

Faced with mass opposition to war

Mexico's President Fox leans toward US on Iraq

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Mexican President Vicente Fox appears to be leaning toward a “yes” vote on the new US-British resolution giving final United Nations sanction for a war of aggression against Iraq. Despite massive popular opposition in Mexico to a US attack, and contrary to his stated position just weeks ago, Fox has moved from opposing war to a position of official neutrality, while loudly attacking Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein for allegedly failing to disarm.

Mexico is part of the so-called middle six countries—Chile, Mexico, Cameroon, Guinea, Angola and Pakistan—on the Security Council whose support the US is seeking to achieve the nine votes needed to pass a resolution. Washington is pushing to receive their votes even though it appears the resolution will be vetoed by France and perhaps Russia, both permanent members of the Security Council. The White House has indicated that Bush would likely utilize a nine-vote approval, or even eight votes, to falsely claim—even after the measure is vetoed—that a majority of the council backing war legitimizes a US invasion.

The Mexican government has faced intense lobbying from the White House, Spanish Prime Minister Aznar, a high-level British delegation, and most recently Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koichumi. On March 10, the Mexican government indicated that Fox had cleared all other items from his agenda to focus exclusively on Iraq.

US officials claimed Wednesday that they already have eight of the nine votes needed, but have yet to name any other countries outside of Britain, Spain and Bulgaria, which have all backed war from the outset.

To achieve nine votes, five out of six of the so-called undecided must support a US invasion, meaning almost

certainly that both Mexico and Chile, the two Latin American countries holding nonpermanent seats on the council, would have to fall into line.

Officially, both countries favor a multilateral solution and have voiced support for a Canadian compromise proposal that would have imposed an April deadline for full Iraqi compliance with UN disarmament resolutions. Washington has worked to quash the Canadian measure because the deadline would interfere with its own timetable for launching an invasion.

Bush administration officials have let it be known that Mexico would pay a price for voting against the US in the Security Council. On March 3, George W. Bush ominously declared that countries voting against the United States should not expect “significant retribution from the government.”

Mr. Bush also said “there will be a certain sense of discipline. But I look for—I expect Mexico to be there with us.” US Ambassador to Mexico Tony Garza said Wednesday that it was “regrettable” that Mexico’s press is focusing on “possible reprisals or threats” that would befall the country if it fails to back the US, rather than “the most important issue: making the world safer.”

According to a February 27 article in the *Economist* magazine, much of the pressure is coming from corporate boardrooms, discussing whether to cut future investment in Mexico if the Mexicans do not side with Washington. A US diplomat warned that a “no” vote could “stir up feelings” against the 20 million Mexicans and Mexican-Americans who live in the US. He alluded to the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

An article in the Canadian *National Post* described

other US diplomatic initiatives as “brass-knuckled” toward Mexico.

While in the past, Mexico has taken positions contrary to Washington’s in international forums (it was the only country in 1962 to vote against expelling Cuba from the Organization of American States), its opposition to US interests has remained largely rhetorical. Too dependent on the US to stand up to pressure from Washington, while at the same time fearing that its subservience to US capitalism will provoke opposition from the masses of Mexican working people, the country’s political class goes through cycles, shifting to meet whichever pressure is greatest at the moment. On the Iraqi resolution Fox has found himself caught between the demands of the US State Department and fear that popular outrage over a “yes” vote will further destabilize his government.

A Mexican reversal from its current neutrality on Iraq would take place in the face of massive popular opposition to the US action. Polls indicate that about 70 percent of Mexicans oppose the attack. On Monday, the Mexican Commission for Human Rights presented the Mexican government with a petition against the war, signed by 750,000 people. In February more than 20,000 marched against the war in Mexico City; there were also demonstrations in Guadalajara, Mexico’s second largest city, and in other areas.

On March 9, Fox’s National Action Party (PAN) lost by a landslide municipal and state elections in Mexico State, which surrounds the capital, Mexico City. In previous votes, what has been called the “Fox effect” helped the PAN win nearly 60 percent of the vote. Last Sunday, PAN’s share dropped to 29 percent, confirming polls showing a collapse in the president’s popularity. While a Mexican president cannot succeed himself, Fox’s support for the US on Iraq would further undermine his party’s chances to remain in power. The biggest gains in the Mexico State vote went to the left-nationalist PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution).

The demand that Mexico subordinate itself to the US war drive has further exposed Fox to charges that he is a pliant puppet of the US-based transnationals and banks. This accusation takes on added resonance coming amid mounting accusations that the PAN president’s 2000 election campaign received illicit US corporate money via “Amigos de Fox,” his fundraising vehicle.

Popular opposition to war in the Middle East has also come together with growing social discontent at home. Since the beginning of the year, the Mexican government has been hit by a wave of protests from small farmers, demanding trade protection against American grains that are being sold at prices so low that it threatens to drive them off the land.

The Mexican Electrician’s Union, meanwhile, is threatening to strike this Sunday as a result of a wage dispute with Mexico’s City Power and Light Company, which would leave much of Mexico City with no electricity.

While Fox was elected in 2000 based on promises that he would promote economic growth and create jobs, he has failed spectacularly to deliver. Last year, Mexico lost over half a million jobs, the result of a recession that began in 2001. This year’s expected anemic economic growth of 1 percent will be insufficient to stop the steep rise in joblessness. The lack of employment feeds a robust movement of young undocumented workers to the United States. According to a recent article by the Los Angeles’ Spanish-language daily *La Opinion*, in many districts youth begin the trek north as soon as they reach the age of 15.

Adding to Fox’s difficulties, he will have little to show for a “yes” vote in the Security Council. President Bush has largely ignored Mexican desires on immigration regulations and has taken a hard line on water disputes involving the Mexican state of Chihuahua and the American state of Texas. It is also reported that the onset of a US invasion of Iraq will be accompanied by a virtual sealing of the US-Mexican border, meaning a severe economic crisis for Mexico’s border region.

While threatening reprisals for a “no” vote, the Bush administration appears to be offering very little in return for Fox’s submission. Washington’s agreement to a March 12 emergency request from Mexico to allow Mexican trucks access to US roads may, in the end, be the meager payoff for a Mexican “yes” vote.



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