

Negotiations to begin in six-month-old Mexican student strike

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For more than five months, Mexican students have waged a struggle to defend their university as a public institution, free to every youth in the country.

On Wednesday, September 29 negotiations were announced between the student strike committee (CGH) and the university management (CU) at the huge National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). A CGH committee of 120 students will meet with the CU.

The students have raised six demands:

1. No tuition fees;
2. An end to the authoritarian role of the CU and the university president, and student participation in the democratic control of UNAM;
3. Amnesty for student strikers;
4. Rescheduling of the lost semester;
5. Reforms of admissions procedures;
6. Ending UNAM's relationship with the national student testing service CENEVAL.

Presently, the student strike committee (CGH) is insisting on the resolution of the first four demands. It proposes that the last two be discussed and decided democratically by a university congress.

The CGH stated its position in an open letter to the Mexican people some months ago: "We the students of UNAM are in a struggle for a free education, so that everyone who has the desire can be able to enter, not just those who can pay."

The letter refuted the argument that the government has no money and can no longer afford to run UNAM without imposing yearly fees of between 1020 and 1360 pesos (US\$120-155). Foreign students, who come mainly from Central America, would have to pay 10 times more. "If it's true that there is no money, why are more than 710,000 million pesos being used to 'rescue' the private banks?... These funds, which are being paid

by the people, would support 80 UNAMs. Why is the army getting more than 50 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product? Why is education only getting 4 percent, when it is the people who pay, and who are being charged again through these new fees?"

The CGH statement went on to say that the decision to impose the fees came as a result of pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, who "expect from Mexico a cheap source of labor, not educated people with the capacity to reason."

The struggle at UNAM has its roots in the 1988 bank rescue by the Mexican government, known as FOBAPROA. As a result of the billions of dollars set aside by a coalition of the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the National Action Party (PAN), major cuts were planned in the budget for education.

UNAM President Francisco Barnes then proposed university fees that would apply to new students only, set in terms of the minimum daily wage. Over the objections and warnings of student and faculty representatives on the CU, Barnes imposed the fees. On April 24 the UNAM students launched their strike.

The hard line taken by Barnes and the university management initially made negotiations impossible. At the end of the fourth month of the strike, a group of eight academicians proposed a compromise based on the abolition of the registration fee. Barnes and the CU accepted the proposal. In a full-page ad in Mexico City's newspapers Barnes declared that this was the last chance to "resolve the strike within the university arena." Barnes also threatened that he was prepared to use force to open the university if the students did not go along. "I will not hesitate to take any measures in defense of the university," he said. Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo later repudiated this threat.

The university began making preparations to register students for the fall semester, with arrangements to conduct classes off-campus. At the same time, groups of businessmen met to plan the decentralization of UNAM.

Additional pressure came from the press and the government. They spread reports of financial losses to the university—including damage to animal research labs, theft of video equipment—in an effort to discredit and isolate the strikers. Finally, on September 26, the CGH agreed to negotiate. A committee of 120 was established, 13 of these positions to be chosen by lot, to negotiate with the CU.

The CGH is calling on students from other Mexican universities to join them in their struggle in defense of education. It organized a march of more than 10,000 students on October 2, the thirty-first anniversary of the 1968 Tlatelolco student massacre when government troops shot down more than 500 protesting students. Throughout the strike it has attempted to link up with dissident sections of the trade unions, particularly in the struggle against the privatization of electric utilities.

The students have repeatedly exposed the lack of resources for education, at all levels, and the inequality of Mexican society, where 46 percent of the country's population live on less than US\$2 a day. Less than 4 percent of Mexican GDP is spent on education, placing it behind Costa Rica, Panama, Chile, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina in education funding.



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