Mexico: 100,000 university workers strike as López Obrador's vows deeper austerity

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About 100,000 university employees went on strike across Mexico Wednesday to protest the bankruptcy imposed by the federal government on nine state universities and to demand greater funds for public education.

At least 30 universities joined the strike, which was called by the National Confederation of University Workers (CONTU). Management at the bankrupt universities have informed workers that they will soon stop paying wages and benefits indefinitely since they have not received money for payrolls since August. Some universities could close before the end of the year.

In his daily morning press briefing on Wednesday, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador denounced the strike as "blackmail" aimed at appropriating the "people's sacred money." He stated, "We are all obligated to act with austerity, and I can speak like that because I have the moral authority," citing the cuts in the budget for the Presidency and for other top officials.

While promising a higher budget for universities in 2020, López Obrador sought to scapegoat striking educators for any future regressive policies. "We have to act with discipline," he added, "because, if money is handed right and left, then it would turn into a deficit and we would have to raise taxes; create new taxes; impose fuel price hikes, like before; ask for loans, increase the debt, like before."

López Obrador's filthy tactic is of a piece with the so-called "education reform" implemented under his predecessor, Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and effectively continued under López Obrador's Morena party. The legislation set up a system of teacher evaluations aimed at charging teachers with "underperformance" to scapegoat them for the social crisis in the country and to justify greater cuts in spending and privatizations.

Social anger against López Obrador's education policies has escalated since the beginning of the year. In January and February, teachers in the southern states of Michoacán and Oaxaca struck and blocked key railway lines to protest the non-payment of benefits. In February, thousands of workers of the Autonomous University of Mexico City (UACM) struck to demand a major raise in spending and salaries, and they were soon joined by the Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM), and the Universities of Oaxaca, Coahuila and Chapingo.

All of these strikes were sold out by the trade unions despite coinciding with the wildcat strikes in Matamoros and strikes by tens of thousands of teachers across the United States and Latin America. The CONTU is doing the same, as demonstrated by its one-day "Hollywood strike" aimed at releasing tensions. At the same time, the leader of CONTU, Enrique Levet, is a proven class enemy of teachers and the working class. As a PRI legislator in Veracruz, Levet eagerly campaigned in favor of Peña Nieto's education reform during 2012-13.

The bankruptcy of universities and the response by López Obrador exposes the anti-working class character of the Morena administration and the farce of its "austerity" for top officials. Two weeks after his July 1 election, López Obrador presented his plan of "republican austerity" to the incoming congressional Morena majority. The program was sold as a set of measures to eliminate privileges and posts of senior bureaucratic offices, and involved 222,600 layoffs. However, the vast majority of employees fired have been operational workers and technicians.

For instance, two-thirds of the 16,000 employees fired earlier this year from the ministry of environment (Semarnat) were rank-and-file workers. These mass layoffs led to a one-day wildcat strike in February at the Semarnat that spread nationwide.

López Obrador is not only continuing but is escalating the massive transfer of wealth to Mexico's financial

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aristocracy and Wall Street under the Pact for Mexico—involving the education reform, oil privatization and massive social cuts—implemented by Peña Nieto. When oil prices fell, Peña Nieto used virtually the same language as López Obrador, declaring in September 2015, "The government is committed to budget austerity. Facing the current economic environment, the government of the Republic must tighten its belt."

Now, Morena, which grew in popularity during the protests against the Pact for Mexico, has upheld the policies of the previous governments and vowed to pay the massive debt incurred. Under Morena rule, Mexico increased its debt payments to Wall Street and Mexican financiers by 21.7 percent in 2019, dedicating fully 13 percent of the federal budget to servicing the debt.

Furthermore, the Morena administration's first major policy was the creation of what López Obrador touted as "the largest free trade zone in the country" on the northern border, cutting the value added taxes from 16 to 8 percent and the income taxes from 30 to 20 percent, depriving the federal government of 41 billion pesos or US$2.1 billion per year. Most of this money is going to boost the dividends and stock prices of the investors of the transnational corporations in the region.

This amount would more than cover the 16.7 billion pesos (US$850 million) deficit of the public universities threatened with closure.

By the end of López Obrador's six-year term, the border tax cut will equal the total taxes canceled by the Felipe Calderón and Enrique Peña Nieto governments between 2007 and 2015. In fact, the record of the state tax agency further exposes the class character of Morena. In 2013, Peña Nieto granted the general secretary of Morena, Yeidckol Polevnsky, a tax amnesty of 16 million pesos (US$817,000). It would take a full-time worker 290 years to make that with the new minimum wage at the border.

The free trade zone decree also doubled the minimum wage inside the free trade zone to a meager 176 pesos, or $8.78 per day, which didn't benefit the vast majority of workers who already make slightly more, while allowing companies to "compensate" this by eliminating bonuses. This stunt, carried out in coordination with the company, or *charro,* unions, triggered the wildcat strikes of 70,000 sweatshop workers in the border city of Matamoros in January and April.

Facing the resurgence of the class struggle in Mexico and internationally against austerity and growing social inequality, the Mexican ruling class and US imperialism have tasked Morena with suppressing opposition.

This political role has taken two forms. Firstly, Morena created a National Guard to perpetuate the internal deployment of the military, and has escalated attacks against democratic rights in preparation for a massive crackdown.

López Obrador has already mobilized 21,000 National Guard troops to attack immigrants, on the direct orders of the Trump administration. This is the same Mexican military that participated in the killing of the 43 teaching students in Ayotzinapa in 2014 for protesting the "education reform," and the subsequent cover-up; or the 2010 killing—and subsequent cover-up—of the two students of the Monterrey Institute of Technology depicted in the recent documentary on Netflix, "Hasta los dientes."

On August 1, Morena rammed through a law imposing six-to-thirteen-year sentences for marches and other protests in López Obrador's home state of Tabasco chiefly, in response to mass marches and roadblocks by teachers since last December protesting unpaid wages.

Secondly, in response to an ongoing rebellion against the company trade unions associated with the PRI, Morena approved a labor reform last April to promote a supposedly "democratic and independent" faction of the trade union bureaucracy aligned with Morena and the AFL-CIO bureaucracy in the United States.

The university trade unions, whether those aligned with the PRI or Morena, have dedicated themselves to defeating any sign of resistance by isolating workers from the rest of the working class in México and internationally who face the same enemy: capitalism.

This has demonstrated that the real aim of the labor reform is to chain workers to corporatist organizations that subordinate workers' social rights to the capitalists' "right" to exploit Mexico as a source of cheap labor, low taxes and other incentives.

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