

Elba Esther Gordillo's downfall in Mexico is political, and personal

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Within a year, the union leader has gone from La Maestra to loser as an example to others who resist the president's reforms

Live by the sword, die by the sword. [Elba Esther Gordillo](#), a union boss so influential that she played a key role in putting a president in office, is now behind bars over the alleged embezzlement of massive amounts of union funds.

Gordillo, leader of the 1.2 million-strong national teachers' union in [Mexico](#), was arrested on Tuesday evening after her private jet had just flown in from California. She has now been formally charged with "operations with resources of illicit origin" and "organised crime".

Just a few days ago, the chairwoman of the [National Guild of Education Workers](#) declared that she had come to the guild's directorship "through the WC", but that she would leave it "through the main gate". It was not so. She left in an ignominious way, under charges for which she could have been arrested many years ago. She was incarcerated by her political ally, [President Enrique Peña Nieto](#).

The union is the biggest in Latin America. Its economic, political and labour power is enormous. Its leaders even have their own political party, the [Partido Nueva Alianza](#), which won 4% of the votes in the last federal election.

Gordillo, its national leader, was sworn in on 24 April 1989. President Carlos Salinas de Gortari had named her to replace Carlos Jonguitud Barrios, who ruled the guild like a *cacique*, or tribal chief, for 17 years and was Elba's protector. Hundreds of thousands of teachers throughout the country were in a desperate situation. Since then she has been the boss, amassing an immense personal fortune.

The relationship between Peña Nieto and Gordillo was straight from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. The breath-taking story of passion, revenge and madness amid the desolate wasteland of Yorkshire repeated itself in the relationship between the Mexican president and the teachers' leader.

The president and La Maestra – as she is commonly called – were helplessly dependent upon one another, tied by the informal power networks within the Mexican state. For the president, it was an unavoidably ambiguous relationship. On one hand, he needed her to advance his project of neo-liberal reforms, similar to those she has happily supported since the days of [President Vicente Fox](#) (2000-06); on the other, her bad reputation helped him win legitimacy.

But on Tuesday this ambiguous approach – keeping La Maestra as the guild's boss while pushing through a reform designed to win him applause from the public and of some of his more important sponsors – came to an end: Gordillo was incarcerated.

She is the great loser. She was right when she backed him to win the presidency and abandoned her alliance with the former [President Felipe Calderón](#). But Peña did not value her support as she had hoped. In the snakes-and-ladders game of Mexican politics, he forced her to step back several squares. She always knew she couldn't direct her union against him.

Their rupture had two immediate causes. One was Gordillo's opposition to an education reform that has no educational content but seeks to impose labour and administrative changes and to cancel important gains made by the teachers. The second was to send a warning to those large sectors of the Mexican public who resist other reforms (such as the increase in value added tax and the privatisation of oil and telecommunications).

Gordillo's arrest is a political decision justified by legal arguments. An openly political conflict is thus channelled through the criminal justice system.

She leaves the union as she came: as a product of a decision, not by the teachers, but by the incumbent president. At stake in this Mexican version of Wuthering Heights is the future of education in the country and that of the teachers who make it possible. But at the same time a message was sent to all the country's political actors: the neo-liberal reforms are here to stay. The last word in this story, however, is yet to be spoken.

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