The following interview with Enrique Semo took place at the end of June after he had spoken at a reception in Wollongong. It took up some of the points he raised at the meeting and others which had come up when Semo, a leading figure in the Communist Party of Mexico, was a guest at the Communist Party of Australia's National Congress in mid-June.

The Mexican Communist Party is currently emerging from a period of illegality imposed after the mass struggles of 1968. Australians will recall the shootings and jailings by the Mexican authorities prior to the Olympic Games. Half the Central Committee of the Communist Party was jailed during the illegal period and the party had only 2,000 members (out of a population of 70 million). Since legality, membership has leapt to around 15,000.

The political problems involved in absorbing new cadres are compounded by the class composition of the party. The Communist Party established, or influenced the establishment of, all the major trade unions in Mexico. Their positions of influence were eroded by reformist/populist forces and the long period of decline, discussed in the interview, witnessed a severe erosion of the party's working class base.

The new influx of members is predominantly from the middle class and the party still faces the task of rebuilding its industrial base.

Mexico faces a future of immense potential development based on oil reserves which make it the “Saudi Arabia of the Americas”. In addition, there are huge proven reserves of uranium. The movement against nuclear power has not yet impacted Mexican political life. The direction of future development, its control and the distribution of its benefits will depend upon the effectiveness of the Mexican left.
Firstly, the position of your party in relation to other forces. Could you say something about the size and composition of the marxist left in Mexico outside of the Communist Party?

Well, our party had a very deep crisis in the years from 1940 to 1960. This was due mainly to dogmatic positions, and difficulties in the application of marxist theory to the concrete conditions of Mexico. During those years and after them, other marxists developed in Mexico as groups or as individuals. So, today, when the Mexican left is able to regain the positions it had 20 years ago, we find ourselves in a situation where we have to recognise that there are other groups and parties which are significant, and which have gained a place in the fight for progress and for socialism in our country.

Because of that, we have a policy of unity with all these groups. We are now going into elections together with three other parties who come from the socialist movement and who had very big differences with the Communist Party about ten years ago. The struggle, the practical struggle of the last years, has brought these tendencies and the Communist Party much closer together.

Three years ago we began discussions with these parties about practical questions and began common actions together. For example, public demonstrations, participation in national strikes, signing and publication of declarations about current political problems of the country, unity in the anti-imperialist struggle. For more than two years, this was a very productive experience for all three organisations. And then we stated that the possibility of organic unity between our organisations was open. We began by two or three meetings with the three central committees of these organisations. At first, we began discussing the Mexican situation and came to an agreement to participate together in the election campaign under the symbol of the Mexican Communist Party. We also began talks about the conditions for creating one party which would absorb these three parties.

I cannot say that the differences have all been erased. We are not going into any unprincipled unity agreement. Unity in action is already a fact and we think now that we should look at the possibility of organic unity. For this we have created conditions:

First, by the declaration that our party does not consider that only communists are marxists in Mexico. There are many marxists outside the Communist Party.

Second, by saying that the Communist Party is ready to discuss many of its political positions and even its internal organisation with other marxists who are willing to take part in the formation of one big workers’ party in Mexico.

And third, we have shown that we have no desire to be thought of as the hegemonic force or as more important than the other parties. Only the real strength and development of the struggle will decide the exact place which each one of us will take in the forming of a big united workers’ party of Mexico.

We have already said that we have no prejudices, that we are ready to talk with people with whom we have important differences, ideological differences, like trotskyites and even maoists, if they take a different position from the very sectarian one they take on Mexican politics.

You described the three parties with whom you are seeking organic unity as "socialist". Could you say more about the political position they adopt and also what size they are compared to the Mexican Communist Party?

The most important of them is the Popular Party of Mexico. This is a group which came out of the Socialist Party, formed in the 'fifties. It called itself marxist-leninist, but in practice had a very reformist and opportunist line expressed in the fact that, in all the clashes between the popular movements and the Mexican state, they always took the side of the Mexican state.

At the time, the Mexican Communist Party chose to be always with the masses, even when we felt that the movement was not going to succeed, or was not completely directed by the Communist Party. The result was that the Socialist Party which had some important and popular backing at the beginning of the 'fifties, slowly lost its mass support and was transformed into a
bureaucratic group backed by the ruling party of Mexico which is basically a bourgeois party. The group that split from the Socialist Party came to the conclusion that its place was with the struggle of the masses and, in practice, came to have positions very close to those of the Communist Party. It is a much smaller group than the Communist Party, but is an important group especially in two regions in the country where it is the main leftist force. It has peasant backing and, in some places, it has considerable support in the teachers' union.

The second one is a group which was thrown out of the party in the 'fifties because it was considered to be an opportunist group. But they kept on fighting and changed their line, coming nearer and nearer the party.

The third group is a small group which came from the Socialist Party but much more recently.

I think it would not be an exaggeration to say that in this coalition of four parties the main force is the Communist Party. But the others are important political movements.

I suppose that one of the few things we in Australia know about Mexico is that it was the place where Leon Trotsky was exiled and murdered. What sort of level and presence has Trotskyism had in Mexico?

The trotskyites were divided into many groups but not long ago — about three years ago — they formed a new party in which four of these groups were united. This party began by making its presence felt in the universities but has now developed and built up some strength in the working class and popular movements, too. We went, together with this trotskyist party, into the election campaign five years ago where we put up a candidate for the presidency, a Mexican communist who is a workers' leader, a man who has worked with railway workers for 20 years and who had been in prison for many years.

The trotskyists supported his campaign. We agreed on a minimum common platform and I think this was a very good experience for them and for us too. Many people both inside and outside Mexico attacked us for co-
operating with the trotskyists, but we think unity in action has to be achieved on the basis of a common platform and without promoting ideological differences. If we are ready to work together with non-marxists, why shouldn’t we be ready to work with trotskyists? They form a tendency in the workers’ movement, the world workers’ movement, with which we do not agree but with which it is possible to work. Perhaps I’ll tell you something, I don’t know whether you can publish it, but you will see after I tell you. The problem of Trotsky played a very important role in the crisis of our party.

In 1939 they tried to make the national leadership of the Communist Party of Mexico co-operate in the assassination of Trotsky. Because these leaders were not prepared to participate in that and because they said that they did not agree with assassination as a way of solving political problems, they were expelled from the party and accused of being trotskyists — an accusation which was not true because they were in the leadership of a big anti-Trotsky campaign going on in Mexico. This contributed very much to the long crisis into which our party fell for 20 years.

So at present the forces with which you are entering the election campaign are three parties. In addition to those there are the Trotskyist parties .... ?

No. We could not come to an agreement with the trotskyist parties about the election campaign. They have a completely different view from ours of the character of this election campaign. We think our objective should be the unity of the left, while they think the objective should be a tactic of class against class. That is quite a big difference. So when we discussed a common platform we couldn’t reach agreement. But that’s the only area where we’re not co-operating.

In other aspects, then, there is a level of unity?

Yes. We’re working together with them in the universities and in some places where popular movements exist.

The other question to which comrades at the Congress who had been speaking with you drew my attention — and I must say they were delighted about it — was the question of the women’s movement and feminist consciousness in Mexico. I wonder if you could say something about the history of your party’s approach to this question. Certainly in our party there was a fairly short and — politically — violent change in that feminism hit the party like a tidal wave. In a few short years it has taken it by storm. Did the movement impact your own party in this way?

No. I think the Mexican feminist movement is not so strong. From what I have heard, you have a much more developed feminist movement here in Australia. However, I wouldn’t say that, in Mexico, things are not rapidly changing in this sense too. Our party has been traditionally active in this area. We had a democratic women’s organisation which our party backed and which survived many difficult periods of repression.

But the new feminist movement naturally has many new aspects. The fight against what you call sexism, the right to abortion, the right to different forms of sexuality — these are the new components of the feminist world movement of today. This began appearing in Mexico and, as a result, three women’s organisations came into being. Originally, there was some resistance from traditional women’s organisations to coming into contact with these new tendencies and the same was true from the other side. They didn’t want to have anything to do with the traditional women’s movement. But in the last five years there have been many approaches, each learning from the other. And now a new unity, a federation has begun. It will probably become one big united women’s movement. It is gaining momentum and every day becomes more important in Mexican reality. I must say that during the years of persecution there were few women in our party, but in recent years many have joined. Perhaps more than a third of our membership is now women.
To what extent did differences between the old and the new movements reflect a class question. Did the new feminism essentially come out of the universities and out of the middle class? If so, to what extent has it percolated through to the working class areas?

It began as a movement among the middle class, among intellectuals and students. It had very many difficulties making contact with the working sectors of society. But I think this period is now over. The existence of the traditional women’s movement has very much helped this new group to acquire a political maturity that would have taken it a lot of time to find by itself. I think the characteristics of the new democratic women’s movement in Mexico will be exactly that. It will unite people who are working on problems of concern to urban intellectuals and problems which are central to the interests of the working people.

You mentioned earlier that there are, I think, two Catholic priests on the list of people you are supporting in the election, and you’ve just mentioned the question of abortion. Immediately one can see the potential for conflict there. Does that arise frequently? I’m thinking of this not just in terms of that question but in terms of all sorts of potential conflicts which could arise. How do you see these conflicts coming through and what forms of resolution do you find for them in practice?

The Mexican Catholic Church is changing very fast. Twenty years ago it was mainly a reactionary political force. It was very difficult to find any progressive expression inside it, but this is completely changed today. A lot of priests and important sections of the church have adopted very progressive positions on many of the main problems of Mexico and they agree with the Communist Party on these political issues. At the same time, our party has declared very clearly that
we consider that Mexican Catholics are one of the main forces for the Mexican revolution, for the Mexican socialist movement.

Socialism will come in Mexico and will be won by people who are Catholic, who stay Catholic and who will be Catholic after the revolution. Because of that, the problem of socialism in Mexico cannot be stated or cannot be practically worked for without solving the problem of the participation in the movement for socialism of Catholics who are convinced of their religious thought and who want to participate in the fight for socialism through their Catholic beliefs.

Therefore, we strive to keep very good relations with these left forces of the Mexican church. More than that, we are, consequently, fighters for the restitution of political rights to Mexican priests and churchpeople.

Under the Mexican constitution, Mexican priests cannot take part in political life. They cannot be elected, they cannot vote, they cannot demonstrate in religious dress and we think that any kind of curtailment of democratic rights of citizens, be they churchpeople, soldiers, or any other sectors of the Mexican population, is a limitation of democratic rights. This does not mean that we forget that the main strength of the Catholic church is conservative today. And it does not mean that we agree with the Catholics about everything. We maintain discussion on many things and one of those is abortion.

The fact that we disagree with the left groups of the Catholic church on abortion doesn’t mean we cannot agree on the question of wages, or the fight against inflation, or freedom of expression, or even socialism, even the possibility of discussing socialism with them. We work not only with the Catholics. There are many liberals who have a very long anti-religious tradition and we work with them too. We do not accept this old liberal anti-religious attitude that attacks the right of people to hold religious beliefs. But we respect the long tradition that exists in Mexico of fighting for a civil society free from the domination of the church. This is a big achievement of the Mexican revolutionary struggles of the nineteenth century.

Moving to international questions. I suppose I’m very happy to raise these having just come from a Congress where we had so many messages of solidarity, in marked contrast to a few years ago when we were out in the cold. Could you say something about the position of your party in the international arena and where it’s come from historically?

Well, from the experience of our own development, we have come to the conclusion that each communist party must be responsible for the development of the revolutionary movement in their own country. In these times it is impossible to speak about any kind of centre or any kind of co-ordination between communist parties which goes beyond the solidarity we have to extend to one another in the common fight against imperialism and for a socialist future for humanity. This means that our party is ready to maintain relations with all communist parties without asking them to agree on every subject for discussion inside the communist movement today.

We think that many people have become socialists because socialism or the movement for socialism is growing very fast. It would be completely false to think that this tremendous movement can be directed, or can be oriented, from any one centre in the world.

Because of that, our party has made many efforts to establish relations — friendly, comradely relations — with all parties which are part of the communist movement. In this sense, we think that different attitudes towards one problem or another cannot be an obstacle to building this proletarian solidarity which all parties need.

We appreciate very much the efforts of the Communist Party of Australia to develop an independent position, to defend it against all possible pressures from without and we are happy that you are making efforts to improve relations with all other communist parties.