

# In attack on WSWS, *Counterpunch* extols “socialism with Mexican characteristics”

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In a recent piece published by *CounterPunch*, American novelist Eve Ottenberg mounts a defense of Mexico’s former president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and his hand-picked successor, President Claudia Sheinbaum, as the government faces growing opposition from below amid spending cuts and a deepening social crisis.

The article’s expressed objective can only be described as absurd: placing a “socialist” label on a government that has functioned as a faithful manager of Mexican capitalism while acting in the service of US imperialism.

Ottenberg’s target is a WSWS article by Jesús Ugarte published in March 2024 that analyzed AMLO’s cash transfer and minimum wage policies. She dismisses its conclusions as “silly,” insisting that “lifting 13.4 million people out of poverty is nothing to sneer at.”

Ugarte had argued that such policies were “designed to ensure that the Mexican working class continues ... as a pool of cheap labor for capitalist exploitation, as Washington steps up its economic warfare against China in the predatory drive for a new redivision of the world,” and that they were simultaneously “aimed at keeping the rising class struggle in check.”

To prove the point, Ugarte cited Mexico’s richest man, Carlos Slim, who praised AMLO: “There is social peace, there is no confrontation.” For Ottenberg, this is irrelevant. Cash transfers are “an unmitigated good,” and “good is so weak in the world that it deserves praise wherever it’s bold enough to act.”

This is not political analysis. It is sentimentalism in the service of reaction.

## The absurdity of “socialism with Mexican characteristics”

The poverty statistics Ottenberg cites do not survive contact with Mexico’s own official data. According to the National Institute of Statistics (INEGI), the share of the population living in poverty did fall from 41.9 percent in 2018 to 36.3 percent in 2022, the period Ottenberg celebrates. But extreme poverty remained virtually unchanged, and in absolute terms nearly 400,000 more people joined the ranks of the extremely poor. More damning still: the number of Mexicans unable to access health services more than doubled, from 16 percent to 39 percent—approximately 30 million people stripped of healthcare during the years of what Ottenberg describes as a “social welfare revolution.”

A study by the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) found that cash transfers played a minimal role even in the modest poverty reductions recorded; the improvements were largely attributable to the post-COVID income recovery.

Yet Ottenberg does not merely praise these programs. She borrows a term coined by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping to justify the restoration of

capitalism in China to describe AMLO’s project as the construction of “socialism with Mexican characteristics.”

The phrase “socialism with Chinese characteristics” sought to provide an ideological cover for the de-collectivization of agriculture, the opening of China to foreign capital, the privatization of state enterprises, and the transformation of the Chinese Communist Party bureaucracy into a property-owning bourgeois ruling class engaged in corruption, theft of state assets, and joint ventures with overseas capital.

It attempted to conceal the fact that China was being integrated into the world market on imperialist terms, reviving the pre-revolutionary “concessions” through special economic zones and enabling the exploitation of Chinese workers at globally competitive wages. The consequences included runaway inflation, mass unemployment, official gangsterism, and the reemergence of prostitution on a scale not seen since the worst days of Chiang Kai-shek—while the regime maintained its dictatorial suppression of the working class, demonstrated most brutally at Tiananmen Square in 1989.

The 1949 Chinese Revolution, nonetheless, represented a monumental world historic event, ending a century of imperialist subjugation and unifying the most populous country in the world. It dealt a major blow to imperialism, smashed the domination of the landlord class and, ultimately, nationalized much of Chinese industry. At the same time it created a Stalinist-style bureaucratic police state that ruthlessly repressed opposition, particularly from the left.

To compare such a history to the meager reforms offered by the bourgeois governments headed by Morena (Movimiento Regeneración Nacional/National Regeneration Movement) is preposterous, while adopting Beijing’s rhetorical fig leaf for capitalist restoration—“socialism with Chinese characteristics”—as the template for a positive depiction of the rule of AMLO and Sheinbaum recalls nothing so much as Lenin’s famous metaphor of “wishing mourners at a funeral many happy returns of the day.”

Neither AMLO nor Sheinbaum, of course, has even claimed to be building socialism. Morena’s ideological content consists of vague promises to put “the poor first” and expand “the people’s access to rights.” The slogan of the “Fourth Transformation” grandiosely compares these limited policies to Mexico’s three prior historic transformations: the Wars of Independence (1810–1821), the liberal Reform War and expulsion of the French Empire’s invasion under Benito Juárez (1858–1867), and the Revolution of 1910-20.

Mexico is seeing a major transformation under Morena, but it has nothing to do with advancing democracy, sovereignty or socialism. What AMLO and Sheinbaum have actually overseen is a later iteration of the “pink tide” pattern that began with Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. This has consisted of left-populist governments implementing limited social assistance programs and partial nationalizations to exploit a surge in economic growth—in Mexico’s case, from not only commodity prices but also the near-shoring investment surge driven by US imperialism’s

preparation for economic and military confrontation with China. This has gone hand-in-hand with defending capitalist property relations and seeking better terms with US imperialism.

## Oligarchy, not socialism

Oxfam Mexico's 2026 report, "Oligarchy or Democracy," demonstrates how preposterous it is to speak of "socialism with Mexican characteristics" under Morena. The wealthiest 1 percent of Mexicans receive 35 percent of the country's total income and hold 40 percent of its private wealth. Carlos Slim—whom Ottenberg quotes praising AMLO's social peace—increased his fortune by 66 percent since 2020, accumulating \$107.1 billion. As Oxfam notes, the Mexican state devotes less than 4 out of every 100 pesos of national wealth to public investment, while the private sector invests less than 8. "When wealth is concentrated," the report states, "power remains in the same hands, causing the erosion of democracy and the establishment of an oligarchy."

AMLO himself, in 2018, created a Business Advisory Council composed of Mexico's richest men and headed by millionaire Alfonso Romo, who served as chief of the Presidential Office. This is the institutional architecture of Ottenberg's socialist paradise.

The economic conjuncture is deteriorating. With US tariffs and the war against Iran producing commercial uncertainty, Mexico faces a depreciating currency, recessionary pressures, and growth projections below 1 percent. Its credit rating has been downgraded, and its public debt is rising rapidly. In April, Sheinbaum announced spending cuts to maintain fuel subsidies—cuts that, whatever rhetorical protections she places around social programs, reflect the growing pressure from Wall Street and Mexico's financial aristocracy to impose austerity. Sheinbaum's approval rating is falling.

This is not the first time Ottenberg has described a "pink tide" government as socialist. She has promoted "Venezuelan socialism" under the Chavistas and declared that Bolivia was "socialist" under Evo Morales. And yet even Ottenberg herself, writing in *Truthout* in 2017, acknowledged the limits of this approach: "While social welfare programs that provide housing, medicine, school and even cash payments to poor and working people are popular, in and of themselves they do not complete socialism's task. Capitalism must be confronted and restructured out of the picture, or it will come roaring back."

Such "flexible" conceptions of socialism function as a political revolving door: socialism is whatever provides enough cover to justify supporting capitalist governments. As the WSWS has previously written in response to similar academic defenders of the pink tide, these layers represent petty-bourgeois currents that promote "populist supra-class political movements based on a regionalist romantic utopianism and a rejection of philosophical materialism and of the revolutionary role of the working class."

Their politics are primarily responsible for preparing the ground for the far right by suppressing independent working class opposition.

Nothing illustrates this more clearly than Ottenberg's treatment of the migration crisis. She describes Sheinbaum's stationing of thousands of military personnel at the US border, transferring Mexican nationals to American custody, detaining migrants, and accepting deportations of non-Mexicans as "handling matters as diplomatically as possible" with "a mercurial despot."

The historic destruction of asylum rights, the construction of a network of concentration camps where migrants are dying, and the deployment of paramilitary forces to abduct migrants and kill protesters is reduced to Trump's "pet bugaboo." This is the language of petty-bourgeois

complacency toward fascism—and it mirrors the position of pseudo-left figures like Bernie Sanders, whom Ottenberg has long championed, who praised Trump's anti-immigrant measures as "making sure our borders are stronger."

## The class content of "regulated capitalism"

Ottenberg states her framework openly: "AMLO's accomplishment comes within the context of regulated capitalism," and she finds it "difficult to get upset about leaders who obviate this awful system, modify it or use it to advance social welfare." What this really means is that capitalism is acceptable so long as it maintains a polite face that helps suppress the class struggle.

But the Mexican working class does not experience capitalism as a spectrum from "regulated" to "unregulated." It experiences it as super-exploitation. A minimum wage of \$15 per day, modestly raised, remains a poverty wage—and in a country where three out of five workers labor in the informal sector, minimum wage laws are largely symbolic.

AMLO also vastly expanded the military budget, created a new National Guard whose first mission was the detention of hundreds of thousands of migrants, and launched a constitutional reform enabling the indefinite domestic deployment of the armed forces. Today this force is omnipresent on Mexico's streets when protests and strikes take place, including in the repression of teachers blocking roads and railways. There is no mention in Ottenberg's piece of Sheinbaum's complicity in Trump's regime change operations across the region, including the fuel embargo against Cuba.

Ottenberg supports Sheinbaum and AMLO not despite their service to US imperialism, but because of it. As the WSWS has explained, the pseudo-leftist layers in the American upper-middle class have long become cheerleaders of US imperialism as its position globally underpins their own wealth and social position.

## Conclusion

Ottenberg's article has a concrete political purpose: to dissuade workers in the United States and Mexico from drawing the conclusion that social reformism has exhausted its historical possibilities and that their joint revolutionary struggle to overthrow capitalism is necessary. Her celebration of Sheinbaum and AMLO as "socialism with Mexican characteristics" replaces class analysis in favor of feel-good storytelling about benevolent rulers—and in doing so, provides a service to Trump and US imperialism in blocking the joint struggle of workers across North America against capitalist exploitation, imperialist war and fascism.

The degree of Mexico's economic subordination to US imperialism means the Mexican bourgeoisie possesses no independent basis from which to resist being reduced to the status of a protectorate. What gives it any room to maneuver at all is the fear, in Washington, of provoking the Mexican working class—and the service Morena provides in containing that class from igniting a continental explosion. Mexican workers need to throw the Mexican bourgeoisie and its representatives in Morena into the trash bin of history and unite with their class brothers and sisters in the United States and the rest of the Americas to destroy imperialism.



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