

Thousands protest as new Mexican president takes office

Rafael Azul

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On Saturday, as newly elected President Enrique Peña Nieto began his first day in office, thousands of workers and youth demonstrated in Mexico City and other cities across the country against the right-wing, anti-working class agenda of the new administration.

The police and military responded to the protests with mass arrests and beatings. In Mexico City at least 35 protesters were injured, and one remains in critical condition.

The transfer of power to Peña Nieto and his party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), took place under tight security. Hidden from the press and the public, Mexico's new president was officially sworn in a few minutes before midnight on Friday. He was protected by police, military forces and a network of barricades that blocked public access.

The PRI returns to power after 12 years of National Action Party (PAN) rule. The day before Peña Nieto's swearing in, the main political parties—the PRI, the PAN and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)—agreed to collaborate in imposing a series of free market educational, financial and energy “reforms.” Peña Nieto and the leaders of the three parties formally signed what is being called the “Pact for Mexico” on Sunday.

In a show of anger, thousands of teachers, workers, peasants and students marched across Mexico, from Chiapas in the South to Baja California and Chihuahua in the north. In the city of Tuxtla Gutierrez, capital of Chiapas State, thousands of teachers and their supporters marched into the city, calling for a national strike. The National Committee of Education Workers (CNTE) led the demonstration.

In Mexico City itself, a chaotic situation developed early Saturday morning when a group of young people tried to break through the police barriers blocking access to the legislature. The protest was led by the YoSoy#132 movement, which takes its name from the students at Iberoamericana University who expelled Peña Nieto from their campus during the presidential campaign. Those students were protesting the PRI candidate's role in the

brutal police repression of the working class community of San Salvador de Atenco in May 2006, in which two workers were killed and many women violated by the state security forces.

The confrontation between students and security forces in the Mexican capital on Saturday took place in close vicinity to a protest by 3,000 CNTE teachers.

The teachers, from the State of Oaxaca, refused to be drawn in by what many saw as a police provocation. A spokesperson for the Oaxaca teachers later declared that Peña Nieto already in his first hours in office stood condemned by the acts of repression against student protesters at San Lázaro and elsewhere in the city.

At the statue of the Angel of Independence in Mexico City's Paseo de la Reforma Boulevard, police and military personnel blocked supporters of Andrés López Obrador from joining a rally opposing Peña Nieto. López Obrador and his National Reconstruction Movement (MORENA) have refused to recognize the PRI victory, accusing the Peña Nieto campaign of buying votes and of violating Mexican campaign laws.

In the industrial city of Guadalajara, hundreds of young people, many of them students from public and private universities, protested against Peña Nieto. The police attacked them as they approached the site of the International Book Fair. Over 20 students were dragged off and arrested. Eyewitnesses reported that students were beaten up inside police cars. A woman was beaten and injured by a tear gas canister.

In Oaxaca, hundreds of students chanting, “We want schools, not soap operas,” marched into the city. They linked up with a separate contingent of student teachers from across the state at Oaxaca's central square.

Education workers participated in protests in the border city of Tijuana. Demonstrations also took place in Puebla, Guanajuato, León and the mining and industrial cities of Hermosillo and Zacatecas.

An extraordinary sequence of political events occurred in the run-up to the “Pact for Mexico” agreed upon last

Thursday. On November 14, Mexican legislators approved a reactionary labor reform law, overwhelmingly opposed by Mexican workers.

On November 19, thousands of teachers marched in Tlaxcala, capital of Tlaxcala State in central Mexico, to protest the new labor law. The protests also denounced the program of “universal evaluation” and tests for teaching jobs. It is not unusual for Tlaxcala teachers to work for years without a permanent post.

On November 22, the conservative Mexican Institute for Competition (IMCO) warned that Mexico faced a “catastrophe similar to Spain’s” within the next five years, pointing out that many of Mexico’s 31 states were deeply in debt. The report singled out public pensions for cuts and demanded a bailout of the banks holding state debt alongside a program of austerity for the working class.

The “Pact for Mexico” agreed by the major parties last Thursday followed the agenda outlined by IMCO. The PRI’s national president, Pedro Joaquín Coldwell, confirmed that the initiative for the agreement had come from Peña Nieto himself. “This is not a conjunctural pact,” declared Coldwell. “It is for the long term, to insure the governability of the country.”

The pact signifies that every faction of the Mexican ruling class has lined up in a common attack on the working class, the peasantry and the poor.

Despite divisions over the agreement within the PRD, on Saturday PRD President Jesús Zambrano declared that the “deal is on.” Zambrano defended the need for a government based on the agreement and promised that the PRD would be a “loyal opposition” to Peña Nieto.

Legislative supporters of the labor law claim that it merely codifies the existing state of affairs. In truth, in the space of little more than a generation Mexican workers have been stripped of rights and protections they struggled to establish over the previous 65 years.

Mass layoffs, the abolition of contractual rights and the elimination of benefits have been enforced with brutal repression, resulting in the arrest, injury and death of strikers, demonstrators and militant workers. Collaborating in this process have been Mexico’s corporatist trade unions. Time and time again the union apparatus has been used to ensure maximum capitalist exploitation and minimum working class resistance.

With trade union assistance, companies were shut down to destroy jobs and living standards, only to reopen with casual and part-time labor. Thousands of national labor contracts have been replaced with agreements known as protection

contracts (*contratos de protección*), hidden from the workers, who in many cases are not aware that they are nominally represented by a union. The trade unions also lend themselves to the firing of militant workers who dare to question this state of affairs.

Trade union organizations such as the Congress of Labor (CT), which includes the Federation of Mexican Workers (CTM) and the militant-sounding Revolutionary Federation of Workers and Peasants (CROC), conspire with Mexican and global capitalist firms and financial institutions. Captive in these organizations are some 25 million workers.

Peña Nieto is publicly committed to further market-based “reforms.” High on his list is the opening up of the energy and mineral sectors to foreign firms, the privatization of education, the deregulation of the financial sector, and the inclusion of food and medicine under the highly regressive Value Added Tax (VAT).

Outgoing president Felipe Calderón claimed that in the context of the world economic crisis, the Mexican economy managed to avoid losing ground. Calderón’s claims are contradicted by a recent European Union report indicating that since 2006 the number of Mexicans in poverty has risen by 12.2 million people, from 45.5 to 57.7 million. The number of those living under conditions of malnutrition has increased by 6.5 million, from 14.7 to 21.2 million.

The EU document, presented to the European Parliament in September, also examined social inequality in Mexico. It ranked Mexico 120th in social inequality out of 160 countries, with the 160th country being the most unequal.

Mexico has gone backwards by every measure—in education (nearly 3 million children do not go to school), health care and nutrition. Fifteen million workers, 29 percent of the labor force (up from 26 percent in 2006), subsist under some form of disguised unemployment. Five percent are officially unemployed, up from 3.5 percent in 2006. All this is in the midst of a brutal war on criminal gangs that has resulted in the death of more than 80,000 people in the last six years.

In a meeting at the White House last week with his Mexican counterpart, President Obama endorsed Peña Nieto’s free market program, calling it an “ambitious reform agenda.”



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