

Over 100,000 teachers march in Mexico, warn of “indefinite strike”

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On May 15, about 100,000 teachers from the National Committee of Education Workers (CNTE), a faction of the government-affiliated National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), marched to commemorate National Teachers’ Day in Mexico City and six other states—Oaxaca, Chiapas, Puebla, Quintana Roo, Sonora, and Baja California.

Teachers marched in opposition to the education reforms that were implemented in 2014 as part of the Pact for Mexico, a major legislative effort to privatize energy, public utilities, and education in the country. The right-wing reforms have established onerous teachers’ evaluations, increased standardized testing and created a system of standards for teacher hiring and promotion based on “merit,” similar to former US President Barack Obama’s anti-teacher “Race to the Top” program.

Spanning from the Yucatan peninsula to northern Mexico, the protests represent another expression of the international struggle by teachers in 2018. These include protests by teachers in the United States, Colombia, Argentina, the United Kingdom, North Africa and Kenya, as well as strikes by workers in France, Germany, and Turkey.

In the southern state of Chiapas, traditionally home to some of the most militant class battles over education, teachers have announced plans for an “indefinite strike” in 13,000 schools ahead of the July 1 presidential elections.

The legislation represents an effort to scapegoat teachers for social conditions facing students in Mexico, while paving the way for the establishment of more private schools and the further deterioration of the rights of all workers.

The legislation has led to the firing of over 500 teachers, while hundreds of thousands have faced

disciplinary actions for boycotting the government evaluations or for missing days to attend protests against the new laws. All three major Mexican political parties, including the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the right-wing National Action Party (PAN) and the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) supported the legislation.

The deep social inequality in the country has created intolerable learning conditions for youth and teachers alike. Nationwide, over half of children and adolescents live under the official poverty rate, with this figure reaching 60 percent in the poor southern states.

Conditions are no better at public schools. A national census of primary schools conducted in 2013 revealed that four out of 10 schools lacked drainage, one out of 10 lacked electricity, and one out of 10 lacked bathrooms for students. The worst conditions were found in the southern states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Veracruz, and Michoacán—the strongholds of the CNTE.

Over 2,500 schools were damaged or destroyed following the 8.2 magnitude earthquake that struck the southern states of Oaxaca and Chiapas on September 7. Parents and teachers in Chiapas launched protests in March over the fact that five months after the earthquake only one out of the 700 collapsed schools had reopened.

Striking teachers have also argued that the reforms unfairly target indigenous students, who tend to be poorer, have fewer resources at schools, and speak indigenous languages and not Spanish. None of these factors are taken into account in standardized testing or teacher evaluations.

Teachers have carried out over four years of protests, strikes, blockades of highways, and occupations of government buildings in opposition to these reforms.

The teachers' struggle escalated in 2016, when the Peña Nieto administration deployed federal troops to Nochixtlán, Oaxaca in an attempt to squash a three-and-a-half month strike by teachers. The resulting confrontations left 13 dead and 100 wounded.

Despite its radical phraseology, the CNTE's strategy to fight against the education reforms has relied on empty appeals for the ruling class to reverse its assault on workers. Meanwhile, the government has made it clear that it has no intention of opening negotiations with the union. In the aftermath of the Oaxaca massacre, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto merely threatened dissenting teachers with more violent repression: "The government of the Republic will have no qualms whatsoever, no reservations whatsoever, in resorting to the use of force to restore order and above all to make good on the rule of law."

In reality, the CNTE's vague appeals for "dialogue" with the government mean a "seat at the table" for the union bureaucracy to dictate the hiring and firing of teachers. The CNTE is opposed to an independent political movement of the working class and has instead relied on isolated protests that, in the final analysis, amount to nothing more than political stunts.

While the CNTE has claimed that it supports no presidential candidate, it has traditionally been allied with the PRD and the "left" Movement for National Regeneration (Morena) and its leader, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. By threatening a strike on the eve of the July 1 elections, the CNTE is seeking to sow illusions in bourgeois parties like Morena and to keep workers tied to futile parliamentary appeals.

For his part, López Obrador is seeking to channel the teachers' anger for the benefit of his own campaign, and if elected, to integrate the union leadership more closely into the suppression of the class struggle. His administration would do nothing to challenge the abysmal levels of social inequality that keep millions of students out of school, or provide the billions that are desperately needed to build new schools and provide a quality education for every child.

There is mass support for the struggles of teachers worldwide. After the Oaxaca massacre, hundreds of thousands of students and workers marched across the country in support of the teachers. Over 200,000 doctors and nurses conducted solidarity strikes, and students and major Mexican universities boycotted

classes to protest the use of automatic weapons against the teachers.

However, the defense of public education will require a fundamentally different strategy than the one being pursued by the CNTE. Far from appealing to the representatives of the financial aristocracy, addressing the demands of teachers will require a unified struggle by all sections of workers, in coordination with their fellow teachers internationally, to expropriate the ill-gotten gains of the ruling elite for massive expenditures on public education, health care, housing, food, water, and infrastructure across Mexico.



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