Brutal police attack on Mexican teachers

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Thousands of security agents using helicopters and armored vehicles brutally attacked striking teachers who had occupied Mexico City's central Constitution Square, commonly knows as *el Zócalo* —a traditional center of public petitions and protests. This well-planned military operation was carried out on September 13 by the federal government of President Enrique Peña Nieto (Institutional Revolutionary Party—PRI) and Mexico City's "left" mayor, Miguel Ángel Mancera (Democratic Revolutionary Party—PRD).

The teachers, members of the "National Coordinator of Education Workers" (CNTE), a radical wing of the National Union of Education workers (SNTE) that is influential among teachers in the southern states, including Oaxaca, Guerrero, Veracruz, Quintana Roo, and Chiapas, had occupied the historic square during three weeks, protesting an education reform that is an attack on education workers and on public education. CNTE negotiators had agreed to evacuate the Zócalo for the observance of Mexican independence day (September 16), which is commemorated each year in the Zócalo.

This violent operation, in the heart of Mexico's capital, is of piece with the Tatlelolco massacre of protesting students in 1968 and the police assault on the residents of Atenco in 2006, executed without any concern for the democratic rights or the safety of unarmed educators. President Peña Nieto, as governor of Mexico State, had directed the Atenco operation.

The police began the assault on the teachers at 10 AM, with the excuse that a core group of teachers were refusing to evacuate. Tear gas was fired at the occupiers from helicopters and armored vehicles, which also sprayed jets of water, while police and security agents brutally beat up the teachers, who where forced to abandon the square.

Many teachers were arbitrarily beaten as they were complying with the demands of their attackers. A reporter for the Mexico City *Proceso* news magazine described how Federal Police pummeled a retreating worker and then joined in with other security officials to invade a nearby school to remove teachers who had sought refuge there. "By all appearances, the police sought to provoke, confront, rather than scold or intimidate teachers," the reporter wrote.

Incredibly, the CNTE itself echoed the government's pretext. Francisco Bravo, a CNTE official, pointed to the presence of a small group of anarchists among the teachers, who could have been removed by police. Instead, he said, the police and military moved in force against all the teachers. "Excessive force" was used against the teachers, declared Bravo.

As in Tatlelolco, police evidently used *agents provocateurs* to create a justification for this brutal assault. The Electricians Union (SME) charged that *agents provocateurs* were posing as SME members. The SME itself is engaged in a fight with the Peña Nieto administration over the privatization of energy resources, and has declared itself in solidarity with the teachers.

The *Proceso* report also pointed out that, previous to Friday's assault, round-ups were taking place against leaders of Section 22 CNTE in Oaxaca State, a CNTE stronghold. Two CNTE leaders have recently been assassinated in Oaxaca and Michoacán under suspicious circumstances.

Bravo's reaction was consistent with the CNTE's role during the period prior to the strike, opposing not the education reform itself, but rather the fact that the union was not being given a "seat at the table." The reform measure establishes teacher evaluations as the principal criterion for wages, promotions, and job security for all teachers.

The assault took place in the midst of a general repudiation of the education reform by teachers across

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the country. On September 4, when the third and final piece of the reform law was approved by the legislature, mass mobilizations had taken place in Jalisco and Tlaxcala in western and central México, in Veracruz, on the Caribbean Coast, and in the northern states of Coahuila and Baja California Sur.

The Peña Nieto administration and the Mexican media carefully prepared the police/military operation against the teachers. Together they vilified teachers, accusing them of corruption and incompetence and of striking against children and poor families. The labor movement itself assisted this effort by helping to isolate the teachers' struggle.

The leader of the official teachers union, the SNTE, Juan Díaz de la Torre, applauded the new law and the establishment of an Evaluation Institute. Díaz de la Torre was appointed by Peña Nieto in February, following the arrest—also at the order of Peña Nieto—of former leader Elba Esther Gordillo for the embezzlement of union funds.

The Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) also defends the education reform and denounced the CNTE mobilization. Even before Friday's repression, CTM leader Joaquín Gamboa Pascoe denounced the CNTE for violating the law. "They think that they can do whatever they want, at everyone else's expense," said Gamboa.

The other major trade union federation, the Workers and Peasants Revolutionary Confederation (CROC) has also lined up against the striking teachers. Tejeda Cruz, who leads the CROC in Veracruz State declared last week his opposition to the new education reform, on the grounds that all the laws that are necessary to repress and fire teachers are already on the books. Cruz denounced the teachers' protest and proudly pointed out that in the entire history of the CROC, they have never barricaded streets. González Cuevas, CROC leader and Senator for Baja California Sur, declared his support for the reform legislation claiming that it would help educate 33 million poorly schooled Mexicans.

For the Independence Day celebration on Saturday the 15th and Sunday the 16th at Constitution Square, Mexico City had the appearance of an occupied zone. Two thousand federal police surrounded the square, supported by 308 vehicles and at least one helicopter hovering overhead. Another 2,100 federal officers and 400 vehicles patrolled the city itself.

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