

Police assault protesting students in Mexico

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Hundreds of police attacked students demanding more resources for education—including subsidies for transportation, food and fuel—in Morelia Mexico. The police occupied three student hostels (*Casas de estudiantes*) and brutally assaulted the protesters.

Behind the police crackdown is a wholesale attack on the right of Mexico's working class and rural students to an education.

The group that organized the protests, the Coordinating Committee of University Students in Struggle (CUL), had made an additional demand: 18 pickup trucks with which to reach out to rural students in Michoacan and surrounding states.

As part of the protest, students also set up barricades in what is known as Morelia's Historic Center. Morelia, about 150 miles west of Mexico City, is the state capital of Michoacan, Mexico and a popular tourist destination.

In past years, similar requests had been granted to Michoacan students. This time they were denied by state authorities, sparking the conflict. In addition to setting up barricades in the Historic District, CUL members are accused of commandeering a dozen state and municipal vehicles.

Government officials further allege that a note was sent threatening to burn all the vehicles unless the government gave in to the demand for the pickup trucks. For that reason, they say, the state administration ended negotiations with CUL and mobilized the state police, when a vehicle was set on fire.

A few minutes after 4 a.m. on Saturday, a coordinated assault was launched against students living in two of the *casas*, which provide room and board to impoverished students. Two hundred riot-equipped state police officers attacked *casa* "Nicolaita". Another assault was launched against *casa* "2 de Octubre". Both residences are located near the Historic District.

While state police forces invaded the student residences, federal Police surrounded other *casas* to prevent residents from coming to the aid of fellow students.

By 6 a.m., the police had vacated both residences and arrested 194 students. Included among those arrested were leading members of the CUL and the Movement of Aspirants and Rejected (MAR).

Later that morning, students from *casa* "Lucio Cabañas" set up barricades across one of Morelia's principal avenues, demanding the release of their comrades. The police attacked the demonstrators and also invaded their residence, allegedly to

put out a mattress fire. Ten students were arrested in that incident.

Michoacan has 36 student *casas* that provide subsidized housing for more than 5,000 impoverished students—many from other Mexican states—who attend the campus of San Andrés de Hidalgo Michoacan University, (UMSNH), a state public institution located in Morelia.

In Mexico, university autonomy and sovereignty, recognized by the constitution and enshrined in law, limits the ability of police to operate within the university. Police and security forces, however, have often violated these rules with impunity.

Michoacan Governor Fausto Vallejo Figueroa denied that the police assault against the student *casas* had violated university autonomy. "We acted according to the law," declared Vallejo. He charged that students involved in the protests who came from other states were abusing Michoacan's hospitality and called for strict regulations on who should live in the student *casas*.

Effectively reversing the legal principle that one is innocent until proven guilty, the Vallejo administration has said that students would be released as their innocence became evident. Fifteen students were let go on Sunday.

The Vallejo government is also insisting that no one died as a result of the police operation, few were injured and that all students are accounted for.

A press release this Sunday from a coalition of student *casas*, teaching schools, and political organizations cast doubt on the government's account. According to that document, in addition to the 200 arrested students, 300 are listed as missing. Six were severely injured and one was killed.

"This is the way that the 'conciliator' Fausto Vallejo governs," declared the press release, "responding to the demands of students with the dialogue of bullets and billy-clubs, of repression, humiliation, evictions, forced disappearances, and assassination."

Students accused the security forces that invaded the student residences of ransacking rooms, destroying student property and stealing student belongings.

On Saturday afternoon, some 60 students from other *casas*, plus their supporters, including members of the CNTE teachers union, protested at the Morelia Government House. Several signs made references to the October 2, 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre in México City in which hundreds of student were

gunned down by security forces.

On Sunday, 250 female students marched through downtown Morelia to demand the release of the jailed students and an accounting for all the disappeared, wounded and dead.

A second press statement, this one from the CUL, denied that the students had burned any cars. The statement accused government provocateurs of setting vehicles on fire.

According to the CUL, the number of arrested and/or disappeared adds up to 900.

The incident is already being used as a pretext for an all-out attack on the right of youth to a university education.

Government and university authorities are now blaming the students for taking advantage of a taxpayer paid education. This is a transparent attempt to discredit the students. The entire political class in Mexico is now lining up against the students, particularly against those of working class or rural origins.

UMSNH President Salvador Jara questioned whether those who had been arrested were even registered students at the institution. Without giving any concrete figures, the university head said that among those living in the *casas* were former students who no longer attended the institution.

Jara then made the seemingly absurd declaration that the students were looking for a way to take advantage of their poverty to get what they want. From now on, declared Jara, “this university will only support those students who really want to study,” effectively equating being poor with not wanting to study.

According to Jara, the UMSNH spent 140 million pesos in 2011 [US\$10.8 million]—down from 170 million in 2010—to maintain the 36 student residences.

Jara made this sound like a considerable sum, but in reality it averages out to US\$2,160 per student resident per year, a paltry sum, even by Mexican standards. Thirty percent of the UMSNH’s 50,000 students come from Oaxaca, Guerrero, Chiapas, and the State of Mexico, a disproportionate number of them wind up living in the student *casas*.

The political establishment in Michoacan supported the governor, including leading figures in the “leftist” Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the National Action Party (PAN.)

PRD leader Victor Baéz, while calling for greater dialogue, made it clear that “social tranquility” comes first.

The PRD’s Presidential Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador [AMLO] ignored the issue at his Sunday morning press conference.

The PRI’s Antonio Guzmán also called for dialogue, while insisting “no agreement is possible under pressure.”

Hector Gómez of the PAN laid emphasis on the right to protest, as long as vehicles were not vandalized and streets not barricaded. The PAN “gives its approval to the re-establishment of order.”

The *casas del estudiante* constitute a unique Mexican institution that resulted from the Mexican revolution

(1910-1917). The post-revolutionary regimes, faced with dual task of raising literacy levels and of creating political stability, made educational concessions to the peasantry and working class. The *casas* were created as living quarters for rural and impoverished urban students, making it possible for them to access higher education, technical schools, and teachers colleges.

Each *casa* elects its own leaders. The three residences that were occupied by the state police supported the CUL, which was formed in 1982 by a coalition of radical populists, Stalinists, supporters of Fidel Castro, former Trotskyists and other petty bourgeois nationalist organizations.

The existence of the *casas de estudiantes* is hostage to the free market ideology that has predominated in Mexico since the late 1980s, permeating all the major political parties. The wave of privatizations and counter-reforms that is associated with the regime of President Salinas [1988 - 1994] also pushed for the subordination of higher education to the needs of corporations.

Ultimately, universities are to rid themselves of their role of providing assistance and opportunities to the working class and peasantry, take on a role that more closely corresponded to the what transnational corporations and global financial institutions require, and impose the financial burden of a college education on students and their families.

Mexican and North American workers and students must repudiate the police assault on students, demand the release and compensation of all those who were arrested over the weekend and defend the right to a decent and well-funded education for all.



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