

Labor, the State, and Professional Baseball in Mexico in the 1980s*

*David G. LaFrance
Department of History
Oregon State University*

INTRODUCTION

Mexico boasts one of the most enviable records for political stability among developing nations over the past several decades. A central factor in that stability has been the role played in the nation's political system by the official party. Now called the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), it grew out of the Revolution of 1910, was officially created in 1929, and has dominated the government since. As a result, party and government are so intertwined that for all practical purposes they are indistinguishable.

One key reason for the PRI-government's effectiveness has been its special relationship to organized labor. Since the 1930s, most unions have enjoyed formal status within the party. In the 1960s they were gathered into a government-sponsored umbrella organization called the Congreso del Trabajo [Labor Congress—CT]. The Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos [Confederation of Mexican Workers—CTM], led by Fidel Velázquez, was the largest and most influential component of the CT.

Both sides benefitted from this relationship, but it was not an equal one. Official unions received many perquisites, both economic and political, and enjoyed a relatively privileged position vis-à-vis labor as a whole. Government used labor to its advantage, coopting union leaders and controlling such fundamental issues as the right to unionize, strike, and bargain collectively. Despite pro-worker rhetoric and sporadic populist actions, over the long run the government sacrificed labor for the economic development of the country.

In the 1980s, Mexico suffered its worst economic collapse since the violent days of the Mexican Revolution early in this century. The reasons for the collapse were many and complex. In their analysis of them many economists and politicians began to question the viability of Mexico's corporatist, nationalistic, protectionist economic system. As a result, presidents Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) and Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1991) attempted to resolve the crisis by modernizing Mexico's economy. They

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emphasized an individualistic, competitive, internationalist, free-market system that encouraged private-sector interests and downplayed government participation including its connection to labor.

In this new environment, government called on labor to sacrifice for the good of the nation. Wages and benefits lagged behind inflation, and newly privatized companies shed their unionized workers. Labor leaders lost influence within governing circles. Unions' efforts to stymie this policy strained relations between government and workers' representatives. Meanwhile, government ties to the private sector became increasingly close and open. As a result, unions' traditional place within the PRI-government came into question, thus threatening the political edifice that had governed Mexico since the 1920s.

In examining Mexican labor in the 1980s, studies have overlooked one of the most important movements of the decade, that of professional baseball players.¹ Their movement, which bridged the transition from the economic boom of the early 1980s to the depths of the crisis several years later, provided government with a golden opportunity to demonstrate its pro-labor credentials, tame its opponents, and strengthen its political base. A whole new category of worker, the professional athlete, asked to enter the official fold. At the same time, baseball owners, wealthy, private-sector entrepreneurs who held absolutist control over the game and flaunted the law, could be tamed. Instead, the government rejected this chance.

A study of the Mexican baseball players' movement of the 1980s illustrates, then, the changing relationship between government and labor in the context of this free-market model of development. This impact was especially apparent in three areas: a de-emphasis on labor recruitment, close and open government ties to private capital, and overt differences between government and the official labor sector. Traces of these characteristics, of course, had always existed to some extent in the government-labor relationship. Nevertheless, they became much more pronounced after 1982 as the effort of baseball players to unionize was among the first casualties of the neo-liberal economic policies of the 1980s.

THE BACKGROUND

Baseball in Mexico dates to before the turn of the twentieth century. The Liga Mexicana [Mexican League], the country's premier circuit, was created in 1925. By the 1940s, it had become well organized and a lucrative investment for its private-sector owners. The best-known power behind the league during that

1. See, for example: Alberto Aziz Nassif, *El estado mexicano y la CTM* (Mexico City: Ediciones de la Casa Chata, 1989); Dan La Botz, *The Crisis of Mexican Labor* (New York: Praeger, 1988); Dan La Botz, *Mask of Democracy: Labor Suppression in Mexico Today* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); Kevin J. Middlebrook, "The Sounds of Silence: Organised Labour's Response to Economic Crisis in Mexico," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 21:2(May 1989): 195-220; Kevin J. Middlebrook, ed., *Unions, Workers, and the State* (San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, 1991); Barry Carr, "The Mexican Economic Debacle and the Labor Movement: A New Era or More of the Same'!" in *Modern Mexico: State, Economy and Social Conflict*, eds. Nora Hamilton and Timothy F. Harding (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1986), 205-231.

era was Jorge Pasquel, a multimillionaire who ran a customs brokerage firm that handled government business and who married the daughter of President Plutarco Elías Calles. Pasquel also controlled the *Novedades* [*News*] newspaper empire and had close ties to President Miguel Alemán.²

When Pasquel died in 1955, another multimillionaire with close connections to the government, Alejo Peralta, took control of the Mexicana league. Also among Mexico's richest individuals, Peralta owned not only the Tigres [Tigers] baseball franchise in Mexico City but also teams in six other major cities including two in Monterrey. In addition, he controlled over sixty companies including IUSA, Scovil, and Tehuacán and had close connections to the Japanese conglomerate, Mitsubishi. Reports linked him to powerful Mexican drug traffickers. He first gained public notoriety in the mid-1950s, when as head of the Instituto Politécnico Nacional (National Polytechnic Institute—IPN), he called in the army to repress student protesters. Over the years, he served as a presidential advisor. In the José López Portillo administration (1976-1982), he had especially close ties to Arturo "El Negro" Durazo, Mexico City's notoriously corrupt police chief.³

Peralta, along with other private-sector owners, building on Pasquel's earlier efforts, reshaped the circuit, increasing its prestige and power. They gained its affiliation with United States AAA-level, minor league baseball. Peralta also created the Asociación de Ligas Profesionales de Béisbol de la República Mexicana [Association of Professional Baseball Leagues of the Mexican Republic], an owners' group that wielded political influence and adamantly opposed players' organizations and the formation of so-called "pirate" leagues. Baseball owners received the support of other sports executives who likewise feared athletes' groups.⁴

Owners viewed players more as expendable entertainers than workers. They felt little obligation to treat players according to the labor codes and had no intention to allow them to organize. Moreover, players' ability to challenge owners was impeded by the fact that most were of modest economic means, poorly educated, unskilled except for baseball, and inexperienced politically.

The idea of forming a professional baseball players' organization began in the 1940s. In the 1950s approximately one hundred players led by Jesús "Cochihuila" Valenzuela of the Tampico Alijadores attempted to form a

2. William H. Beezley, "The Rise of Baseball in Mexico and the first Valenzuela," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 4(1985): 3-13; Gilbert M. Joseph, "Forging the Regional Pastime: Baseball and Class in Yucatán," in *Sport and Society in Latin America: Diffusion, Dependency, and the Rise of Mass Culture*, ed. Joseph L. Arbena (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1988), 29-61; Michael M. Oleksak and Mary Adams Oleksak, *Béisbol: Latin Americans and the Grand Old Game* (Grand Rapids: Masters Press, 1991), 49-52; Alan M. Klein, "Baseball Wars: The Mexican Baseball League and Nationalism in 1946," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 13(1994): 33-56; *Current Biography*, 1946, 459-460; *New York Times* (9 Mar. 1955).

3. Interview with Victor Becerril, former sports reporter for *Esto* and *Uno Más Uno*, Mexico City, 24 Aug. 1987; *Proceso*, 29 Aug. 1983, 14-17, 23 Jan. 1984, 10, 13, 24 Aug. 1987, 12-13, 28 Sept. 1992, 16-19; *Excélsior*, 22 Aug. 1986; Luis Suárez, *Alejo Peralta: Un patrón sin patronos* (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1992), 252. By 1992 Peralta reportedly owned 154 companies: see Suárez, 271.

4. Interview with Becerril, 24 Aug. 1987; *Proceso*, 7 July 1980, 46-47; *Siempre*, 16 July 1980, 14-15; *Uno Más Uno*, 15, 25 July 1980.

mutualist society to provide health and pension benefits. Low salaries, particularly in comparison to foreigners, were also a concern. Pressure and threats from owners doomed the effort. Jorge Pasquel, along with executives from other sports, led the counterattack. A similar organization in 1961, called the *Mutualidad de Peloteros Profesionales Mexicanos* [Mutual Society of Mexican Professional Baseball Players], also failed when the owners refused to contribute to the society's fund and "froze out" the movement's leadership.⁵

Over the next two decades, profits from professional baseball as well as the conditions under which players performed, even according to some businessmen, warranted the formation of a players' association. The players' position seemed especially anachronistic when compared to their colleagues in other Caribbean basin countries such as the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela. In these nations, performers legally had formed unions that provided them with many of the same benefits that the Mexicans wanted for themselves.⁶

Mexican players demanded first and foremost to have their status as workers under Mexican law recognized, thereby gaining respect and implying their legal right to organize and receive benefits due all workers. The benefits included compensation for spring training, a paid vacation and one day off per week, the traditional end-of-the-year bonus [*aguinaldo*], and more money for food while on the road. Other improvements asked for were a retirement fund, the right to a minimum 25 percent of one's selling price when traded, veto power over trades, and improved hotel accommodations and transportation.⁷

5. Benito Terrazas, *Casa llena, bola roja: La lucha de los peloteros de la ANABE* (Mexico City: Editorial Leega, 1984), 31-33; *Esto*, 23 July 1980; *Hit*, 8 Aug. 1980; *Uno Más Uno*, 4-5 July 1980, 4 June 1983.

6. *Expansión*, 1 Apr. 1981, 40-47; *Uno Más Uno*, 11 July 1980.

7. Interview with Arturo Jiménez (former player and National Association of Baseball Players-ANABE member), Mexico City, 23 July 1993; Interview with Becerril, 24 Aug. 1987; *Hit*, 18 July 1980; *Proceso*, 7 July 1980, 46-47, 14 July 1980, 57; *Uno Más Uno*, 15 July, 6 Aug. 1980. Some regulars found themselves required to play in as many as 137 games in 138 days. Players in 1980 received 180 pesos per day, about eight U.S. dollars, but, given the overvalued peso, this amount was barely enough for a modest meal. Few teams provided air travel, except for certain foreign players, and bus rides of 12, 18 and even more hours were not uncommon—the trip from Chihuahua City to Mérida took 52 hours and upon arrival players often had to go directly to the park to play. This situation led to high levels of drug and especially alcohol use as players attempted to pass the long hours on the road. Salaries, too, played a role in the players' discontent, although not as much as the issue of workers' rights: A handful of star players made as much as 90,000 pesos (about 4,000 dollars) per month in 1980, but most regular, established ones received 30,000 to 35,000 (1,300 to 1,500 dollars), while rookies earned 7,000 to 9,000 pesos (300 to 400 dollars) monthly. Foreigners, however, received more money than even the best Mexican players and generally were paid in dollars. Former Boston Red Sox slugger George Scott, for example, earned 6,000 dollars a month in 1981 while playing with the Mexico City Tigres. These salaries were paid only for the regular playing season which lasted from mid-March to mid-August. Some players, particularly those on teams near the United States border, trafficked in contraband goods in order to add to their salaries. Most performers, too, had to supplement their income in other ways during the off-season. The Mexican peso's value in 1980 was approximately 23/1 U.S. dollar. See: *Esto*, 7 July, 10 Aug. 1980; *Uno Más Uno*, 21 July, 26 Aug. 1980; *Chicago Tribune*, 16 June 1982; William Nack, "George Scott is Alive and Well and Playing in Mexico City." *Sports Illustrated*, 17 Aug. 1981, 42; Leo W. Banks, "South of the Border." *Sports Illustrated*, 30 Aug. 1982, 31; Steve Wulf, "Béisbol in His Blood," *Sports Illustrated*, 18 Aug. 1980, 26. Note that Mexican baseball players' demands did not include the more radical issue of free agency, which U.S. players first gained in 1975 and lay at the heart of the long and bitter 1981 strike; see James B. Dworkin, *Owners versus Players: Baseball and Collective Bargaining* (Boston: Auburn House, 1981); James B. Dworkin, "Results of the Professional Baseball Players' Strike of 1981," *Texas Business Review* 55:6(Nov.-Dec. 1981): 268-271.

In the face of owner opposition to players' associations, government only slowly extended basic labor rights to them. It was not until 1970, after the 1968 Olympic Games, hosted by Mexico, and a soccer players' protest focused attention on athletes' poor treatment, that the government amended the 1931 Ley Federal del Trabajo [Federal Labor Law] to include professional athletes.⁸ Even then, change came slowly. Ten years later, only after word leaked that baseball players again were attempting to organize, owners finally agreed to comply with the section of the 1970 law calling for contributions to the national health system, Seguro Social, for athletes.⁹

Player frustration with owner disdain and recalcitrance and government indifference, led in 1980 to baseball players again attempting to organize, this time successfully. They created the Asociación Nacional de Beisbolistas [National Association of Baseball Players-ANABE]. Their subsequent strike against the Mexicana league and later creation of a rival circuit, the National [National], dramatically changed Mexican baseball during the decade. Moreover, the ANABE's challenge brought to light a changing governmental labor policy.

THE STRIKE

Two incidents in the spring and summer of 1980 provoked the formation of the ANABE and the subsequent strike. In April, Puebla, the previous year's Mexicana league champion and a perennial contender, became involved in a dispute with an umpire while playing in Veracruz. After the contest, one of the opposing team's officials induced local police to arrest the whole Puebla club including its manager, Jorge Fitch. In the process, several Puebla performers were beaten. Although the squad was soon released thanks to the intervention of league higher-ups, the officials suspended Fitch and fined the players 3,000 pesos each. This move so angered the club's members that they refused to play the next series of games in Mérida. Only when league President Antonio Ramírez Muro threatened to disband the current team (by firing all the strikers and creating a whole new Puebla nine to be made up of men drafted from the other nineteen teams in the League) did the Poblano squad agree to return to the diamond.¹⁰

This brief but sharp confrontation with the owners galvanized the Puebla team into action. Led by one of its stars, Alfonso "Houston" Jiménez, they sought to defend themselves against the arbitrary action of the league. Within a month some fifty players, including the whole Puebla squad, had taken the initial concrete steps to form the ANABE. They contracted a lawyer and

8. Interview with Mariano Albor Salcedo (ANABE lawyer), Mexico City, 7 Aug. 1993. For a more detailed and legal consideration of the law and professional athletes, see: Mariano Albor Salcedo, *Deporte y derecho* (Mexico City: Editorial Trillas, 1989), esp. 272-290.

9. *Proceso*, 14 July 1980, 57.

10. Interview with Albor Salcedo, Mexico City, 9 Sept. 1986; *Hit*, 25 Apr., 2 May 1980; *Uno Más Uno*, 2 July 1980.

chose a slate of officers headed by a president, Ramón “Abulón” Hernández, veteran shortstop for the Mexico City Diablos Rojos [Red Devils]. When formally notified of the existence of the ANABE, league officials refused public comment; nevertheless, a blacklist containing ANABE players’ names was already in the hands of team owners.¹¹

Tension increased when owners threatened ANABE players with dismissal and traded deemed troublemakers to other teams in order to isolate them. Then, on the last day of June, the Mexico City Tigres owner, Alejo Peralta, fired catcher Vicente Peralta (no relation). Although officially dismissed because of his “inadequate performance,” Peralta clearly fell victim because of his active role in the ANABE. Consequently, in solidarity with the fired Peralta, the next day, 1 July, ANABE President Hernández and the remainder of the Diablos Rojos team refused to play the Tigres in an all-important series between the two arch rivals. That same evening Puebla followed suit in Poza Rica. The strike was on.¹²

The stoppage spread quickly. Eighteen-year-old Arturo Jiménez, who played for Yucatán, for example, upon receiving word of the strike, collected his paycheck and immediately flew to Mexico City to join the protesters. Within two weeks an estimated three hundred to four hundred players, a majority of them veterans, had joined the walkout, thereby incapacitating fourteen of the twenty teams in the league. The owners responded by firing all the strikers and forming a mini-league composed of the six remaining clubs that would play out the remainder of the season. The league also induced key performers, including foreigners, to continue playing by offering them bonuses and plane flights to games. In early August, players on the six functioning squads formed a company organization, the Asociación Profesionales de Beisbolistas [Association of Professional Baseball Players—ASOBEPRO].¹³

The ANABE, lacking even such things as office equipment no less a well-oiled organization, money, and political backing, took on the fight of its young life. While financial needs were met in part by playing exhibition games in various cities and through such gimmicks as selling autographed baseballs, ANABE’s leadership soon realized that it was involved in much more than a simple dispute between labor and capital. It had entered the thickets of Mexican politics by directly challenging the longtime, expedient relationship among the government, the official union structure, and the private sector. This situation called for some very fast and adept maneuvering in order to survive.¹⁴

11. Interview with Albor Salcedo, 9 Sept. 1986; *Proceso*, 7 July 1980, 46-47; *Uno Más Uno*, 5 Sept. 1980.

12. Interview with Albor Salcedo, 9 Sept. 1986; *Esto*, 1, 2 July 1980; *Hit*, 18 July 1980; *Uno Más Uno*, 2 July 1980.

13. Interview with Jiménez; *Esto*, 6 Aug. 1980; *Hoy*, 14-20 July 1980, 16; *Proceso*, 7 July 1980, 46-47; *Uno Más Uno*, 3-11 July, 5 Aug. 1980; Wulf, 25-26; Suárez, 255. The six remaining teams were Ciudad Juárez, Laguna, Reynosa, Saltillo, Coatzacoalcos, and the Mexico City Tigres.

14. *Uno Más Uno*, 17 July 1980.

The first step had already been taken. Upon its formation the previous May, the ANABE petitioned to be recognized as a civil association (*asociación civil*) rather than a full-fledged labor union (*sindicato*) (civil association status was finally granted in April 1981). To get labor union recognition in Mexico was a long and generally complicated process with political costs. Registration as a civil association was easier to obtain, being somewhat analogous to a non-profit organization. It also was viewed to be less adversarial than a labor union, thus making it, the ANABE calculated, more palatable to the owners and government.¹⁵

The second step was to reach out to the press. This was not an easy task in a political system in which much of the media practices self-censorship and carries the favor of the government and the private-sector establishment. As a result, most organs ignored or condemned the ANABE, but the association did enjoy the support of three sympathetic print sources in Mexico City—*Esto*, the nation's largest-circulation sports newspaper; *Uno Más Uno*, a left-leaning general news daily; and the influential weekly news magazine, *Proceso*. These sources and a handful of lesser ones kept the ANABE issue before the public and helped generate support for the striking players.¹⁶

The third step taken to gain political backing was a risky and audacious one. Because the ANABE was not a labor union it had only a very limited right to strike. Its action came under the category of a labor stoppage (*suspensión de labores*), giving it a mere nine days to solve the dispute or face the possibility of government sanctions. Therefore, the association went directly to President José López Portillo and asked for his personal intervention in the conflict. López Portillo proved reluctant to embrace the players and confront the owners. Nevertheless, the ANABE, supported by the official labor groups, the CT and the CTM, pointed out the president's hypocrisy. They cited his own rhetoric regarding workers' rights and the need to save jobs in the face of owner intransigence. Finally, López Portillo relented and personally received a group of ANABE representatives. After listening to their grievances, he promised his support.¹⁷ López Portillo's acknowledgement of the players' cause gave the ANABE a modicum of official respectability and some desperately needed political maneuvering room.

15. Interview with Albor Salcedo, 9 Sept. 1986; *Proceso*, 14 July 1980, 57.

16. Interview with Jiménez; Interview with Becerril, Mexico City, 8-9 Sept. 1986; Interview with Benito Terrazas (former *Uno Más Uno* sports reporter), Mexico City, 8 Sept. 1986; Interview with Albor Salcedo, 9 Sept. 1986. The contemporary popular press in the United States ignored the movement. As far as this author can ascertain, no U.S. news medium covered the 1980 Mexican baseball strike and its aftermath, although the U.S. had close connections to Mexican baseball for decades. Not even the *Sporting News*, the so-called "Bible" of United States sports, uttered a word about the action, despite the fact that it normally carried Mexicana league standings and that the stoppage received the public support of a number of U.S. major league players and paralleled their own movement which ended in a walkout a year later; see *Uno Más Uno*, 14 July, 19 Oct. 1980.

17. Interview with Albor Salcedo, 9 Sept. 1986; Interview with Becerril, 8-9 Sept. 1986; Interview with Terrazas; *Esto*, 8 July, 1 Aug. 1980; *Uno Más Uno*, 7, 15 July 1980.

The president called for the establishment of a governmental commission, headed by his brother Guillermo, to meet with the two disputing parties. At the talks, the owners insisted that in return for recognizing the players' demands the ANABE would have to be absorbed into the company association, the ASOBEPRO. The commission supported the league's position, but the ANABE refused to take such a step, fearing its demise. In a countermove, the ANABE asked the government for registration as a labor union. The ANABE's request initially received backing from the CT and one of its principal leaders, Fidel Velazquez. Nevertheless, López Portillo opted to back the owners by nixing the initiative and making it clear to both the ANABE and labor that union status would not be granted, at least not any time soon.¹⁸

Finally, in mid-August 1980, an agreement was reached. In it the owners recognized the players as workers and promised to treat them in accordance with the Ley Federal del Trabajo, something that they admitted they should have been already doing for years. As such, the owners agreed to provide a retirement fund; health care (Seguro Social); payment for trades; improved room, board, and transportation; a better schedule; and to take no reprisals against ANABE members. The accord did not, however, outline in detail the implementation of any of these provisions nor did it provide for collective bargaining—each player still had to negotiate individually his own contract. As a result of the agreement, then, the ANABE found itself in a troublesome position. Not being a union, it could not legally strike to force recalcitrant owners to comply with the federal labor law. Therefore, it was dependent on the goodwill of a less than fully supportive government to see that the statute was enforced.¹⁹

The ANABE quickly reaped the product of this weak agreement. Although the Mexicana league owners had consented to treat the players according to the law, nothing required that they deal directly with the ANABE, and they did not. Instead, they attacked the association and its members, Players' relatives, who in some cases worked in Alejo Peralta's factories, were threatened with dismissal. League executives used their political muscle to block government officials at the federal and state levels from meeting with ANABE representatives, and town fathers came under pressure to prevent the striking players from performing exhibition games in their communities. A negative press campaign orchestrated by the Mexicana and

18. Interview with Albor Salcedo, 9 Sept. 1986; Suárez, 254-256; Terrazas, 41-44, 71, 74; *Esto*, 12, 13 Aug. 1980; *Proceso*, 25 Aug. 1980, 23-24; *Uno Más Uno*, 16, 17 July, 12-14 Aug. 1980. The commission was composed of Guillermo López Portillo, director of the Instituto Nacional del Deporte [National Institute of Sport]; Pedro Ojeda Paullada, secretary of Trabajo y Previsión Social [Labor and Social Security]; and Alejandro Gertz Manero, head of the Procuraduría General de la Defensa del Trabajo [Attorney General for Labor].

19. Suárez, 256-261; Terrazas, 75; *Esto*, 8, 20 Aug. 1980; *Proceso*, 25 Aug. 1980, 23-24; *Uno Más Uno*, 20-21 Aug. 1980. In retrospect, one former ANABE member asserted that the organization's lawyer, Albor Salcedo, made a mistake in not accepting the offer to merge the ANABE into the ASOBEPRO, as from that point forward the government did little to help and the Mexicana took an inflexible anti-ANABE stance that ultimately killed the movement; see interview with Jiménez.

its media allies tried to make it appear that the ANABE refused to negotiate with the owners and was greedy for demanding more than the labor law provided. The owners warned that the financial demands made by the ANABE threatened the economic existence of several Mexicana league teams as well as entire minor league circuits. The threat was not an idle one. The Bajío and Noroeste leagues folded when the Mexicana and its allied winter circuit, the Liga del Pacífico [Pacific League], withdrew subsidies to their farm organizations. Later, four teams dropped out of the Mexicana, again depriving players of a large number of employment opportunities. When the question arose whether ANABE players would perform in the upcoming Pacífico season, one press source falsely claimed that 85 percent of the association's membership wanted to play, but its lawyers and about 25 recalcitrant activists were blocking an agreement.²⁰

LIGA DEL PACIFICO

With the aid of government mediation, the ANABE and the Pacífico league came to an accord in early September. The ANABE felt pressure from its membership to provide jobs by playing in the winter league. This step was taken even though cardholders from the company union ASOBEPRO, would also be performing and receiving the same benefits as the ANABE. The Pacífico, unlike the Mexicana, came to an agreement because some of its team owners could challenge the hegemony of Alejo Peralta due to their greater economic independence.²¹

Consequently, the Pacífico agreed to provide the benefits outlined in the federal labor law including vacation days, better meal money, a housing fund (INFONAVIT), an end-of-year bonus, and health and retirement plans. These benefits came, however, at a price. The league claimed that its expenses rose some 40 percent because of the implementation of the law. Two of the circuit's teams, Tijuana and Los Mochis, folded. Rosters were cut from twenty-five to twenty players, and deductions from players' paychecks increased from about 5 to 30 percent.²²

Despite the Pacífico's promises, however, the agreement was not fully implemented. Not all teams provided health (Seguro Social) coverage, and the ANABE had to threaten the league with legal action before it turned money over to the government for the establishment of a retirement fund. A black list circulated among league officials, and ANABE members (fewer were actually hired than originally hoped) faced harassment, trades, and dismissal. In some cases, they were replaced with foreigners. Despite all the problems, the Pacífico completed its full schedule, capping the season with the traditional championship series in January 1981.²³

20. Suárez, 258; *Hit*, 12 Sept. 1980; *Uno Más Uno*, 8, 15 July, 30 Aug., 1-2 Sept., 6 Oct., 19 Nov. 1980.

21. Interview with Becerril, 8-9 Sept. 1986; Interview with Terrazas; *Uno Más Uno*, 6 Sept. 1980.

22. *Hit*, 12, 19 Sept., 3 Oct. 1980; *Uno Más Uno*, 13 Sept., 1, 9 Oct., 24 Nov. 1980.

23. *Uno Más Uno*, 31 Oct., 1, 6 Nov., 3 Dec. 1980, 9 Jan., 2-3 Feb. 1981.

SERIE DEL CARIBE

As the Pacífico league season neared completion, speculation mounted over the Serie del Caribe [Caribbean Series] scheduled for Caracas in early February 1981. Annually, the top team of the winter leagues of Mexico, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic met to decide the Caribbean champion. With the creation of the ANABE, the players of the four countries were fully organized. Consequently, the ANABE joined the Confederación de Peloteros Profesionales del Caribe (CONPEPROCA), which demanded from the owners of the various teams participating in the series increased benefits. The owners balked, especially over the issue of radio and television revenue. Then, despite the intervention of Venezuelan President Luis Herrera Campíns, they cancelled the series rather than meet the players' price. ANABE representatives traveled to Caracas to meet with the owners, but were refused an audience. One critic of the ANABE tried to smear the group by claiming that it received money from Fidel Castro's communist regime in Cuba to help finance the trip. By canceling the series, the owners lost an estimated 28 million pesos in revenues.²⁴

CREATION OF THE LIGA NACIONAL

The cancellation of the Serie del Caribe did not bode well for the chances of a compromise between the ANABE and the Mexicana league over collective bargaining. During the fall and winter of 1980-1981, the Mexicana's principal officials, Alejo Peralta and Antonio Ramírez Muro, refused to deal with the ANABE. They said that their part of the previous August's bargain was simply to implement the federal labor law, and players, as individuals, could approach the league to negotiate a contract for the coming season. The Mexicana directors argued that the ANABE, because it lacked juridical personality (*personalidad jurídica*), legally could not represent players, and the league therefore had no obligation to bargain with it.²⁵

The Mexicana also kept pressure on the ANABE in other ways. In addition to the loss of four teams allegedly because of financial problems, Peralta arranged to move the Puebla franchise, whose players helped initiate the strike, to Campeche, thereby depriving one of the country's principal cities of a Mexicana team. To train new players and keep them out of the clutches of the association, Peralta established a baseball school, complete with full "scholarships." Funds for the players' retirement fund, due from the 1980 season, were not paid to the government. The league falsely claimed to have contracted several big-name Mexican and foreign players in an attempt to frighten ANABE performers into signing. Other key players, such as the ANABE's president, "Abulón" Hernández, were offered large sums to

24. *Hit*, 16 Jan. 1981; *Uno Más Uno*, 11 Dec. 1980, 14, 16-17, 20, 22 Jan. 1981. The CONPEPROCA wanted 15 instead of 8 percent of the gate receipts, 30 dollars per day for food rather than 5, and 5 percent of the radio and television revenue from the series.

25. *Esto*, 16 Feb. 1981; *Uno Más Uno*, 14 Nov., 27 Dec. 1980, 12 Feb. 1981.

abandon the group and sign with a league team. The company union, ASOBEPRO, announced talks with the league and plans to allow its members to enter into contracts. Finally, Mexicana league managers sympathetic to the ANABE were fired.²⁶

With the prospects of playing in the Mexicana looking dim, players searched for positions elsewhere. Some managed to land jobs in the Caribbean. Others looked to the United States. On a handful of occasions they signed letters of intent with major league organizations, but soon found that their careers were blocked north of the border, too. Upon joining the strike, all ANABE members had been fired from the Mexicana league teams and were, therefore, theoretically free agents. Nevertheless, Peralta and Bowie Kuhn, the United States baseball commissioner, adhered to a longtime agreement in which United States baseball clubs refused to hire any Mexican player without an explicit release from the Mexicana. ANABE appeals to the Mexican government to overrule the pact proved futile. Finally, only after the ANABE threatened to go to court to force Mexicana teams to hand over their financial records to the government, on suspicion of tax and revenue-sharing evasion, did the league relent. As a result, Elena Cuen became the first ANABE player to sign with the major leagues, in this case the Pittsburgh Pirates. Still, few ANABE performers ever signed with the major leagues. Moreover, for those that did, Mexicana and major league teams reportedly avoided paying traded players the full amount due them by citing a low public figure while passing a large "under-the-table" sum between each other.²⁷

The approximately three hundred members of the ANABE refused to succumb to the Mexicana league. The association even raised the stakes by taking a position that its members would be allowed to sign with the owners only when the August 1980 agreement were fully implemented. Black lists were ended, contracts outlined the working conditions for each player, and, upon signing, each performer be paid a 300,000-peso bonus. Part of this sum would go to the ANABE and the remainder to the player. In this manner, the ANABE argued, the performer would receive money that the league should have been paying him in the form of better salaries and benefits over the previous years. Moreover, the ANABE would gain financially and the league would be, in essence, recognizing the association. The league rejected these demands thus ending any hope of reconciliation.²⁸

26. Suárez, 258-259, 269-270; *Hit*, 3, 20 Feb. 1981; *Uno Más Uno*, 20, 29-30 Jan., 4, 10, 14 Feb., 3 May 1981; *Wall Street Journal*, 28 Dec. 1987.

27. Terrazas, 106-108; *Esto*, 23 Feb., 11, 17, 31 Mar., 29 Apr., 1981; *Uno Más Uno*, 4, 16, 19, 26 Feb., 29 Apr. 1981. This agreement between Mexican and U.S. baseball, which disallowed Mexican ball players from negotiating contracts with U.S. teams without Mexicana league approval, began in the 1950s and grew out of a truce over the two countries' raiding of each other's players during the post-World War II years; see: Oleksak and Oleksak, 155-156; Klein, 33-56; Milton Jamail, "Put Baseball on the Free-Trade Agenda." *Washington Post* (26 Oct. 1991).

28. *Esto*, 17 Feb. 1981; *Uno Más Uno*, 4 Feb. 1981.

As a result, in mid-February 1981, three weeks before spring training, the ANABE announced its plan to form its own circuit, the Nacional. Talk of exercising such an option in the face of owner intransigence had circulated for months. Squads of Anabistas had been playing exhibition games throughout the country since the summer of 1980 in an effort to raise money and to encourage local officials to consider the establishment of a team in their jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the ANABE wanted to ensure that an accord with the Mexicana was out of the question before taking such a consequential step. The association called upon its allies in the labor movement and appealed for support from other groups including the private sector. It pointed out the economic benefits of having a team in one's community and promised to direct a portion of its income to local social causes.²⁹

Efforts to create the new league met with relative success despite the Mexicana's opposition. Over the next three months the ANABE managed to form a two-division, eight-team circuit. The ANABE received aid from a variety of people and groups, and the motives for backing the venture were many. Nevertheless, most credit is probably due to labor's influence plus the desire of local and state officials to score political points. For example, the absence of a high-calibre professional team in Zacatecas prompted the governor and the state university to join hands to provide the facilities and ensure the financial backing (approximately 500,000 pesos for each franchise plus another estimated four million in start-up costs) necessary to create a franchise. In Puebla, anger over the Mexicana's abrupt transfer of its franchise to Campeche and the debts left in the wake of its departure prompted that state's chief executive to hand over the capital city's modern baseball park to the ANABE. Private interests, construction and metal unions, and the state university combined to back a team in Veracruz. The principal shareholder in Gómez Palacio was an individual with interests in two television stations in the state of Durango.³⁰

Meanwhile, the Mexicana league acted to block the creation of the Nacional. The small number of pro-ANABE sports writers, instrumental in drumming up public support for the upstart league, were black-listed, harassed, and physically prevented from entering Mexicana league parks. Local officials, including ones in Mexico City, Monterrey, and Aguascalientes, were intimidated into refusing or renegeing on agreements with the ANABE to allow Nacional teams to play in their jurisdiction. Although the Nacional included a Mexico City franchise, for example, the team could not get authorization to play in any park in the nation's capital, including the publicly-owned Seguro Social [Social Security] park. It was

29. Interview with Jiménez; *Esto*, 21 Feb. 1981; *Uno Más Uno*, 6, 18, 20-21 Feb. 1981.

30. Interview with Jiménez; Terrazas, 80-83; *Esto*, 2, 5, 8 May 1981; *Uno Más Uno*, 6-7 Mar., 5, 7, 9, 20 May 1981. The Nacional was composed of teams in Durango, Gómez Palacio, Querétaro, and Zacatecas in the northern division and Mexico City, Puebla, Toluca, and Veracruz in the southern division.

forced to share ones in Puebla and Toluca. The Mexicana also used spies to gather information on its opponents.³¹

Despite the enormous difficulty of creating a whole new league, especially in the face of such formidable opposition, the ANABE finally succeeded. On 12 May, the first regular game of the Nacional league season took place in Puebla, where Veracruz won five to two before a full house. Three days later the remainder of the league's teams took the field.³²

THE LONGER TERM

The ANABE-manned Nacional league completed the 1981 season and four others before folding during the 1986 campaign. Despite its initial successes, the struggle to survive over the longer term proved to be exceedingly difficult. Three major factors contributed to the insurgent baseball players' eventual demise: a hostile economic and political climate, competition with and interference from the Mexicana league and its principal power broker, Alejo Peralta, and divisions within the ANABE-Nacional coalition.

The ANABE movement and its offshoot, the Nacional, came to life at a propitious time, at the peak of Mexico's petroleum-induced, deficit-financed economic boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s. This era of easy money helped the fledgling ANABE economically and facilitated support for it from a range of groups including labor and, albeit reluctantly, the Lopez Portillo government.

Two events, however, changed the relatively favorable economic and political equation in 1982. With the collapse of oil prices and rising international interest rates, Mexico could no longer service its debt and, for all intents and purposes, declared bankruptcy. The country entered its worst economic crisis in decades. Bankruptcy led to devaluation of the peso, currency and trade restrictions, rising inflation, and falling incomes. For the baseball teams, this situation proved to be a double blow. Devaluation and restrictions on currency movements (e.g., the limitations on the purchase of dollars) and trade raised the financial burden and logistical difficulty of paying for and of importing foreign-made equipment and non-Mexican players. At the same time inflation meant declining real income for both players and the general public, and government at all levels suddenly faced the need for

31. Interview with Becerril, 8-9 Sept. 1986; Interview with Jiménez; Interview with Terrazas; *Esto*, 10, 23 Mar, 16 Apr., 14 May 1981; *Uno Más Uno*, 22, 26 Apr., 14, 30 May 1981. Meanwhile, the absence of the ANABE players, more than half of whom were former starters, hurt the Mexicana. Its owners attempted to fill their rosters through threats and bribes and the hiring of new players. While many Mexican rookies were contracted, agents also traveled to the United States to locate raw high school and college-level talent at a salary of 1,200 dollars per month. The owners tried to circumvent the law limiting the number of foreigners on a team's roster to 10 percent by passing off outsiders with Spanish surnames as Mexican citizens. See: *Esto*, 9, 20, 27 Mar. 1981; *Uno Más Uno*, 9 Apr., 25 Feb., 12, 17, 19, 26, 31 Mar. 1981.

32. *Uno Más Uno*, 13 May 1981.

economic retrenchment. Teams had little choice but to raise ticket prices to remain solvent, but this alternative further reduced attendance.³³

Furthermore, a change in administrations occurred in the midst of this wrenching economic crisis. As a result, the new president, Miguel de la Madrid, had neither the economic means nor the inclination to look upon the plight of professional sports players with concern. Unlike his predecessor, he was no populist with plenty of cash on hand. He and his government saw less government and greater cooperation with the private sector as the keys to rescuing the economy. Labor activism had to be tamed. Moreover, viewed from this perspective, domestic "restlessness" became a national security concern as Mexico tried to project internationally an image of stability in order to encourage foreign investment and a renegotiation of the nation's huge debt. Consequently, De la Madrid assigned labor problems to the secretariat of the interior (gobernación), which was charged with internal security and headed by a hard-liner, Manuel Bartlett. The secretariat of labor (*trabajo*) normally would have handled such issues.³⁴

Once the Nacional was created in 1981, the Mexicana and its officials, led by Alejo Peralta, continued to wield a wide array of measures designed to undermine the insurgent movement. Publicly ANABE's opponents conformed to the law, but privately they conspired to destroy the movement by both legal and illegal means. ANABE players remained black-listed from the Mexicana and its allied circuits. United States baseball refused to recognize the Nacional and only reluctantly dealt with known ANABE members. Local government officials and private entrepreneurs, upon whom the Nacional increasingly depended for funding, also felt pressure to shun the league, while Peralta constantly juggled franchises in his own circuit to take advantage of the difficulties of his opponents.³⁵

In an attempt to attract larger audiences at the expense of the Nacional, Mexicana owners hired additional foreigners and altered the game. They routinely ignored rules that limited total team salaries and foreigners' pay; the extra amounts were either paid under the table or hidden in bonuses and expenses. The teams' offensive capability, in an effort to make the game more exciting, was increased by pulling in the fences and tolerating the use of

33. *Uno Más Uno*, 22 Feb. 1982. The Mexican peso fell in value vis-à-vis the United States dollar from approximately 25 to 1 in 1981 to approximately 700 to 1 in 1986. Real wages fell by over 50 percent during the same period: see *New York Times*, 10 June, 23 Oct. 1986. Both leagues, of course, were affected by the deteriorating economic situation, but the lesser established Nacional doubtless felt the effects more. Ticket prices in the Mexicana, for example, rose from between 120 and 240 pesos in 1981 to between 700 and 1,000 pesos in 1986: see *Uno Más Uno*, 20 Mar. 1982, 17 Mar. 1986. The Mexicana first confronted the problem of importing and paying foreign players in "hard" currency. Nevertheless, the Nacional found itself in the same position when it began to look for foreign talent in 1983; see *Esto*, 1 Mar., 7 Apr. 1984.

34. Interview with Albor Salcedo, 9 Sept. 1986, 7 Aug. 1993.

35. Interview with Becerril, 24 Aug. 1987; Interview with Jiménez; *La Afición*, 4 Mar. 1983; *Excelsior*, 1 Dec. 1984; *Uno Más Uno*, 17 Mar. 1985, 13, 21 Mar. 1986, 12 Mar. 1989; *Proceso*, 11 Aug. 1986, 62.

doctored bats and balls. As a result, hit, run, and home run totals dramatically increased.³⁶

In the long run, the Mexicana's close links to and ability to influence the media proved especially damaging to the ANABE and its young circuit. Journalists either ignored the movement or increasingly projected a negative image of it, blaming it for "ruining" baseball and threatening the jobs of players. Carlos Calderón de la Barca, the editor of *La Afición*, one of Mexico City's major sports dailies with close links to the nation's industrial sector, also served as the head of public relations for the Mexicana's Diablos Rojos franchise in Mexico City and the Águilas [Eagles] of Mexicali in the Pacífico league. Another important writer, Tomás Morales, with connections to both *La Afición* and the sports magazine, *Hit*, served as the Mexicana's official scorekeeper. Many other reporters, too, chose to accept the traditional *igual* or stipend from those whom they covered rather than deal with the new league. Indeed, Mexico City journalists, who were notoriously underpaid, could pick up as many as three *iguales* each month (from the Diablos Rojos, the Tigres, and the Mexicana league) totaling several tens of thousands of pesos.³⁷

The electronic media, too, succumbed to the Mexicana's influence. Before the strike, Mexican baseball did not appear regularly on television because of low audience ratings. Then in 1982 the Nacional gained access to the government network, IMEVISION, which broadcast weekend games. One year later, however, IMEVISION ended its relationship with the circuit when Peralta gave the network a transmitter on condition that it no longer carry Nacional games nor even report its scores on news broadcasts. In 1984, IMEVISION began showing Mexicana league contests on the weekends. Meanwhile, powerful radio station XEX, owned by the private media monopoly, Televisa, continued to broadcast Mexicana games on a daily basis. The Nacional, however, failed to find a regular radio outlet.³⁸

ESTABLISHING A MEXICO CITY FRANCHISE

The deteriorating economic and political climates after 1981 combined with the wide-ranging attack on the ANABE and Nacional by its principal opponent, the Mexicana, resulted in constant insecurity and instability. Because of these factors, it was especially difficult to create stable franchises. Indeed, as of the start of the 1986 season, only two of the original eight

36. Interview with Becerril, 24 Aug. 1987; *Esto*, 5 Apr., 8 May 1984; *Uno Más Uno*, 27 July 1983; *The Oregonian* (Portland), 13 Feb. 1987; *Proceso*, 11 Aug. 1986, 60-61; Banks, 33. One of the foreigners playing in the Mexican League in 1986, for example, was former Kansas City Royals star, Willie Mays Aikens; see *New York Times*, 17 June 1986. Total team salaries were limited to 45,000 dollars per month and foreigners' pay to a monthly maximum of 3,500 dollars; nevertheless, outsiders received as much as 7,000 dollars per month. In 1986 an American, Jack Pierce, and two other players broke Hector Espino's 1964 home run record of 46 for a season; Pierce, who set the new record, hit 54 round-trippers.

37. Interview with Becerril, 24 Aug. 1987; Interview with Jiménez.

38. *Ibid.*; *Uno Más Uno*, 11, 17, Mar. 1984.

teams, Durango and Zacatecas, were still playing in the league and several franchises had moved more than once.³⁹

Perhaps best illustrative of the problems in establishing and maintaining a franchise was the effort made by the ANABE and Nacional to secure a viable presence in Mexico City. A team's existence in the capital not only enabled it to draw on a large pool of fans, but also provided ready access to the national media, the government, and labor unions, three potentially important allies.⁴⁰

When the 1981 season opened, the Mexico City franchise of the Nacional, the Metropolitanos Rojos [Red Metropolitanans], had no home park in the city. Officials of the Federal District, over whom the president had ultimate authority, refused the Nacional team permission to use Mexico City's principal baseball facility, the publicly-owned Seguro Social stadium. There Alejo Peralta's two Mexicana teams, the Diablos Rojos and Tigres, played. The Metropolitanos then sought to gain permanent access to another city park, Magdalena Mixhuca. Although the team had been allowed to conduct pre-season training sessions at the facility, its directors also denied the request. Finally, in late July, only after repeated entreaties from the CT, the Federal District relented and authorized the team to play in Magdalena Mixhuca.⁴¹

Meanwhile, the team's financial backers, two private-sector investment groups, failed to meet the two-million-peso monthly payroll and pulled out. The players frantically searched for additional gate receipts and new investors. As an inducement to fans, children were allowed into games without charge. Attempts were made to broadcast games over radio and sell stock to the general public. Talks began with labor unions. As a stopgap, the Banco Obrero [Workers' Bank] offered a loan in return for the right to keep the team's books and promises from the other squads in the league to help pay off the debt. As a result, Anabistas on other teams contributed five percent of their salaries, not without some grumbling. Also, the Nacional contributed half of the proceeds from a league playoff game, held in October 1981.⁴²

Financial problems continued to plague the Metropolitanos during the 1982 season. It sought backing from officials and business interests in Ciudad Sahagún, Hidalgo, as well as the many official labor unions in that industrial town, located north of Mexico City. The team held its spring training there and even talked of playing regular season games in the community. Nevertheless, the initiative failed, forcing the Nacional to turn again to the league's other teams which agreed to assume the Metropolitanos' expenses for food, housing and travel.⁴³

39. Terrazas, 80-83, 89-92; *Uno Más Uno*, 9 Mar. 1986.

30. Interview with Albor Salcedo, 7 Aug. 1993.

41. Interview with Jiménez; *Uno Más Uno*, 14 May, 2, 12, 15 June 9, 15, 24, 30 July 1981, 9 Mar. 1982.

42. Interview with Jiménez; *Uno Más Uno*, 12, 19, 25 June. 11, 21 July, 8 Oct. 1981.

43. *Uno Más Uno*, 23 Feb., 9, 18 Mar. 1982.

By the end of the 1982 season, Nacional officials decided that they could no longer maintain a team in Mexico City as long as it could not play in Seguro Social park. Because its present home, Magdalena Mixhuca, had no lights, all games took place in the afternoons. As a result, few of the club's mostly working-class fans could attend during the week. Therefore, when renewed efforts by the CT to help gain access to Seguro Social park again failed, the team moved. The stadium in the new host community, Chihuahua City, boasted lights, and the squad became the Centauros [Centaurs]. The transfer was made in secrecy in order to foil the Mexicana league from placing pressure on Chihuahuan officials to sabotage the deal. Thus, the nation's capital hosted no Nacional league team during the 1983 season.⁴⁴

Finally in 1984, under intense pressure from the labor movement and over the strenuous objections of the Mexicana, government officials agreed that a Nacional team could play in Seguro Social park. Nevertheless, in its zeal to gain access to the stadium, the ANABE and Nacional acceded to conditions that would soon haunt them. They agreed to vacate the park a minimum of three hours before a Mexicana game and maintain the facility's cleanliness. Moreover, the Mexicana retained preference for the scheduling of contests, meaning the Nacional franchise would again have to be satisfied with playing afternoon games during the week and at night during the weekend.⁴⁵ The new team, called the "Aztecas," was to be run as a cooperative with financing from the other teams in the league and the CT.⁴⁶

The first game played at Social Security park, against Durango in March 1984, attracted several thousand fans. Nevertheless, the optimism generated by this turnout was immediately dashed. The Instituto Mexicano de Seguro Social [Mexican Institute of Social Security-IMSS], the caretaker of the park, accused the Aztecas of several breaches of its contract including overstaying the allotted time for use of the facility and leaving the premises uncleaned. As a result, the Aztecas received a five-million-(later reduced to two-million) peso fine, which it could not pay. The Nacional naively had fallen into a Mexicana-engineered trap.⁴⁷

Several days later the Aztecas attempted to play a second game in the park. Despite the intervention of labor leader Fidel Velázquez, city officials ordered the field closed to the team until it paid the fine. In protest, some 1,500 angry fans tried to block traffic on Cuauhtémoc avenue, a major thoroughfare that passes by the facility, but to no avail. In the face of subtle threats from secret police and with no possibility to appeal to President de la Madrid, who was conveniently absent from the country, the ANABE and Nacional leadership decided to avoid any further confrontation.⁴⁸

44. Interview with Albor Salcedo, 7 Aug. 1993; *Uno Más Uno*, 4, 15 Mar., 30 Apr. 1983.

45. Interview with Albor Salcedo, 7 Aug. 1993; *Esto*, 2, 3 Mar. 1984; *Uno Más Uno*, 2, 3 Mar. 1984.

46. *Esto*, 10 Mar., 6 Apr. 1984; *Uno Más Uno*, 20, 30 Mar. 1984.

47. *Esto*, 13, 22, 29 Mar. 1984; *Uno Más Uno*, 22 Mar. 1984; Terrazas, 96-98. Estimates of the number of fans vary between 8,000 and 11,000.

48. Interview with Albor Salcedo, 7 Aug. 1993; *Esto*, 29 Mar. 1984; *Uno Más Uno*, 29 Mar. 1984; Terrazas, 96-98.

Then, as a conciliatory gesture, the ANABE and Nacional offered eventually to pay the fine (one million pesos of which was paid within a week) and open negotiations on a new agreement. In response, the city and IMSS took a hard line, accusing the Aztecas of several additional infractions (including a lack of security at the park and the illegal sales of tickets) and demanding a ten-million-peso deposit plus additional fees for the scoreboard and sound system. One newspaper report claimed that Alejo Peralta used his close ties to police chief, Arturo "Negro" Durazo, to influence the IMSS. Again, the intervention of Mexico's labor movement on behalf of the Aztecas had little effect. Again, the CT, especially at critical junctures in the conflict, had proved unable to wield real power in the face of government indifference and owner hostility.⁴⁹

DIVISIONS

At this point the difficulties in establishing a viable franchise in Mexico City clearly exposed a slowly emerging breach between the ANABE and the Nacional league as well as divisions within the ANABE itself.

From its beginning, the Nacional had been a haphazardly run organization, dominated by baseball players, union activists, lawyers, and local and state officials, including university people, most of whom had little practical business experience. For example, the 1983 season roster of clubs and personnel as well as the official schedule appeared only six days before the opening game, because the league had no publicity officials. Moreover, these people often placed ideological and social considerations above practical economic needs. As much as making money, the ANABE attempted to improve the image of professional sports people and contribute to society by, for example, requiring that its members dress up while traveling, holding clinics for youths, and encouraging children to stay in school.⁵⁰

This situation became clear with the ANABE's efforts to keep a team in Mexico City. By 1984, however, with economic conditions in the nation deteriorating rapidly, thus undermining the ability of unions, state and local governments, and universities to maintain their financial commitments to the game, many Nacional teams had fallen into the hands of private entrepreneurs who enjoyed much greater resources. These profit-minded owners, all located in the provinces, saw little reason to back a money-losing franchise in the national capital, especially when it faced brutal competition from fellow businessman Alejo Peralta. Moreover, it was highly influenced by unions, which the owners held in suspicion.

49. Interview with Albor Salcedo, 7 Aug. 1993; *Esto*, 30 Mar., 7, 11 Apr. 1984; *Uno Más Uno*, 30 Mar., 5, 7, 13, 18, 19 Apr. 1984. For more information on Durazo, see: José Gonzalez González, *Lo negro del Negro Durazo* (Mexico City: Editorial Posada, 1983); David G. LaFrance, "The Myth and the Reality of 'El Negro' Durazo: Mexico City's Most-Wanted Police Chief." *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 9(1990): 237-248.

50. Interview with Jiménez; *Uno Más Uno*, 10, 15 Mar. 1983.

Therefore, when Mexico City officials denied Seguro Social park to the Aztecas and other teams in the Nacional were asked to come up with one million pesos each to keep the Aztecas solvent, several owners moved to nix the Mexico City franchise. This step provoked a direct conflict between the owners and the ANABE and its mainly labor-sector allies. In addition, charges flew that the Nacional owners' motivation for abandoning Mexico City was to make a deal with Peralta.⁵¹

Between March and July 1984, then, the Aztecas changed hands four times as the CT, backed by the ANABE, fought the owners of other Nacional franchises for control of the team. On the one hand, the CT and ANABE wanted the team in order to keep it in Mexico City as a show of commitment to the public and to demonstrate their resolve in the face of Mexicana league opposition. They failed, however, because they ultimately lacked the political backing necessary to gain access to Social Security park and the financial resources to administer the team. On the other hand, the owners sought the money-losing team in order to move it out of Mexico City to friendlier terrain or kill it. They had good reason to avoid further confrontation with and even to come to an accommodation with the powerful Peralta, seeing an opportunity to integrate their teams into his Mexicana league.⁵²

When labor and ANABE mustered enough influence to prevent the team's transfer, the owners moved to strangle it. They refused to invest any money in the franchise, including paying salaries and benefits and the remainder of the fine owed the IMSS. They blacklisted and attempted to trade ANABE activists. They threatened Dominican Republic players, who had arrived under an agreement with CONPEPROCA to play in the Nacional, with expulsion from the country if they played for the Aztecas. They placed pressure on other squads in the league not to play the Aztecas. And they refused to use the proceeds of an all-star game to pay off the Aztecas' debt, instead pocketing the gate receipts for themselves.⁵³

By July, the Aztecas franchise was little more than a memory. Meanwhile, Jorge Ancer, owner of Nacional league teams in Monterrey and Reynosa, and former owner of the Aztecas, petitioned the Mexicana league to admit his two franchises for the 1985 campaign. The following month, reports surfaced that the Nacional was withdrawing its franchise in Puebla. This move opened the important city to a Mexicana league team, thus further pointing toward an accommodation of the Nacional with Peralta.⁵⁴

51. Interview with Jiménez: *Uno Más Uno*, 15 Apr. 1984; Terrazas, 98-100.

52. *Uno Más Uno*, 26 Apr., 14 June 1984.

53. *Esto*, 7 Apr., 2, 4 May, 3, 11 June 1984; *Uno Más Uno*, 27 Apr., 2, 3, 4, 19 May, 9, 13 June 1984; Terrazas, 98-100. Only after much pressure from the CT and the ANABE did the Nacional owners finally agree to hold another all-star game to benefit the association and the Aztecas team; *Uno Más Uno*, 15, 16, 28 June 1984. By July 1984 the Nacional league owed the ANABE nearly 9.5 million pesos for the players' retirement fund and other benefits: *Uno Más Uno*, 6 July 1984.

54. *Esto*, 22 June, 2 July, 20 Aug. 1984; *Uno Más Uno*, 18, 27 June, 29 Aug. 1984; Terrazas, 98-100.

The struggle to maintain a viable movement in the face of difficult economic and political obstacles eventually left the ANABE weak and internally divided. Even from early in the movement, the players had had difficulty maintaining a unified front in the face of generally united owner opposition, first from the Mexicana and then also from the Nacional. Serious differences within ANABE ranks began in 1983 when the leadership decided to play in the winter Pacífico league, despite its blacklisting of some players. Then, the problem of establishing a team in Mexico City exacerbated the differences within the union. ANABE head Ramón “Abulón” Hernández had moved with his team, the Metropolitanos, from Mexico City to Chihuahua in 1983. He came under criticism from union members because from there he was unable adequately to carry out his duties. The ANABE then created a full-time administrative position for him, but he delayed his departure for the nation’s capital because the Chihuahua team paid him three times what the ANABE offered. Hernández also was accused of giving in too easily to Nacional owners’ demands and even cutting deals behind the Anabistas’ backs. Luis Meré, the ANABE’s player representative and treasurer and the player-manager of the Aztecas, was one of Hernández’ most vocal critics. However, Meré also came under attack from the rank and file for being absent from Mexico City and devoting too much time to his team, as the Aztecas wandered from city to city, always the visiting team with no home base. In July the ANABE ousted Meré for unauthorized use of one million pesos of the union’s retirement fund to help prop up the Aztecas team.⁵⁵

THE END

Over the next two seasons, 1985 and 1986, the fortunes of the Nacional and the ANABE went from bad to worse. The league became so disorganized that it issued no official statistics (including scores and standings) until the middle of the 1985 campaign. Moreover, the person in charge did such a poor job that he was fired and as a result the numbers finally released were open to question. The league was so unprepared for the 1986 season that opening day had to be postponed for two weeks; as late as one week before the first game the official schedule had not been announced. Little information or publicity was forthcoming from either the ANABE or the league. All its games took place in the provinces, yet they failed to provide the results to important press outlets in Mexico City. Therefore, their isolation grew as newspapers such as *Uno Más Uno*, which had championed the movement’s cause from its beginning, carried no results of Nacional league contests, except for an all-star competition held in Mexico City.⁵⁶

At least some of the disorganization can be attributed to the poor economic conditions of many teams and ANABE’s continuing problems. Several

55. Interview with Jiménez; Suárez, 266-267; Terrazas, 98-100; *Uno Más Uno*, 3, 19 May, 14, 18, 21 June, 6 July 1984, 3 July 1985.

56. *Esto*, 3, 7 Apr., 5, 10 May 1985; *Uno Más Uno*, 30 June 1985, 13, 21, 28, Mar., 10 Apr. 1986.

league franchises disappeared or moved as the country's economic situation deteriorated. Some teams did not know if they could play, only days before the season's beginning. Finding new homes also proved difficult, because of economic as well as political reasons, and moves did not necessarily enhance a squad's chances for prosperity and stability. The Puebla team, for example, transferred to the neighboring, but smaller, state capital of Tlaxcala for the 1985 season. Then in 1986 it journeyed to the isolated, tiny sugar mill town of Atencingo in southern Puebla, thereby finding a modicum of financial backing from the local union, but at the price of virtual obscurity.⁵⁷

The ANABE, now estranged from the Nacional owners, remained divided internally and began to suffer erosion of its labor-based coalition. As a result it could no longer provide either the economic or the administrative stability needed to keep the league alive. Players continued to express discontent about the union, condemning the leadership for its lack of communication with the rank and file. In turn, ANABE officials, such as "Abulón" Hernández, criticized the players for not taking a more active part in the organization, leaving the decisions up to him, and then finding fault with him. In the summer of 1985, the value of ANABE's links to the CT, its heretofore primary financial and political backer, virtually ended when a Cuban select team toured the country. The Cuban squad, world renowned for its quality, ignored the Nacional and only played Mexicana league teams. At the end of the junket, the CT attended a PRI-sponsored reception honoring the Cubans and officials of the Mexicana league.⁵⁸

Until 1986, the Nacional provided most, but not all ANABE members a job for several months of the year, however unsteady and poorly paid. Nevertheless, over time, the ANABE players and their families slowly but surely became tired of the fight, losing much of their original enthusiasm for the movement which demanded many sacrifices of them and furnished, given the difficult circumstances, only marginal returns. As the Nacional's fortunes fell, Anabistas began abandoning the league. Arturo Jiménez, for example, who had joined the ANABE in 1980 and then became one of the original players for Zacatecas in 1981, left for Mexico City. In the national capital he earned more money playing "amateur" ball than if he had stayed in the Nacional.⁵⁹

Then, with the league's demise, all the remaining players had to seek employment elsewhere. Some left baseball altogether. Others entered the Mexicana where, if one were good enough, one could possibly sign a contract with a major league team. However, given the high signing price asked by the Mexicana, only a handful ever managed to play in the United States. A few others went to Europe, especially Italy. Most joined less prestigious regional

57. *Esto*, 5, 17 May 1985; *Uno Más Uno*, 14 July, 22 Aug. 1984, 3 July 1985, 4, 21 Mar. 1986. As of 30 June 1984, the Nacional had a debt that totaled 11,765 million pesos; *Uno Más Uno*, 23 July 1984.

58. *Uno Más Uno*, 3, 4, 16, 23 July 1985.

59. Interview with Jiménez.

circuits, particularly in the southeast of the country, where one could at least make a living. There the Mexicana league had only limited influence totally to control the sport.⁶⁰

Ignored, isolated, indebted, and uncompetitive in the national sports market, the Nacional folded during the summer of 1986. Its disappearance was barely noticed in the midst of the celebration and publicity surrounding the soccer World Cup held in Mexico during the months of June and July.

Subsequent efforts to revive the Nacional or any other circuit using ANABE players were met with firm opposition by the Mexicana league and its monopolistic arm, the Asociación de Ligas Profesionales de Béisbol de la República Mexicana. In 1987, for example, the CT again attempted to use its political muscle to allow ANABE to play in Mexico City's Seguro Social park, this time featuring a group of Anabista stars in a series of exhibition games. The effort failed when the Mexicana demanded a high price for the stadium's use. Again, organized labor demonstrated its impotence vis-à-vis the private sector and an indifferent government.⁶¹

In 1989 the ANABE made one, last, desperate attempt to form a league, the Circuito Mexicano de Béisbol [Mexican Baseball Circuit—Cimebe]. It gained the backing of the former owners of teams in Tijuana and Guadalajara. Alejo Peralta had withdrawn their franchises because they contravened traditional Mexicana league practices: operating too independently of Peralta and being too generous to their players.⁶²

Immediately the new circuit ran into problems. Francisco Eguiarte, the former Guadalajara owner who now ran the Cimebe, was an "unorganized dreamer" with little business acumen and not the best choice of a partner by the desperate ANABE. Moreover, in retaliation for his effort to revive the ANABE, the Mexicana arranged for its president, Ramón "Abulón" Hernández, to be fired from his position as player-manager of the Chinameca, Veracruz, team in the Liga Regional del Sureste [Southeast Regional League). In addition, several cities came under pressure from the Mexicana. It promised Guadalajara, Puebla, and Veracruz teams for the next season if the cities forbade the establishment of a Cimebe franchise. In Guadalajara, Eguiarte already had a three-year contract to use the stadium at the University of Guadalajara for his former Mexicana franchise. When he attempted to house his Cimebe team in the facility, the University canceled the agreement claiming that only a Mexicana team could perform in the park. Once the

60. Interview with Albor Salcedo, 9 Sept. 1986; Interview with Becerril, 8-9 Sept. 1986, 24 Aug. 1987; Interview with Terrazas; *Proceso*, 11 Aug. 1986, 62; *Uno Más Uno*, 12 Mar., 7 Apr. 1989. In 1985, of the 109 Latin American players in the U.S. major and minor leagues, only eight were from Mexico; *Uno Más Uno*, 29 Mar. 1985. By 1991, 38 Mexicans played north of the border, out of 585 foreigners, most of them Latin Americans; see Jamail. Also, see other articles by Milton Jamail on this topic in *USA Today Baseball Weekly*, 10-16 May 1991, 24 Feb.-2 Mar. 1993.

61. Interview with Becerril, 24 Aug. 1987.

62. *Excelsior*, 25 Jan. 1989; *La Jornada*, 13 Mar. 1989; *Uno Más Uno*, 4 Mar., 7, 8 Apr., 21 Aug., 30 Sept. 1989; *Proceso*, 6 Mar. 1989, 60-63.

Cimebe started play, the Mexicana tried to prevent umpires from working the games.⁶³

Momentarily overcoming the difficulties, the Cimebe began action in September 1989 with six teams and a sixty-two-game schedule. Nevertheless, the league lasted only one season, even though it enjoyed the backing of the influential governmental body, the Comisión Nacional del Deporte [National Commission of Sports—Conade]. It succumbed, like its predecessor, to the relentless pressure of its principal antagonist, the Mexicana league and its owner-director, Alejo Peralta.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

Despite the ANABE's failure to unionize and its ultimate demise, it had an important impact on sports in Mexico. As the first group of players in any Mexican professional sport successfully to organize and strike, it gained modest yet concrete benefits not only for its own members, but for other players as well. In 1984, for example, the Mexicana provided a pension plan to its own players in an attempt to contain discontent. Then in 1989, the Mexicana announced the establishment of a life insurance program for players and petitioned the government to enforce the 10 percent per team limit on foreign players. Less concretely, it also established a precedent for future labor-community-press cooperation in the world of professional sports. Moreover, it served as an educative process that made players in Mexico more aware of the contradictions of their situation as athletes and as workers. This contradiction was amply underlined when, in direct response to ANABE, sports owners created a new anti-union group, the Consejo Mexicano de Espectáculos Profesionales [Mexican Council of Professional Spectacles—COMEDPEP], made up of the heads of baseball, boxing, football, tennis, bullfighting, and acting.⁶⁵

The ANABE experience also brought into sharp focus a changing labor policy of the Mexican government during the 1980s. The most salient aspects of this newly emerging policy, which reflected the implementation of a free-market economic model, beg a reevaluation of the continued viability of the traditional PRI-government-labor relationship: 1) government's unwillingness to recruit and protect labor, notably non-industrial, non-public-sector workers, the ones least organized and therefore those with the greatest potential for organization, thus bringing into question government's future commitment to labor; 2) government's deference to capital, thus bringing into question the real extent of government's willingness and power to regulate the private sector; and 3) government's estrangement from its captive labor

63. Interview with Albor Salcedo, 7 Aug. 1993; *Diario del Istmo* (Coatzacoalcos), 2 Apr. 1989; *Uno Más Uno*, 3 Aug., 30 Sept., 6 Oct. 1989.

64. *Uno Más Uno*, 30 Aug., 18, 20, 21 Sept. 1989, 9 Mar. 1990.

65. Interview with Albor Salcedo, 7 Aug. 1993; Interview with Becerril, 24 Aug. 1987; Suárez, 265-266; *El Nacional*, 26 Apr. 1984; *Proceso*, 10 Apr. 1989, 60-63; *Uno Más Uno*, 1 Oct. 1989.

sector, reflected in public disputes and workers' declining political clout, thus bringing into question the well-being of the official governing coalition.

The professional baseball players' movement, and, indirectly, professional athletes' organizational efforts in general, then, became the first major casualties of free market reform. Government's treatment of athletes revealed, in turn, the emergence of a significantly different policy toward labor as a whole that undermined the traditional official relationship with workers, a relationship that had greatly contributed to the PRI-government's domination of Mexico. As this effort to modernize based on a neo-liberal model continues, one must logically ask, does it jeopardize the entire governmental edifice of the twentieth-century, post-Revolutionary Mexican state?⁶⁶

66. See, for example, the *New York Times*, 14 Dec. 1993, which comments on the fate of Mexican labor in the wake of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).