

LEFT OUT

A MILITANT



BY SCOTT SHERMAN



UNAM STUDENT
STRIKERS BURN EFFIGY
OF RECTOR BARNÉS,
NOVEMBER 1999

THE FIFTEENTH ANNIVERSARY OF Mexico's leftist daily newspaper *La Jornada* certainly seemed an occasion worth celebrating. Founded in 1984 with the assistance of Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, and José Saramago, *La Jornada* is now one of Mexico's most influential and sophisticated newspapers. It came as little surprise that on September 13, 1999, several hundred journalists and intellectuals converged on a museum in Mexico City to applaud the paper's success. But just as the festivities came to a close, the party's distinguished guests found themselves under attack: Two hundred striking students from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) surrounded the museum. They hurled insults, trashed a vehicle owned by the newspaper, and threatened to set fire to the door of the building.

Two days later, a somber editorial in *La Jornada* likened the incident to those incited by fascist students during the Spanish civil war, and thirty-six intellectuals dispatched a letter of solidarity to the beleaguered newspaper staff. The student movement's General Strike Council, known as the CGH, attributed the violence at the museum to a small breakaway faction. But to some observers, the *Jornada* incident illuminated a generational rupture of startling proportions. Writers, artists, and professors who, in the past, had been closely linked to social movements were now at odds with the student rebels.

In his graceful, elegiac *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War* (Knopf), Jorge G. Castañeda highlighted the "central function" of Latin American intellectuals: "Keepers of the national consciousness, critics and constant demanders of accountability, bulwarks of principle and honesty." While many Mexican intellectuals are enticed by government grants and jobs,

a good number fulfill this watchdog function. Since the 1960s, intellectuals have been involved, as participants, chroniclers, and public advocates, in countless battles on behalf of trade unions, gay rights, environmental justice, land reform, and feminism. In 1994 they lent considerable support to the Zapatista uprising, whose most visible spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos, is himself a former Mexico City intellectual who reportedly studied at UNAM in the 1970s and retains a taste for the works of William Shakespeare, Federico García Lorca, and Julio Cortázar. In July 1994, six thousand intellectuals and activists ventured into the sweltering Lacandón jungle for a "National Democratic Convention" hosted by the Zapatistas.

It would seem only natural for the same writers and thinkers to throw their weight behind a movement that one imprisoned leader has called "the first rebellion organized by young people in the center of the country, against the alienating social and cultural dynamic of neoliberalism." But something about the yearlong UNAM strike—or something about the current disposition of Mexico's intellectuals—has split a traditional left-wing alliance in two.

UNAM, which rests on two thousand acres in the southern outskirts of Mexico City, is a world unto itself. With 270,000 students, 28,000 professors, and 26,000 administrative workers, it earns its title: University City. The bustling main campus, strewn with volcanic rock, is ringed by mountains whose contours are barely visible behind a wall of smog and haze.

Founded in the sixteenth century, UNAM is Mexico's preeminent university, the site of most of the nation's academic and scientific research. Nevertheless, recent decades have witnessed its steady decline—especially since Mexico's economic downturn began, in 1982. Today, UNAM's facilities are decrepit and antiquated, faculty salaries are abysmal, and some observers insist that academic standards have deteriorated. "UNAM graduates need not apply" is a common refrain in newspaper want ads. Increasingly, students with economic resources choose to attend Mexico City's private universities.

UNAM is officially autonomous, but the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—which has clung to power in Mexico since 1929 through an adroit synthesis of

coercion, co-optation, patronage, and ruthlessness—is deeply involved in its day-to-day affairs. UNAM's rector, for instance, is chosen by the PRI's ruling elite, and the upper echelon of university bureaucrats tend to work in his employ. To harass and contain left-wing student organizations, the authorities created an elaborate network of paid student provocateurs in the 1950s. These students, known as *porros*, are frequently recruited from the capital's tough shantytowns, and they are capable of stunning violence and mayhem. "The UNAM, like the state oil monopoly, has historically been contested symbolic terrain, a theater of values where university and non-university political conflicts are played out," says David Lorey of the Hewlett Foundation, who writes on higher education in Mexico.

Mexico is a country with a permanent student movement. In 1968 UNAM students spearheaded a massive revolt against the authoritarian regime of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. Díaz Ordaz saw the student movement as a communist-inspired effort to undermine Mexico's sponsorship of the Olympic Games, and he ordered soldiers to suppress a demonstration in Tlatelolco Plaza. The military operation left hundreds dead and wounded, prompting Octavio Paz, a leading Mexican intellectual, to resign his ambassadorship to India in protest. Despite the government's efforts to cloak the details of the massacre in secrecy, Tlatelolco remains a pivotal event in recent Mexican history.

It was into this politically volatile arena that UNAM's rector, Francisco Barnés, introduced a plan to raise fees from a symbolic two cents to approximately \$150 per year. Barnés knew it would not be easy: In 1987, when the administration tried to impose fees, students shut the university down for three weeks, and the plan was scrapped. A second attempt in 1992 was also defeated. This time, in February 1999, Barnés insisted that the fees would be used for scholarships for needy students and for improvements in libraries, labs, and computer facilities. To soften the proposal, he offered students who could not afford the new fees the right to request an exemption, and his plan contained a grandfather clause: The fees would only apply to incoming students.

Campus organizations nevertheless denounced the "Barnés plan." They argued that many UNAM students come from fam-

ilies with scant financial resources. The plan, opponents added, was simply the latest step in the PRI's inexorable march toward economic privatization. Because the Mexican government had already privatized the telecommunications, banking, and railroad sectors—and were considering electricity and petroleum as well—the students feared that higher education was next on the list. (1997 World Bank documents recommending the imposition of tuition fees in Mexico's public universities bolstered the protesters' arguments.) Students threatened a general strike if the plan went into effect.

The University Council, which is largely controlled by the rector, convened to vote



on the plan on March 15. In an attempt to evade student demonstrators and delegates opposed to the plan, the meeting was moved at the last minute to an off-campus facility. Students were outraged, and so was the general public. The council's maneuver recalled the darkest days of the PRI's authoritarian rule, when congress and the press were servile and opposition parties virtually nonexistent.

On April 20, twenty-seven of UNAM's thirty-six schools went on strike, leaving 223,000 students without classes. Only scientific and research institutes remained open. The CGH issued a six-point petition outlining its demands, which included the abolition of all student fees, a congress to restructure the university along democratic lines, and the destruction of the campuswide police infrastructure. Students occupied university buildings, turning

auditoriums into makeshift dorms and classrooms into communal kitchens. Banners blared: ZAPATA SAID THE LAND BELONGS TO THOSE WHO WORK IT; WE SAY THAT THE UNIVERSITY BELONGS TO THOSE WHO STUDY IN IT and WE ARE CLOSING THE UNIVERSITY TODAY SO THAT TOMORROW IT WILL BE FOR EVERYONE. Three days into the strike, seventy thousand students and citizens marched in support of the movement. Subcomandante Marcos, in a letter to *La Jornada*, assailed the "Barnés plan" as an attempt "to divide students into two types—those who can afford to pay, and those who can't"—and celebrated the birth of a new student move-

to the strike. But other students insisted on full compliance with the CGH petition, which demanded an end to all cash transactions within UNAM. After all, many UNAM students could barely afford subway fare, much less student fees, and they questioned federal spending priorities. "Last year the government spent \$77 billion to rescue dozens of banks controlled by the wealthiest families in Mexico," says Cristina Ochoa, a second-year political science student. "Yet they refuse to spend a fraction of 1 percent of that sum to preserve *gratuidad* and strengthen UNAM."

Although the CGH contained dozens of ideological currents, from liberal to

ability to pay fees often determined one's position on the strike, and the schism within the movement turned working-class students against middle-class students and Mesoamerican students against Spanish-American students. By summer, the CGH had embraced radical tactics: Students blocked major highways in the capital and closed down campus research institutes.

Extremely militant teenagers who attend the fourteen high schools attached to the UNAM system began to swell the movement's ranks. For decades, these high school students enjoyed automatic admission to the university if they maintained mid-level grade-point averages. Reforms enacted in



STRIKING
STUDENT



ZAPATISTA PRESS
CONFERENCE,
AUGUST 1999

SPEAKING AT A PRESS CONFERENCE IN CHIAPAS, SUBCOMANDANTE MARCOS CELEBRATED THE BIRTH OF A NEW STUDENT MOVEMENT THAT WAS "CREATIVE, SKEPTICAL, BRAVE."

ment that was "rebellious, defiant, critical, ingenious, creative, skeptical, brave."

FOR NEARLY two months UNAM was paralyzed by continuous protests. No classes met. Finally, on June 7, Barnés dropped his tuition scheme. But while the rector backed down on tuition, his decree allowed various departments and schools to continue charging fees for a wide range of services, including exams, English classes, and laboratory access. Some sectors of the CGH viewed Barnés's reversal as a victory for the movement and argued for an end

Trotskyist, after June 7 it was cleanly bifurcated in the eyes of the public. The press started to refer to "moderates," who desired a negotiated solution with the administration, and *ultras*, who were prepared to wage a long struggle on behalf of the CGH petition's six points. The marathon assemblies, which were active in dozens of schools and departments and which elected delegates to the CGH, became increasingly chaotic, routinely ending in fisticuffs and bloodshed. At one point, different factions in the CGH had to be separated by barbed wire. One's

1997, however, raised admissions standards, introduced new standardized tests, and made it much more difficult to obtain the major of one's choice. Class-conscious teenagers, many of whom work to support their families, saw the reforms of 1997 as an attempt by the state to deprive them of a university education and to steer them toward technical schools. The restoration of the "automatic pass," ensuring these students a place in the university, became one point on the CGH petition.

By October, most of the moderates had departed: Some left in frustration; others

were expelled by force from the assemblies. With the *ultras* in command, the movement became more rigid and confrontational, and public support ebbed. Young people from the most beleaguered sectors of Mexico City's lower-middle class—a class ravaged by the economic crisis of the last twenty years—now formed the nucleus of the movement. Their threadbare clothing, old shoes, and bad teeth attested to their limited resources. They called themselves *los jodidos*—"the fucked."

NEGOTIATIONS between the CGH and the rector proceeded fitfully until they were temporarily aborted in the wake of a suspicious incident on December 11.

That day, as CGH members converged in front of the U.S. embassy to protest the repression of demonstrators in Seattle, a melee ensued, and eighty-eight students were arrested. Newspaper reports, and the CGH, blamed agents provocateurs for the violence. But the government nonetheless felt it had the upper hand. A month later, the rector, with the assistance of the Interior Ministry, organized a university-wide plebiscite, in which an overwhelming majority voted for a return to classes. (The CGH, pointing to irregularities in the balloting, sponsored its own plebiscite, which resulted in a majority vote to continue the strike.) On February 1, a scuffle among strikers, anti-strikers, *porros*, and security personnel at UNAM's High School 3 triggered a large-scale riot. Once again, some newspaper accounts linked agents provocateurs to the violence, but the state-influenced TV networks blamed the CGH and proclaimed that events at UNAM were spinning out of control.

Five days later, at 6:30 A.M., 2,260 policemen entered the campus and surprised the sleeping students, who did not resist the invasion. Of the 737 students brought to prison, some were reportedly beaten and tortured. Memories of Tlatelolco stirred darkly around the episode, and on February 9, more than a hundred thousand people marched in Mexico City to protest the violation of the university's autonomy, the incarceration of students as young as fifteen, and the government's decision to use force.

The occupation of UNAM led to a prompt resumption of classes, but it did not destroy the CGH. Three months later, a group of approximately seven thousand

hardened activists continue to stage an interminable stream of rallies, marches, and occupations, many of which end in brawls. Nine of the CGH's principal leaders remain in prison, while hundreds of other student activists are charged with various crimes and offenses. The campus is tense and divided: A large number of students are contemptuous of the CGH and desire a return to normalcy. Many others, however, support the CGH's demands regarding fees and a congress but express reservations about its militant tactics.

PRACTICALLY from the start, the UNAM conflict presented difficulties for the intellectuals, for it reopened a debate

hope. Their struggle is for today; tomorrow doesn't exist. It's a punk sensibility."

Some intellectuals quickly condemned the student mobilization. Writing in the August 1999 issue of the journal *Letras Libres*, the historian Enrique Krauze highlighted the CGH's "absolute disdain for democracy," its lack of a "historical vision," and its "intolerant...demagogic" style. Krauze, who also dubbed the strikers "the last nihilists," is a vocal champion of the 1968 student movement. But the new generation, he felt, sprang directly from the pages of Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. "We must not fear them or repress them," Krauze wrote. "We must defeat them with reason and the law." Others to

"BANKS, TELECOMMUNICATIONS, MARITIME PORTS—EVEN AIRPORTS—HAVE ALREADY BEEN PRIVATIZED," SAYS GARRIDO. "THE STUDENTS SAW THAT HIGHER EDUCATION WAS NEXT, AND THEY DECIDED TO RESIST."

on the left about the virtues of electoral versus grassroots struggle. Many intellectuals are tied to the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), which, by choosing the electoral road to power, now governs the sprawling capital as well as numerous municipalities around the country. For many leftist intellectuals, the strike committee became a kind of Frankenstein's monster, whose uncompromising militancy threatened to undo the PRD's hard-earned electoral victories. Throughout the strike, the PRD's social-democratic posture clashed with the anarchist bent of the *ultras*, who detest political parties and who saw their fight as not simply against UNAM's administration but against the Mexican government; indeed, some in the CGH likened the movement to the student revolt that helped to bring down General Suharto in Indonesia.

Generational differences also came into play. "The students don't operate with a logic the intellectuals can understand," says Alejandro Moreno, a young critic who is writing a dissertation on the CGH. "They don't have a teleological vision. They don't believe in utopia. They don't have any

the left of Krauze were conflicted. "The strikers are right about many things—about the injustice in the country, about the need for massive reform in the university—but their methods are deplorable," says UNAM sociologist Sergio Zermeño. "They fight with everyone. They exclude everyone. They are totally isolated as a result." The *ultras*, for their part, accused the intellectuals, who are overwhelmingly middle class, of safeguarding the status quo by defending the rector and backing the moderates.

By January the relationship between the intellectuals and the students had reached the boiling point. On February 3, a petition signed by eighty-nine of the nation's most distinguished intellectuals—including Carlos Fuentes, Jorge G. Castañeda, and Enrique Krauze—was printed in national newspapers. Denouncing the CGH as an "intolerant minority," the signatories demanded that the strike council accept the results of the official plebiscite and surrender the university at once. In many quarters, the petition—paid for by the rector's office—was interpreted as a declaration that the intellectuals would not

oppose a military solution. "When the intelligentsia placed its power and its prestige against what it called an 'intolerant minority,' it opened the doors of the jails and turned the keys over to the state," says Denise Dresser, a well-known political commentator. "The intellectuals abdicated their responsibility to maintain a critical distance vis-à-vis the established order and gave the government a blank check."

But not all of the signatories were prepared for the government's subsequent action: It was only three days after the petition was published that troops invaded the campus. Some intellectuals who signed the document immediately offered mea culpas. That very night, Elena Poniatowska—author

and his abrasive polemical style, Garrido is one of the paper's most radical contributors, and one of its most celebrated. The day after the invasion *La Jornada* asked five people, including Garrido, to write about recent events. "The students," Garrido thundered, "fought not only against the government but against the entire political class, from left to right: hence the enormous merit of their resistance."

Throughout the strike, Garrido regularly jostled with critics like Krauze in *La Jornada*'s letters column. He was, in the end, one of the only intellectuals the students trusted. Each week, his essays were blown up and pasted on the walls of campus buildings. During the interminable nego-

and an aura of decrepit elegance. The place, which used to belong to his parents, is outfitted with chandeliers, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Spanish paintings, finely carved chairs from Paris, and antiques acquired in European capitals. Books are everywhere: Garrido's library exceeds fifty thousand volumes. An adjoining room contains the last six years of *La Jornada*, thousands of issues neatly stacked and organized. "The libraries in this country are terrible," he explains with a shrug.

"The Mexican Constitution of 1917 promulgated that education provided by the state will be free at all levels," Garrido says. "Since the 1980s, the Mexican government has embraced the World Bank's agenda regarding privatization. The imposition of fees at public universities is an integral part of that agenda. Banks, telecommunications, maritime ports—even airports—have already been privatized. The students at UNAM saw that higher education was next on the list, and they decided to resist." From his point of view, it's a worthy crusade. "These are young people with extremely limited resources. I have eighty students in my class at the law school, and the textbook costs twenty dollars. Only twenty students could afford to purchase it. This movement has shown courage and generosity from the beginning. Their demand for free public education was opposed by the entire political system—the government, the unions, the opposition parties, the mass media, the institutional left. Yet the students, at great personal risk, insisted on defending the *principle* of free tuition. All of them are exempt from the new fee structure. They are fighting for future generations, not for themselves.

"But fees are just one demand. This is also a dispute about the internal structure of the university. State spending for UNAM has been declining for years, yet the bureaucracy keeps expanding. There is simply no equivalent in American or European universities. It's a bureaucratic caste that controls all the schools and departments. It's not uncommon for a department chair to have three or four vehicles for his personal use, for the use of his wife and children. They have credit cards, too, and you see them eating in the finest restaurants in the south of the city. Meanwhile, there are virtually no funds for laboratories, libraries, scholarly journals. The CGH is demanding



of *Massacre in Mexico* (Missouri), the definitive account of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre—burst into tears on national television, declaring, "I'm ashamed." Others, like Carlos Fuentes, responded by demanding the immediate release of all the student prisoners. But the student strikers nonetheless saw the petition as a stunning betrayal.

AT LEAST ONE Mexican intellectual never abandoned the student movement. Luis Javier Garrido teaches political science and law at UNAM and writes a column every Friday for *La Jornada*. Known for his honesty, his fierce independence,

tiations between the strikers and the administration, Garrido was frequently on hand to provide technical and strategic advice to the CGH. Forty-eight hours before the invasion, during a break in the talks, the rector spotted Garrido in the men's room. "Luis Javier, help me!" he implored. "Honor the six-point petition," Garrido snarled.

At fifty-eight, Garrido has a law degree from UNAM and a doctorate in political science from the Sorbonne. His late father was UNAM's rector from 1948 to 1953. Garrido lives by himself in the upper-middle-class Del Valle neighborhood, in a house with an enormous number of rooms

a fundamental reform of UNAM, especially with regard to financial transparency. This level of corruption is simply not acceptable in a public university."

Much of Garrido's ire is aimed at the PRD, which played an ambiguous, vacillating role in the strike. Week after week in *La Jornada*, Garrido sustains a relentless drumbeat against the center-left party, which, in his view, has become bloated, morally bankrupt, and fully integrated into the ruling elite. "Change in Mexico will only come from below," he wrote on March 24, "following the example of Chiapas and UNAM." He believes that the intellectuals, with their PRD connections, have become lethargic as well. "It's ironic that intellectuals who call themselves 'leftists' would sign a petition endorsing the police intervention in the university, overriding

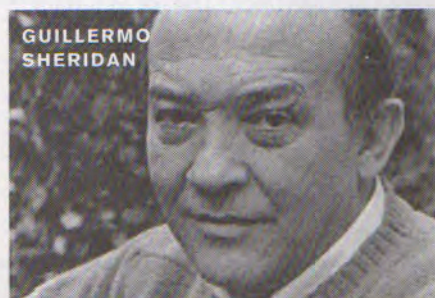
IF GARRIDO IS the student movement's most articulate and energetic ally, Guillermo Sheridan is perhaps its most ferocious intellectual antagonist. Sheridan is the enfant terrible of Mexican letters, a kind of Hispanic H.L. Mencken. His essays and criticism appear in numerous publications, and for years he wrote a regular column about UNAM for Octavio Paz's magazine, *Vuelta*, which forged his reputation as an influential critic of the institution. He has taught literature at UNAM for twenty years—his specialty is modern and contemporary Mexican poetry—and he has written novels and short stories.

When the strike began, Sheridan tried to confront the logic of the student movement, arguing that students who could afford the new fees should pay them and help subsidize the education of those who

ernment. When his Mexico City apartment caught fire, Octavio Paz, dying of cancer, spent his final months here; the original galley of his book, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, are currently on display in the foundation's small gallery.

Sheridan is a sardonic and intense man of fifty. Like many of his compatriots in the Western Hemisphere's most polluted city, he devours one cigarette after another. Books by his favorite writers—Paz, Mencken, Edmund Wilson, and Isaiah Berlin—line the shelves of his office. Like many people enmeshed in the strike, he exudes a certain weariness.

"It never made sense to me why a student of means—someone who, for instance, can afford two thousand dollars a year—shouldn't pay for his tuition at the university. On the campus, it is not



GUILLERMO SHERIDAN

"THE REVIVAL OF IRRATIONALITY THESE PAST TEN MONTHS IS AMAZING," SAYS SHERIDAN. "HAVE YOU SEEN THE PEOPLE WHO ARE CUTTING THEIR VEINS?"

the path of dialogue," Garrido affirms. "It's one of the saddest chapters in Mexican intellectual history."

When pressed, Garrido does offer a gentle critique of the CGH. "Unfortunately, the movement committed errors," he says carefully. "Every social movement commits errors. There are no perfect movements. But the flaws of this movement pale in comparison to its many virtues." Garrido admits that his uncompromising stance on UNAM has cost him some friends on the left. "But," he says with a smile, "I've made new ones." After the occupation, he was one of two professors invited by the CGH to give seminars to students inside the penitentiary.

These days, he keeps up a frenetic schedule of speaking engagements. One afternoon in late March, Garrido was asked to speak at an UNAM high school in the Coyoacán suburb. Attired in a navy-blue sport jacket, gray shirt, and silk handkerchief, he addressed a packed auditorium of sixteen-year-olds, many of whom wore buttons that read LIBERTY FOR THE POLITICAL PRISONERS! They gave him a deafening round of applause.

could not. As the conflict deepened, his prose became more astringent. In September he declared that the strikers were "advancing toward their very own Finland Station, and the future of the university hangs in the balance." A month later Sheridan wrote: "The UNAM is no longer public; it's been privatized by a small Jacobin directorate.... It is not popular: It's been transformed into an aristocracy of indignation. It is not autonomous: It's been invaded by a handful of *villistas*, *marquistas*, *zapatistas*, *cheguevaristas*, *maoistas*, *rosaluxemburguistas*.... In sum, it's not even a university but a political-military beachhead."

Sheridan is the president of the Octavio Paz Foundation, which is located on what is perhaps the most elegant cobblestoned street in Mexico City. Situated behind stone walls covered with ivy is a sixteen-room mansion, built in the seventeenth century, whose architecture reflects the Baroque style of the Spanish empire. The mansion—which is surrounded by statues, outbuildings, and gardens—was donated to the foundation by the Mexican gov-

uncommon to see very good cars, late-model cars, driven by students who don't pay a cent for their education. But the left in Mexico, as far as I can tell, is absolutely determined to preserve an ideological proposition that is rooted in Mexican nationalism and populism of the 1930s. It is the idea of a socialist state that will provide and will take care of everything. UNAM might be the last place where this kind of illusion can be sustained. But higher education is not for everyone. It is for those who earn it, those who deserve it."

Sheridan traces the roots of the present conflict to the early 1970s, the difficult years following the Tlatelolco massacre, when the Mexican Communist Party, in collaboration with student sympathizers, conquered the campus employees union. Throughout the current strike, that union, which has twenty-five thousand members, has been an essential bastion of support for the CGH. But, he says, other leftist groups have entered the fray, and the result is a dangerous amalgamation of ideological forces: "The fact that UNAM can be taken hostage by a group of ideologues contradicts not

only the spirit of the university itself but the principles of democratic behavior we are trying to strengthen here in Mexico. These students are saying that only radical measures produce change, which is a very dangerous assertion in this country. We are seeing guerrilla tactics applied to the national university. The students put barbed wire around the campus. They set up barricades in the streets. They burst into classes, before and after the strike, to denounce professors. It's *Lord of the Flies*."

Sheridan believes that, in the course of the strike, the CGH and its allies—including Subcomandante Marcos and some radical squatter organizations—deliberately harnessed the most superstitious and reactionary aspects of Mexican culture. "The revival of irrationality these past ten months is amazing," he notes. "Have you seen the people who are cutting their veins?" After the occupation, parents of the arrested students erected a tent city in front of the rector's office, and some of them staged fake crucifixions. "They cut themselves and collected the blood with a syringe. Then they wrote on the walls

with it. It's a fanatical, superstitious impulse, and somehow Marcos and the left have tapped into it." All of this led Sheridan to sign the February 3 petition. "I don't regret it," he says. "There was no other way out. I have a right to teach my class."

And yet his future as a professor is uncertain. "I'm not going back to the university for at least six months," he says. "Two weeks ago, in the middle of March, I tried to go and teach my class. I didn't even make it to the classroom. Somebody recognized me and started shouting. A few of his *compañeros* came and said, 'Yeah, that's him! Are you the bastard who's criticizing us?' I lowered my head, turned around, and went back to my car." Sheridan sees no end to the conflict; indeed, he thinks it will gather momentum in the upcoming months as adjunct professors—along with tens of thousands of applicants who are turned away from UNAM every spring—join the protests.

Where does that leave him? "I have a small group of students this semester, and they will start coming here," Sheridan replies, puffing on his cigarette and nodding

toward a table and chairs in the foundation's magnificent garden. "What can I do?" he says with a nervous chuckle. "I'm definitely a persona non grata."

LUIS VILLORO is hardly a persona non grata. As he approaches the age of eighty, his position in the intelligentsia is secure. Born in Barcelona, educated in Paris and Munich, he possesses sterling credentials: professor emeritus of philosophy at UNAM; former ambassador to UNESCO; author of many books and articles. Generally liberal in his politics, Villoro, like many intellectuals, was radicalized by the Zapatista uprising of 1994, and he eventually became an adviser to the insurgents in Chiapas. But his stance on the student strike was measured. When UNAM was occupied, Villoro wrote a pithy essay for *La Jornada* titled "Days of Mourning":

This is a wake-up call to the young people who wish to transform the university and the country. It is indispensable to have ideals, but intransigence can lead to the destruction of those ideals. The CGH had many opportunities to end the conflict

VILLORO RECALLS THE ANGER OF THE STRIKERS: "STUDENTS ERECTED A CEMENT WALL—A CEMENT WALL!—INSIDE THE SCIENCE BUILDING TO PREVENT THE DIRECTOR FROM RETURNING TO HIS OFFICE."

with dignity and honor; it rejected all of them. The lesson is hard, but it must be confronted: No matter how just its cause, a movement cannot impose its will on everyone else while excluding all possible allies....

Villoro himself was among the excluded allies. In late July, he and seven other professors emeriti released a proposal to end the crisis. Under their plan, the CGH would lift the strike in exchange for a series of university-wide roundtables whose recommendations concerning the "fundamental problems" of UNAM would eventually be implemented by the University Council. The proposal triggered weeks of intense debate in the press, in political circles, and within the student movement. President Ernesto Zedillo himself endorsed it as "generous and lucid." On August 10, four of the *eméritos*, including Villoro,

debated the plan face-to-face with the CGH. It was an electrifying event: Two thousand people packed the Che Guevara Auditorium in the School of Philosophy and Literature, and, for six hours, the invective and chaos that normally characterize CGH meetings were absent. It was a gesture of respect for a group of professors—among them Marcos's old instructor, the Spanish Marxist Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez—whose integrity and political commitment were unimpeachable.

Yet the proposal was heavily criticized. Many delegates highlighted its ambiguity and lack of guarantees. These critics invoked the 1996 peace accords between the government and the Zapatistas, which the regime signed but failed to implement, choosing low-intensity warfare instead. "We should learn from that example. Why

surrender now?" one student asked, pointedly declaring that "Luis Villoro should know that, since he was an adviser to the Zapatistas." In a scorching communiqué published in *La Jornada*, Marcos unleashed the same argument: "Why do the *eméritos* think the rector and the government will live up to their word, despite what they sign or promise?" Villoro dispatched a smoldering letter to *La Jornada* defending his proposal and affirming his commitment to "our common cause: the defense of the rights of the indigenous peoples." In the end, the CGH rejected the proposal.

Tall, handsome, with a shock of white hair, Villoro lives in a stylish house in the tony suburb of San Angel. A maid serves coffee. "These young people have no confidence in the system," he observes. "They treat it with scorn and hostility. It is a

deeply frustrated generation. They grew up in a society filled with corruption, a society where politicians murder each other, a society where there is no real democracy, where there are no substantial public discussions about the problems that plague us. Hope has been eliminated from their lives. The majority of the students belong to the lower-middle class, a class that has been shattered, a class where your chances of rising are very limited.

"I grew up in the 1940s and 1950s, in the middle of the 'boom,' the 'takeoff,' the 'Mexican miracle.' There was a sense, back then, that the problems of the country were slowly being resolved. Beginning in the late 1970s, however, everything fell apart. It's been a nonstop economic crisis since then. We're still living through it. What was lost was confidence in the system, confidence in institutions. This strike resembles a surrealist film. Students erected a cement wall—a cement wall!—inside the science building to prevent the director from returning to his office. These young people are filled with anger and rage. The university becomes the arena where they

unleash that rage, but it stems from a deep crisis in Mexico's social, political, and economic system."

UNAM's political structure is a lightning rod for their disaffection. Villoro refers to the "frightful bureaucracy," the administrators who cling to their free meals, travel budgets, and chauffeurs, and the "vertical style" of decision making that prevails throughout the institution but especially in the University Council. The event that detonated the strike—the March 15, 1999, vote on the "Barnés plan"—is, he says, "a good example of this. No one was consulted—not the students, not the professors—no one. It's a very Mexican tradition."

The strike has put Villoro in a pensive mood. "I believe the movement began as a revolt against an unjust, corrupt system by young people who wanted to restore hope and justice to this country. They succeeded in creating an awareness, throughout Mexico, about the urgent need for reform in the university. The rector, sooner or later, will have to confront their demands regarding the automatic pass and a congress. This is a great victory for the

students! Unfortunately, at the same time, the movement became sectarian and intransigent and embraced tactics that contradicted its stated ideals."

Villoro will not discuss his clash with Subcomandante Marcos. Six months later, those wounds are still fresh, and he claims not even to possess a copy of their published exchange, which he refers to as "a small matter best forgotten." The strike has left him peevish and melancholy. While his proposal was being debated by the CGH, a number of banners on the campus, where he has labored for four decades, branded him a traitor. "But I haven't given up," he says quietly. "A great many students in the movement, young people of extraordinary character and intelligence, refused to embrace the violent, intransigent tactics of the *ultras*. They are the seeds of change and hope not only for the university but for Mexico."

Scott Sherman's work has appeared in *The Nation*, *The New York Observer*, and other publications. His article "The Radosh File" appeared in the October 1999 *LF*.