

Teachers in Mexico block major railway as government deploys National Guard

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For two weeks, public school teachers in Puebla, Mexico, have blocked the major railway between Mexico Valley, where Mexico City is located, and the Port of Veracruz. The demonstrators are demanding greater staffing in general, especially the re-hiring of recently fired teachers as well as democratic elections in the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE).

Initially, the teachers set up five different blockades, but they have since reduced these to blocking one station in the Lara Grajales municipality.

As the rail corporations and industrial chiefs escalate their pressure on the government to use force against the teachers, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) ordered the deployment of the National Guard to the 144 trains stranded in Veracruz, ostensibly to prevent burglaries.

Both, AMLO and Puebla Governor Miguel Barbosa Huerta, who belongs to the president's Morena party, have dismissed the teachers' demands as "internal affairs" of the SNTE. No consideration whatsoever has been made about halting the firings and other austerity measures, which seek to make more resources available for AMLO's historic tax cuts for transnational corporations and interest payments to the financial vultures on Wall Street and in the Mexican ruling elite.

The argument about not interfering with union affairs has been repeated constantly by Morena officials to wash their hands of the continued abuses against workers by the trade unions, which the Mexican ruling class has relied upon for decades to crush opposition to widespread poverty and bare-bone social services. The clearest demonstration of these efforts was AMLO's participation last month in the 84th anniversary ceremony for the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), in which the president summoned this organization of paid corporate thugs to back his government's agenda.

The response by the Morena administration to the blockades has been guided by the imperative of suppressing this and any other struggles by teachers and other workers against social austerity and capitalist exploitation.

"I have trust in the teachers because they are very responsible," AMLO said in his morning press briefing Friday. "Since we took power, there have been no strikes in schools. My adversaries should not come out, since they are a little thing, and start promoting strikes." He then slandered the protesters as being tools of "the conservatives," while claiming that he will not humiliate teachers and bragged about his cordial relations with the right-wing SNTE bureaucracy.

The protests themselves attest to the anti-worker character of AMLO's program. The blockades by teachers are a sign of great anger, militancy and bravery, especially considering the record of savage repression by the Mexican police and military. Workers are realizing that AMLO's labor legislation enacted last May is not really aimed at "democratizing" the trade unions, as the official line claims. On the contrary, while instituting requirements for union recognition votes, the law's enforcement is based on giving a democratic veneer to the corrupt union bureaucracy, letting it use fraud and intimidation to supposedly comply with the voting requirements.

Given AMLO's main interest in defending the interests of the transnational corporations and their Mexican partners against growing opposition in the working class, the danger that force will be used against the teachers is significant.

In fact, Morena's creation of the National Guard and the enshrinement of its domestic deployment in the Constitution had little to do with the so-called "war on drugs." The aim was to derail opposition to the corrupt and repressive military, known to work systematically for the main drug cartels. AMLO insisted that the National Guard represents "the people in arms," while preparing to use it in a massive crackdown against opposition from below.

So far, AMLO has insisted that "we will not repress them," but his deployment of the National Guard troops can only be understood as a thinly veiled threat. As the economic disruption of the blockade mounts, moreover, the pressures by the ruling class to use force against the teachers is increasing.

The Port of Veracruz, which sits on the Gulf of Mexico, handles most vehicle and auto parts exports in the country as well as significant loads of chemicals, oil, mineral and food products. An ongoing expansion is expected to make it the largest port in Latin America. As of Friday, the blockade had impeded the transportation of 440,000 tons of goods, and the Industrial Association of the State of Michoacán estimates corporate losses of \$2.5 million per day.

Given the close global integration of supply chains across industries, particularly within North America, and “just in time” assembly, the effects of cutting this crucial vein is undoubtedly causing widespread disruptions for major auto, food, electronics, construction and other transnational corporations. This is compounded by the convulsions in production and transportation being caused by the coronavirus.

On Thursday, the railway company Ferrosur, owned by Grupo Mexico, issued a statement asking the authorities, “via their political good offices and exercising their lawful powers, to carry out the fast liberation of the affected railways.”

The SNTE and the government are working together to quell the protests. During an event Friday to commemorate International Women’s Day, SNTE leader Alfonso Cepeda Salas denounced the blockades as “extreme, radicalized measures that are useless because the economy or other people don’t need to be affected due to internal issues in our union that we can resolve internally.” He then promised to convoke a National Congress to change the statutes but said that this process would take about one year.

The keynote speaker at the event was AMLO’s interior minister, Olga Sánchez Cordero, who sought to portray the SNTE as progressive for organizing an event centered around the theme of “violence against women.” Sánchez, however, is the public face of the repressive preparations against the working class, including the largely female education sector. She was also the public face of the first deployment of the National Guard to comply with the Trump administration’s orders to militarize Mexico’s southern border to round up and lock up immigrant workers, men and women alike, in squalid concentration camps.

Morena’s policies have strengthened the capitalist state, including its armed forces. They are aimed first against the most vulnerable sectors of the population, like the Central American immigrants, but the ultimate target is the entire working class.

The efforts to suppress the class struggle involve the entire trade union apparatus, including the “dissident” National Coordinator of Education Workers (CNTE) and the self-proclaimed “independent” trade unions, whose eager defense of capitalism and the nation-state is essentially no

different from that of the CTM or SNTE.

Throughout January and February of 2019, thousands of teachers affiliated to the CNTE struck and hundreds participated in blocking at least seven major railways across the southern state of Michoacán, demanding about \$250 million in back wages.

After delivering about a fifth of the amount due, AMLO called the continued protests a “whim.” At the time, one month into his term, the president did not employ the armed forces, relying on the CNTE to lead workers into a dead end of continuous appeals to Morena until protesters became demoralized.

Mexican teachers and workers in general have undergone strategic experiences under the AMLO administration, and it is crucial to draw the necessary conclusions. Continued appeals to the president and Morena to “democratize” the trade unions and otherwise defend social rights are more than futile. Those insisting that workers must appeal to this bourgeois government and simply elect new bureaucrats to the same pro-capitalist trade unions seek to subordinate workers’ independent interests to the politics and institutions controlled by the capitalist ruling class.

Instead, teachers need to elect rank-and-file committees independent of every trade union, to democratically discuss and decide the demands, the perspective and program to win them. These committees must direct their appeals not to bourgeois politicians and corrupt bureaucracies, but to the rest of the working class in Mexico and internationally.

This is the only reliable source of protection and political support that the teachers will find against the capitalist state because they face the same class enemies and share the same class interests. For instance, since October 14, about 1,700 Asarco miners in Arizona and refinery workers in Texas have been on strike against the same Grupo Mexico threatening the teachers in Puebla.



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