

Ninety three dead and dozens in critical condition from Mexico pipeline explosion

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At least 93 people have died and dozens were severely wounded in an explosion of a gasoline pipeline with a leak in the community of San Primitivo in the central Mexican state of Hidalgo, just over 50 miles north of downtown Mexico City.

The victims are being treated in hospitals across Mexico and the United States, most of them with severe burns and fighting for their lives, according to the Secretary of Health. This includes one 12-year-old boy. Four died from their injuries on Tuesday.

The explosion and the enormous human toll are an indictment and a direct result of the reactionary and militaristic policies of the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as AMLO) to accelerate the privatization of the country's oil.

On Sunday, the state governor, Omar Fayed, announced that most of the remains of those killed in the blast are unidentifiable and will take days or even months to identify by way of genetic samples provided by their families.

Hours before the explosion, a leak was reportedly opened deliberately, creating a 22-foot fountain of gasoline that up to 800 neighbors approached during the afternoon to fill bottles for their families to use. At the time of the fire, about 200 people were reportedly in the immediate surroundings.

Shortly after, harrowing images appeared everywhere on social media and the news stations showing dozens of men and women running away from what had become a giant wall of fire. Family members nearby, calling out the names of their loved ones and telling people on fire to roll on the ground, captured with their phones the moments victims approached them, pleading, "Help me, I'm dying."

The deadly fire took place in the context of a new supply and distribution system implemented by the recently-elected National Regeneration Movement (Morena) government of López Obrador to prevent the stealing of gasoline from pipelines.

The government's "strategy," implemented the first week of 2019, has consisted in deploying more than 5,000

members of the military and police to Pemex installations—including six refineries, 39 storage and distribution terminals and others—and closing down 1,050 miles of pipelines until they can be policed by the armed forces or repaired.

At least ten states in the center of Mexico have reported shortages of fuel, and the Federal Consumer Protection Office (Profeco) reported last Tuesday that 69.5 percent of gas stations in these states surrounding the capital, Mexico City, had no oil.

In the *colonias* or neighborhoods and surrounding cities of this scattered metropolitan area of more than 25 million people, getting gas has required waiting hours in lines that extend for a mile or more. This has produced the immediately desperate conditions in which hundreds approach such dangerous leaks, something that continues even after the fire on Friday.

More broadly, however, as part of the oil privatization scheme initiated by the previous administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto, cuts to gas subsidies to liberalize the market have made the product increasingly unaffordable for workers.

The explosive and massive *Gasolinazo* protests all across the country in January 2017 in response to a 20 percent price hike caused by subsidy cuts demonstrated the widespread and profound popular opposition to the ongoing privatization scheme, but also the obstinate determination of the ruling class to carry it through, deploying the military and police to suppress the protests, leaving four dead and hundreds arrested.

The policy of the Morena administration to deal with oil theft is a continuation of the militarized response of the ruling class to any obstacles to the implementation of energy reform and social cuts, including preparation to crack down on future protests like those in 2017 against privatization.

This is yet another measure by López Obrador repudiating his campaign promises to remove the military from domestic operations, after years of being implicated in widespread abuses and even massacres like the 2014 killing of the 43

Ayotzinapa teaching students.

The 2019 budget approved by López Obrador and the Morena-controlled Congress was celebrated by ruling circles because of its continued social austerity under the banner of “fiscal responsibility.” It also provides the largest disbursement to the armed forces in Mexico’s history, in part to create a new National Guard of up to 150,000 soldiers, as a guarantee that the new government will not hesitate to defend the private interests of the bourgeoisie against any challenge from below.

On Sunday, López Obrador stated in a press conference that he didn’t blame or “criminalize” the victims, and rejected criticism by some officials of the failure of a few dozen soldiers present to forcibly remove people from the vicinity of the pipeline before the explosion. “We shouldn’t do that because we have to resolve these things from their root,” he said. “Those practices will be eliminated with the support of people and options for people with needs who chose to do these things.”

And yet, this is precisely what his policy against oil theft has been, criminalizing and deploying the military against the impoverished workers and youth *compelled* to take such risks. López Obrador said one honest thing Sunday, pledging “all the support to the military,” demonstrating that his response to generalized poverty and staggering levels of social inequality will be no different from his predecessors—militarization and mass repression.

This was seen clearly in Matamoros this past week, where the administration’s response to an ongoing 10-day strike by 70,000 *maquiladora* workers has been to ignore their demands for just salaries, and deploy police and Navy soldiers with assault rifles to harass workers at the picket lines.

The government has also indicated that the stealing of oil represented losses for the state oil company Pemex of about \$3 billion each year, claiming its measures are meant to “save” money for the government.

However, all signs indicate that they are directed at accelerating the privatization of the oil fields. In fact, the government is assuming new costs on behalf of private companies. On top of the military and police deployments, Pemex will be buying 1,600 new tanker trucks and hiring 3,600 new drivers and other staff from private contractors also profiting from Obrador’s measures.

When the Peña Nieto administration implemented a sweeping energy reform in August 2014 annulling the 1938 constitutional provision that nationalized the oil industry under President Lázaro Cárdenas, 17 percent of proven reserves and 79 percent of prospective ones were opened for private investment.

As of mid-2018, about 3 percent of oil reserves were in

private hands, according to *Forbes*. After a sharp fall in oil prices after 2014 slowed down the pace of privatization, higher prices since the beginning of 2018 (in spite of a significant fall since November 2018) and a relatively cheaper peso, cutting labor and other production costs for the last two years, has accelerated investments and pressures on Pemex to create new incentives.

Back in May 2018, when the tide was turning, Carlos Morales-Gil, CEO of the new oil company Petrobal created by Mexican billionaire Alberto Bailleres González, told a meeting of oil magnates in Houston, Texas, “Mexico is a country with social challenges. So, the value of our natural resources needs to be realized more efficiently, and monetized quicker. We are a welcoming market... If liberalization still remains the objective, we [private companies] also need open access to infrastructure built by Pemex.”

The discussion in Houston, according to *Forbes*, continued on the sidelines of the meeting with demands that Pemex increase its “transportation capacity and storage” and dismissing any concerns that a Morena administration will have less of an “appetite for privatization.”

In other words, the oil-supply policies of the López Obrador administration cut across its demagogic claims that it seeks to cut costs for social investment. They expose Obrador’s nationalist bluster about making Mexico less “dependent” on US oil by building more refineries, pipelines and investing more on exploration. This rhetoric has all been a façade for transferring enormous wealth from previously state-owned and future oil reserves and from government coffers into the profit-making schemes of the Mexican, US and international financial elite, with fatal consequences for Mexican workers and youth.



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