

Teachers in widespread walkouts in Mexico

Don Knowland**19 May 2016**

The National Coordinator of Education Workers union (CNTE) on Tuesday, Teachers Day, called a nationwide strike of indefinite duration of public teachers. The strike represents a continuation of teachers' opposition to regressive 2013 federal education reform.

Among other things, the education law revoked teachers' rights to control hiring and firing and gave this power to the government. The "reform" plan established a mechanism for testing teachers to facilitate mass firings and created a system of government supervisors to monitor and report on teachers.

The work stoppage Tuesday closed thousands of schools in the southern states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, Chiapas and Michoacán, long bastions of militant teacher action.

In Chiapas, the union said that 90 to 95 percent of the state's 75,000 education workers went out on strike. The head of the state's education department claimed that only 10 percent of schools had closed, however.

Officials in Oaxaca said that 88 percent of the state's 13,882 schools opened Tuesday and gave classes. However, the Guerrero teachers' union claimed that over 70,000 of Oaxaca's more than 80,000 teachers participated in a march to Oaxaca City, casting the government's figures in substantial doubt.

The union set up a new *plantón*, or encampment, at the city's central square, which until last year was a fixture in the city's historic center. At last 800 teachers settled in, according to security forces. Demonstrations were held outside numerous government offices.

Teachers also sought to block key locations on roadways in Oaxaca City. Such blockages are likely to invoke repression by security forces. The spokesman for Oaxaca governor Gabriel Cúe on Tuesday said the government would not hesitate to use force to break up such actions.

There is a history to such threats. During a 2006 teachers' strike in Oaxaca, 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.

Ominously, on Tuesday, the federal government said it was sending 500 federal police to Oaxaca to deal with the teacher unrest.

Teachers vow to continue with work stoppages until federal officials sit down with them at the negotiating table and meet their demands. Among them are abrogation of the education reforms, a 100 percent salary increase, and formal recognition of a bilateral relationship between the union and the federal government.

The federal education secretary, Aurelio Nuño Mayer, on Tuesday urged teachers in the country "not to fall into the trap" of participating in the strike convened by the CNTE, saying it only sought to blackmail the government "so its leaders continue keeping illegal privileges."

Nuño Mayer said that teachers who participate in the strike would have their pay deducted, and that if they struck for four days they could face more severe sanctions.

On Wednesday, Nuño Mayer threatened to employ 16,000 newly credentialed teachers and 10,000 retired teachers to substitute for striking teachers. This was a thinly veiled threat to fire the teachers.

In response, the secretary general of section 22 of the National Union of Education Teachers in Oaxaca, an affiliate of the CNTE, said the teachers would continue on strike and urged parents not to send their children to school.

Nuño Mayer claimed that the government is "open to dialogue" provided the discussion is about how to start

up education reform; but as long as the approach is scuttling reform or finding mechanisms to cut back the law and failure to comply with it, there will be no dialogue.

He specified: “If your request of dialogue is to ask for the repeal of the educational reform or to seek to implement exceptions such as [teacher] evaluations, or that there are no more tests, or to continue to give teachers automatic positions,” there will be no dialogue.

In other words, the federal government insists that teachers adhere to and not challenge any aspect of the federal education law, a law that subordinates education to the profit needs of big business, seeks to privatize education, and singles out and slanders educators for the supposed failures of public education.

Indeed, there can be no dialogue between public teachers and the working class as a whole with a government that imposes such measures by diktat.

However, the approach of the teachers unions, including CNTE, to the law is not to reject the reforms in their entirety, but to seek inclusion as partners in their implementation. The unions particularly want a seat at the table in teacher evaluations, hiring and firing. Through such arrangements, their membership’s militancy will be kept within acceptable limits.

The unions have sought political alliances with bourgeois politicians such as Manuel Lopez Obrador and his pseudo-left Morena party. Such political layers in reality serve as a lightening rod for social opposition in Mexico, and a means by which the ruling class seeks to diffuse social tensions and forestall social revolution.

In 2010, the CNTE endorsed Obrador’s Citizens’ Movement candidate Gabino Cúe, who won the Oaxacan gubernatorial election that year. Cúe has since played a key role in helping the federal government ram through its education reform plan in Oaxaca.

This week Cúe parroted the line of Nuño Mayer as to the strike, saying there would be no dialogue with teachers until they returned to the classroom and dropped their challenge to the federal law. The CNTE now calls Cúe a “traitor” in an attempt to cover up its own bankrupt politics.

Defeating the “reform” drive for privatization of education requires the development of a united political offensive by teachers and the entire working class of Mexico, independent of the bureaucratized trade unions

and all of Mexico’s bourgeois political parties. It must be based on the demand for the material resources necessary for quality public education for all, as part of a revolutionary struggle against the capitalist profit system. Such a movement would find allies among teachers in the US facing the same kind of attacks.

Education unrest has also spilled over to the Mexico National Polytechnic Institute (IPN), an institution of 200,000 students. A strike has been going on for two months, led by student associations. The strike has protested fee increases, cuts to school programs and elimination of the school’s autonomy from government control.

On Monday, some 1,500 students marched to Los Piños, the presidential residence in Mexico City, delivering a letter addressed to President Enrique Peña Nieto from the general assembly of the school containing their demands. Students read from the letter, demanding that the federal government agree that any changes at IPN be based only on decisions taken by the IPN National Congress, which is in the process of being organized.

Later that day, Peña Nieto advised that he had instructed education secretary Nuño Mayer to provide an answer “as soon as possible” to the students’ demands and called for the return of all IPN schools to normal academic activity.

This was a slap in the face to the IPN marchers. “We marched today to Los Piños because the secretary of public education, Aurelio Nuño, did not want to talk with us,” the students said. In fact, just as with the national education reform, Nuño’s marching orders are to refuse all accommodation.



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