not competed against other labor organizations to represent the teaching
profession at the national level nor in the country’s thirty-two entities. Upon entering SEP, hourly workers automatically joined the union.

The SNTE comprises 56 sections that are distributed throughout Mexico and divided into 7,000 delegations. Until May, 1992, when basic education was federalized, the sections were divided into federal, state, sole, and private school sections. The federal sections consisted of workers in education who provided their services at institutions that depended, in both employment and financial terms, on the federal government. The state sections corresponded to employees who worked for the state governments. The sole sections usually grouped, within a single federal entity, employees dependent on the federal and state budgets (Loyo y Muñoz, 2003; Peláez, 1999; Benavides y Velasco, 1992).

According to the organization’s theory, the teaching profession is a semiprofessional organization because teachers and their union representatives cannot be ignored in the design and implementation of public policy in school. The statement can even be made that without the support and agreement of the teaching profession, any decision in educational policy is very likely to fail. The system works in this manner because of the organizational nature of the work of the teaching profession, in the sense that its members are fully involved with the school’s objectives, in contrast with other professionals who work in public administration. Although schools’ objectives are determined at the SEP, union representatives and even teachers must be consulted as the implementers of decisions.

In these terms, although the SNTE is an institutional mechanism of control for effects of political mobilization, subordination in labor matters, and for maintaining the ideological/political line of plans and programs of study, in professional questions, the leaders of the teaching profession and even the members of the profession have always shown belligerence.

Therefore, although the leaders of the SNTE have been loyal representatives of the corporatist objectives of control, they have not ignored the fact that teaching requires a certain margin of freedom for those who exercise the profession, and that teachers as a professional group have their own standards. In fact, the oldest demands of the teaching profession are:  

a) greater participation in educational administration and in the definition of plans, programs, and textbooks, and  
b) a greater margin of autonomy in performing their professional activity (Arnaut, 1996:208-210).

Since teaching implies a type of social status that goes beyond the classroom and since professional training occurs in institutions that incarnate a type of cultural and social corporatism:

Teachers, it is said, must be called to teach, implying a moral, civic, and social evaluation. Teachers must be an example not only in the classroom, but also outside of the classroom; teachers are different from other public-sector employees, since they are not bureaucrats who shed their work identity each time they leave the office; teachers continue to be teachers; in other words, they incarnate a set of qualities that are attributed to them because they are teachers […] Besides training in special schools—diverse types of “normal schools”—teachers frequently marry a member of the same profession. The norm in certain families is to enter the “Normal School” […] Corporatist relations […] in the case of the teaching profession imply a weighty cultural dimension (Loyo, 1992b:250).

In addition, corporatist control cannot ignore that the SNTE consists of different professional groups that occasionally struggle for national representation and therefore the benefits of negotiations on the national and state levels: teachers of preschool, elementary, and secondary schools who are “normal school graduates”; “free” professionals who offer their services at the secondary level and in high school and college. Such tensions also include manual and administrative workers employed by the educational sector.
The Teaching Profession as a Social Movement

Control is also important for the government because the SNTE since its founding has consisted of groups that, due to ideological or labor reasons, have generally assumed an attitude of belligerence or confrontation toward national and sectional leaders. In this sense, since the union’s founding, opposing “currents” have defended various causes that they believe the national leadership does not consider during annual negotiations with the SEP and state governments.

The central demand of dissident groups has been improved wages and benefits. This demand cannot be considered a simple façade, since the dissident teachers, except for those from Estado de Mexico (the members of section 36) and the Federal District (the members of sections 9 and 10) in the late 1980s, have historically been located in highly marginalized geographic and economic regions. In this respect, the outstanding sections are section 22 in Oaxaca, sections 7 and 40 in Chiapas, section 14 in Guerrero, and section 18 in Michoacán.

Improvements in wages and benefits are generally demanded in the form of a direct wage increase, an increase in the number of days paid as a year-end bonus, and rezoning (classifying the geographic area where the teacher works as urban); in addition, support is requested for rural teachers to have better living conditions in isolated regions and communities. In social security issues, they generally press for higher quality in medical and hospital services, an increase in the number and amounts of home loans, as well as a substantial increase in the pensions of retirees and pensioners. They also state demands related to their professional work; mainly, greater ease in entering training courses offered by federal and state governments; scholarships for students in normal school; and more openings in the areas that have rural teachers; more resources for the infrastructure of real estate and chattels at school; scholarships for elementary and secondary school children with low resources; and free uniforms and school supplies. Until 2001, they demanded the government invest 8% of the country’s gross domestic product in education, an amount that was increased to 12% that year.

They also question the orientation of plans and programs of study in ideological terms, the way schools are operated, the type of product parents receive, and the policies for training and promoting teachers and raising their wages. Occasionally, they threaten to boycott the distribution of free textbooks because they believe they censor history or because daylight savings time is a “foreign imposition” that affects schools.

The magnitude of educational backwardness and social and economic marginalization in regions where dissident groups are located has generally surpassed the negotiating ability of national leaders; the disadvantage of belligerent groups is greater if one takes into consideration that negotiations between the SEP and the SNTE are immersed to a large degree in corporatist logic. In other words, union leaders do not have full autonomy to represent workers.

In the sections and delegations, the general secretaries have more autonomy than national leaders. However, from 1944 to date, national leaders have been promoted or authorized by the head of the executive branch. As a result, when dissident groups establish an informal channel of negotiating labor conditions, they end up confronting top union leadership. Their protests have been accompanied by the banners of “union democracy” and “autonomy” versus the government; in other words, rejection of subordination to the government (known as union cowboys). And on occasion, demands are also made for the rendering of accounts regarding the use of the union’s financial resources. Such actions are generally centered on the organization of marches, meetings, work stoppages, the blocking of streets or highways, and the taking over of school buildings and other government offices.

Between 1948 and 2007, various sections of the SNTE organized approximately 61 work stoppages, mostly due to two reasons: disagreements regarding the election of the sectional leader (who was generally accused of being an arbitrary appointment or undemocratically selected); and demands for
wage increases or other economical/labor matters. Such demands included the suspension of set positions for promotions, increase in overtime pay, the reclassification of regions with a high cost of living, the payment of unpaid wages, complaints regarding the functioning of health clinics for government workers (Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores del Estado—ISSSTE), the construction of ISSSTE grocery stores, an increase in the number of mortgage loans, and employee housing (Peláez, 1984; Arnaud, 1996; Loyo, 1985 y 1991; Trejo, 1990; Cook, 1996; Muñoz, A., 2002; Loyo y Muñoz, 2003).

Possibly because of the corporatist mechanics of labor relations, these currents have never suggested breaking away from national leadership or forming a splinter organization. Why? The first reason is related to the infeasibility of official recognition: if a union exists it is backed by the Secretariat of Labor in the case of private-sector organizations, and by the Secretariat of the Interior in the case of federal government workers. In the thirty-two federal entities, recognition in the event of a splintering “dissident” section would depend on the Secretariats of Labor and the Interior. In fact, the separation of some teachers’ groups from the SNTE in Puebla, Estado de Mexico, Veracruz, Tlaxcala, Tabasco, and Baja California, as well as other states, was encouraged by the governors in order to resolve leadership problems between groups or to weaken state sections. The federal or state government would be unlikely to give union registration to “dissidents” or groups of an independent nature.

The most important “dissident” current is the National Coordinator of Workers in Education (Coordenadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación—CNTE) which, in 1979, replaced the Teachers’ Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Revolucionario Magisterial—MRM) in agglutinating individuals contrary to the hegemonic group (Loyo, 1985; Salinas e Imaz, 1984). Over its history, the CNTE has attained a presence in various states of Mexico, such as Tabasco, Estado de Mexico, Oaxaca, Campeche, Chiapas, Guerrero, Yucatán, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Querétaro and Chihuahua. Its national presence, however, has been weak, and since the late 1990s, the group has only been able to become established in Oaxaca’s section 22, flying the flags of “union democracy” and labor improvements (Cook, 1996; Yescas y Zafra, 2006). As a majority current, it also controls section 18 in Michoacán and section 14 in Guerrero. It has a fundamental presence in sections 9, 10 and 11 of the Federal District and sections 7 and 40 in Chiapas.

Although CNTE’s territorial scope is limited if one considers that it controls only three sections out of fifty-six, the group often becomes—because of the intensity of its protests and the support it obtains from parents, independent unions, and diverse social organizations—the reference of the SNTE’s National Executive Committee (Comité Ejecutivo National—CEN) for negotiating with the educational authorities. For example, the teachers in Oaxaca are the only teachers in the nation who have a year-end bonus of ninety days, and this is the demand made by many sections and the national committee in their negotiations with the SEP and the state governors. In Michoacán, students in the normal school receive scholarships from the state government and are guaranteed access to the state educational system upon graduation. In most sections, this system of immediate hiring upon completing normal school studies has been lost.

An additional characteristic of dissidents groups is that they generally do not protest alone. Historically they have received support from independent unionism, located primarily in the services sector, such as the Mexican Union of Electricians (Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas—SME) or the National Union of Workers (Unión Nacional de Trabajadores—UNT), and in the university sector, where the Independent Workers Union at the UAM and the Workers Union at the UNAM are outstanding. The dissident teachers have also received support from parents, often associated with organizational structures of an urban or low-class urban cut, or of an indigenous and rural type. In political terms, some of their leaders have historically formed alliances with the left, beginning with the
Mexican Communist Party and continuing on to today’s Party of the Democratic Revolution (Partido de la Revolución Democrática—PRD), after passing through political organizations not affiliated to parties, such as the Movement to Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo—MAS). Since this type of coalition generates demands that go beyond education, over the decades these groups have also been promoters of the democratization of the political regime (Street, 2000:177-178).

The CNTE has experienced splintering because of internal conflict or voting that has given rise to other, more moderate minority currents like “New Unionism” or “Democratic Fractions”. An important difference is that these currents have been willing to cohabit in union governance with the “institutional” groups, while the more belligerent sectors reject sharing governing organizations like committees or even sectional and national congresses: they believe that the leaders of the national committee are not backed by the majority of workers and thus are subordinate to the government. Such postures have implied conflicts in the heart of dissidence, which over the years has become divided over this circumstance. In addition, since the CNTE has not established mechanisms to channel internal dissent, as a “group” it has fragmented and has lost the government of some union sections or presence in an important number of delegations. This is the case of sections 9, 10 and 11 of the Federal District and sections 7 and 40 of Chiapas.

The force of the CNTE, from its creation to date, has been linked to the political and economic “structure of opportunities” of the Mexican regime (Tarrow, 1983). To the degree this current struggles against union corporatism, which is a line of transmission from the authoritarian regime, it attracts more followers, many more members willing to participate in confrontation. Thus at various times the CNTE has constituted a type of “social movement”—a joint, intentional act that is developed from a logic of recovery, of defense of an interest or cause; the statement can even be made that the CNTE has formed a collective company that has the objective of establishing a “new order” in its union and labor location (Melucci, 1980:202).

In the social and political terrain, dissident teachers have formed part of the struggle for the democratization of the political regime. In first place, by leading regional protests against the authoritarian practices of leaders aligned with political bosses; and in second place, as candidates or leaders of the leftist political opposition. In fact, in states like Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero and Michoacán, this opposition has been supported by dissident teacher groups for decades.

However, to the degree that the regime has become more democratic and demands for salary increases are heeded, the CNTE has lost followers. On the other hand, as long as the CNTE was the “opposition” in sectional committees, its mobilizations used volunteer workers, but once it took over the sections’ governance, the group’s acts of protest were based on an organizational structure that, in the terms of the same corporatist framework, favors discipline and permanent cooperation from its members. First, because workers are unable to change to another union section if there are two in the same entity, and second, because of the granting of incentives as a form of compensation, according to individual performance in collective protest actions (March y Olsen, 1998; Olson, 1995).

The SNTE as a Pressure Group

Corporatist control has been exchanged for professional sinecures and especially for the monopoly on school and teacher administration. Therefore, since its creation, the leadership of the teachers’ union has pressured the educational authorities to accept union boards in some of the areas where the sector’s principal resources are distributed.

These areas are the management positions that have to do with the administration of public schools; recruiting centers (normal schools); promotions commissions; offices that determine the creation and filling of new positions and the imposition of fines or the granting of incentives (a bureaucratic pyramid
within the SEP or state offices of education: school director, supervisor, inspector, department head, and area director. Given this relation, some who study the SEP-SNTE relationship speak even of “colonization” and the union’s “overlapping” (Street, 1992; Reséndiz, 1992) the public administration’s tasks in education.

According to this logic, lines of authority are connected as follows: school directors with supervisors and zone inspectors and they in turn with area directors in states, in elementary and secondary schools. Union power can even be confused with the power of the SEP bureaucracy because of the high degree of “overlapping” (Arnaut, 1996:211) between salaried positions and union positions. For example, zone supervisors, whose function is to oversee teaching work and if necessary, report anomalies, are simultaneously union leaders assigned to sectional committees or to national leadership. Thus they preside over union assemblies, and decide on promotions and worker transfers. Although the supervisor position is salaried, it is on the union promotions list and is therefore part of the controversy regarding the interaction between the two entities to which it pertains (Arnaut, 1996:213-214).

This overlapping or colonization, although possibly viewed as “historical”, is institutionalized in the General Law of Education (DOF, July 9, 1993), which establishes that the authorities “are obligated to recognize their union organization as responsible for collective labor relations according to the terms of the current roster”. Although the states now manage the labor relations of the teaching profession in each entity, the SEP’s *General Working Conditions* is another normative reference of this overlapping, especially because it covers a relation of “uses and customs” in which “salaried” positions like undersecretaries, directors, general assistant directors and normal school directors have been generally proposed by SNTE leaders. A similar situation occurs in the thirty-one decentralized educational systems in the states.

This de facto single-sidedness also occurs in the Regulations for Promotions, which is managed by a national commission consisting of two representatives from the SEP, according to the regulations, two from the SNTE, and a fifth member called the “Arbitrating President” who is designated jointly by the involved parties. This group has the task of “providing that necessary for exercising the rights of promotion and transfer”; calling for applicants to fill vacant positions, whether definitive or provisional; determining promotions and transfers, and dealing with worker complaints with respect to promotions. According to the Regulations for Promotions, the National Mixed Commission “is an autonomous institution in its decisions, whose resolutions cannot be invalidated by administrative authorities or bodies of the union government, but only by the competent courts”. Another aspect these regulations indicate is that employee service is divided into four groups, according to the institutional assignment: two administered by the SNTE and two by the SEP.

Although the regulations differentiate clearly between the tasks of the SNTE and SEP representatives on the National Mixed Commission on Promotions, as well as the competencies of each group, it is evident that the union broadened its sphere of influence: as pointed out by Arnaut (1996:210), “what is controlled by the SEP, can feasibly be controlled by the SNTE, due to the presence it has attained from its origins both inside and outside of the organization”. In labor terms, the power of the SNTE is obvious, since for both transfers and promotions, workers in education must apply at the administrative offices of the educational system as well as at the Labor Affairs office at the national and sectional level. Even in the Carrera Magisterial program, which by norm is a system of promotions that are requested in individual form and are based on individual merits, evaluated by a Mixed National Commission, real entry is determined by the SNTE.

In the areas mentioned above, the SNTE intervenes because it is the pillar of the permanent reproduction of its qualitative and quantitative force. Yet in some of these areas and in other SEP areas, the union tries to participate because it considers participation a “professional right” of the teaching
profession. In this situation, when the educational authorities propose to reform partially or totally some of these areas, they are obligated to discuss the reform with the union, which has always been reluctant to accept changes made without its participation, and in some cases, without its consent (Muñoz, A., 2005; Latapi, 2001; Guadarrama, 1997; Arnaut, 1996; Ornelas, 1995; Guevara, 1992; Miranda, 1992; Reséndiz, 1992).

These characteristics make SNTE a pressure group, to the degree that it can be seen as an association of individuals aimed at exerting a favorable influence on group interests. Although the group’s leaders carry out mobilizations or alliances with parties, their objectives are in essence professional and labor-related. It can be considered within the typology of protection groups because it has the essential purpose of defending a sector of society (Dowse and Hughes, 1986:466-468). It is also a pressure group because it is a set of individuals united by ties of interests or particular advantages, and aware of those ties and their effects on other parties. Because of the type of structure, the group demands permanent performance from its members for established ends (Almond and Powell, 1979:98).

The SNTE as a pressure group has the particular characteristic of acting as an institutional group, to the degree it consists of “professionalized” personnel who fulfill political and social functions that are duly regulated. It is also an associative group since it is a structure that is “specialized” for the articulation of specific interests; in this case, those of the national teaching profession (Almond and Powell, 1979:99).

Union Corporatism as Legal Control over the Teaching Profession

The original legal foundation of the SNTE (a union of workers in public education provided by the federation) is a product of the “political” division of differentiated legal regimes of general workers and government workers, corresponding to sections A and B of article 123 of the Mexico Constitution, respectively. This same division includes what is called federal versus local jurisdiction, as well as the restrictive use of organizational typologies, such as trade unions, company unions, industrial unions, and so on. According to Bensusán (2000a:234-235), this is a product of the divisions generated in “artificial units” in the heart of unionism—units that operate as “straightjackets” in hindering the eventual convergence of workers organized for the defense of common interests.12

At this point, it should be clarified that due to mainly political reasons, the SNTE is the only national union that has “double attendance”; in other words, it is located in both sections of the constitution’s article 123. After the process of decentralizing educational services to the states, in legal terms, with the exception of the workers in the Federal District (sections 9, 10 and 11), the union members had no relation with the SEP and remained uncovered by the regulations of the Federal Law of Workers at the Service of the State. For legal effects, the 52 remaining sections are obligated to sign a collective bargaining agreement with each governor.

In light of this legal situation, which represented a problem of governance for the SEP as well as the federal government, the Agreement for the Modernization of Basic and Normal Education (ANMEB) was signed in May of 1992, establishing that the government recognized the national leaders of the SNTE as the sole intermediaries in labor negotiations, and that these leaders without litigation could replace the sectional leaders in negotiating with the governors.

This Agreement meant that the sectional leaders’ future labor negotiations with the governors would adjust to the orientation and advice established by the National Executive Committee of the SNTE. The national leadership of the union retained the prerogative of revoking the sectional committee’s authority to manage the collective bargaining relationship. And the obligation of the Secretariat of Finance, or the state treasuries as needed, would be to deliver to the union’s national committee the percentage of wages the union members are obligated to contribute as union dues13 (Loyo, 1992b).
During the terms of President Carlos Salinas and President Ernesto Zedillo, the lack of a legal basis for this arrangement was not relevant. However, once the PRI lost the presidency in the federal elections of 2000, the SNTE hurried to register at the Federal Board of Conciliation and Arbitration and obtained recognition in July of 2001 to support its position as labor's representative before the governors. At the same time, it conserved the registry granted by the Federal Court of Conciliation and Arbitration as the representative of SEP workers.

In addition, due to political reasons, the SNTE has been the only governmental union organization that since its creation has broadly used, in a decentralized manner—through its sections in the states—the “coactive powers” assigned to unions in labor legislation on unions and hiring, to the degree that this legislation facilitates certain conditions:

In each organization, there will be only one union […] All workers have the right to form part of the union, but once they request and obtain entry, they may not resign from it (Federal Law of Workers at the Service of the State, articles 68 and 69).  

This legal condition gives the authoritarian corporatist nature to the SNTE because it assumes, according to the theory of corporatism:

A system of intermediating interests that is organized into monopolistic units in spheres of representation that do not overlap, coordinated hierarchically by “higher” associations that can cover more and are based on involuntary contributions. In exchange, the state concedes explicit recognition to one association per category, it incorporates this organization directly and reliably within the decision-making process, and it negotiates to obtain the union’s consent with regard to applicable measures, which normally are present as packaged global agreements related to various matters. Seen from the perspective of results (in other words, social control), corporatism involves associations actively dedicated to the definition and indoctrination of its members’ interests and to the exercise of authority over their behavior, specifically by imposing restrictive sanctions and conceding fundamental benefits for them […] In exchange, the state receives the guaranteed consent of the entire category and returns part of the responsibility involving the implementation of policy in the association (Schmitter, 1992:7).

Probably because of the minimal cost of interrupting work and the non-optimal working conditions, corporatist control has not been one hundred percent effective throughout the union at all times. Depending on teachers’ economic situation and the degree of organization of “dissidents” or of groups adverse to national or sectional actions, teachers, through “stoppages” have been characterized as turning to this resource on a permanent basis; strikes, although legally permitted, are made practically impossible by the conditions established by the respective labor law (Federal Law of Workers at the Service of the State, articles 94, 96, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105 and 109).

In this sense, as the head organization in representing workers in education in both the national and regional settings, the SNTE, in exchange for corporatist control, maintains a series of “administrative courts” not seen in other union organizations that depend on the federal government: the SNTE has had the prerogative of participating in one hundred percent of the “unionizable” hiring, the possibility of generating the termination of a worker if he is expelled from the labor organization by means of the so-called exclusion clause (although this mechanism is not considered in the law of state workers), as well as the ability to impose a “stoppage” on its members, the continuation of a stoppage, and as necessary, the conclusion of the stoppage (especially at the regional level). This ability is relevant if one takes into account that the labor law of government workers indicates that union representatives have only an
advisory nature in the determination of working conditions (Federal Law of Workers at the Service of the State, article 87).

The results in this matter have shown ups and downs for the educational system and its workers. On one hand, the SNTE has expanded its presence in almost all sectors; in general terms, it has been able to impose coactively the negotiation of working conditions, at times with the reticence of educational authorities (not the federal government) as well as the assumed represented members. It has even been able to avoid the modernization of educational sectors (the most recent case was its rejection of the secondary school reform) because of the effect on acquired rights at schools or the implication of payroll cuts or decreased working hours. However, on other occasions it has supported the employer’s wishes in spite of members’ opinions, as in the case of hiring employees by the hour without benefits, the refusal to basify workers with interim contracts or the acceptance of the legislative conditions of the new ISSSTE law.

The SNTE and the Political Regime Before and After the PRI’s Loss of the Presidency

It is necessary to place in context the corporatist relation the SNTE maintains with the political regime. Even after the PRI’s presidential candidate lost the national election in 2000, the relation was the product of the political design promoted by the government upon the creation of the National Revolutionary Party (Partido Nacional Revolucionario—PNR) in 1929. Although a hegemonic party (Sartori, 1987:277-289) was intended to restrict electoral competency to the detriment of potential opponents, it was also an instrument of corporatist organization of the most relevant sectors in the economy, where unionized workers played a fundamental role from the beginning (Bizberg, 1990; Bensusán, 2000a and 2005; Pereyra, 1981).

The state needed to organize society to disarticulate various local powers and reinforce its central power. It encouraged the formation of rural, union, and “popular” organizations with the purpose of: a) mobilizing them vertically to support government policies and make them active voters; b) to regulate economic and political conflicts in a centralized manner; c) to create a controlled mechanism to channel demands; and d) to have controlled and subordinated social actors (González Casanova, 1990; Córdova, 1994; Pacheco, 2000:76-77).

The core of the corporatist monopoly in terms of arbitration and the course of supportive action and the subordination of institutionalized groups to the government was the nation’s president. The head of the executive branch, through PRI mediation, was generally the principal source of the political initiatives that affected corporations’ interests. The inclination to favor one group or another, whether by granting positions in the PRI, appointments or elected positions, or through policies, was associated with the president’s six-year term project or the current circumstances (such as a sudden social uprising or the strengthening of a dissident in the official party). In short, union corporations were incorporated into the regime and party to establish a relation of exchange that implied control through public positions and economic policies that were acceptable for union leaders. In this manner, corporatism became a type of relation known as political exchange (Rusconi, 1985; Panebianco, 1982).

Because of the above, it is useful to consider that although the recognized “corporatist” power of SNTE leaders has a legal nature, its operation has a political nature that implies the recognition or lack of recognition by the nation’s president. In other words, the SNTE—like other strategic unions—is subject to the mechanisms that counterbalance the recognized “legal power” of the union organizations. These mechanisms have in principle a legal nature, but were designed to restrict the autonomy of collective representation with regard to the state and/or employers: their formality occults the president’s discretionary ability to recognize or refuse to recognize the representativity of a union organization or its leaders.
The most important of these counterbalancing mechanisms is the demand for the “union registration” of any organization and of union leaders before the labor authorities, through what is known as “taking note”, whether through the federal board or court of conciliation and arbitration. Thanks to these powers, the government has been able to select leaders favorable to its policies, thus exerting an influence on union spokespersons who agree with government interests. This allowed the government to control SNTE leadership politically and thus guarantee the corporatist vote of workers for the ruling party, at least until 1988 (Muñoz, H., 1999:38-39). In this sense, it is useful to remember that from 1972 to date, the last two national leaders of the SNTE, Carlos Jonguitud Barrios and Elba Esther Gordillo, were designated by the nation’s president; in other words, without initially requiring the legitimacy of an election process involving union members.

In addition, having the guarantee of union control is fundamental for the government when facing an educational reform since union intermediation legitimates and facilitates change. The way leaders are replaced is irrelevant; for example, in the context of a wage crisis in public education and a deficit in electoral legitimacy, the federal executive’s office made the decision to remove Jonguitud Barrios as the national leader of the SNTE. After meeting with President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, on Sunday, April 23, 1989, Jonguitud announced his resignation as the lifetime president of the “Revolutionary Vanguard” union group and as the permanent advisor of SNTE’s national committee.

Factors of influence were the sizeable drop in teachers’ wages; the strengthening of a “dissident” current in the CNTE, based primarily in sections 22 in Oaxaca, 7 and 40 in Chiapas, 14 in Guerrero, 18 in Michoacán, and 9, 10 and 11 in the Federal District; the union leader’s belligerent response to the modernizing discourse of President Salinas; and the political need to give a “political air of legitimacy” to heal the deficit in electoral legitimacy due to the fraud perpetrated against the presidential candidate of the National Democratic Front party, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, in the 1988 federal elections. But most importantly, Jonguitud lost to a large degree the control that was required to forge ahead with the plan for educational decentralization, as started in 1982 (Arnaut, 1992:36).

Almost one year after the fall of Jonguitud and with the backing of the Federal Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, Elba Esther Gordillo organized, with the purpose of establishing her position as independent from President Salinas, the First Special National Congress on January 22, 1990, in Tepic. The congress ratified the political decision that Gordillo would serve as the general secretary of the SNTE, in order to reorganize internal alliances in her favor. With union legitimacy and after modifying the required statutes, on February 26, 1992, Gordillo extended her mandate until 1995 (Loyo, 1997:38-39; Muñoz, A., 1996:174-175). And from that year until 2004 she served formally as the president of the National Committee of Political Action, although she controlled the union from the same position. In May of 2004, following another statutory reform, she was elected “president” of the SNTE for a four-year term.

The continuity of Elba Esther Gordillo indicates, among other aspects, that she learned the mechanics of a corporatist relation from the beginning: that the union had to be controlled without ignoring the semiprofessional nature of the teaching profession and serving its pluralism in organizational terms. From the political perspective, it was necessary above all to establish an alliance with the nation’s president regardless of the direction of his educational project or his party membership. Thus, from the beginning, Elba Esther Gordillo became a fundamental ally of the presidency.

In this respect, the data indicate that during Salinas’ term, Gordillo made possible the signing of the ANMEB and the General Law of Education. During Ernesto Zedillo’s term, the SNTE’s leader favored the flexibility of teachers and authorities regarding the changed content of various textbooks and avoided confrontations with authorities in the field. During the term of Vicente Fox, the SNTE accepted
presidential initiatives: the Quality Schools Program, Encyclomedia, Parents’ Guide, and Social Agreement for the quality of Education, which obligated the union to sponsor competitive hiring for teachers, directors and supervisors (Navarro, 2005:269-319). In all terms, it offered electoral support to the party of the sitting president.

Taking into account that like Salinas, Felipe Calderón reached the presidency in the shadow of electoral fraud perpetrated against Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the candidate of the Coalition for the Good of All formed by the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), the Labor Party (PT) and Democratic Convergence (CD), and also taking into account that the public opinion is that the SNTE and its leaders are the main obstacle to improved quality in basic education (a political context similar to that in which Carlos Jonguitud was removed from his position), Elba Esther Gordillo protected herself against a possible “coup of political legitimacy” and the probable interest of an opposing teachers’ leader in negotiating her dismissal with the President.

In this scenario, on July 7, 2007, Elba Esther Gordillo was reelected president of the SNTE, in advance, by a special national congress for a “sole term” until 2021, since her term was to conclude in July of 2008. To ensure the legal effects of this action, it had to be backed by two institutions that depend on the nation’s president: the Federal Board and the Court of Conciliation and Arbitration. The ratification was not made public, but no competent authority claimed to be against it (La Jornada, July 8, 2007).

The Relation between Corporatism and Oligarchic Leadership

Although the political and labor subordination of the SNTE, as in most “institutional” unions, has guaranteed control, it has also implied certain benefits for the leaders, who have been able to manage unions without counterbalances and without member supervision. This situation occurs because no norms regulate the internal management of union affairs, such as the collection of dues and the use of dues (which has generated significant fragility in the leaders’ rendering of accounts for workers); another reason for the situation is the inertia of time and the political function of control, which has prevented the implementation of minimal regulations regarding the democratic functioning of bodies of union governance (Bensusán, 2000b:418). In the case of the SNTE, the result has been, except at intermediate levels (sections and delegations), null worker participation in fundamental decision making, such as the election of the leaders of the national committee and collective bargaining.

The structural factor that favors this situation is that the legitimacy of the SNTE’s national leaders does not depend on the members’ votes (although indirect through delegates). Legitimacy is essentially determined by the national president’s support. On one hand, workers’ acceptance or rejection depends (in addition to the corporatist model of labor regulations), on the success of national wage negotiations and especially on the union mechanisms to grant incentives in the form of punishments and rewards for workers in education. In other words, as mentioned above and according to Arnaut (1996:211), teaching (and to a large degree the administrative activities of the educational sector) is a “unionized” profession. From hiring through retirement, in the nation’s 56 sections, workers depend entirely on union management.

According to the analysis by Michels (1972), organizational oligarchies in unions and parties are related to structural factors and the advantages of leadership. In the first case, very few members are interested in decision-making, the special needs for an effective organizational defense, and professional representation. And in the second case, leaders acquire outstanding knowledge, a high income level, and especially, the ability to manage fundamental areas of organizations like recruiting, finance, rules, internal communication, and the succession of leaders at all levels. Another factor that is crucial in relations between workers and employers is that the leaders control negotiations and are responsible for
the results, whether positive or negative. Therefore, according to Michels, the “organization” can be oppressive for its members as a whole, yet in an individual manner meet members’ expectations more efficiently.

The national leaders of the SNTE are a powerful oligarchy because, as Michels indicates, their power is “directly proportional to the organization’s power”, emphasizing that “where the organization is strongest is where least democracy is being applied” (1972:33). Although adapting the case of the SNTE to Michels’ view and his iron law of oligarchies may be overly forced, empirical evidence shows how national leaders handle invitations to compete for positions, select voting members at congresses, keep voting processes relatively secret from members and the public, and determine their continuity in a matter of hours.

The statutes establish, however, direct secret voting for candidates in the main bodies of union governance: national and sectional congresses. The statutes also establish proportional distribution according to the percentage of votes received by the second and third places. In principle, there is democracy if one considers that “all” active members can vote; in fact, however, democracy has a limited nature if one takes into account that the National Executive Committee controls the invitations to national and sectional congresses. Even if the Committee does not send an invitation to an outgoing sectional committee, it is in fact extending a four-year mandate that is established by statute.

*The Relation of SNTE with the Political Parties*

The ability of SNTE leaders to intervene in the design and operation of educational policy, as well as in members’ working conditions, is reinforced by the relation maintained primarily with the PRI until 2000 and with the other political parties since 1989. The leaders relate to teachers as a group or in individual form because they are the permanent bearers of social leadership in the communities where they work. Their presence, like that of a physician or priest, carries social status because of the significant backwardness and marginalization of some regions. The political parties have attempted to utilize this situation to their benefit, especially since the effective presence of government occurs in all of the nation’s towns in the schools that offer basic education.

Thus through teachers, Mexico’s diverse political forces are present in communities throughout Mexico. The political work that SNTE members traditionally do for the parties in their communities include actions of proselytism, representation in electoral bodies, the coordination of campaigns, and serving as candidates or even party leaders. Since from 1929 to 1988, the only party that could win regional elections was the PRI, practically all of the support of the teaching profession was directed to this party, with very marginal support for other political forces.

Teachers belonging to other parties had few opportunities for adhesion, either because of intimidation and repression, or because opposing parties had no national presence. In this scenario, for decades, the PRI had an important basis of mobilization and promotion for their candidates and programs within the SNTE during electoral moments. The union used both its human and financial resources to support the political campaigns of the PRI (Muñoz, A., 2005:61-63; 2006a:327-338).

Such collaboration allowed the union to have representatives in municipalities, local congresses, and especially at the federal level. In fact, due to the union’s corporatist characteristics (permanent membership that is increasing, leaders’ dependence for arranging promotions, leaves, changed job assignments, loans, and access to training), the presence of SNTE leaders in the Chamber of Deputies on behalf of the PRI was evident until the union’s national leadership broke away from this party in 2006 (Chart 1).
In the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, the SNTE legislators have been able to intervene as members or presidents of educational commissions, especially in matters relative to the process of law and regulations of public education. Through these positions, representatives from the teachers’ union have been able to participate in discussion on budgeting funds for the administration of their area of interest.\textsuperscript{15}

According to this logic, until 2005, the SNTE existed within the PRI as a type of party-based group and its national leaders formed part of what Panebianco (1982: 89-90) calls the dominant coalition. The most important task of the SNTE, from its founding until the elections of 1991, was the party’s internal “organization”; in other words, the interconnection of the state committees and their connection with the national committee, as well as the promotion of voting. Although the SNTE separated from the PRI in 1989, it continued fulfilling the same functions until 2003, yet in decentralized form; in other words, the state sections took charge of connections and electoral mobilization in exchange for the “political legitimacy” for the union and favorable legislative measures. Since the relation between the SNTE and
the PRI was corporatist until 2000, there was a “relation of party control over the organization”, generating unequal exchanges.16

The SNTE supported the PRI unconditionally because the electoral institutions guaranteed the triumph of the “official party”, and also because the main opposition parties, the PAN and PRD, do not have an organizational structure that favors the inclusion of the union agenda, with mechanisms for inserting the leaders of the teaching profession into party management, and even less so, for allowing them to hold elected positions on the national or local level. Their planned programs are distant from, if not opposite to, the union ideas of the SNTE (Muñoz, A., 2006b:135-142).

The SNTE and its Corporatist Continuity in Democracy
For the effects of this document, “democratization” implies, according to Dahl (1997), that since the electoral reform in 1996, Mexico’s political leaders in general can compete in the elections with unquestioned possibilities of winning if they obtain the majority of the public vote, cast in a direct and secret manner.17

In the case of the SNTE, in contrast with other union organizations of a “national” or regional nature, including confederations, federations and particular unions, the effects of political democratization were completely different. Most of the union centrals and corporatist unions maintained their internal system of oligarchic governance and discretionary, arbitrary management of economic and material resources; the continuity of mechanisms for electing leaders removed from democracy; disinterest in the process of productive and technological modernization; and subordination to employers and the government in terms of working conditions. Externally, that internal authoritarianism became a deficit of social legitimacy in the eyes of the parties and citizens after the democratization of the electoral reforms in 1990; thus their political positions were lost due to the electoral retrocession of the PRI, along with all possibilities of linking to the main political forces. After the transition, the traditional corporatist unions were expelled from politics, and their ability to influence federal and state governments was minimized in questions relative to economic, fiscal and labor policies, especially regarding wages, benefits, social security, and pensions. In the best of cases, they conserved their spaces of “control” based on the logic of a corporatist relation between the government and union organizations (Bensusán, 2005:134-137; Xelhuantzi, 2005:18-25).

In exchange, the SNTE internally strengthened its mechanisms of corporatist and oligarchic control, while generating an alternate track of democratic legitimacy. Externally, the leadership assumed the discourse of governmental modernization and created internal forums to promote reflection and debate on educational topics with the purpose of elaborating union proposals for improving the educational system.

The building of a new union oligarchy began in 1992, once the SNTE was recognized as the “sole union” in spite of decentralization. In principle, the “union delegate” position was created in each section and would eventually replace sectional representation in temporary form if so determined by the national government.18 On the other hand, the statutes of 2004 created the position of the “president” of the National Executive Committee, above that of “executive general secretary” in order to disarticulate the force of union groups potentially opposed to Elba Esther Gordillo (Articles 81 and 82). With the same purpose, the mechanism known as “national secretary” was created upon the instructions of the union president, to define the union’s orientation (Articles 73, 74 and 75). Thus the areas of responsibility of the national committee (like finance, labor rights, etc.), that were handled by a single person, became national “collegiate groups” consisting of at least two people. The implication was the weakening of individuals or positions interested in holding the union’s national power.
A track of internal legitimacy and autonomy was also created in 1992, based on statutory modifications that favored plurality and democratization at the delegation and sectional levels. This autonomy was reflected in the introduction of direct, secret voting in delegations and sectional congresses; as well as in the creation of a mechanism of proportionality in the processes of national, sectional and delegation competence and the elimination of restrictions for forming internal movements. On the other hand, a political agreement established in 1992 guaranteed union leaders that teacher compensation in no state would be lower than the equivalent of four times the minimum wage; a horizontal promotion system called Carrera Magisterial was created, which in theory rates mentors for their effort more than for their seniority; lastly, 500 teachers’ centers were opened throughout the nation as proposed locations for generating dialogue, reflection, and encounters among teachers in all schools. At the same time, in spite of collaboration at the presidential level, in the sphere of the SEP and the states, leaders maintained their belligerence toward union involvement in the administration of the educational sector.

Externally, union leadership assumed modernizing discourse and established, in the 1992 statutes, a governing body referred to as the National Congress of Education (Articles 230-235). To debate and generate proposals regarding educational problems, two union groups were created for research and training: the SNTE Foundation for Teachers’ Culture, and the Institute of Educational and Union Studies of America (IEESA) (Articles 91 and 93). Subsequently, in 1993, after the publication of the General Law of Education, union leadership agreed to enter the National Council of Social Participation (Conapase) led by the SEP, where it held discussions and invited business leaders, opinion leaders, and diverse social actors to debate on the educational problem. It can be stated that these changes have not implied substantial transformation in union actions, but generated a significant impact in terms of image and legitimacy.

In the political sphere, the SNTE needed to maintain its spheres because its influence in the educational sector depended on them, especially because the functioning of schools is linked to public finance, and because the changes and continuities in operations are defined in the federal executive branch and in the federal legislature. In this sense, the teachers’ union required, in spite of the PRI’s electoral retrocession, to maintain its spheres of political representation in the state legislatures and Congress. The SNTE leaders needed a quota of political power in the Congress through the PRI or other parties to retain the basis of their legitimacy in labor intermediation, the administrative and labor “jurisdictions” of their constituents, their influence in the SEP, and the budget for basic education that would cover the expectations of union workers.

Thus the leadership of the teachers’ union oriented its strategy to adapting to political change, making internal modifications to the mechanisms of its relation with the government and parties, and diversifying externally its political alliances. In 1989, the union leaders led by Elba Esther Gordillo, following the SNTE’s rupture from the PRI and based on the statutory reform of 1992, created the National Committee of Political Action to support union members who were nominated as candidates by any political party for popular election. This organizational change consolidated the SNTE as an interest group in competition for public resources of an economic and normative nature (McFarland, 1987; Xifra, 1998; Finer, 1966; Hula, 2002); thus it was obligated to “lobby” in executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Its leaders aimed at managing the agenda of the complex transformations of the national educational system given the demands of increasing the quality and transparency of the educational system.

The leadership of the SNTE faced the political challenge of democratization on different fronts. In first place, from 1989, when President Salinas designated Elba Esther Gordillo as the general secretary of the union, until Felipe Calderón’s arrival in December of 2006, the SNTE maintained an alliance with
the president, which implied supporting presidential initiatives in educational matters as well as in political and electoral mobilization. In second place, the leaders of the SNTE strengthened their hold within the PRI and as other corporatist groups lost strength, progressed in “colonizing” the party. Thus in 2002, Elba Esther Gordillo was launched as the candidate for general secretary along with Roberto Madrazo, who was running for the presidency of the PRI. Both won. From her position, Gordillo became the parliamentary coordinator in the Chamber of Deputies between 2003 and 2005 (60th Legislature) and obtained twenty-five seats for members of the SNTE. In third place, without breaking away from the PRI and still without confronting other political forces, the leaders of the SNTE created a new political party in 2005: New Alliance (Panal), which would participate for the first time in the federal elections in 2006.

Madrazo’s presidential aspirations collided with the new force of the SNTE in the PRI. To be a candidate “without conditions” and to prevent Gordillo from occupying the party’s presidency due to the “order of priority” established in the statutes, Madrazo began to annul Gordillo-centered power. To start, she was accused of having a close political relation with President Fox. She was then removed as parliamentary coordinator in November of 2003 and as the party’s general secretary in 2004. Finally she was expelled from the PRI in July of 2006. One of the accusations she faced was of betraying the party, since in 2005 she promoted the founding of Panal, whose principal base was the members of the national teaching profession (Observatorio Ciudadano de la Educación, 2005:9).

Elba Esther Gordillo’s exit from the PRI did not imply retrocession in terms of political holdings for the SNTE, particularly because of the type of political relation that had been constructed since 1989 with various actors. Internally, the expulsion of Elba Esther did not translate into a leadership problem. On the contrary, the union’s capacity of electoral mobilization and the consolidation of a political culture based on pragmatism became valuable currency for the PAN, President Fox and presidential candidate Felipe Calderón, especially because the presidential candidate of the Coalition for the Good of All, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was ahead in the polls one month before the election. The leadership of the SNTE, with the support of the government, mobilized its followers in favor of the PAN’s cause.

In this respect, the most significant evidence came from the Citizen Association of the Teaching Profession, which reported that the Secretary of Finance of the SNTE spent 51 million pesos per month from the beginning of the presidential campaign until the election on July 2, to finance an electoral network to support the presidential campaign of National Action. Its operating structure was coordinated by 372 individuals who were mostly union commissioners, with salaries ranging from 35 to 80 thousand pesos per month, in addition to their salaries as teachers. Of these commissioners, 70 were members of CEN at SNTE, 55 were members of state committees, 55 were general secretaries of the sectional committees, and 32 were members of the Democratic Federation of Unions of Public Servants. In addition, there were 40 members of Panal, 15 from the Institute of Education and Union Studies of America (IEESA), 20 from the SNTE Foundation, 30 from the union’s publishing house, and 55 from the House of the Teacher and the Library of the Teacher (Reforma, January 21, 2007).

This support translated into important political dividends for the SNTE. In the legislative terrain: fifteen deputy districts (nine for New Alliance, three for the PAN and three for the PRI) and three senate districts (one for each one of these three parties). In the setting of the federal public administration: the veto right of the head of the Secretariat of Public Education (the case of Juan Carlos Romero Hicks, initial proposal of Felipe Calderón); the directors of the National Lottery and ISSSTE; the head of the National Council of Public Safety and the Undersecretary of Basic Education for Elba Esther Gordillo’s brother-in-law. In the union area: presidential support for the reelection of Gordillo until 2012.
Final Reflections

Paradoxically, political democratization strengthens the vertical, authoritarian control of the SNTE’s leader over members as well as the leader’s influence in the educational sector, which goes against the grain of social demands for transparency in the use of public resources granted to the unions of government employees and for professionalizing administrative decision-making structures. This situation, as I have indicated in other articles, is unacceptable in political and institutional terms because it affects the development of democracy and the individual and collective capacity of workers in education to fight for their rights.

The reasons that explain the power of SNTE include the following. An important need for control prevails in the educational sector, particularly because teachers do not have optimum working conditions. Although wages have not deteriorated as in the 1980s, the situation is far from satisfactory: many schools in the nation, in urban as well as rural areas, are in conditions of very severe deterioration, including the lack of running water, electricity, and proper maintenance. Teacher promotions are not current, nor is the regularization of teachers who are classified as interim (without a defined position); many teachers are hired by the hour, without minimum employee rights, such as a pension, severance pay, stability and even access to legal benefits. Access to the Carrera Magisterial program is limited and restricted by budget items. And many teachers have to use their own money to buy teaching supplies.

Nor are teachers properly represented in the SEP with regard to training. Prevalent practices in the union are teaching positions filled by the highest bidder, payment for arrangements that are a right, and acts of corruption in access to housing, life insurance, loans, and the purchase of products that are deducted from wages in deferred amounts.

In politics, the SNTE continues to be a fundamental asset in winning federal and state elections. In first place, since the “hard vote” of the parties is not sufficient for a win, either because the economy does not meet voters’ conditions or because the acts of corruption and negligence committed by many public servants have caused a problem of political “disaffection” for most voters. In this sense, the verticality used to handle the structure of the teachers’ union favors “controlled” and “disciplined” mobilization in electoral times. This is fundamental because it is perhaps the only social organization of a national nature that has these characteristics.

Of course, the price that public education pays for the service of corporatist control and mobilization is significant. First, because the measures of power of the coterie that currently controls the SNTE have broadened within the spectrum of the educational apparatus, in federal and state administration, and in the party system. In the labor setting, union power is reflected in the presence of teachers who have no incentive or possibility to improve and move forward on their own. Therefore, many of them are most interested in conserving the sympathy of their immediate leaders (assistant director, director and supervisor) to attain, as a favor, the professional promotions granted by law. Many teachers find it more profitable to join electoral campaigns or actions of union proselytism than to participate in training or maintain an employment record that reflects punctuality and commitment to students.

The political functions fulfilled by the SNTE in the educational apparatus and in the electoral campaign, however, are sustained by the relationship-forming abilities of personalized and strongly vertical oligarchic leadership. In other words, Elba Esther Gordillo. This support is somewhat problematic if one considers that the union’s “national unity” in large part and the budgetary stability to pay teachers’ salaries are sustained politically in Gordillo’s relation with governors and Mexico’s president. In this perspective, what is now seen as a strength, could imply a strong weakness over the medium term—a partial explanation for Gordillo’s reelection in the SNTE until 2012.
These elements are affected by the deepening of antidemocratic practices in the SNTE. The changes carried out have been significant, however, in generating flexibility in a union characterized until 1989, by rigidity in topics like party plurality, or in union governance (in sections and delegations) that is shared with losing candidates and in part with dissidents; changes have been even more significant in promoting a “modernizing” discourse that involves other social sectors. In reality, leaders’ attitudes toward educational policies have not varied in a substantial manner. An outstanding factor is that parents’ intervention in school administration is still rejected.

Ever since Rafael Ochoa was first elected secretary general of the SNTE (he has been twice reelected) at the congress in Chihuahua in 2001, dissidents, even those representing “moderate” groups have been excluded. In fact, that congress, as well as the congress held in Tonatico, Estado de Mexico, in 2003, and the most recent congress in Tijuana, have been carried out “behind closed doors” and with tight security.

On the other hand, “authoritarian” practices in school regimes have not changed as established in the statutes, especially with regard to including minorities in union governance. From the union perspective, each school has a “union representative”; in no case is the union foreign to the director or zone supervisors since both are union authorities. In these terms, the most important changes occur at the level of union delegations, where the interests of governors or supervisors are diluted as long as a “dissident” group is not a majority at the regional level.

In these circumstances, the only bastion of protest and “genuine” struggle against union authoritarianism is in the sections controlled by the CNTE. These are places for discussion, debate, and the social and political unity of teachers in favor of other social sectors. Although the sections have strong individualistic leadership with corporatist practices to a certain degree, they have no one person like Elba Esther Gordillo in the case of the National Committee, who maintains indisputable control of any section or who imposes sanctions if an educational worker refuses to adhere to an electoral agreement or a given party or administration.

Notes
1 This new federation is a product of the rupture between the leadership of Elba Esther Gordillo and Joel Ayala Almeida, the leader of the workers of the Health Secretariat and the general secretary of the Federation of Workers at the Service of the State.
2 There are sections (like the workers in the National Institute of Anthropology and History or the National Institute of Fine Arts, and the technological institutes) that function as independent unions of the SNTE since they have a direct relation with the educational authorities and ad hoc regulations for their operation. However, this has not meant that the national leadership of the SNTE cannot intervene in the internal processes of selecting leaders, and even in negotiating wages and benefits.
3 The classification of organizations as professional, semiprofessional and nonprofessional, differentiated by the degree of linkage with the organization’s purposes, was developed by the US sociologist, Amitai Etzioni (quoted by Arnaut, 1996:209).
5 In contrast with “institutional” teachers’ groups, teachers on the political left act individually based on the merits of leadership in regions and communities. In other words, their presence does not imply dues for the teaching profession or a party “fraction”.
6 Susan Street indicates that dissident teachers struggle to generate “alternatives”, linking their teaching and school practice in favor of children with processes of socioeconomic improvement for the majority. This idea can be synthesized in the recognition,
along with some intellectuals and social activists, of creating democracy in Mexico’s educational field. And doubtlessly in the political field as well.

1 I refer to “democratization” relative to the political regime, which assumes that competition for power offers the possibility of triumph for the party or coalition that obtains the most votes. Of course, in democratic regimes, competition must occur in conditions of equality for opponents and government impartiality during the competition. According to Przeworski (1997), democracy as a proceeding does not annul the authoritarian practices of those who govern, nor the problems of economic inequality in the population. In other words, there are differences between winning democratically and governing democratically.

2 For example, attending a march, a sit-in, or another act of protest, assumes points in the Escalafón promotion system or in acquiring a housing loan.

3 On this point, please see Condiciones generales de trabajo (“General Working Conditions”) from the SEP, Chapter II, Article 4.

4 A fundamental aspect of the Condiciones generales de trabajo and the Regulations of the Escalafón promotions system is that they guarantee the irremovable nature of base employees of the SEP, who are almost 100% of the personnel. This norm also guarantees union leaders “strong influence in recruitment, job-holding, and mobility in service”. An additional factor of this norm is that positions are the property, in legal terms, of their holders, but before the SNTE, which is required for positions to have more value through promotions and upward movement in the Escalafón system (Arnaut, 1996:210).

References


Arnaut, Alberto (1992). La evolución de los grupos hegemónicos en el SNTE, Documentos de trabajo núm. 4, México: CIDE.


**Documents**

Condicioness Generales de Trabajo de la Secretaría de Educación Pública
Declaración de Principios del SNTE del 2004
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