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South County

TJ labor chief muzzles radio commentators

By Nancy Cleeland
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TIJUANA — A union leader has applied pressure on local radio commentators as a warning that, even in Mexico's new era of democracy, speaking against the nation's ruling political party can get them into big trouble.

"There are some things you shouldn't attack," said Antonio Mena Murguía, chief of the Union of Radio and Television Workers, known as STIRT. "You have to respect the

rules of the game if you want to be on the team."

Already, one veteran journalist was briefly fired, and although she is back on the air, a morning commentary show by her remains canceled. Her offense: a series of pro-democracy commentaries that included readings from Aristotle and quotes from Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

Luz Elena Picos of station XEXX also publicly congratulated the winners of last month's statewide

election, in which the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI, suffered a humiliating defeat. That, for Mena, was too much.

"She should have understood our position," said Mena, who has ruled the 171-member union for more than 10 years. "As members of a union, we are all members of a political party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party. And she systematically attacked this party for 15 days."

In a letter to station manager Gustavo Lopez Moreno two weeks ago,

Mena demanded the immediate cancellation of Picos' daily three-minute commentary and one-hour interview program.

Mena said last week that other broadcasters may follow. And he said the union might ban political discussion on radio talk shows.

"Our executive committee will meet soon to decide what action to take," he said.

Picos, along with more than half
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the radio commentators and newscasters in Tijuana, is not a union member. She, like the others, worked under a special permit that could be pulled at any time — even over the objections of the radio station.

Before the Picos incident, the union had never taken such drastic action. But several radio journalists who asked to remain anonymous said they were constantly aware of the threat.

In the last year, at least two radio commentators have taken sudden "vacations" after broadcasting news that may have been offensive to the political establishment.

Because of their tenuous position, Picos said, many broadcasters practice self-censorship, avoiding controversial or political topics.

Ironically, Picos, who began her career as a newspaper columnist 20 years ago, rarely speaks of political matters. Her hourlong program "Vida Plena," or Full Life, which airs at 2 p.m., covers a wide range of topics from celebrity interviews to advice on parenting.

Apparently her dismissal stemmed from a sideline she recently developed, a three-minute commentary on issues of the day that airs at 7:30 a.m.

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— Luz Elena Picos

said. "I talk of public services, the economy, the children of Central America.

"I always talked about democracy. Like when I read from Aristotle, it was about well-being and happiness and democracy. It is such a beautiful philosophy. I resist believing that was the reason. It would be very childish. It would be the thought of a very small mind."

Mena would not name a specific broadcast that led to the demand to cancel Picos' programs. He said he rarely listens to them but was tipped off by union members that Picos was attacking the PRI.

"I'm not saying this caused the defeat, but I think it helped," Mena said of the offensive commentaries.

Picos' programs were pulled from the air July 13, the day after Mena's letter arrived. But station owner Enrique Lutteroth, a wealthy businessman from Monterrey in the state of Nuevo León and a fan of Picos' programs, insisted that she be returned. Last Wednesday, Mena relented and allowed her back on the radio.

Two days later, however, the union chief began demanding cutbacks in the duties of other XEXX broadcasters. Among them was Alberto Estrada, a newscaster who suddenly was restricted to sports and weather broadcasts.

Station manager Lopez interpreted Mena's new demands as retribution for Picos' return and feared the harassment would continue. And so Friday, just two days after she was allowed to return to work, Picos again was told to go home.

Lopez said that until station owner Lutteroth arrives at an agreement with Picos and Mena, the journalist's morning commentaries will be held.

However, her afternoon show was back on the air yesterday afternoon and should run through the week, Lopez said.

Picos, an energetic woman who is married to a Tijuana attorney and writes for several magazines, said she does not need the money her radio program generates.