

Mexican government steps up repression in Oaxaca

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The Mexican city of Oaxaca is under police occupation. Government security forces are engaging in a “dirty war” of arbitrary detentions and disappearances reminiscent of the operations carried out in the 1970s.

Since the Federal Preventive Police (PFP) invaded and occupied the city on October 29, more than 40 leaders and members of the Popular Assembly of Oaxacan Peoples (APPO) have been arrested, 140 others have been detained and 39 have disappeared, including teenage youth. Brutality against protesters and teachers is on the rise. Disingenuously, PFP commanders claim that the current wave of detentions has nothing to do with repression against Oaxacan opponents of the governor, but is merely in response to common crimes. In addition to the PFP, paramilitary squads linked to Governor Ulises Ruiz and his Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) are involved in the detentions and disappearances. Following the initial police operation, masked police were seen doing house-to-house searches in neighborhoods most supportive of APPO. People who have been released have reported beatings and torture. Some of those still in detention are as young as 13 years of age. Arrest orders have been issued for the entire APPO leadership.

The Mexico City daily *La Reforma* indicated last week that 16 have been killed at the hands of police or paramilitary squads since June, including *Indymedia* reporter Brad Will, who was shot on October 27 together with two protesters.

PRI thugs who brandished weapons and shot at barricaded teachers and APPO members during the weeks before the government assault have been emboldened by the presence of the PFP. Teachers throughout the state describe being accosted and threatened by PRI paramilitaries. Some of these have fired on the university radio station, wounding one of the students guarding the facility. The government is jamming transmissions from the radio station, which still is in the hands of APPO.

The situation facing workers, students and peasants in Oaxaca, an impoverished state in southern Mexico, who have been protesting against the policies of the PRI state government and the national government of President Vicente Fox (National Action Party—PAN) is dire. They face the full force of the state under conditions in which they remain isolated from the rest of the working class of Mexico.

The primary responsibility for this rests with the trade union bureaucracy and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and its leader, former presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

The Mexican Congress of Labor (CT) is doing all it can to prevent the Mexican working class from mobilizing in support of Oaxaca. For his part, Obrador, who postured during his election campaign as a tribune of the people and this summer was able to mobilize hundreds

of thousands in Mexico City and elsewhere behind his demand for a recount of the July presidential vote, remained silent for months on the situation in Oaxaca and tacitly backed the incursion of federal riot police into the city of 250,000 people.

The struggle in Oaxaca began in May when the state’s 70,000 teachers demanded pay increases to cope with the high cost of living in the region. With the overwhelming support of the membership, Local 22 of the National Education Workers Union (SNTE) called a strike on May 22 after state authorities, claiming there was no money, rejected the teachers’ demand for a wage increase. On June 14 the state police attempted to put an end to the job action by evicting striking teachers from a protest camp in downtown Oaxaca, burning their tents, killing two teachers and wounding many others.

On August 1, Oaxacans, led by APPO and demanding PRI Governor Ulises Ruiz’s resignation, took over a hotel, occupied public radio and TV stations, and set up barricades throughout the city. The next day, striking teachers voted to add Ruiz’s removal to their strike demands.

Health workers joined the strike on August 16. During the next month, federal authorities largely abstained from confronting the Oaxaca crisis. The Fox government was preoccupied with the contested result of the presidential election. PRD candidate Obrador mobilized hundreds of thousands to press for his demand for a vote recount after election officials declared PAN candidate Felipe Calderon the victor by a razor thin margin.

After the Independence Day observance of September 16, with the election crisis under control, Fox and the Governance Ministry turned its full attention to Oaxaca and proceeded with the political preparations for the police occupation of October 29.

One of the main preconditions for the police assault on Oaxaca was an official end to the teachers’ strike, which was engineered by the SNTE leadership. Under pressure from the national union leadership, Local 22 leader Enrique Rueda reversed his former stance and engineered a return to work vote in return for a \$42 million contract financed by the federal government.

Rueda and the Local 22 leaders are part of the National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers (CNTE,) a dissident faction within the SNTE. Even though they struck a militant pose at the beginning of the strike, Rueda and the CNTE leaders kept the teachers struggle confined to Oaxaca. Other CNTE locals, including the one in Mexico City, remained on the sidelines.

On November 6, SNTE national leader Elba Esther Gordillo, a PRI politician, warned the Fox administration that she would no longer tolerate direct negotiations between the Governance Ministry and the Oaxacan SNTE, demanding instead that it negotiate directly with the national union bureaucracy. Gordillo declared that any gains made by

the Oaxacan teachers would only encourage “radicalism” in the union and called on the government not to grant amnesty to the teachers or the local SNTE leaders.

Since the takeover of Oaxaca, the PFP police have continued to receive reinforcements. The Pro Juarez Center for Human Rights (PRODH) gave evidence last week that out of 86 arrests it had documented, 59 detainees had disappeared and their place of detention was unknown.

PRODH also reported that most of the arrests were violent and detainees had been tortured. PRODH spokesperson Luis Arriaga gave the example of David Huesca, who was arrested and beaten last Thursday by PFP officials. Huesca was transported to the Oaxaca airport. He has not been heard from since.

Lawyers for APPO took the PFP to court last Wednesday, presenting numerous instances of illegal detention and torture. On the same day, APPO leaders requested that the Catholic Church in Oaxaca provide it with sanctuary against PFP arrest.

In the face of increasing repression, Oaxacan workers, peasants and students continue to resist. Local teachers’ union leader Rueda was forced to cancel a November 4 teachers’ delegates assembly, blaming APPO for exacerbating tensions among teachers by advertising the meeting on the radio. The delegate meeting was to set a return to work date.

On the same day, five leaders of Local 22 were pulled off a bus returning from Mexico City to Oaxaca and arrested by the PFP. Four hundred teachers marched in Oaxaca to protest the arrests, chanting “Assassins, Assassins” and demanding that the PFP leave the city.

On November 5, tens of thousands of APPO supporters marched in Oaxaca demanding that the police leave the city. Among the marchers were large contingents of teachers, students, peasants and representatives of the state’s 17 Indian ethnicities. A contingent from Mexico City included students as well as members of the Electrical Workers Union and unions representing university employees. Leading the march were family members of the victims of police and paramilitary violence since the Oaxacan crisis began on June 14.

A demonstration of more than 3,000 teachers in Oaxaca on November 7 opposed a return to work. On the same day medical students and faculty at the Benito Juarez University declared themselves on strike.

On November 8, hundreds of women demonstrated, dressed in black and carrying a coffin. The marchers were dispersed by PFP water cannons.

Despite the support from some independent unions, the Oaxacan teachers, workers and students remain largely isolated. Contributing to this isolation is the perspective of APPO itself.

The Popular Assembly of Oaxacan Peoples was formed in June, shortly after the attack on the teachers. A coalition of some three hundred organizations formed APPO to support the teachers and demand the resignation of Oaxaca Governor Ruiz.

APPO was able to mobilize tens of thousands, driven by the crisis conditions in the state, which were exacerbated by the collapse of corn prices, government indifference to the destruction caused by hurricane Stan in October 2005, and its policy of shifting water resources from villages to tourist hotels and corporate interests. APPO dissolved itself this week and reconstituted itself as CEAPPO (State Council of the Popular Assembly of the Oaxaca). Its program is a mixture of nativist populism, Oaxacan nationalism, syndicalism, and pacifism, conforming to the perspectives of the disparate groups that formed it. These include former elements of the People’s Revolutionary Army

(ERP) and supporters of the Zapatista Army, the Communist Party, Anarchists, Maoists and other radicals, together with elements of the bourgeois PRD.

While refraining from formally supporting any presidential candidate in the July elections, in deference to the Zapatistas, who called for a boycott, APPO called for a “no” vote for the candidates of the PAN and the PRI—effectively throwing its support to PRD candidate Obrador.

CEAPPO leaders have now discarded the fig leaf of political distance from the PRD. The new organization has openly proclaimed its support for the PRD and Lopez Obrador, and announced its intention to participate in the latter’s November 20 rally, called to proclaim him the legitimate president of Mexico. CEAPPO also intends to protest the December 1 official ceremony that will install the PAN’s Calderon as the country’s president.

Obrador, for his part, has reciprocated, publicly calling for the resignation of Oaxaca Governor Ruiz.

Such an approach represents is a recipe for defeat and disaster. The interests of the workers, peasants and students of Oaxaca and the country as a whole cannot be advanced on the basis of a policy that subordinates the working masses to any section of the Mexican ruling elite or any of its political parties. Nor can they be advanced on the basis of a nationalist perspective, whether based on Indian ethnicity or Mexican nationalism.

An alternative strategy is needed. The first step must be an appeal to the working class throughout Mexico for industrial and political action to defend Oaxacan teachers, workers, peasants and Indian communities, demanding the withdrawal of the PFP, the removal of Governor Ruiz and the release of all detainees.

Such a struggle must be conducted as part of the fight to build an independent socialist political movement that advances an internationalist program to unite working people in Mexico with their class brothers and sisters in the US, Canada, Central and South America.



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