

Mexico: Opposition to government militarization of “drug war” grows

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On May 5, author and poet Javier Sicilia kicked off a four-day “Peace March” from Cuernavaca—the capital of Morelos state—to the Zocalo, or central square, of Mexico City. With signs and large sheets inscribed with slogans such as “They provide the guns, Mexico the dead,” about 1,000 marchers called for an end to the bloody drug war initiated by President Felipe Calderon shortly after assuming the presidency in 2007. According to recent estimates, this war has resulted in the deaths of 40,000 Mexicans to date.

Once the march reached Mexico City, its ranks had grown to nearly 100,000 people.

Sicilia’s fight against the drug war began with the mysterious murder of his 24-year-old son Juan Francisco, a University student from Cuernavaca. Last March, Juan Francisco was found dead with six others in a car abandoned along a highway. On April 4, the attorney general of Morelos state, Pedro Luis Benitez Velez, met with several state and local officials to present the results of his investigation into the killings. According to several attendees, Benitez Velez told them that the grisly murders were carried out by ex-soldiers, some of whom were still active in the Mexican armed forces. Local politicians Tania Valentia Rodriguez and Francisco Santillan also attended and confirmed the statements, adding that Benitez Velez told the group that it was a dangerous case because public officials were involved.

Shortly afterward, Sicilia’s family, friends and local intellectuals organized a protest in Cuernavaca against the country’s militarization and its climbing death toll. This initial protest drew support and grew, culminating in the current “Peace March.” Between his son’s murder and the peace march, authorities have publicly changed their version of the circumstances surrounding the murders and their suspects three times due to obvious inaccuracies. A week before the peace march was set to begin, the Secretary of Public Security, a federal agency, finally announced the capture of two men said to have killed the victims during a robbery.

The murky circumstances of Juan Francisco’s death are emblematic of what, for large numbers of Mexican workers has become a confusing, seemingly endless and deeply unpopular domestic military action over which they have no control.

A large contingent from Ciudad Juarez in Chihuahua State, along the US border—a critical cheap labor hub and access point to the US market, which is a primary focus of the drug war militarization—were also represented in the Peace March. Leticia

Chavarria, from the “Medical Committee of Ciudad Juarez”, told the daily newspaper *La Jornada* that there is “no doubt about the military strategy: since 2008 the violence in her city (Ciudad Juarez) has drastically increased with the arrival of thousands of soldiers and police...” She told the media she was participating in the march because she wants to “...prevent the whole country from being turned into the laboratory they have made of Juarez.”

Several marchers from Juarez carried a large red blanket adorned with the names and faces of drug war martyrs including: Marisela Escobedo who was killed at the door of Chihuahua’s palace of government where she sought an official explanation of her daughter’s murder, and Josefina Reyes, a well known activist who was captured by an unidentified group of men and shot dead after her participation in the “Forum on Militarization and Repression” in Ciudad Juarez, which examined reports of increasing human rights violations committed by members of the military, according to Amnesty International.

The Peace March is a particular manifestation of a general, growing national dissatisfaction and questioning of the bloody war that has effectively shredded the social fabric of Mexico, traumatizing and intimidating millions in little more than four years. The national re-examination of the drug war has also been fired by the recent release of a trove of secret cables from the US embassy in Mexico. The cables were given to *La Jornada* by WikiLeaks.

Consisting of nearly 3,000 cables, the documents had an immediate impact, ultimately leading to the resignation in March of the former US ambassador to Mexico, Carlos Pasquale. It was revealed that Pasquale secretly criticized President Calderon, the Mexican military and other high level government officials for their disorganization and lack of resolve in fighting the drug war. Calderon’s political rivals immediately seized upon Pasquale’s disparaging statements to brand an already unpopular president and his National Action Party (PAN) as stooges of the US government.

Although Pasquale’s comments were significant, they pale in comparison with scores of documents, largely ignored by the media, demonstrating the absolute prostration of Mexico’s entire political and military elite to the wishes of US imperialism in the prosecution of the drug war. Cable 10MEXICO690, issued by the US Embassy February 24, 2010 to all US consulates, sums up the embassy’s own estimation of its influence over the country, noting, “As we institutionalize our security agenda we will also

need to give more attention to the economic and social agendas in a country whose economic and social well-being affects ours directly.”

Popular revulsion for the drug war has grown significantly in 2011, although, so far, it has been directed primarily against those most closely associated with the war: Calderon and his National Action Party. This has allowed the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—the widely-reviled, corrupt and antidemocratic party that ruled Mexico for more than 70 years—to take advantage of Calderon’s decline, the economic crisis and the collapse of the nominally left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) to become the front-runner for the presidency in 2012.

The PRI’s likely candidate is the governor of the state of Mexico, Enrique Pena Nieto, who has already sought to distinguish himself as a pro-war candidate by joining the PAN in support of a bill for “security reform.”

The PRI announced last month that it was ready and willing “to assume the political costs” of the bill, which if passed would give the president of Mexico the power to unilaterally deploy the military against a wide range of popular movements and declare a “state of exception” over entire regions of the country based on his personal determination of the threat they pose to public order. In other words, the bill would codify the excesses of the drug war, broaden its range of targets and centralize control of similar deployments in a single individual, with no real democratic oversight.

Mexico is the United States’ third largest trading partner after China and Canada. The PRI leadership, like every major party in Mexico, is keenly aware that US imperialism will not countenance any significant alterations to its security agenda for the country.

A recent article in *Foreign Affairs* by former Department of Defense director for the Western Hemisphere, Russell Crandall entitled, “The Post-American Hemisphere” underlines just how essential the drug war intervention is for crisis-ridden US imperialism seeking to maintain its eroding foothold in Latin America.

The article begins by citing the decline of US influence throughout Latin America: “Long Latin America’s master, the United States must adapt to the new realities of the post-hegemonic era. ...” It then warns of the “Venezuela-led block of quasi-authoritarian leftist governments” which will require “an ability to quietly engage and lead when appropriate—an approach that will allow Washington to remain actively involved in the region’s affairs without looking as though it is trying to maintain its legacy of hegemony.” It then specifically cites Mexico as a “critical test” of its efforts to quietly maintain regional hegemony.

Crandall refers to the Obama administration’s approach to the region as essentially a continuation of that of the Bush administration. While he advocates a more subtle approach to dominating the region, he warns, “Latin American countries’ unpredictable behavior and ambivalence toward US leadership will make it difficult for Washington to maintain strategic patience.”

Exhibiting confidence in stooge governments like that of Calderon, he ends by noting the political instability of the region as a factor that will ensure continued compliance with US dictates saying, “...the behind-the-scenes reality is that most Latin

American governments ... appreciate robust US attention and even leadership—as they in fact did during the Honduras crisis ... they know full well that their gains remain precarious, that it could take only one economic crisis or political row to send the region spiraling back to the old days of instability.”

This is absolutely the case for every major party in Mexico and Central America. Not only do they want to curry favor with their “patron” to the north, but they are all keenly aware that they sit atop a social time-bomb. Poverty and unemployment have grown significantly in Mexico over the drug war period, while food prices have sharply risen. This lethal combination is even stronger in Central America because its countries do not enjoy the same access to oil and natural gas as Mexico, and poverty there is historically much worse.

Where Crandall emphasizes drug war intervention as the future of US hegemony in the region, a recent cover story in the *Economist* pushes the policy a bit further, advocating a vast expansion of the drug war strategy throughout Central America.

After tying itself in knots to create a humanitarian justification for militarizing the entire region, the *Economist* piece gets right to the point: “It is in Central America that democracy is under greatest threat. The isthmus seethes with ideological polarization and political mistrust. China is active there. Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez is stirring things up. ... Stopping their slide into violence and chaos will require many things: reform of the police, prisons, and courts; better intelligence and information-sharing ... and more hardware, such as helicopters and patrol boats.”

Essentially, a vast new security edifice is to be erected throughout Central America in the interests of US imperialism. Aid funds will now be distributed based not merely on the imposition of savage austerity programs, but on a given country’s progress toward the US security agenda. The obvious danger this new policy poses for the population of Central America can be found in the recent history of war-torn countries like Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua and is now most prominently on display in Mexico, where such policies were initiated four short years ago.

Only a mass movement of workers throughout the region armed with a socialist perspective and leadership can arrest the militarization and resolve the social disaster that has spawned violent drug trafficking.



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