

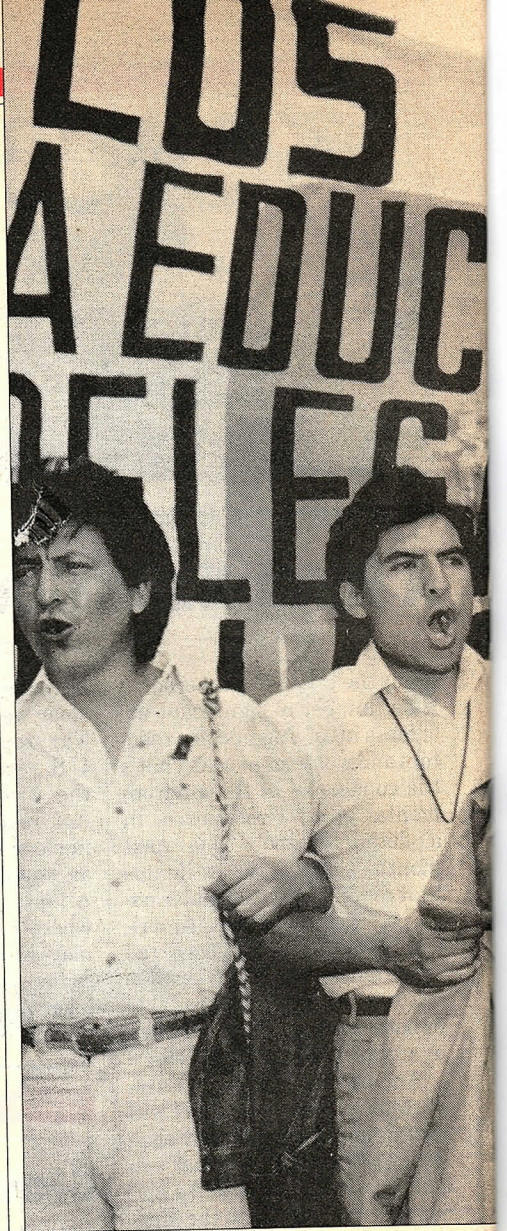
Mexico's Giant Killer

After a shaky start, Salinas gets tough fast

BY STRYKER McGUIRE

In the first five months of his presidency, Carlos Salinas de Gortari has jailed one powerful labor boss, one influential financier and one multimillionaire often fingered as Mexico's top cocaine trafficker. Early last week, inside Los Pinos, the Mexican White House, another giant was about to fall. Carlos Jonguitud Barrios, the "leader for life" of Mexico's million-member teachers' union, had been summoned to a 9 a.m. meeting with the president. A haggard Jonguitud emerged from the session and announced his immediate resignation. The next day, in the country's largest labor demonstration in three decades, between 200,000 and 400,000 teachers and supporters marched through the capital, wildly glad that their longtime boss was finally gone.

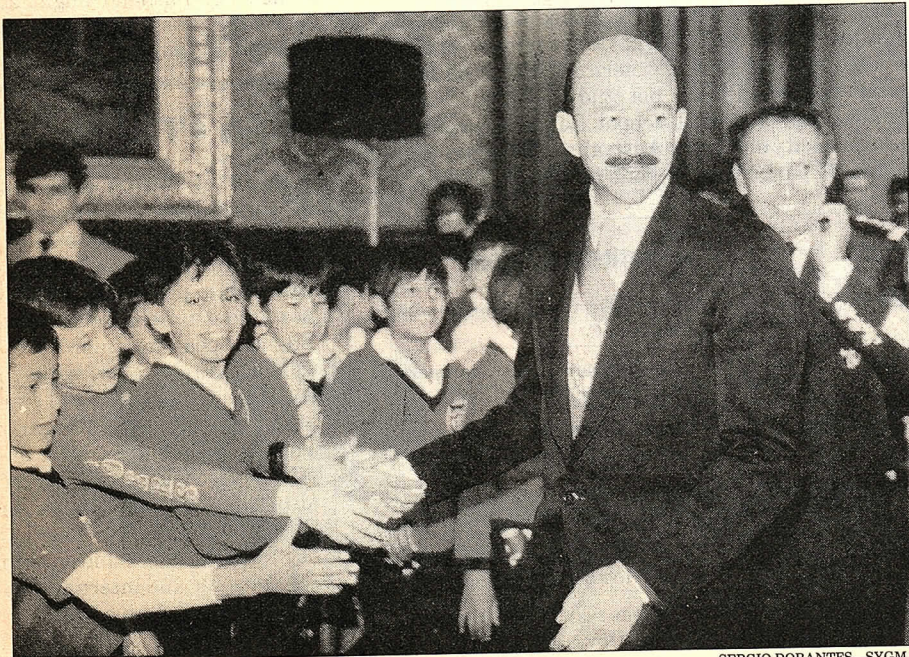
Jonguitud's capitulation was the latest in an exceptional series of moves by a man who has become a surprisingly forceful president of Mexico. Salinas's ability to govern at all was openly questioned during the days following his fraud-tainted election last summer. Today he is on a roll, and it shows. He is a more relaxed and confident man than he was in the contentious aftermath of last July's balloting. Back then, his natural self-assuredness turned easily to arrogance when he was on the defensive. Today he wears that self-assurance well. He seems comfortable with his policies, restored by his ability to seize the political initiative with strong actions and sure-footed enough to indulge in a little self-mockery. One afternoon last week he went for a run on the pine-studded grounds of Los Pinos. A photographer accompanying him was distressed when it began to rain. "Hey," said Salinas, looking up at



A time of testing for the president and the people

the sky, "not even I can do anything about this."

A more pressing question is whether Salinas can do anything about the massive economic, political and social problems that bedevil Mexico. The economy is stretched as tight as a drum. Salinas's emphasis on cutting inflation to less than 2 percent a month and on being the "model debtor" is pushing the Mexican people to the limit. Their real wages continue to drop steadily and Salinas knows it is unrealistic to ask for much more belt-tightening. Yet he also seems unwilling to alter his economic course for the time being, clearly counting on foreign banks to reduce Mexico's debt payments, which last year amounted to \$6.6 billion in interest alone. "I have said: no more sacrifices," the president told NEWSWEEK. But he also believes that the present level of sacrifice must continue for a while: "What we need during this transition period while we are negoti-



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