

Mexico to hold elections in midst of social catastrophe

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The July 1 elections in Mexico will take place in the midst of a social crisis of historic proportions.

The statistics are grim. Since President Felipe Calderon took office in 2006, some 50,000 Mexicans have been killed by drug syndicates, the police or the army; 100,000 have been internally displaced by the same violence; another 5 million have been forced to flee to the United States, Spain or other countries.

The “war” on drug syndicates is consuming an increasing share of the federal budget, further burdening the population. Big business is demanding that the next president impose budget cuts and tax increases that will make life even more intolerable for workers and peasants.

Already, 28 million Mexicans, or a quarter of the country’s 112 million people, suffer from malnutrition. Six million live in extreme poverty, and some parts of the country are experiencing famine.

Out of a labor force of 45 million workers, nearly 3 million are officially unemployed. Another 6 million jobless are not counted in the official unemployment figures. The annual jobs deficit—the gap in the number of new jobs needed to maintain current employment levels—has risen from 500,000 to 800,000.

For those who are employed, three decades of plummeting living standards have left many in deep poverty. Officially, real wages have fallen 42 percent since 2006.

As described last week by Andrés Hervis Mayoral, a leader of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), in the 1980s the basic food budget for a family of five was 80 pesos a day. The same food basket today costs 200 pesos. Relative to today’s minimum wage of some 60 pesos a day, this represents a lowering of buying power of 80 or 90 percent. Instead of paying workers for seven days, as required by Mexican law, many employers are paying for only six days, an effective 14 percent wage cut.

The agricultural crisis, driven by global warming and drought, has made food unaffordable in rural areas of northern Mexico. In 2011 alone, 600,000 tons of corn and beans were lost to the environmental catastrophe, together with thousands of heads of cattle and millions of chickens. Starving peasants who were forced to consume their seed reserves will be unable to plant crops without massive government aid.

The impact of the crisis has been multiplied by financial speculation on maize, which has driven up the price of tortillas, a staple of the Mexican diet.

The government’s indifference toward the poorest sections of the population was evident in its response to a March 20 earthquake in the southwestern state of Oaxaca, which damaged or destroyed the straw and adobe homes of 40,000 people, many of whom are still sleeping in

the streets.

Economic growth has taken place at a dismal 0.8 per cent per capita and distributed to the top layers of the population, while for the vast majority living standards are collapsing.

By every socio-economic measure, Mexico is moving backwards.

The working class has come into struggle against these conditions throughout the Calderon years, as under his predecessor, Vicente Fox. From Oaxaca to Cananea, miners, teachers, airline workers and utility workers have carried out strikes and mass protests in which they confronted the police and military, only to be betrayed time and again by the corporatist CTM and other union federations.

The “drug war” has evolved into a dirty war that targets the Mexican working class and peasantry. The mobilization of the Mexican armed forces in the name of fighting the drug cartels, beginning in 2007, has led to an acceleration of civilian disappearances and deaths, as well as torture, rape and repression at the hands of the army and national police.

Meanwhile, the depredations of the drug syndicates have increased. In major cities such as Guadalajara and Monterrey the gangs set up roadblocks and carry out terror attacks. The crime cartels intervene openly and with impunity to block the candidacy of anyone they do not like. A division of labor between the narco gangs and the state security and military forces is emerging, directed against the working class and peasantry.

The United States and Europe, particularly Spain, are paying a great deal of attention to the coming elections. In March, US Vice President Joseph Biden visited Mexico and spoke with the three major candidates—Josefina Vazquez Mota of the ruling National Action Party (PAN), Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

Biden relayed the Obama administration’s demand that Mexico continue the drug war. At the conclusion of his visit, he reported that all of the candidates had assured him the present policy would remain in place.

The cost of this policy is truly ruinous. In addition to the death and social disruption over the last six years, 11 billion pesos have been spent on weapons and munitions. Over 4 billion were spent in the last year alone. This is 2.6 times what the government spends on food aid to the poor, according to a report this month in *Contralínea*, a Mexican investigative journal.

The bulk of this money has gone to transnational arms dealers. The criminal gangs, for their part, get automatic weapons, vehicles and ammunition from the other side of the US-Mexico border. This means that corporations are arming both sides.

An earlier article in the same journal reported that Mexico represents between 10 percent and 30 percent of the global profits of transnational weapons manufacturers such as Boeing, BAE Systems, EADS, General Dynamics and Honeywell. These and other arms dealers are financed by international financial institutions that operate in Mexico, likely channeling laundered money from drugs and other criminal activities to the weapons corporations and completing a bloody vicious cycle.

Despite repeated requests from President Calderon, US President Obama, whose government has deported hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants, has shown very little interest in stopping the flow of arms into Mexico. Roughly 90 percent of weapons confiscated from drug syndicates in Mexico originate in the United States.

The syndicates are fully integrated into the global economy. According to a 2010 Chilean academic study, US financial institutions manage between 8 and 25 billion dollars of cartel money annually.

Besides their direct involvement in legal, illegal and semi-legal activities across the world, from human trafficking to casinos to toy factories, the cartels channel their funds through banks, hedge funds and capital markets to governments and corporations in the US, Europe, and elsewhere.

The response of all the political forces in the coming elections to this social catastrophe is to propose a further dismantling of social programs and labor rights, higher taxes on the poorest Mexicans, and more concessions to big business, in particular the banks. The ruling clerical National Action Party and the more secular bourgeois nationalist Institutional Revolutionary Party for all practical purposes share the same program, in keeping with the PAN-PRI legislative coalition during Calderon's term.

Speaking in Veracruz on April 4, PRI candidate Peña Nieto made it clear that he supports the Mexican army's continuing occupation of Veracruz and other Mexican states. If elected, he intends to add a 40,000 strong paramilitary force, akin to Spain's infamous Guardia Civil, to the current mix of police agencies, military and other security forces that are being deployed in this extraordinary war. For her part, the PAN's Vazquez Mota proposes increasing the size of the national police to 150,000.

The PRI and PAN favor privatizing the state-owned oil company, Pemex, together with all other government-owned enterprises. Also in support of this policy is Gabriel Quadri, candidate of the New Alliance Party (PANAL), which is controlled by the SNTE teachers union.

All three major candidates favor measures that, in the name of labor flexibility, would remove virtually all obstacles to firing workers and limit the right to strike. A labor "reform" currently being discussed in the national legislature also includes curtailing Social Security and medical benefits and downgrading pensions for government workers.

The PRD's Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador (known in the press as AMLO) is a former mayor of Mexico City. In 2006, AMLO lost the presidential election by less than 1 percent of the total vote.

He has tried to distance himself from the other candidates through demagoguery. He calls for raising the minimum wage, pledges to create 1.2 million jobs annually and provide youth employment and educational opportunities, and promises to conduct the drug war differently. Lately he has also called for a national referendum on the legalization of drugs.

In 2006, the Coordinating Corporate Council (CCE), a powerful and reactionary Catholic business lobby, and COPARMEX, an association of Mexican CEOs, bitterly opposed AMLO, running ads that called

him a "danger to Mexico" and comparing him to Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez. In that campaign, Lopez Obrador presented himself as an enemy of corporate influence, denouncing the CCE and COPARMEX as "power mafias."

Six years later, a new relationship has been established. Not only have both the CCE and COPARMEX met with AMLO and called on him to support their legislative agendas, but the candidate himself has enlisted corporate leaders from the industrial city of Monterrey, a group that calls itself "México Wake up!"

He has signaled his willingness to negotiate a free market agenda aimed at the destruction of living standards and working conditions of Mexican workers. The PRD's differences with the PAN and PRI are largely tactical.

The PRD is being supported by the Political Organization of the People and Workers (Organización Política del Pueblo y de los Trabajadores—OPT), the political arm of the Mexican Electricians Union (SME). The OPT is in turn supported by a number of pseudo-left organizations, such as the Popular Socialist Party (PPS) and the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT).

The OPT uses revolutionary and anti-imperialist rhetoric to mask its opportunist alliance with AMLO and the PRD. It presents its support for the PRD as a step toward the formation of what it calls a "National/Popular Front Block" that will unite "progressive liberal and socialist forces" against the "main enemy"—imperialism and neo-liberalism.

History has demonstrated that such alliances, fronts and blocks are traps for the working class, leading to betrayal and defeat. The OPT is, in fact, providing a cover for the rightward movement of the PRD, behind which the forces of reaction are preparing massive attacks on the working class and peasantry.

The refusal of the above-mentioned "left" forces to fight for a working class movement that is socialist and internationalist is driving the proposal by a layer of students for young people and workers to vote a blank slate on July 1. The "vota en blanco" protest campaign is being supported by poet Javier Sicilia, whose own son was a victim of the drug war and who has organized protest marches against Calderón's war. Other loosely organized groups are campaigning in the social media along these lines.

Despite the political confusion that exists in their midst, these forces reflect a growing frustration and anger with the Mexican political elite.

However, the drug war, unemployment and poverty cannot be ended through protests. What is required is a political party that expresses the interests of the working class and fights for the creation of a planned economy, democratically controlled by the working class, that places social needs before profits. Such a socialist program includes the nationalization of the banks and corporations and their transformation into public utilities.

At the heart of this struggle is the unification of the Mexican, North and South American and international working class in a common fight to establish workers' governments and socialism.



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