

# Eighteen teachers jailed as police crack down on protests in Mexico

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Eighteen teachers were arrested in Chiapas on Friday as demonstrations spread across southwestern Mexico against the implementation of a right-wing federal education reform law. On Saturday, the ten men and eight women were transferred by airplane to a prison in Tepic, Nayarit where they are being held on federal charges.

The arrests were part of an overwhelming show of force by police against the thousands of teachers who marched in the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guerrero, Michoacán, and Veracruz. Teachers set up road blocks in several cities and set fire to the city hall of San Cristobol de las Casas, Chiapas.

The protests are aimed at preventing the implementation of a right-wing education reform program passed by the federal government in 2013. Implementation of the law has been incomplete due to the widespread opposition to the reforms amongst teachers. The reform program revokes the teachers' right to control hiring and firing and gives this power to the government. The reform plan also establishes a mechanism of testing teachers to facilitate mass firings, creates a system of government supervisors to monitor and report on teachers and decentralizes funding.

The reform law package was introduced by President Enrique Peña Nieto in 2012 and was immediately met with opposition of teachers. In May and June of 2015, the federal government was unable to impose exams on teachers due to protests and has been attempting to impose the programs ever since.

The outbreak of demonstrations was provoked when the Oaxacan state legislature met last Saturday in a secretive midnight session to ram through a new series of reforms aimed at bringing the state's education laws into harmony with the new federal reforms.

Thousands of armed police mobilized against the teachers on Friday and fought street battles against teachers armed only with rocks and eggs. In San Cristobal de las Casas alone, 1,000 federal police, 400 state police and 100 special agents hurt dozens of teachers in the crackdown.

The Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) responded to the demonstrations by claiming that most classes were not cancelled and that most teachers remained on the job.

However, the Mexican ruling class is well aware of growing popular discontent over widespread inequality, corruption and state violence, and fears the possibility that opposition to the education reforms may spark broader social discontent. An April 13 opinion piece in the daily *Excelsior* noted with concern that “legal and political failures could incite extremists—or those that don’t have anything to lose—to create a radicalization like what is taking place in Guerrero.”

The outbreak of protests by teachers comes at a dangerous time for the Peña Nieto administration, which according to a recent poll is the least popular administration in 20 years, garnering the support of just 30 percent of Mexicans.

The teacher demonstrations follow protests last week by student-teachers (known as *normalistas*) in the state of Michoacan. On April 12, street battles broke out between youth and riot police after police attacked a blockade the *normalistas* set up on a highway. Four police and many students were hurt in the confrontation.

Sections of the Mexican ruling class are maneuvering to bring the longstanding opposition of teachers back into the acceptable framework of bourgeois politics. On March 21, the leadership of the National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE) finalized a deal with

National Regeneration Movement (Morena) leader and ex-Mayor of Mexico City Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

Obrador has long served as a lightning rod for social opposition in Mexico, and his political maneuvers serve as a key method by which the ruling class seeks to diffuse social tensions and forestall social revolution. The CNTE-Morena alliance is intended to give Obrador an increased space to maneuver and channel opposition to education reform into Morena's 2016 election campaign in the state of Oaxaca.

In announcing the deal, Obrador issued hollow and demagogic statements against Peña Nieto's education reform and proclaimed that the CNTE-Morena alliance "angers the mafia of power." Obrador proposes the election of a "democratic government" led by his party. Such a government, Obrador said, would apply a reform plan put together by the Oaxacan state government and the CNTE, known as the Plan for the Transformation of Education in Oaxaca (PTEO).

In 2010, the CNTE endorsed Citizens' Movement candidate Gabino Cue, who won the Oaxacan gubernatorial election in 2010 and has since played a key role in helping the federal government ram through its education reform plan in Oaxaca. The CNTE has called Cue a "traitor" in an attempt to cover up its own bankrupt deals with the Mexican ruling class aimed at protecting their dues base and ensuring that their membership's militancy is kept within acceptable limits.

Mexican teachers, especially in the poorer southwest region, have a long history of militancy. During a 2006 teachers strike, police opened fire on strikers taking part in nonviolent demonstrations, provoking mass social opposition. The Mexican government organized death squads and called in the army to crush the strike, leaving 27 teachers and protesters dead.

The Mexican ruling class, with the support of its US imperialist masters, is preparing similar massacres today. The government's attempts to amend Article 11 of the Constitution to grant the president the power to impose martial law to crush strikes and protests, and its passage of the Atenco Law in the State of Mexico, show how the ruling class responds to social protest.

Mexican teachers cannot rely on sections of a capitalist class that respond to their protests with bullets and bombs to change the education through reform

plans like the PTEO. For all his populist phraseology, Obrador only serves to sow illusions in the bourgeois political system by juxtaposing his call for "democratic" bourgeois government to the government of the current "mafia of power." These meaningless terms cover over the basic class character of the Mexican state and serve to disarm workers, paving the way for future state massacres.

Mexican teachers and *normalistas* do not lack militancy or courage, but in the absence of an independent, socialist political party of the working class, they are left defenseless to betrayals by the CNTE and attacks by the military and police.



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