

# Police suppress Mexican University strike

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Mass arrests and a police-military occupation have brought an end to a 10-month student strike at UNAM, Latin America's largest university, while sparking protests by students in other parts of Mexico City which threaten to spread nationwide.

The struggle to defend free tuition and the right to higher education for working class and poor students at UNAM (the Spanish acronym for National Autonomous University of Mexico) has from its outset encompassed broader issues relating to the intensification of social inequality resulting from the economic policies of the Zedillo government.

The assault by militarized federal police on the campus February 6 led to the arrest of approximately 750 students, professors and their supporters. Together with those arrested during a carefully orchestrated provocation by right-wing goon squads and police the previous week, this left more than 1,000 Mexicans jailed for political reasons, facing charges that include "terrorism" and "sedition."

Nearly 3,000 police participated in the pre-dawn raid, rounding up the students in barely an hour. The intervention represented the first time that the police have carried out repressive operations at the university since 1968, when the government cracked down on mass student protests, leading to the massacre in the Plaza of the Three Cultures (Tlatelolco), which left more than 300 dead.

The shadow of that bloody event hung over the decision to move against the student strike. As a precaution, the government decided to send in its forces armed solely with truncheons and shields.

The strike began last year after the former UNAM rector, Francisco Barnes, decided to raise student fees from a symbolic three cents a semester to \$220, an amount which would have effectively barred many of the university's working class students from attending. Other proposed "reforms" included limiting the amount of time a student could spend getting a degree, another measure which would have locked out students unable to depend on their families' wealth. These students are forced to take classes while holding down full-time jobs. The government also sought an end to automatic admission from preparatory high schools linked to UNAM.

President Ernesto Zedillo vowed from early in the strike not to use repressive measures against the students. Many suspected that behind this conciliatory posture lay a decision to let UNAM stay shut as a means of furthering the government's policy of privatizing higher education and slashing the budget for the state-run university, which has an enrollment of 270,000.

With the installation last November of Juan Ramon de La Fuente as UNAM's new rector, the government changed course, systematically setting the stage for the suppression of the strike. While making paper concessions to some of the strikers' demands, the government fomented a media campaign that portrayed the protest as the work of a handful of "ultras"—fanatical students under the control of outside radical organizations. In the end, this extended to fantastic stories that the university had been taken over by armed guerrillas, raising fears that a military assault on UNAM was in the works.

De La Fuente organized a so-called plebiscite on January 20, in which less than half of the students participated. Nonetheless, the regime claimed that an overwhelming majority of those who did vote supported an end to the protest and a reopening of UNAM, and it moved toward a policy of ultimatums and provocations.

The turning point came February 1, with a government-organized melee at Preparatory No. 3, one of the high schools affiliated with UNAM. While initially portrayed as a clash between pro- and anti-strike students, it soon emerged that the violence had been initiated by a group of professional strikebreakers, the Cobras, which operates under the direction of the Mexican secret services and is made up largely of former cops. The brawl provided the federal police with a pretext for intervening, arresting over 270 students, including 75 youth under the age of 17.

On February 15, De La Fuente entered into "negotiations" with the strike's leadership, delivering an ultimatum to immediately evacuate the university. "We must define the terms of the immediate and peaceful return of the buildings," he told the students. "This is what the academic majority and all of society demand."

While the students indicated their willingness to continue

talks on concluding the protest, the repressive measures were being prepared even as the talks began. The police assault took place within hours of De La Fuente leaving the negotiations, as the strike leadership began to meet in a university auditorium to discuss the next step in the talks.

The turn towards outright repression followed Zedillo's trip to the economic summit in Davos, Switzerland, where he sought to impress international financiers with tough talk on issues ranging from Mexican fiscal policy to the Zapatista guerrillas in the southern state of Chiapas. Privatization of the universities and severe reductions in spending on public education are policies which international finance capital, working through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, are demanding throughout Latin America. The drive by governments to carry out such policies has ignited mass student protests in Argentina, Venezuela, Central America and elsewhere.

While part of the "structural adjustment" programs aimed at maximizing profits for foreign investment by reducing social expenditures, this policy is also aimed at bringing education into line with the direct needs of the multinational corporations.

"The hard-line sector speaks of academic quality, but there are various definitions of academic quality," explained Hugo Aboites, an adviser to the strikers, who teaches education at the Autonomous Metropolitan University. "They postulate it as a university with a small number of students, very well selected, which in Mexico means chosen by a certain social class.... They want to educate just 10 percent to 15 percent of the workforce and make the rest technicians."

With national elections set for July, the UNAM strike has also served to expose the economic trajectory of the main political parties. Francisco Labastida, the candidate chosen by the ruling PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), like his opponent in the right-wing PAN (National Action Party), has used the student movement to strike a "law-and-order" pose, demanding the trial and punishment of the student activists.

The PRD (Democratic Revolutionary Party) of Cuauhtomoc Cardenas, until recently the mayor of Mexico City, has conspired in an all-but-open fashion from the outset of the protest to force an end to the strike. Mexico City police, under the PRD's control, have repeatedly been used to violently attack the students, while the party lent its support to the bogus plebiscite. Mexican intellectuals linked to the PRD, meanwhile, have launched public attacks on the student strikers, which have been more strident in tone than even those of the Mexican right.

Much of the strike's leadership has been dominated by petty-bourgeois nationalist tendencies which lack any perspective for building a political movement of the working class in opposition to the Mexican bourgeoisie. That having

been said, there is an objective reason for the protracted and bitter character of the UNAM struggle. The issue of the future of public education is bound up with global economic forces and policies which are transforming the conditions of the working class in Mexico and throughout Latin America.

Under the Zedillo government Mexico's economy has become transformed ever more rapidly by multinational corporate interests, serving as a cheap-labor export platform for automotive and electronic goods bound mainly for the US, and a source of super profits for finance capital.

More than 4,000 maquiladoras, or final assembly plants, have been established in northern Mexico, where US as well as Japanese and European-based corporations take advantage of labor costs that average \$5-a-day to assemble commodities for the North American market. Employment in these factories has doubled between 1993 and 1998. Over the same period, 75 percent of the population has seen its living standards slashed and, according to some estimates, 40 percent of the Mexican people are living under conditions of extreme poverty.

While the maquiladoras draw cheap labor from the impoverished south of the country, small farmers there and in other regions are facing ruin, as agricultural prices, subject to international competition, have fallen to historic lows. In recent months Mexico City has seen not only the student strike, but also mass protests by farmers.

These same economic policies have served to further enrich a thin layer of the Mexican financial elite and the most privileged layers of the upper-middle-class.

The repression at UNAM is a warning of the far more violent measures that the ruling class is prepared to unleash against a movement of the Mexican workers. Asked by reporters if he did not believe the arrested students should be amnestied as a gesture of "good will," Mexico's Interior Minister Diodoro Carrasco responded, "This is not a problem of good will; it is a problem of the application of the law. It is a problem of maintaining order and political and social stability."



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