

Mexico: Government ultimatum against striking teachers

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The Mexican government has threatened striking teachers in the city of Oaxaca with police and military repression this week unless they accept a negotiated agreement between the Vicente Fox government, the teachers union and the Oaxacan Peoples Popular Assembly (APPO). On October 12, striking teachers voted to reject the deal.

In reality the repression has already begun. What for months took the form of a medium-intensity conflict between the strikers and government vigilantes has substantially escalated. On Saturday a squad composed of soldiers in civilian clothing killed a striker and wounded several others.

Earlier in the week, an APPO group that was attempting to persuade police officers to vacate their station was fired upon, presumably by the police themselves. Also last week a vigilante group violently occupied a regional community radio station operated by the Nahuatl and Mazateca Indians. When Mazateca women attempted to march into Oaxaca in protest, a “human chain” organized by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which controls the state government, blocked the only road out of the town of Mazatlan-Villa Flores.

In its October 15 issue, the Mexican political magazine *Proceso* described the contents of a document in its possession—*Plan Hierro* (Iron Plan). The plan gives details on the tactics that security forces are to follow in taking control of Oaxaca, a city of 250,000 inhabitants. *Proceso* spoke to a priest who asked that his identity not be revealed. He said, “We now live in fear; we never imagined that we would witness scenes similar to Central America in the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s. Police in civilian disguise that resort to illogical and uncontrolled acts of repression such as arbitrary detentions and shooting at protests.” President Fox has so far held back from implementing the plan. Three thousand federal police and several contingents of army and navy troops have been mobilized and could quickly enter the city. Striking teachers indicate that the state government has hired a mercenary group—Grupo Zeta—to carry out assassinations and other acts of state terrorism.

The teachers’ struggle began on May 22, when the 5,000 members of the Oaxacan section of the National Education Workers Union (SNTE) declared themselves on strike over wages, working conditions and the education budget.

On June 14, Oaxaca state police attacked a teachers encampment in Oaxaca’s central square. Before being beaten back the security forces had killed two strikers, injured scores of others and burnt down the encampment. Enraged teachers demanded the resignation of Ulises Ruiz, the state governor.

The struggle of teachers attracted support from throughout the state from the working class, peasantry and the unemployed. It was the spark that pushed the region to the brink of insurrection. Behind the demand that Ruiz resign was a deep social frustration over the collapse of living standards coupled with the government indifference to last year’s destructive Hurricane Stan. Popular anger was further inflamed by the revelations of widespread corruption, including the siphoning of government funds to PRI candidates in the July 2 national elections.

Following the June 14 repression, a coalition of ethnic communities, peasant organizations and the SNTE formed the Oaxacan Peoples Popular Assembly (APPO). The APPO proceeded to organize the takeover of media outlets and government buildings in Oaxaca. In the last two months the Oaxaca state government has effectively ceased to function. The embattled governor is limited to travel by helicopter or in the company of armed escorts.

The Oaxaca teachers strike is the culmination of 26 years of demands by the educators for improvements in the schools, including decent wages and working conditions, a school breakfast program for students and a budget large enough to repair the state’s broken-down school buildings and to equip each school with up-to-date books and supplies.

Oaxaca teachers often work in isolated and impoverished rural Indian communities (the state has over 17 distinct ethnicities) hundreds of kilometers away from the capital. Many teachers buy books and pencils for their pupils out of their own wages. Despite the high cost of living in the

region, Oaxaca teachers' wages are well below the national average.

The May 22 walkout was provoked by the blatant diversion, by the administration headed by Governor Ruiz, of education money to the campaign of the PRI's presidential candidate, Roberto Madrazo. Millions of dollars are unaccounted for, including \$60 million earmarked for children's breakfasts and an undetermined amount of private donations, collected as disaster relief for Hurricane Stan.

Together with Zacatecas and Chiapas, Oaxaca is one of the poorest Mexican states. Oaxaca's per capita income of less than \$3 a day is half the national average, and less than one fourth the average in Mexico City. The poverty of the region has been made worse by the consequences of Hurricane Stan and of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada.

One year after Hurricane Stan devastated the region last October, many of Oaxaca's inhabitants are still suffering the effect of destroyed bridges, roads and water and sewage systems. Scores of peasant communities have yet to see any sign of promised government reconstruction funds.

The entry of cheap corn and beans from the United States—as a consequence of NAFTA—had a devastating effect on much of the state's agriculture. Many farms have been abandoned, their former owners forced to immigrate to Mexico City or the United States. Thousands depend on the remittances of family members in the United States.

State policies linked to NAFTA have led to outright looting of water resources from peasant communities. Water that formerly was available for irrigation is now marketed and channeled to the Coca-Cola bottling subsidiary in Oaxaca and to the hotel chains in the tourist corridor of Bahias de Hauatulco. Driven by the indifference of state and federal authorities, thousands have thrown their support behind the teachers' struggle.

President-elect Felipe Calderon of the ruling National Action Party has pressed for a resolution of the Oaxaca crisis before he formally takes office on December 1. The lame-duck administration of Vicente Fox has wavered between outright repression by a task force of federal police and army and navy troops, and a negotiated solution with the APPO.

Teachers voted down a negotiated solution last Monday between APPO, SNTE leaders and the federal government on Thursday on the grounds that it left Ruiz in office. The deal would have ended the occupations and sent the teachers back to work in return for economic incentives and an amnesty for potentially illegal acts committed by teachers in the course of this job action. The governor's removal was left in the hands of the Senate and a Senate commission was appointed to investigate the situation.

From the first APPO, set up as a coalition of 360 peasant

and community organizations, including the SNTE, "with the sole purpose of removing the tyrant [Ruiz]," according to APPO leader Dolores Villalobos Cuamatz, rejected electoral politics. Cuamatz describes APPO as a conduit for the people's demands for justice and good government. In practice it restricts those demands to Ruiz's removal and support for the teachers' strike demands. Were Ruiz to resign and the teachers to win all their demands, the underlying causes of the crisis—poverty and class and ethnic exploitation—would remain.

There is a parallel between the protests in Oaxaca and the mobilizations organized by the Party of the Democratic Revolution in Mexico City in July, August and September. Those mobilized hundreds of thousands in support of PRD presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's demand for a full recount of the all the votes cast in the July 2 presidential election.

Like Lopez Obrador, the APPO maintains the struggle within the bounds of protest demonstrations. Lopez Obrador uses populist rhetoric to mask the continuing subordination of the Mexican working class to the demands of international investors. The APPO leaders limit the aims of the movement by channeling popular anger into marches, occupations and other acts of protest.

The APPO placed itself at the head of a popular insurrection but presented no real alternative other than the removal of Governor Ruiz, leaving his succession up in the air. Without such an alternative the only real beneficiary from Ruiz's removal is the PRD, which is widely expected to head the next Oaxacan administration.



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