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Mexico

The Agony of Mexican Labor Today

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For the last year and a half, tens of thousands of Mexican teachers have been involved in demonstrations, weeks-long strikes, seizure of highway toll booths and government buildings, and violent confrontations with the police and the army. [1] These teachers, in the southern and western states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Michoacán, oppose the education reform passed by the Mexican Congress in 2013. President Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) claims that the reform will improve education for the country's youth, but teachers argue that it is intended to break the power of the union and weaken public education, and that it will be bad for students and the Mexican people at large.

The dissident teachers also joined parents and students in militant protests in Guerrero, in Mexico City, and throughout the country over the massacre and kidnapping that took place on September 26, 2014, when police and other assailants killed six, wounded twenty-five, and forcibly disappeared 43 students in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero. Beginning in late September, protestors "striking out at symbols of government and politics" burned the Iguala, Guerrero, city hall, as well as the office of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in the state's capital of Chilpancingo. Teachers also joined a large protest on November 8, where protestors set fire to the door of the National Palace in Mexico City. Protests reached a peak on the November 20 anniversary of the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, when tens "some say hundreds" of thousands marched and rallied in the zócalo, the national plaza. By early December, students, labor unionists, and community groups had taken over the Sonora state legislature, while teachers blocked the Highway of the Sun that links Mexico City to the resort city of Acapulco, with the Christmas holiday season just about to begin.

The central issue has been testing and evaluation of teachers. Led by the National Coordinating Committee (known as "la CNTE"), a dissident left-wing caucus of the Mexican Teachers Union ("el SNTE"), the teachers have prevented teacher exams from taking place in their stronghold states, closing test sites, burning testing materials, and cutting the hair of teachers who attempted to take the test. When the national elections for congress, state governors, and mayors took place this past June, teachers called for a boycott, arguing that all the parties were corrupt. In Oaxaca, the union blockaded polling places and burned ballots in the street, coming into conflict with the police and army and sometimes with grassroots community groups that wanted to vote. The Oaxaca SNTE Local 22 is planning on striking on August 24, at the beginning of the school year, unless they can work out a rollback of the evaluations with the federal government.

Yet, despite the show of power, Mexican labor unions and workers are, overall, in the worst situation in decades. President Peña Nieto and the PRI, along with their allies in the equally conservative National Action Party (PAN), have succeeded in passing a series of so-called reforms "education, labor, energy, and communications" that will have devastating effects on an already weakened labor movement. And so far there seems to be no labor or broader social movement capable of resisting, stopping, and overturning these reforms. All of this is taking place in a country where the war between the government and the drug cartels has taken 110,000 lives and seen 25,000 people forcibly disappeared. The army and the police have engaged in beatings, robbery, torture, rape, and extrajudicial murder, acts committed with impunity. While this has been fundamentally a war between the federal government and the drug cartels, it has sometimes spilled over onto the social movements, providing a context for incidental repression. The result is greater insecurity throughout the society, including the labor movement. With the possibility of violence from the cartels on the one hand and the army and the police on the other, many choose to keep their heads down.

The Mexican workers' situation, then, is incredibly difficult, the result of a long history of state oppression, employer exploitation, and "as a Mexican woman labor organizer recently said to me" "what can only be described as "social

decomposition.” How did Mexico’s working class get into this situation? And how might it ever get out?

Mexico’s System of State Labor Control

The Mexican government has controlled the unions since the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920, but it was in the 1930s that the system of one-party state control over the unions was fully developed. President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) fulfilled the Revolution’s goals by nationalizing the U.S.- and British-owned oil industry, distributing millions of acres of land to Indians and peasants, and recognizing the labor unions. During the Great Depression, Mexican workers, often under leftist leadership, organized new industrial unions and federations. Cárdenas brought the unions of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) and the National Confederation of Peasants (CNC) into the ruling party, creating the state-party that later became the PRI. It was the dream of Cárdenas that the state, rising above labor and capital, could create a socialist society in his agrarian nation while also developing industry through the substitution of domestically manufactured goods for imports.

After Cárdenas, however, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, more conservative presidents—while improving relations with private and foreign capital—drove the Communists and other leftists out of the unions, using the police and gangsters to install new union leaders, known as *los charros*. (The nickname comes from a railroad union leader who dressed up in fancy charro, or cowboy, outfits.) More than simply labor bureaucrats, these men were a caste of corrupt, violent political loyalists—often simultaneously union leaders and PRI representatives, senators, or governors. The PRI’s “official unions” existed to prevent independent unionism, to stop strikes, and to keep wages down. It was this low-wage system, combined with the high tariffs of the import-substitution model, that made possible the “Mexican miracle” of the post-war period.

The Example of the Teachers Union

The Mexican Teachers Union’s history illustrates what happened to unions under the system of state control. In the early 1940s, a young man named Carlos Jongitud Barrios attended a rural teachers college in Ozuama, Veracruz. After graduation, he joined the teachers union and then the PRI. By the 1950s, he had become part of the union’s national executive committee; by the 1970s, he was the union’s top leader. His caucus, called the Revolutionary Vanguard, worked closely with the PRI and the Secretary of Public Education, controlling the union through a political machine that imposed leaders on the state and local unions. Loyal officials and members could be rewarded with union, political, and government posts, including no-show jobs, jobs for family and friends, and so on. When rank-and-file teachers protested, they might be fired, beaten, or even killed, as some were.

During the 1970s, leftist teachers in the states of Oaxaca and Chiapas, many of them indigenous bilingual teachers, began to protest against Jongitud Barrios’ union dictatorship, creating the National Coordinating Committee (la CNTE). By the 1980s, through many strikes and protests, the teachers in those states succeeded in winning control of their state organizations and formed an alliance with teachers’ union locals in Mexico City. When, in the late 1980s, the teacher rank-and-file seemed poised to take control of the national union, Mexico President Carlos Salinas (PRI) intervened and assured the ascension of Elba Esther Gordillo, a supposed reformer, to leadership of the union. Gordillo, who had been part of the Jongitud Barrios administration, re-created the same sort of dictatorial party machine, running the union through fear and favors, the latter including, one year, the gift of a Hummer to every single union delegate to the national convention. Against Gordillo, unions in Oaxaca and Chiapas, joined by some in Guerrero and Michoacán, have continued the fight for union democracy and teacher power to the present day.

Calderón Crushes Dissent

The Mexican state continues to use both the law and brute force to deal with union problems. When, in February 2006, there was a disaster at the Pasta de Conchos mine in the state of Coahuila, killing 65 miners, Miners Union leader Napoleón Gómez Urrutia called it “industrial homicide,” blaming the companies and the government. In retaliation, the administration of President Felipe Calderón (PAN) falsely accused Gómez Urrutia of embezzling \$50 million from his union. To avoid being imprisoned, Gómez Urrutia fled, with the help of the United Steel Workers of Canada and the United States, to Vancouver. At the same time, with the miners on the defensive, Grupo México, one of the country’s largest mining corporations, waged a war against the Miners Union and eventually dislodged it from the Cananea mine. While the courts have thrown out all charges against Gómez Urrutia, he has continued to lead the union from Canada, fearing to return to Mexico.

A few years later, in October of 2009, Calderón crushed the Mexican Electrical Workers Union (SME), a union that led a coalition against neoliberalism and privatization, seizing the Mexican Light and Power Company, liquidating the company, and firing 40,000 union workers. A remnant of 16,000 SME workers has continued to fight for their jobs. In February 2013, President Peña Nieto’s administration also arrested and imprisoned Elba Esther Gordillo, head of the Mexican Teachers Union on well-founded charges of embezzlement. Jailed because she had made the mistake of challenging PRI leaders, Gordillo remains in prison. The union is now headed by Juan DÃ-az de la Torre, long an associate of Gordillo and head of the union’s political machine and its New Alliance Party, which is allied with the PRI.

Repression and Rebellion in the Unions

Workers in the industrial unions, the Mexican Petroleum Workers, the Railroad Workers, and electrical workers (in one of the two national unions, SUTERM), experienced the same sort of state-party imposed authoritarian unions as the teachers did. There were rebellions, of course—“fights for union democracy and greater union power by the railroad workers in 1959, by the electrical workers in 1974-75, by telephone workers in the 1970s and ‘80s”—but the police, army, and the “official union” thugs put them down. During the workers’ insurgency of the late 1960s and early 1970s, some industrial unions and public university unions did succeed in winning independence. Some of the leaders of the 1970s struggles went on to create the independent National Union of Workers (UNT) in the 1990s.

At the peak of the imposition of neoliberalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, President Carlos Salinas used the army and the police to attack the offices of the Petroleum Workers Union (STPRM) and arrested and indicted union head JoaquÃ-n “La Quina” HernÃ-ndez Galicia and other union officials on charges of corruption. Salinas also sent the army to preemptively occupy the Cananea mine—the birthplace of the Mexican union movement—to prevent strikes and protests over its privatization. During this period, Salinas privatized 1,000 state-owned companies, the largest being the Mexican Telephone Company (TELMEX), bought by Carlos Slim and a consortium of Mexican and American companies. Slim is now the richest man in Mexico and one of the richest in the world.

Most recently, farmworkers in San QuintÃ-n, Baja California, organized a strike for higher wages in March against both their employers and the state-controlled union that represents them. The mostly indigenous fieldworkers shut down the Transpenninsular Highway that carries produce from the fields to warehouses and stores in the United States, effectively paralyzing the agricultural assembly line. President Peña Nieto’s government promised investigations, but authorities meanwhile sent the army and police to break the strike. The coalition of indigenous groups that had organized the strike was defeated and the companies continued to pay the same low wages. How is it possible that the state can run roughshod over the working class in this way?

The Power of Mexico's Capitalists

Mexico's capitalist class is wealthy, well organized, and politically powerful. Mexican businesspeople have for many decades been organized in the Employers Confederation of the Mexican Republic (COPARMEX) which boasts that its "more than 36,000 member companies across the country are responsible for 30% of GDP and 4.8 million formal jobs." COPARMEX and other business organizations, such as the National Chamber of the Manufacturing Industry (CANACINTRA), have worked for years, principally through the PAN but also with the PRI, to develop policies, write legislation, and to lobby for their political agenda.

The Mexican capitalists brought neoliberal government to power in two stages: First, the victory within the PRI of the so-called "Technocrats" over the "Dinosaurs" (that is, the neoliberals over the economic nationalists) in the 1980s and 1990s. Second, the electoral victory of the PAN. The two PAN administrations—under Vicente Fox (2000-2006) and Felipe Calderón (2006-2012)—demonstrated that the party was incapable of governing Mexico. Fox's administration failed to deliver on its promises to the business class, while Calderón initiated the disastrous war on drugs with the tens of thousands of dead and forcibly disappeared as well as widespread police and army human-rights violations.

Enrique Peña Nieto, the governor of the State of Mexico (the country's most populous state, which wraps around the Mexico City Federal District and includes much of the Mexico City metropolitan area) won back the presidency for the PRI in 2012. He has been the champion of Mexican capitalists and foreign investors, pushing forward the neoliberal agenda that the PRI had initiated back in the 1980s. Immediately after his election, "EPN" (as he is widely known) succeeded in drawing the PAN and also the ostensibly left-of-center PRD into his Pact for Mexico. The pact bound these parties to the neoliberal program advocated by COPARMEX and by foreign investors. Over the next three years, Mexico passed the so-called reforms—education, labor, energy, and telecommunications—representing a clear victory for big business.

Nevertheless, Mexico's capitalist class faces a serious problem: economic stagnation. After 2008, virtually the entire world economy went into crisis, followed in many cases by prolonged stagnation. Because of its high degree of integration into the North American regional economy, Mexico's economic growth depends upon the United States, its largest trading partner. The world economy and the U.S. economy have not been strong enough to pull Mexico out of its economic doldrums. Mexico's GDP is not growing at even 1% per year. For the working class, this has meant a continual decline in its standard of living. This situation might drive workers to fight back, but workers' independent organization is as of yet virtually non-existent.

The State of the Mexican Working Class

The Mexican government's policy for many decades has been to maintain low wages. One way to do that is to establish a low minimum wage, one at or even below subsistence level. Minimum wages have been kept at subsistence except during the period of large-scale labor and social movements in Mexico that lasted from the mid-1960s to the 1970s. Since labor became more quiescent after 1976, the minimum wage has lost 73% of its purchasing power. Today, the minimum wage is actually lower in real (inflation-adjusted) terms than it was in 1930, 1940, or 1960.

A second way to keep wages low is through the "wage ceiling," an officially unacknowledged but well-known government policy that works to keep wages in both public and private sectors from rising. The Secretary of Labor and the Labor Boards typically use their authority to keep wage increases slightly below the rate of inflation. The result, of course, is that over time wages tend to fall below the cost of living.

Since 2013, wages in Mexico have fallen lower than Chinese wages, about one-fifth lower. Some six million Mexicans earn the minimum wage of 70.10 pesos, or \$4.50, per day, while another 12 million earn 140 pesos, or \$9.00, per day. Manufacturing workers, 16% of the labor force, average about \$2.70 an hour. Jornaleros, agricultural day laborers, generally earn between 65 and 110 pesos, that is, between \$4.25 and \$7.15 per day. Even when parents and their children work in the fields, as they frequently do, they earn barely subsistence wages.

Low wages, of course, mean poverty. Various organizations report that 40-50% of all Mexicans live in poverty. The Mexican Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL) actually suggests that only 18.3% of all Mexicans are not poor; 81.7%, or more than four-fifths, are poor. Nor are things improving. The World Bank recently reported, "Poverty has not diminished in the last twenty years." It is the lack of good jobs and decent wages, of course, which has led 10% of all Mexicans to migrate to the United States.

Why are Mexican workers paid so little? The principal reason is that they do not control their own unions or have their own political party, so they have no vehicle with which to struggle to improve their situation. Even the "official" unions affiliated with the PRI have declined in size. One study suggests that unions declined from representing just over 30% to just below 20% of workers between 1984 and 2000, while today unionization is about 10%. One expert calculates that only 8.6% of the economically active population is unionized.

The tripartite system of the Labor Boards, made up of government, business, and labor representatives, represents the institutional collusion of the state, capital, and a corrupt and violent labor bureaucracy, all three of which oppose workers' self-organization. Studies suggest that 80-90% of all contracts in Mexico are so-called "protection contracts" that offer only the basic minimum wages and conditions, contracts that are frequently negotiated by "ghost unions" unknown to the workers. Very few Mexican workers have genuine labor unions committed to improving the situation of their members.

So it is not surprising that Mexico has few official strikes. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), strikes have fallen from 577 in 1995, to 84 in 2010, and only 62 in 2011. Of course there are many unofficial work stoppages and strikes, especially in the more unionized public sector, and particularly among the militant teachers. In the private sector, however, workers who engage in unofficial strikes are often simply fired and replaced.

Recent Election

Despite widespread disillusionment with the political system, as well as continuing economic doldrums, President Enrique Peña Nieto and the PRI were the big winners in the Mexican elections of June 2015, followed by the conservative PAN. Both parties are committed to deepening of the country's neoliberal, "free market" economic reforms.

The PRI won 29% of the vote; the PAN, 20%. Several competing leftist parties had smaller tallies: the PRD received 10.8%; the Movement of National Regeneration (MORENA), 8.3%; the Citizens Movement, 5.9%. The Labor Party (PT), received only 2.87%, too little to keep its registration and ballot status. The teachers' boycott of the election had little impact. The PRI and its allied parties, such as the Green Ecological Party and the New Alliance Party, will have large pluralities in both houses of the Mexican Congress.

Why has the Mexican left done so poorly, when in many past elections it has received a third of the vote? Three things are at work. First, the PRD lost members and voters to its former leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his new MORENA party. Second, some became cynical about the PRD with its history of opportunism and

corruption, but did not follow López Obrador into MORENA. Third, splits in a movement always lead to some disillusionment and apathy. Does the current teachers' union movement, with its tens of thousands of militant demonstrators, represent the death agony of the old labor movement or the birth of a new one? The low wages and high levels of poverty, the weakness of the unions and of the left political parties, the government's use of repression to crush labor movements and jail union leaders all suggest that the labor movement is at best on the defensive and at worst in serious decline. The widespread skepticism and cynicism about the political system tends to undermine confidence and inhibit political change.

In Mexico, as in many other nations around the world today, the main parts of the political system—the government, the electoral authorities, and the parties—do not enjoy the confidence of the people. According to a recent poll, some 72% of the Mexican public has no confidence in the government; 82% has no confidence in the political parties. This is, no doubt, one reason that only about half of all registered voters actually vote. The Mexican political system, controlled by the elites of la clase política and representing the interests of the oligarchy and foreign investors, uses its power to block change at every level.

Attempts to break out of the system over the last twenty-five years have failed in one way or another. The PRD, controlled by cliques, became corrupt. The Zapatistas, the group that led the Chiapas Rebellion in 1994, never found a way to play a role in national politics and behaved in a sectarian way that isolated them from other movements. Only small left groups argue for the building of a militant labor movement fighting to improve the wages and living standards of workers and to create a mass working-class party. The activist remnant of the Electrical Workers Union (SME), la CNTE, and left groups such as the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT) attempted to do this with the creation of the Organization of the Working People (OPT)—but then dropped that project to support the teachers' boycott of the election.

Mexican leftism has tended for decades to vacillate between a Cardenist reformism that seeks to penetrate the corrupt Mexican state and a radicalism that dreams—with images of Villa, Zapata, and Che—of creating a new Cuban revolution through violent rebellion. In Egypt, Spain, the United States, Greece, Brazil, and other countries, movements have emerged in recent years that might suggest a break from past models. Mexico, in contrast, has had no major social explosion—no Tahrir Square, no indignados, and no Occupy Wall Street. Since 1989, there have been no new major political parties—such as have appeared in Bolivia, Brazil, Venezuela, Greece, and Spain—to shake up the corrupt party system. Mexican working people will have to find a way to make a break with the government-controlled unions and with the existing parties—but given the high level of repression and the pervasive cynicism, it will surely not be easy.

Source: [Dollars&Sense September/October 2015](#).

Glossary of Mexican Politics

Political Parties:

⌘ Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) – Institutional Revolutionary Party

⌘ Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN) – National Action Party

⌘ Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) – Party of the Democratic Revolution

â€¢ Movimiento Regeneraci3n Nacional (MORENA) – Movement of National Regeneration

â€¢ Partido del Trabajo (PT) – Labor Party

â€¢ Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (PRT) – Revolutionary Workers Party

â€¢ Organizaci3n PolÃ-tica del Pueblo y los Trabajadores (OPT) – Political Organization of the People and the Workers

Unions and Labor Federations:

â€¢ Confederaci3n de Trabajadores de M3xico (CTM) – Confederation of Mexican Workers

â€¢ Confederaci3n Nacional Campesina (CNC) – National Confederation of Peasants

â€¢ Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educaci3n (la CNTE) – National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers

â€¢ Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educaci3n (el SNTE) – National Union of Education Workers

â€¢ Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros de la RepÃ-blica Mexicana (SNTRM) – Union of Petroleum Workers of the Mexican Republic

â€¢ Sindicato Ã-nico de Trabajadores Electricistas de la RepÃ-blica Mexicana (SUTERM) – Sole Union of Electrical Workers of the Mexican Republic
Uni3n Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT) – National Union of Workers

Employers’ Organizations

â€¢ C3mara Nacional de la Industria de Transformaci3n (CANACINTRA) – National Chamber of the Manufacturing Industry

â€¢ Confederaci3n Patronal de la RepÃ-blica Mexicana (COPARMEX) – Employers’ Confederation of the Mexican Republic

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The Mexican Education Reform of 2013 – The Key Issues

(1) At present, the Mexican state government assigns graduates of the teachers colleges to teaching positions. Since the union is influential in the teachers colleges, this tends to give the union control over all hiring. There have been complaints over the years that government, party, or union officials sometimes sell these positions, which is illegal.

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Under the new law, all teaching positions will be assigned by competitive examinations administered annually.

(2) For the first two years of the new law, only graduates of the teachers colleges could take the exam, but beginning this year, anyone who meets the criteria to be established by the education authorities will be able to take the exams. The union dissidents of la CNTE fear that this will reduce the changes of the teachers college graduates getting jobs. Many teachers believe that they should be able to turn their jobs over to their children, but if graduates of other colleges can compete, their children may not get their jobs.

(3) In addition to new teachers, all current principals, supervisors, and teachers will have to be periodically evaluated and examined. The evaluation and exams will be designed by the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (INEE), a non-governmental agency, and will be carried out by the state secretaries of education. Teachers will have three chances to take the exams over a two-year period, during which time the education authorities should offer remedial courses, but if the teachers still fail to successfully pass the exam in that period, they can be terminated or reassigned.

(4) New teachers hired after the passage of the education reform law who failed to pass the exam (three chances in two years) will be terminated. Teachers hired before the law took effect who fail the exam (three chances in two years) will not be terminated, but will be removed from the classroom and assigned some other job, such as administrative work or the authorities may encourage them to retire. Teachers are now reportedly retiring in great numbers. La CNTE argues that this procedure violates the teachers' labor rights because union members had permanent jobs.

(5) The INEE will make public the results of the tests, indicating whether or not teachers at a school have passed or failed, but it will not post the scores which are considered confidential.

(6) Teachers who without good cause miss more than three days of work in a one month period can be terminated. Teachers argue that this kind of punishment should be able to be appealed to the labor board.

(7) Teachers who accept union positions will now be paid by the union and not by the government, as they have been in the past. The argument is that this will limit the number of teachers who hold union office at the expense of the state, but are not working as teachers.

Sources: Mauricio Torres, "7 puntos clave de la nueva ley para evaluar a los profesores" (Seven Key Points on the New Law for Evaluating Teachers), CNN Mexico, September 6, 2013 (mexico.cnn.com); Ignacio Pérez Vega "Se jubilarán 200 mil maestros en los siguientes 10 años: SNTE" ("SNTE: 200,000 Teachers Will Retire in the Next Ten Years"), La Jornada Jalisco, December 7, 2013 (lajornadajalisco.com.mx).