

# Head of Mexican teachers union arrested

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1 March 2013

The Mexican government arrested Elba Esther Gordillo, the leader of the National Union of Education Workers (*Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de Educación*, SNTE) on Tuesday afternoon when her private jet landed in Toluca, capital of Mexico State, after a flight from San Diego, California.

Following her arrest, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto made a nationwide television announcement to inform the Mexican public. This had been a “strictly legal process,” declared Peña, who pledged that his administration would not interfere in the judicial system.

The move against Gordillo, dubbed by *Proceso*, a Mexico City weekly, as the “Elbazo,” takes place in the context of a new Mexican education law that the SNTE bureaucracy had opposed. Her removal from the SNTE leadership was not unexpected, even by Gordillo herself, who, in a 2012 interview with the daily *La Jornada* intimated that she had been offered an “honorable” exit.

Gordillo, popularly known in México as *la maestra*, or “the teacher,” is accused of embezzling union funds and money laundering between 2008 and 2011. Mexico’s attorney general, Jesús Murillo Karam, alleged that Gordillo, and three others had transferred over 2,000 million pesos (US \$156.5 million) from union coffers to bank accounts in Switzerland, Lichtenstein and the United States.

Murillo also accused the SNTE officials of having used the money to, among other things, finance Gordillo’s plastic surgery, pay off accounts at Neiman-Marcus, purchase two luxury homes in San Diego, and an art collection in addition to the private jet that she had at her disposal. Murillo suggested that Gordillo might also be charged with income tax evasion.

According to the Mexico City daily *El Universal*, Gordillo boarded her jet in San Diego under the watchful eyes of US and Mexican agents, who, after

making sure that Gordillo was on board and the plane’s doors had been closed, informed federal authorities in Mexico City. As the plane flew over Tijuana, two Mexican navy jets took off in pursuit. When she landed in Toluca, authorities blocked the Gordillo jet from taking off again; federal officials came on board and arrested her; she did not resist.

Under her leadership, the SNTE had been fully integrated into the network of corporatist trade unions—known as *charro* unions—subordinated to the Mexican State and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, PRI).

It is no secret that Gordillo had run the SNTE as her own personal fiefdom of corruption and patronage. She was known for using gangster methods against her opponents and is suspected of having ordered the assassination, in 1981 of dissident teacher Misrael Nuñez Acosta. Nuñez was gunned down as he was leaving the school where he taught.

She had been compared to other *charro* leaders, particularly to oil workers’ leader Carlos Romero Deschamps, who like her had also been appointed by former PRI President Carlos Salinas de Salinas.

She was general secretary of the PRI between 2002 and 2005, and had been elected to both the House of Deputies and the Mexican State Senate as a PRI candidate. In 1989, then president Salinas named Gordillo as head of the SNTE as part of an earlier plan to “reform” education along neo-liberal lines. Known for her ruthless methods in quashing opposition within the SNTE, she became a tool of the PRI, the PAN and the Mexican ruling class.

In 2005, following a dispute with the PRI candidate Roberto Madrazo, she openly backed Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party (*Partido Acción Nacional*, PAN) and formed her own party, The New Alliance Party (*Partido Nueva Alianza*, PANAL.) In return, she was rewarded by Calderón with lucrative government

positions, including head of the national lottery and head of the Institute of Security and Social Services for Public Employees.

Gordillo's arrest came just one day after the approval of a new education "reform" law and one day before the SNTE was to vote on a response to the new legislation, which is modeled on similar measures approved in the US, placing the blame for the crisis of Mexico's education system squarely on the backs of teachers.

Last December, SNTE leaders had rejected the reform, which includes proposals to compensate, promote and fire teachers according to standardized evaluations and sets the stage for moving toward the privatization of public education.

Education Secretary Emilio Chuayffet Chemor made it clear that, with the passage of the legislation, the government was reasserting its control over education. "This control will not be betrayed, nor muddled, nor blackmailed" said Chuayffet in a not-so-veiled allusion to Gordillo and the SNTE.

Gordillo had supported a similar measure under the presidency of Felipe Calderón, of the PAN, the so-called Alliance for Quality Education (*Alianza por la Calidad de la Educación*). Her opposition to this latest reform had more to do with horse-trading for bureaucratic privileges than any real differences.

At its December meeting, the SNTE had been careful to reject strike action against the legislation. Instead, it had favored a toothless lobbying campaign by SNTE members. The SNTE was scheduled to meet this Wednesday to plan a response to the education law.

Despite initial confusion, the SNTE leadership did meet in Guadalajara on Wednesday and voted to replace Gordillo with Juan Díaz de la Torre. In his acceptance speech, the new leader never mentioned Gordillo's arrest. He also announced that the SNTE would reverse its previous position and support the new education law.



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