

Mexican teachers vote to end strike

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On May 31, striking teachers in the southwestern Mexican city of Oaxaca voted to suspend their protests and return to the negotiating table with state authorities. The vote was hastily organized in the wake of a new monetary offer by state authorities. Out of the 73,000 strikers, just 28,844 voted to return to work. There were 13,793 votes to continue with the strike.

The teachers' union, Section 22 of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), has announced it will end its occupation of the city's central square on June 3, and that classes will resume on June 6.

On May 23, tens of thousands of striking public school teachers had occupied the city's downtown to press for economic and political demands.

Four columns of teachers approached the city of Oaxaca, the state's capital, in a massive show of force. About 1.3 million school children attend nearly 14,000 public schools in Oaxaca. Leaders of Section 22 of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE) had declared that an offer made by Governor Gabino Cué Montegudo was inadequate. A militant dissident faction within the SNTE, the CNTE, controls the SNTE in Oaxaca. The union represents 73,000 teachers. Teachers in Oaxaca are paid, on average, 750 pesos per week, less than US\$70.

The purchasing power of these wages is being diminished daily by price increases in food, fuel and other essential commodities. Many teachers are forced to take on two jobs to make ends meet. However, in this struggle, the teachers demands were not limited to wages and benefits for the teachers, but included demands for the families of the students themselves, such as increases in government subsidies for uniforms and student meals, as well as the repair of badly deteriorated schools, and the electrification and the purchase of computer equipment for all the schools.

The city of Oaxaca is the capital of one of the poorest Mexican states. One third of all Oaxacan homes lack potable water. Hunger and malnutrition affect 40 percent of the population, more than double Mexico's 18 percent.

Nearly 50 percent of Oaxacan households earn less than the value of a basic food basket for its inhabitants. There is widespread agreement that the school system is in dire need of repair. Oaxaca state has one of the highest rates of illiteracy (22 percent) in the country.

On the economic demands, a discrepancy exists on the real value of a government pay package. A news article that appeared in the Mexican daily *La Jornada* reported that while the state had offered Oaxacan teachers an education budget of 1.6 billion pesos, that sum did not correspond to reality—it counted federal funds from past budgets and exaggerated the value of planned expenditures. The true value of that budget was less than half of what the government claimed.

Accepting the validity of the SNTE claim, the government upped its offer last week by about 600 million pesos. The current Governor Gabino Cué was elected less than a year ago, on July 4, 2010, with the support of the SNTE/CNTE and its supporters, the Popular Assembly (Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca, APPO).

At the same time, the strikers insist that the current job action is not just about money. In particular, they refer to their demand for justice for the victims of the working class struggles of May 2006.

The current struggle is a replay of the mass strike that shook Oaxaca exactly five years ago. That struggle ended in defeat, in no small part due to the policies of the SNTE itself. During that strike and occupation, the teachers mobilized mass popular support for the demands that also included the revamping of the state's educational system and subsidies for students.

That struggle also began with the occupation of central Oaxaca by the SNTE, demanding pay raises for public school teachers and more money for education. Other sections of the working class and middle class mobilized behind the teachers. These forces established the APPO. In the course of the struggle, their demands grew to include the ouster of then Governor Ulises Ruiz of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI,) a notoriously

corrupt and gangster-like figure.

The state government responded with a wave of repression against the strikers and their supporters. The “battle” of Oaxaca lasted through November of 2006. In August of 2007, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), an agency of the Organization of American States (OAS), reported that the Ruiz’s human rights violations had included “violent deaths, executions, torture, police brutality, and mass detentions.” The repression also targeted human rights advocates and journalists. In all, according to the SNTE, 26 people lost their lives, and more than 500 people were arrested by state authorities, of whom 380 were tortured.

The perpetrators of these crimes have yet to face criminal charges. Throughout the months of labor battles, the national SNTE bureaucracy, as well as the Labor Congress (CT) refused to mobilize Mexican labor in support of the Oaxacan workers. The strikers were also hamstrung by the policies of their own CNTE leaders who have no perspective for an independent political struggle. Instead, the CNTE and APPO subordinated the teachers’ demands to the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and its then presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Despite efforts by the Oaxacan SNTE and by the APPO to paint the 2006 struggle in a positive light, the Oaxacan teachers returned to work in November 2006 in defeat, without having obtained any of their demands and with Governor Ruiz still in office.

So far, the state government has taken a more conciliatory approach than in 2006, appealing for more flexibility from the teachers, and urging them to limit their economic demands because of state budgetary constraints. Having been elected with the support of the SNTE, government officials prefer a solution that enlists the SNTE bureaucracy as a partner.

At the same time, it became clear on February 15 that the state has no intention of abandoning the repressive methods of the previous administration. On that day a combined force of federal and state police officers and right-wing trade union thugs, the infamous *porras*, attacked a march by teachers who were protesting President Felipe Calderón’s visit to Oaxaca. The security detail had been deployed the night before and included snipers who fired on the teachers from rooftops. The protesters had to fight their way out of this ambush.

The confrontation lasted the entire day, at the end of which 14 protesters had been wounded by gunfire, two in the head from sniper fire. A smaller number suffered

wounds from tear gas canisters, and one person was shot in the chest.

No sooner had this incident ended, Governor Cué called for negotiations with the SNTE. The call for dialogue was endorsed by López Obrador himself, who, merely three weeks after the February repression declared that Cué was a “good hearted man” who would not violate human rights.

On March 14, Oaxaca SNTE activist René Román was abducted and has not been seen since. The SNTE suspects that he was kidnapped for his opposition to the educational policies of the federal government, led by President Calderón, and is demanding that he be released alive. Oaxaca state authorities claim to know nothing about the abduction.

Román had also been battling the national SNTE bureaucracy for its complicity and cronyism with the Calderón administration.

The ruling class reaction to the teachers strike and protest has been to try to discredit and divide teachers from parents and the rest of the population, accusing teachers of being overpaid and incompetent.

The strikers are demanding SNTE leader Elba Gordillo’s resignation from the government and from the SNTE, calling her a menace to the “democratic life of trade unionism.” They are also demanding the resignation of state and federal education officials.

SNTE leader “for life,” Gordillo is now an official in the Calderón administration and deeply involved in the so-called Alliance for Quality Education (ACE,) a scheme to subordinate education to the needs of multinational corporations.

The decision by SNTE section 22 leaders to drop non-economic demands before the vote exposes their unwillingness to take on the Oaxacan governor and SNTE leader Gordillo. The SNTE/CNTE and APPO are determined to follow the same bankrupt methods and program as in 2006, substituting militancy and radicalism for a political struggle that mobilizes all Mexican workers in a political struggle independent of ruling class parties, including the PRD.



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