

Protests in Mexico continue against gas price hike, water privatization

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The *gasolinazo* protests, which erupted in Mexico early this month over the slashing of gasoline subsidies, continue throughout the country. In Baja California, these protests have coincided with enormous social anger over PAN (National Action Party) state Governor Francisco Vega's attempt to ram through legislation that would privatize water services and implement severe rate increases, a measure backed by the ostensibly "center-left" PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) and Movimiento Ciudadano (Citizens' Movement).

On January 22, protests were coordinated across the country. In Tijuana, some 18,000 protesters gathered at the city's *Monumento a Cuauhtémoc* roundabout in one of the main arteries of the downtown district and marched to the town hall. In Mexicali's town hall, over 20,000 protesters convened. At these protests, the calls for the resignation of Governor Vega were added to the national calls for the resignation of President Enrique Peña Nieto.

The immense anger set off by the efforts to subordinate to private profit such a basic social right as access to water, forced Vega to repeal the measure earlier this month. The most extreme proposed rate hikes were in Tijuana, where the minimum rate of 59.1 pesos per cubic meter would have been raised to 99.5 pesos, and in Playas de Rosarito, from 81.2 to 99 pesos. In addition, the bill would have allowed private water concerns to cut off service for non-payment after 90 days, a measure which is deemed unconstitutional. Even at present prices, urban residential rates in Tijuana currently exceed those for similar services across the border in San Diego.

In spite of the repeal, the protests against the state government continue, alongside the ongoing protests throughout a country beset by inflation and a

chronically underperforming economy, whose future looks increasingly uncertain with the election of Donald Trump.

Since coming to power, Trump has demanded that Mexico pay \$12 to \$15 billion for a border wall and has threatened trade war through the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The Mexican peso has lost approximately 13 percent of its value in relation to the dollar, while the cost of gasoline is expected to rise by 14 to 20 percent in the next year, driving up prices of all commodities and further straining the ability of working families to pay for basic necessities. Mexican President Peña Nieto's politically-calculated cancellation of a planned meeting with Trump will do nothing to resolve the Mexican government's state of crisis, with the president's approval rating hanging precariously just above the single digits.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality intervened at continuing protests this past Sunday to speak with those attending about social and political conditions in Mexico, the significance of a Trump presidency and the need for a socialist program which insists on the international unity of the working class.

Protesters chanted "*Fuera Peña, fuera Kiko!*" ("Out with Peña, out with Kiko!"—the latter referring to the Baja California state governor) and carried signs expressing their outrage over not only the *gasolinazo* and the attempt at water privatization, but a range of long-standing grievances, including the counter-reforms aimed at the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS), the disappearances of many individuals in the state and of the 43 students who were kidnapped by the government in Iguala in 2014.

About 400 people attended the protest. A truck

equipped with speakers and a microphone led the march through the city as angry citizens denounced the government. Professor Juan Ramirez, a member of the “non-party” political organization Ciudadanos Unidos de Tijuana, which has played a role in organizing the demonstrations over the past month, was the main speaker during the march. His remarks consisted mostly of the narrowest of demands to the municipal government.

That the protest’s final destination was an empty city hall seemed to symbolize the ruling elite’s indifference to the needs and aspirations of the masses of working people, and the dead-end protest perspective of the Ciudadanos Unidos de Tijuana leadership. Among those who joined in the demonstration, however, many were looking for a way to fight the government and the deteriorating social conditions in Mexico.

“I’m very pleased that people are protesting, it’s good to see Mexicans waking up,” said Lorena. “This protest shows that we won’t stand for privatizing water or paying 18 pesos more for a liter of gasoline.

“I don’t feel that working people are represented. They’re all equally dishonest—neither PRI, nor PAN, nor PRD; they’re all the same, corrupt, enriching themselves off of the people, and never following through with what they promise. I’ve voted for the PRI for 25 years, but with everything that’s going on, I’ve had it.”

While expressing hopes that a party like Morena (the National Regeneration Party headed by Andrés Manuel López Obrador-AMLO) might offer some sort of alternative, she noted that figures such as AMLO were cut from the same cloth as the rest of the political establishment. “It’s true, even the ones claiming to be outsiders are all from the same group as the rest. They haven’t been in power yet, so we’ll have to see how it plays out.”

“It’s important that we’re here to defend the Constitution, which the water law would’ve gone against. We need a solution to the political parties that we have now, which only exist to benefit wealthy classes,” said Miguel, one of the protesters. “I wish that the media would cover these protests more extensively, and tell the truth about them. Too often, they attempt to portray us as just rabble rousers with nothing to do. That’s obviously not true, we’re here peacefully.”

Alicia, a domestic worker, said, “There could be a

danger that this gets derailed. What we have now is a government that only represents the wealthy, the millionaires. It makes no sense that we have one of the richest people in the world, Carlos Slim, and yet we have a minimum wage of 80 pesos a day. That doesn’t cover anything, and the price of just about everything keeps increasing.”

Members of the Socialist Equality Party were able to address the assembled crowd, emphasizing the international dimension of the struggle facing workers, and the consequent need to unite Mexican and US workers across the border that divides them.

“We have to unite [internationally], and we have to be very conscious of which Mexico we’re talking about—the Mexico of workers. Long live the international working class!” said one SEP speaker. These remarks were met with shouts of “Viva!” and applause, with many in the crowd asking for leaflets and information.

The protests express a growing popular awareness that the whole of the Mexican political establishment is fundamentally hostile to the needs of the masses of working people. What is lacking, however, is a conscious revolutionary leadership in the working class, raising the danger that the protests will dissipate mounting anger behind one or another wing of the bourgeois political establishment. What is urgently required is the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Mexico to link the struggles of working people across North America on the basis of a program of international socialism.



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