

# Political issues unresolved in the wake of the Mexico student strike

By Gerardo Nebbia 20 March 2000

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Five weeks after the Mexican federal police broke up the 10-month-long strike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) hundreds are still in jail. The UNAM authorities pretend that things are getting back to normal. At the same time, the student General Strike Committee (CGH) continues to agitate in defense of education rights and for the release of the UNAM prisoners.

March 15 marks the anniversary of the decision to raise student fees from 20 cents per semester to 143 dollars. The UNAM strike began on April 1999 sparked by that decision. Many students saw in the new fees the implementation of a plan to reduce the size of UNAM and to make it less accessible to working class and middle class students. The demands of the strikers were in defense of the right to quality, public and free educational opportunities for all Mexican youth.

UNAM administrators claim that the university has met all the demands of the strike. The fee increases have been rescinded. A University Congress is to be convened which will supposedly give students some power in the running of the university. In addition, according to Chancellor De La Fuente, the university is engaged in a process of "reconciliation." Yet the university has not withdrawn any of the outstanding warrants and charges against the over 700 students who were arrested on Sunday, February 6 by federal police. It is dragging its feet on the congress, which will not occur until after the national elections on July 2, if it happens at all.

Over 200 of those students arrested are still in jail. Those who have been released on bail will face charges ranging from interfering with the right of education to terrorism. Punitive bail amounts equivalent to \$5,000 to \$10,000 impose a big hardship on many of the students' families. As many students point out, the charge of "interfering with the

right of education" should be levied against the government of Ernesto Zedillo and University Council, who have been engaged in an attack on the right of access to a college education.

Since the strike ended, struggles have erupted in three of the sixteen rural teaching colleges and at several preparatory high schools. At the teaching colleges of El Mexe, Amilcingo and Acatlan, hundreds of residents have occupied the facilities, demanding better conditions and higher stipends. These struggles have revealed the precarious conditions that these colleges face. The residential colleges are falling apart, with a per capita budget of about \$900 per student. Students are badly fed, the windows are broken, and labs and classrooms are poorly supplied. When teaching students protest, they are jailed and characterized as radicals, hotheads or supporters of Marxism. There are 16 rural teaching schools today, the remnant of a much larger network established beginning in the 1920s as a result of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-16.

At the same time, the struggle continues among students at the Preparatory High Schools that provide the recruits to UNAM and other universities. Mexico City preparatory students have denounced the use of right-wing *porras*, gangs of thugs linked to the government whose purpose is to intimidate and break up student protests.

Days before the police broke up the UNAM strike a fight between striking students and one of these *porra* linked to police intelligence was used as a pretext by the police to arrest more than 300 students. Undoubtedly the provocation and arrest of the preparatory students was a dress rehearsal for what was to go on a week later at UNAM.

Students were repeatedly photographed and subjected to physical and psychological abuse, such as threats of beatings and rapes, forced exercises and humiliations. They were paraded in front of hooded individuals that presumably fingered them for various charges. Supposed "lawyers" were provided, which were in reality police agents to extract information from the students.

Amnesty International is investigating the role that so-called observers from the National Committee for Human Rights played. It appears that they accompanied the police on February 6 to give the operation the appearance of legality. In fact, there was none. Students were arrested without warrants, and made to sign statements under duress in violation of Mexican law.

Over the weekend of March 11-12, students from 18 UNAM departments met to discuss a series of activities to commemorate the anniversary of the beginning of the strike, including a National Mobilization on Friday, March 17 to demand the release of the student prisoners.

A General Strike Committee press bulletin dated March 11 reiterated that the issue is the right of working class and middle class youth to have a UNAM education. "We will continue fighting to keep the University open to the children of workers, and to expand that right," said the declaration. In addition it called for an end to privatizations. Finally the press statement emphasized the CGH's intention to continue the struggle by "invading the streets with protest brigades, pasting the demand for freedom for all political prisoners on the walls, speaking out in the buses and subways."

However, the March 11 statement exposes the political limitations of the CGH, which lacks a clear analysis of the strike in the context of the social crisis in Mexico.

A recent report from the World Bank indicates that 38 million Mexicans (40 percent of the population) live on less than two dollars a day, placing Mexico below most comparable economies in Latin America. Among these impoverished masses, 14.5 million subsist on less than a dollar a day. Living standards for workers are the lowest since 1972 and have dropped 30 percent since Zedillo took office five years ago. Just to stand still in terms of unemployment Mexico must create 1 million jobs a year.

Less than 4 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product is spent on education. Mexico's social spending of \$446 per capita in 1997, including just \$153 for education, placed Mexico behind Costa Rica, Panama, Chile, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina and only slightly ahead of Venezuela. At the same time inordinate social resources are directed to the military to repress the impoverished masses.

CGH statements correctly contrast the above situation with the rescue of the nation's banks by the Zedillo government during the last two years and with the opulence of the rich. Yet its March 11 statement offers no perspective for political struggle, only a single line restating the demand for an end to privatizations. The CGH calls for a series of protest actions, which would culminate in a one-day strike in Mexico City on April 6.

There is a sense in which these new proposals are a substitute for an assessment of the lessons of the 10-month

UNAM strike and the preparations that must be made for the development of a political alternative to the existing regime. This was underscored by the failure of the CGH statement to even mention that Mexico is in the middle of a presidential campaign. Each of the three major candidates—Francisco Labastida, Vicente Fox and Cuauhtemoc Cardenas—have made it plain to investors and bankers, in and out of Mexico, that their policies will not differ fundamentally from those of President Zedillo and the ruling party.

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has ruled Mexico continuously, for over 70 years. Its candidate Labastida is running neck and neck with Fox of the right-wing PAN (National Alliance Party). They each have 40 percent in the polls, with Cardenas third with about 15 percent. Cardenas is the candidate of the so-called left of center PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution). He is also the former mayor of Mexico City, who sent the city police against the UNAM strikers on more than one occasion.

Each one of these campaigns is running on demagoguery. All three candidates are using similar and vague slogans—against corruption, for education, for economic progress. Vicente Fox, in particular, is running a campaign deliberately modeled on Clinton in the US, which contrasts the candidate's personal appeal to the wooden Labastida.

In earlier statements the CGH has made very clear its opposition to the Zedillo government and the Cardenas mayoralty in Mexico City. Yet it limits its activity to pressuring for various educational and social reforms that do not challenge the ability of the PRI, PAN and PRD to dominate Mexican politics. Its insistence on an "anti-politics" of direct action and protest is a backhanded concession to the legitimacy of the same regimes.

To go forward, the Mexican student movement needs to address the July 2 elections. More broadly, it needs to address the programmatic and organizational task of building a working class alternative to the PRD, PRI and PAN.



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