

Energy and Roses - The birth of a militant women's movement

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In Mexico, an energy users' association is growing into a militant women's movement.

On November 11, hundreds of people from Mexico's National Assembly of Energy Users (ANUEE) [1] came together for an event on the new feminist movement in the auditorium of the Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME) [2]. This is a building with a long militant history, featuring a colossal mural by José David Alfaro Siqueiros, who worked on this "Portrait of the Bourgeoisie" between 1939 and 1940, until he was forced to flee the country after participating in an assassination attempt on Leon Trotsky.

In 1936 the SME won a major victory against its employer, the British-Canadian Mexican Light, through a strike that shut off all power in Mexico City. After the nationalization of the energy system in 1960, the union became a point of reference for radical and politically independent unionism, and in recent years promoted the creation of the New Workers' Confederation (NCT) and of a new political coalition, the People's and Workers' Political Organization (OPT), currently involved in the presidential campaign for a Zapatista-backed indigenous woman, María de Jesús Patricio Martínez [3].

In 2009 the SME called energy users to mobilize against the privatization of the energy sector, which had already caused price hikes in electricity bills that became impossible to pay. In 2010 ANUEE was created in response to this call. The struggle for public and accessible energy goes back to the 1990s, when Salinas de Gortari's government privatized 40 percent of the generation of energy, opening Mexico's energy market to transnational companies based in Spain.

As workers' opposition to privatization grew, so did elites' desires to defeat opposition and clear the way for their "modernization" projects. In 2009, in an attempt to destroy the union, Felipe Calderón's government liquidated the public energy company Light and Power, sending the army and police force to seize the plants. He left dozens of thousands of workers without a job.

In 2013, Peña Nieto's government pushed through further energy reforms, including a constitutional amendment legalizing the privatization process. The main beneficiaries of these measures are the Spanish multinational companies Iberdrola, Unión Fenosa, and Endesa, who reap 70 percent of the private energy sector's profits. However, since the negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the United States have also played a key role in pressuring Mexican governments into privatizing strategic sectors.

This is the context in which ANUEE was launched and has grown. The idea behind its creation was to combine the workers' fight at the point of production with mobilization within social reproduction. The organization now boasts a membership of more than one hundred thousand households and small businesses and has organized hundreds of actions, becoming a major player in the movement to re-nationalize the energy system. It has also promoted forms of civil disobedience, inviting the

population not to pay energy bills and blocking the provider's attempts to disconnect the energy supply to insolvent users.

Over the years, its positions have evolved from asking for debt forgiveness and fair rates to reclaiming access to energy as a human right and linking this demand to a more encompassing critique of neoliberal capitalism. This year, through a forty-six day occupation in front of the Federal Energy Commission (CFE), the movement achieved a major victory in their struggle against price hikes.

Among the gains was the government's pledge to forgive the outstanding debt, which in some cases has reached as much as \$15,800, and to allow the consumers to sign a contract with the company of their choice for continued service. This would allow ANUEE members to be served by the Mexican Electrical Workers' Union new cooperative, which has an agreement with them to charge a preferential "social rate" to protect citizens' right to access to energy. Until the time of this writing, however, the government has not fulfilled its promises and has begun a campaign to criminalize the movement.

During the weeks of the occupation, ANUEE activists organized marches and teach-ins as well as a week-long educational activity devoted to the history of women's struggles in Mexico. Just a couple of months before, ANUEE had mobilized a four-thousand-person-strong contingent for March's International Women's Strike.

This is key, because it is women who have shaped ANUEE's radical trajectory.

Transformed Through Struggle

Women make up the majority of the participants in the protests, and an increasing number of working class and poor women are assuming leadership of the organization. Alejandra, a young woman who joined ANUEE in 2012, explained that the majority of the movement is made by women, because it is women who are in the homes. They are the ones responsible for doing the work of care and social reproduction within their families, and for making ends meet. Energy access determines their day-to-day conditions.

For many of them, this was their first political experience, and one that transformed them. Juanita, an activist from Hidalgo who joined ANUEE seven years ago, described how this experience changed her life:

"ANUEE helped me to free myself of my fear and to fight. I have children and I'm fighting for them, to give them a roof, education, food. It's not easy, but I'm feeling proud to belong to ANUEE. My daughter now understands me, my children resisted at the beginning, but now they understand that we have to fight for our rights, for our future. We are fighting for those who will come after us."

The movement led a number of women to get out of their homes and start living a public life for the first time, attending and organizing meetings and marches. This has provoked a reshaping of family life and gender roles within the household, though not without resistance from family members. Having to face this opposition led women activists to see their participation in the movement as containing an existential and political significance reaching far beyond the struggle for public and accessible energy. Veronica, a volunteer coordinator of ANUEE, explained how her years in the movement reshaped her perception of herself:

"My father was a sexist, he didn't allow me to study or work. I have no career, I have two sons and a

husband, and I'm the only woman in my family. They don't understand my engagement, as I became a coordinator and have meetings, activities . . . Before this, I spent most of my time with my sons, but now I have to go out and my sons don't understand." They are beginning to understand, though, that I have to realize myself as a woman. I want to teach them that if one has the will, one also has the power, and that if one begins something, then she has to finish it. I want to teach them as men, for their idea is that women should stay at home."

In some cases the lack of support by husbands and partners led to a break-up. This is the experience of Maria, who left her partner because of his opposition to her participation in the movement:

"I'm part of the struggle and I don't want to give up. I'm fighting for the well-being of my children and the future of my grandchildren. I learned that it is possible to be on one's own: I don't depend on anyone who can tell me not to go to a march or to work, I depend only on myself. We are strong women, we are warriors, because we know that there will be a price to pay, as nothing is easy, but when we win, when we march together and chant "Yes, we can," well . . . all of this is worth doing . . ."

For others, like Miriam, another coordinator, taking up a leadership role and being busy in organizing meetings and protests had a therapeutic function after a break-up: "It helped me. My children support me. It taught them to fight back, now — when I go to a march or a meeting — they ask me to tell them everything about what I did and how it went."

In spite of the number of women participating in the organization, ANUEE only decided recently to create a women's coordinating committee, which is still not incorporated in the statute. As Rosario, a veteran feminist organizer, explained, women faced resistance not just within their family, but in the organization as well. For example, some male activists resisted the introduction of women's rights and struggles among the topics of educational work, used sexual insults against the women who had political disagreements with them, and offered scant support to women taking up leadership roles.

Moreover, while the number of women in leadership roles has increased over the years, it still does not reflect the number of women participating in the movement. Margarita, a member of the national coordinating body, reported that some male activists ignored her leadership while she was in charge of an occupation. "They didn't accept I had this role. We need to play our role aggressively, otherwise men don't take us into account, don't respect us," she said. "My father was very sexist, but this taught me to resist, to say that I, as a woman, I'm equal to men, I'm worth the same. I have a son, and he learned to respect women."

This fall, ANUEE organized hundreds of symbolic occupations of local energy offices and plants. This culminated, on November 16, with a twenty-thousand-person march to protest privatization and demand the implementation of the social rate ANUEE helped win.

Mobilizations like these are crucial, because while the movement has made some gains, the government's modernization project is ongoing. Organizers think that, if realized, it will leave millions of users without access to energy. The government is also trying to divide the movement, by offering thousands of "modernization" jobs to SME electrical workers, who have been out of work since the liquidation of Light and Power.

But the women of ANUEE are not showing any sign of discouragement or fatigue. As Alejandra put it: "The fight taught us to fight, beyond our demands concerning energy: we are fighting for women."

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 12.11.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/12/mexico-energy-privatization-anuee-sme>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://anueeoficial.blogspot.fr>

[2] <http://www.sme.org.mx>

[3] ESSF (article 42680), ['Mexico needs healing': María de Jesús Patricio Martínez, the first indigenous woman to run for president.](#)