

Teachers lead growing strike movement across Latin America

Andrea Lobo
3 June 2025

A wave of teacher strikes from Mexico to Panama, Colombia, Argentina and Brazil signal the emergence of a counteroffensive against the onslaught of attacks on public education, pensions and other social rights across Latin America.

A strike launched May 15 by over 20,000 teachers affiliated with Mexico's National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE) has escalated into a protracted mobilization by teachers nationally, marked by roadblocks, the occupation of Mexico City's Zócalo plaza, a protest that temporarily shut down Mexico City's airport and clashes with police.

The movement challenges President Claudia Sheinbaum's continuation of policies implemented by her openly right-wing predecessors, particularly the 2007 ISSSTE law that handed the management of pensions to private firms and introduced a gradual increase of the retirement age. Teachers are demanding the elimination of the law, the reduction and freeze of the retirement age and a 100 percent wage increase.

Strikers argue that this 2007 reform—upheld by successive governments, including those of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and Sheinbaum—prioritizes financial elites over workers.

Sheinbaum has insisted that there is no money for returning to the old system. Government negotiators have merely offered freezing the retirement age—i.e., the “word” of the ruling class that it will not be seek to increase it in the future— a meager 9 percent wage increase, a week of vacations, and the traditional gridlock “commissions” to discuss improvements to the pension system.

“Removing the reform presents diverse problems,” Sheinbaum said during a press conference, citing “budgetary constraints.”

The meaning of this is clear: the left populist administration of the Morena party doesn't want to

impinge on the profit interests of private pension firms, raise taxes on corporations or the rich (Sheinbaum campaigned on opposing such taxes), or divert funds from paying the vulture capitalists in Wall Street and Mexico City that own the public debt.

On Saturday, following 17 days of protests, section 22 of CNTE from Oaxaca, which has the largest contingent at the protest, nearly lifted the occupation at the Zócalo plaza and neighboring streets based on such “offers.”

As discussions were taking place among the leadership, hundreds of rank-and-file teachers forced their way into the meeting place, with at least 200 taking the stage to speak. As *La Jornada* reports, “Despite the heavy rain, the educators remained at the entrances to the building, which were blocked. ‘We don't want a treacherous leadership. Here are the rank-and-file that want to continue fighting for a decent pension,’ shouted the protesters.”

Teachers who put their lives on hold to travel from afar to join the protest clearly interpreted the convoking of votes to leave as a sign that the leadership refuses to wage a real struggle and is merely seeking to keep its place at the table with the government.

The confrontation with the government reached a fever-pitch on May 23, when teachers blocked Mexico City's main international airport and shut down several terminals. Sheinbaum canceled negotiations and deployed the military and police with anti-riot gear.

As Trump's tariffs strangle Mexico's economic growth, the Morena party has prioritized corporate incentives, particularly low taxes and cheap labor and benefits, to compete for capital investments. In other words, as a representative of the interests of the local billionaire clients of US imperialism, the Sheinbaum administration and its counterparts across the region are forcing workers to pay by the deepening crisis of global capitalism marked by Trump's tariffs and the first stages

of a third world war.

As negotiations failed Monday in Mexico City, Panama remained in the grip of a ten-week multi-sectoral strike first launched by teachers on April 23 against the right-wing José Raúl Mulino administration. Workers oppose pension cuts, other attacks on other labor rights, concessions to Trump over control of the canal and negotiations to reopen a polluting copper mine.

The Panamanian construction workers union Suntracs and the banana workers union Sitraibana have joined the indefinite strike, while healthcare workers, university students and staff have participated in the protests.

Mulino has responded by declaring the strikes illegal, imposing a state of emergency and deploying police to crack down violently on roadblocks.

The most dramatic escalation took place in the banana sector, where Chiquita Brands announced the dismissal of its entire workforce in the country. The American multinational, which controls 90 percent of Panama's banana production, had previously fired 4,900 employees, with the remaining 1,600 workers ousted this week. From transportation to commerce, the decision threatens to devastate the already impoverished western province of Bocas del Toro.

Speaking to France24, banana worker Carlos Machado denounced claims that their strike is “illegal” and explained: “This strike also affects banana workers and future generations of us workers, as well as educators and parents, which is why we are out on the streets today.”

In Argentina, researchers, doctors and nurses are carrying out a week-long series of strikes and demonstrations to protest the massive cuts to healthcare and science by the government of fascist President Javier Milei. These workers joined retirees in their weekly protest against pension cuts outside the National Congress.

The Argentine University Teachers Federation (Conadu) is reportedly facing major pressure by the rank-and-file to join the strike movement and demand financing for public education and wage increases that compensate for years of losses in real terms. A strike will be the central theme of a leadership plenary on Thursday.

On May 28 and 29, 2025, Colombia experienced a major 48-hour national strike called by the main union federations in support of President Gustavo Petro's proposed national referendum on limited labor and healthcare reforms, which have been repeatedly voted down by a right-wing Congress. Demonstrators blocked key thoroughfares, disrupted public transportation, and

staged rallies in city centers.

In Brazil, the latest wave of teachers' strikes reflects deepening unrest over austerity privatization and deteriorating working conditions. From April 15 until May 6, São Paulo municipal teachers launched a major strike against wage cuts imposed by far-right Mayor Ricardo Nunes, who is also advancing privatization, militarization of schools, and the expansion of civic-military institutions in the education system. While Nunes obtained a court injunction requiring 70 percent of teachers to remain at work and threatened with punitive measures, the strike was ultimately betrayed by the SINPEEM union bureaucracy.

On Tuesday, Federal District (Brasilia) teachers were attacked with pepper spray during a demonstration on their second day of an indefinite strike demanding wage increases.

From Río de la Plata to Rio Grande and beyond, rank-and-file educators face the same challenges as they enter into struggle against the escalating threats on their jobs, pensions and working conditions: governments whose only response to their demands is to teargas and/or mass firings, while union bureaucracies advance the losing strategy of holding talks and “putting pressure” on these regimes as a vent for workers to merely let off steam.

It must be added that teachers in the United States are fighting Trump's destruction of the Department of Education and mass privatizing efforts, as global finance capital demands the same attacks on public education and social spending everywhere.

The criminal response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that the defense of the lives and livelihoods of teachers and all workers requires organizations that are independent of the union apparatus and reject all concessions. Without exception, the unions sent workers and youth to die in schools and workplaces to defend the profits of the ruling elite.

The necessary organization that must be built is the Educators Rank-and-File Committee, an international network of rank-and-file organizations that belongs to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact