

The National Autonomous University of Mexico: A Continuing Struggle

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Once the University Council of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) approved a tuition increase on March 15, 1999, the institution's course changed radically. Many members of the university community and other national political actors warned of the enormous risks that the project posed, but the authorities went ahead with the initiative. The project called for increasing the amount that students have paid since 1948, from less than 2 cents annually to U.S.\$68 at the high school level and U.S.\$120 for undergraduates. In the past, every time a rector decided to increase tuition at UNAM, students organized to protest the reform. It happened once again.

On April 20, 1999 one of the largest strikes in the history of student movements began. For nine months, all teaching activities were suspended in a university with an enrollment of 269,516 students. Research activities continued for the most part in the scientific research centers and to some extent in several of the social research centers. The students had six demands: the elimination of the tuition increase; the creation of a university congress to work on reforming the university; the cancellation of the external evaluation of students, abrogating the 1997 reforms related to the admissions process; the elimination of any sanctions against the strikers; and the recovery of time lost from the academic calendar during the strike. The list was composed of the specific demands of the different groups participating in the movement. In the end, the complexity of this list was one of the main obstacles to resolving the conflict.

The movement was organized into the General Strike Council (CGH). The CGH occupied all the UNAM schools that offer instruction and related activities. At the start, the movement had strong student support in many schools, even in those with a tradition of political apathy, but it gradually lost the participation and support of the university community. The public image of the movement was negatively affected when, in June, the rector decided to make tuition payments voluntary but the CGH decided to continue the strike until all six of their demands were met. Unfortunately, all attempts at negotiation between the activists and the authorities failed. Two months later, the rector, who had declared at the beginning of the conflict that he "was ready to face a long strike," was forced to resign. The former secretary of public health was elected as the new rector in November.

The new functionary tried to negotiate with the strikers—the authorities and the strikers held some unsuccessful public discussions in December, and finally the rector called for a referendum on a university reform initiative as a way to resolve the conflict. Some 180,000 members of the university community voted—49 percent of the total population of students, faculty, personnel, and administrative staff from all of the UNAM campuses around the country. Of these, 89 percent voted to end the strike, and the 87 percent supported the initiative presented by the rector. The CGH conducted its own referendum, opening participation to the general public. Prior to the end of the strike many violent incidents occurred between the strikers and the Mexico City Police Department. Every public demonstration held by the CGH provoked conflicts for the city authorities. The strike ended on February 10, 2001, when the military police entered the university to remove the strikers and 1,200 students were arrested. The jailed students were gradually released, although some leaders still face prosecution.

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In the literature on student movements, there are few studies on the effects student movements have on universities. Most of the research is focused on the causes that provoke the protests or on a description of the movements. It is important to talk about some of the consequences of the UNAM movement for the institution. The negative results for the institution went beyond the economic losses. The decision to employ the military police to end the strike divided the university community and the country in general because the principle of university autonomy had been violated again, almost 30 years after the last time the military entered the university to resolve a labor conflict at UNAM.

The national and international context is a key element to understanding this conflict, but the characteristics of the student participants themselves also played an enormous role. The majority came from lower social class backgrounds. For many, this movement constituted

their first political experience. These students considered themselves a generation without a future and in many ways as saviors of the Mexican left. The CGH pretended to be democratic, but was in practice just the opposite. The council created a very bureaucratic structure with intolerant and violent tendencies, particularly at the end of the conflict when support for the strike had dwindled. Moreover, the movement opposed the traditional idea of academia itself. The enemy was defined as anyone who disagreed with the CGH.

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The fact that, at that time, Mexico was living through one of the most important presidential elections in its history (for the first time in 75 years, the ruling party lost) complicated the panorama of the UNAM conflict and increased the polarization of the different groups, inside and outside the university, and the relationships between UNAM and the government. In particular, it created tensions between the strikers and the Mexico City government, which was aligned with the leftist political party and whose presidential candidate was weakened by the strike. There were also ongoing charges about the involvement of political parties and guerrillas in the movement with the intent of creating turmoil during the national elections.

In the view of some analysts, the protest by the CGH was one of the first student movements in the struggle against economic globalization and its impact on education, at least in the Latin American region. The students argued that some of the policies proposed by UNAM authorities came from recommendations dictated by international agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to Third World countries. It seems that the antiglobalization movement is revitalizing student activism at least in some Latin American countries. Venezuela, Ecuador, Argentina, and Mexico are examples of that phenomenon.

UNAM is currently facing one of the most problematic moments in its history. After the strike ended, the university lost considerable prestige in public opinion. The institution became more politicized than ever. Some students dropped out, and others have transferred to different higher education institutions. The university community is absolutely divided along the lines that the various factions took during the conflict. The rector insists that the university will have its reform congress, but the community is not showing any enthusiasm for the idea. This new

reform process, starting with setting up the commission that will organize the congress, is struggling in a climate of apathy, distrust, and fatigue with respect to university politics. The congress is following in the footsteps of an earlier UNAM congress organized in 1990 for the purpose of discussing and working on issues such as governance, financing, and academic transformation. That congress, which was the outgrowth of another important student movement at the institution, also had very little lasting impact on the institution.

While the student movement did provide an impetus toward university reform, it is not clear if this process will move in the direction set by the student activists, or in the opposite one. Currently, the CGH seems to have lost the ability to influence events, mainly because the council is now made up of a number of small groups that seek to boycott every reform proposal put forward by the authorities. One of the main challenges for UNAM authorities will be to mobilize the community's interest in UNAM's reform. Another very important task will be to resolve some of the major conflicts at UNAM, given that it is the most important public university in the country. Like other public higher education institutions worldwide, UNAM has an obligation to respond to the needs of a changing society and the challenges of the global context.

Faculdade Pitagoras: A New Phoenix Is Born

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Close to three-fourths of Brazilian higher education is private. This private sector is composed of sedimentary layers with different cultures and backgrounds. The oldest layers comprise mostly religious institutions and tend to be conservative. Newer ones include a share of for-profit institutions run by businessmen who see the money in education and little else. But there is a third and newer category that is also profit-driven but more professional in management and based on the belief that investing in quality pays better than offering shoddy education.

Some of the latter institutions started as cramming courses for elite universities. Cramming courses work in a very competitive market, have clear and public performance indicators (how many students pass the university entrance exams), and therefore have to offer better teaching and pricing than their competitors. The most successful courses grew and eventually their creators became competent in the art of running multicampus programs. The best of them