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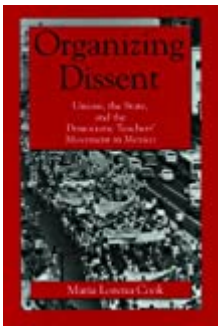

Maria Lorena Cook. *Organizing Dissent: Unions, the State and the Democratic Teachers' Movement in Mexico.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996. xvi + 359 pp. $27.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-271-01561-3; $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-271-01560-6.

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The teachers' movement, it could be argued, has been the single most important labor movement in Mexico in the last twenty years. The movement in the teachers union (el SNTE), Mexico's largest labor union, began in the mid-1970s and came to involve tens of thousands of teachers in marches, demonstrations, sit-ins (*plantones*), strikes, and myriad other forms of confrontation with their employer, the Secretary of Public Education (SEP). These were usually struggles for higher wages and better benefits, but above all for union democracy.

Over a period of fifteen years, rank-and-file teachers in the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, and to a lesser degree in other states, as well as in Mexico City, succeeded not only in creating a mass movement, but more remarkably in an authoritarian regime such as Mexico's, in creating an on-going national rank-and-file organization, the National Coordinating Committee (la CNTE) of the teachers' union. La CNTE succeeded in winning control of the Chiapas and Oaxaca state organizations and later played a key role in bringing down the dictatorial regime of Carlos Jonguitud Barrios, head of Vanguardia Revolucionaria, the political machine that controlled the union.

Maria Lorena Cook, assistant professor at the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University, asked, "How was this possible?" And in response to that question she has written an excellent account of this important rank-and-file labor movement. Most studies of social movements or of labor reform movements ignore or neglect the importance of the movement's own organizational structures, procedures, and values, but Cook puts those issues at the very center of her study. What makes this book important is its emphasis on the democratic self-organization of the teachers' movement as essential not only to its survival, but also to the achievement of its goals of democratizing the union, and–at least for some of its members–the larger goal of democratizing Mexican society.

After the excellent introduction come two chapters which some lay readers may find tedious. The first two chapters show the origins of this book in Cook's dissertation and review half a dozen theories of social movements, particularly in authoritarian societies. The point of those chapters seems to be the truism that workers take advantage of differences among the government, the employer, and the union bureaucracy to advance their cause.

However, Cook goes on to tell in a quite readable and interesting style the important history of this movement, beginning with the struggle of indigenous bilingual teachers in the early 1970s, through the organization of la CNTE in 1979, to the great teacher mobilizations of

the early 1980s, and finally the overthrow of Jonguitud Barrios and Vanguardia in 1989. (The history is told in chapters 3, 4, 5 and 7.)

The heart of the book, however, is chapter 6, "Sustaining the Movement: Democracy as a Survival Strategy," in which Cook argues that democracy became central to the teachers' movement. Cook makes a valuable contribution by specifying the democratic structures, procedures, and values that this movement created.

La CNTE itself was a "*coordinadora*," a "loose network of regional dissident movements in state and federal locals of the SNTE" (p. 145). La CNTE consciously decided not to attempt to form a rival independent union– a strategy adopted by some other union reform movements in this period; rather, la CNTE defined itself as an opposition current within the official union, fighting for the right to elect its own local leaders. La CNTE's strategy was usually moderate and legalistic, but based on constant mobilization of the membership to pressure the employer and the state. The movement's central demand became the members' right to control their own local unions.

How did it happen that la CNTE adopted profoundly democratic procedures and values? First, the teachers knew what they were against: the dictatorship of Jonguitud Barrios and his political machine Vanguardia. They were opposed to the dictator and that made them democrats at least in theory. Second, since Jonguitud Barrios and Vanguardia represented the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) inside the union, the teachers decided they wanted la CNTE to be independent of political parties. Political organizations, mostly Maoists, Trotskyites, and Communists (usually acting under the cover of some caucus name) were permitted to operate within the CNTE, but those groups had only one vote, compared with five for each of the "struggle committees" made up of rank-and-file members (p. 147). Thus la CNTE took advantage of the political groups' analyses and strategies, without necessarily being controlled by them. "Most of the time the existence of political factions within the movement had a positive impact," says Cook (p. 250). Perhaps because the PRI and Vanguardia were centralized organizations, la CNTE adopted the form of a decentralized coalition.

Since this was a movement that constantly mobilized the teachers, the basic organizational form of la CNTE was the local "struggle committee" or regional "central councils of struggle," extra-legal forms of organization not recognized by the union statutes. There might also be "municipal struggle committees" and strike committees, and "brigades," teams of teachers who carried information and support to other areas. La CNTE's members demanded that they be consulted and have a vote on decisions, and they felt that leaders should not be fully trusted.

By the mid-1980s both the Chiapas and Oaxaca rank-and-file movements succeeded in winning control of the state conventions and the executive committees. How did they then attempt to democratize the union? First of all, la CNTE did not disband as a rank-and-file organization, feeling that the struggle committees and councils would continue to play an important role, even though the reformers now had control of the official structure. They decided to have two structures, one legal and official, the other legal and unofficial. In the event they lost control of the state-wide local, they would still have their parallel organization.

Second, they made changes in the official structure as well. Most important, the state-wide assembly became the ruling body, rather than the smaller state executive committee. The state-wide assembly schedule was changed so that it met once a month or more often if necessary, and the assembly was expanded to include not only the official representatives, but also rank and filers from the *coordinadora*. Individual offices were replaced with collective commissions, to spread the knowledge and the responsibility. Also rank and filers were incorporated into these collective commissions alongside elected officials, to keep everybody honest.

The membership demanded the right to make decisions. In the state assembly itself, delegates were required to take the debate back to their local areas before voting and adopting a decision. This process of *consulta* or consulting with the rank and file was essential to la CNTE's vision of democracy. Delegates to state assemblies often had to produce an "aval," a document proving that they had actually consulted with their members and were representing their position. "It was this daily practice of discussion and decision making that was at the root of the new political consciousness movement leaders wanted to instill in union members" (p. 228).

In addition to looking at union organization and procedure, Cook also looked at the role of women and ethnic minorities in this process of building a democratic movement. Though indigenous bilingual teachers had been among the earliest activists in the contemporary teachers' union movement, the Indians seldom became the leaders of la CNTE. "Teachers from the Mixe, Mixteco,

and Triqui regions of the Sierra Juarez became the foot soldiers, but never the officers of the emerging movement," writes Cook (p. 233). In part this came from the condescension of other Indians: "In spite of the indigenous ethnic background of most teachers in the state, urbanized and more highly educated Zapotecs, Mixtecos and mestizos in the teachers' movement tended to treat members of the indigenous teachers' coalition with a high degree of paternalism" (p. 234). Nevertheless, Cook argues that some of the democratic qualities of the Chiapas and Oaxaca movements may have come from indigenous traditions of democratic self-government.

Similarly, though women make up a majority of teachers, or a very large minority in some states and more rural areas, few women were found among the rank-and-file leaders, at least initially, this despite the fact that women played a key role in mobilizations. "In spite of this large presence of women in the union, the representation of women in leadership positions at both local and national levels has been highly disproportional in favor of men," Cook found (p. 235). However, Cook also found that women's participation in leadership grew, apparently as a result of the movement's generally democratic practices.

Cook argues that despite such weaknesses, the movement created a democratic collective identity that united men and women, primary and secondary school teachers, bilingual indigenous and urban teachers. Moreover, the teachers developed a sense of identity with parents, students, the community, and other workers. Cook argues that not only was there a movement identity, but also a "greater class consciousness" (p. 243).

Though this was an impressive movement, it was not without its faults and weaknesses. One weakness, Cook explains, was its neglect of educational issues such as pedagogy and curriculum. Mostly concerned with wages, benefits, and union democracy, the teachers spent little time on their professional concerns. Also, while teachers and parents might appear to be natural allies, sometimes the teachers' job actions, strikes, demonstrations, and meetings meant that in certain periods they spent little time teaching, leading to friction with parents.

In 1989 la CNTE played a key role in organizing huge teacher demonstrations in Mexico City which brought down Jonguitud Barrios. But, Cook points out, la CNTE failed to provide leadership at that crucial moment. Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari succeeded in installing as the new union leader Elba Esther Gordillo, a member of Jonguitud's Vanguardia, and a person whom some believed to be responsible for the assassination of a la CNTE activist. Gordillo then successfully divided la CNTE's leadership, winning over some of them to join her new executive committee while isolating others. La CNTE split into several rival currents, while the rank and file demobilized.

Ironically, by 1990 the union had become more democratic and more independent of the PRI, but the union also became closer to President Salinas and became part of the model union federation he was sponsoring, which advocated higher productivity and flexibility. Salinas, it could be argued, had successfully used la CNTE to help unseat Jonguitud–an old dinosaur who would have resisted Salinas's "modernization" of labor union contracts and attitudes–and replaced him with Gordillo, who was a more pliant union official. (She is now a leader of the Foro group of unions and at this moment, as head of FNOP, playing a key role for the PRI in the up-coming elections.)

Cook's book leaves us with a number of questions. First, if these groups succeeded in building such strong democratic organizations, why in the end did the teachers fail to control their leaders, many of whom made deals with Gordillo and the PRI? Second, why did leaders formed by such a movement make such deals? What was the role of the Maoists, Trotskyites, Communists, and of the National Democratic Front (FND), which became the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), in the deals with Gordillo? What was the relationship between the democratic social movement and the political reform movement and various self-conceived revolutionary movements? Perhaps the greatest merit of Cook's book is that it leads us to want to know more and understand better.

This book takes a place in studies of the teachers' union alongside Susan Street's *Maestros en movimiento: Transformaciones en la burocracia estatal 1978-1982* (Mexico: CIESAS, 1992) and in general Mexican labor studies is in a class with Kevin J. Middlebrook's important *The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State and Authoritarianism in Mexico* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1995). Anyone interested in Mexican labor today should get and read this book.

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