

Mexican healthcare workers storm union headquarters, as nationwide rebellion over sellout contract grows

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Workers of the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) forced open the gate of their own union headquarters on Zamora Street on the night of October 1, after more than nine hours of marching and blocking roads in Mexico City. Some 50 workers went inside to demand the resignation of Rafael Olivos Hernández, secretary general of the National Union of Social Security Workers (SNTSS), chanting “Olivos, listen: The rank and file is not for sale.”

Olivos was nowhere to be found, but the Mexico City police were. They removed the workers and left riot units posted around the building at midnight.

The same day, nurses, doctors, orderlies, technicians and retirees marched in at least 17 states. In the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, between 2,000 and 2,500 IMSS-Bienestar workers, members of the health ministry workers’ union (SNTSA), stopped work for 48 hours, shutting outpatient care, laboratories and scheduled surgery in all 19 local delegations and more than 100 rural clinics. IMSS-Bienestar is the federal system into which the government has folded the healthcare services of more than 20 states.

The revolt pits healthcare workers against a union apparatus, which negotiated a wage cut and now polices their speech, and against the government of President Claudia Sheinbaum and the Morena party. Under pressure from Washington’s trade war and the International Monetary Fund, Sheinbaum is raising spending on the armed forces and on servicing the public debt, while hospital workers are told to accept a raise below inflation and to work without gauze or cleaning supplies. The SNTSS is the instrument that imposes this policy on the workers’ backs.

A raise below inflation

The immediate cause of the revolt was the wage agreement approved on September 11 at the SNTSS’s 65th Ordinary National Congress in Playa del Carmen. The bureaucracy presented it as an 8.55 percent “weighted” increase. Only 2.9 percent goes to the tabular wage, the base for calculating pensions. Another 3.9 percent goes to a rent allowance, and 1.75 percent to employer contributions to the individual retirement accounts of workers hired since 2008.

Annual inflation reached 3.42 percent in the first half of September, making the part of the raise on which pensions are calculated a cut in real terms. Workers are demanding a 10 percent tabular wage increase. “Our wage is not to be weighted but made dignified,” read a banner at the September 24 march in the capital.

The 1.75 percent has a history. In 2008 the SNTSS signed an agreement

with the IMSS that shut every new hire out of the institute’s defined-benefit pension and placed them in individual accounts run for a fee by the Afores, nine private firms and one public administrator, which are moving the money steadily into private equity. Having signed away the pension of every future hire, the SNTSS now counts payments to these financial houses as part of a raise.

The agreement passed the SNTSS congress by 1,056 votes to 260. When a video surfaced in which Olivos said critics of the raise had “two neurons,” the crowd outside the union building on October 1 answered: “The rank and file removes, the rank and file appoints.”

Conditions in the hospitals

In Guadalajara in late September, more than 200 workers from eight clinics and hospitals blocked traffic, saying they were working “under protest” without gauze or cleaning supplies. At the October 1 march from the Western National Medical Center, where the deaths of three newborns were recently reported, head nurse Salvador Gómez Ríos said: “Here in Jalisco we have no materials, we have no medicine.”

In Xalapa, Veracruz, at least 500 IMSS-Bienestar staff marched on September 13, reporting suspended surgeries and patients forced to buy their own materials. They demanded the removal of the state coordinator, Roberto Ramos Alor, a Morena federal deputy on leave, who told medical residents that if there were no supplies they should not operate.

On September 22, Sheinbaum denied the movement existed. “What you are saying, that there are protests all over the country, is not true,” she told reporters.

A gag law and a table at the Interior Ministry

On September 13, an extraordinary SNTSS congress added Article 136 Bis to the union’s statutes. Workers call it the *ley mordaza*, or gag law, because it exposes them to discipline for publicly denouncing shortages, which the bureaucracy calls “unverified public defamation.” In Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, nursing assistant Selene Fuentes Celaya said union representatives phoned workers to threaten reprisals if they marched: “On top of that, they want to silence us.”

That night, with police still around the building, union representatives and the protesters signed a memorandum ending the blockades and

scheduling October 8 for the start of talks mediated by the Interior Ministry (*Gobernación*). The union set the terms of 37 delegates of active workers and one retiree with a voice but no vote will be held, although pensions are in dispute. No one would be sanctioned under Article 136 Bis for protesting, but the article stays. The dissidents had only two days to name delegates nationwide; on October 4 the union said it had no list and would inform the Interior Ministry. Rank-and-file groups say they will march on October 9 regardless.

On October 5 Olivos announced a national vote for October 14, now defending the agreement as a 6.8 percent increase rather than 8.55 percent. The union deleted the video within minutes and restored it only after workers reposted it.

Such votes come from the 2019 labor reform, adopted under pressure from Washington in the NAFTA renegotiation and sold by Morena as union “democratization.” The bureaucracy writes the question and keeps the roll, the government mediating the dispute certifies the result, and retirees, whose pensions are at stake, have no vote.

Washington, the IMF and the pandemic precedent

The drive to hold down wages in Mexico is part of a global offensive against the working class. On July 1, Washington refused to extend the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) at its mandatory joint review, leaving Mexico’s access to the US market subject to annual reviews that could run until 2036. Meanwhile, Mexico has aligned itself with Washington’s trade war against Beijing, imposing tariffs of up to 50 percent since January 1 on 1,463 tariff lines from China and other countries without trade agreements.

Sheinbaum’s 2027 budget, sent to Congress on September 8, allocates 1.575 trillion pesos to servicing the public debt, 15 percent of all federal spending. The Navy and Defense ministries get the largest percentage increases of any agency. The Navy’s budget rises nearly 20 percent after inflation. On October 2, the IMF urged the government to consider a more ambitious and faster fiscal consolidation to bring the debt down.

Morena has shown before whose demands come first. In March 2020, as COVID-19 reached Mexico, IMSS workers protested in at least eight states over the lack of protective equipment, chanting, “We want material!” The government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) dismissed such protests as the work of its opponents. In April of that year, as maquiladora workers walked out over infections, the American Ambassador Christopher Landau campaigned to reopen plants supplying US industry, blandly asserting that “there are risks everywhere.” On May 12, under this pressure, the General Health Council declared auto manufacturing, mining and construction “essential activities.”

By September 2020, according to Amnesty International, at least 1,320 Mexican healthcare workers had died of COVID-19, the highest toll known for any country. Sheinbaum governed Mexico City throughout the worst phase of the pandemic. Then as now, Morena placed corporate profits and Washington’s demands above the lives of the workers who staff the hospitals.

Dead ends

On September 24, Alejandro Moreno, president of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), declared his support for the protests. But the PRI built the system of state-controlled *charro* unions during seven

decades in power, and the SNTSS grew up inside it.

The dissident groups beside the official unions offer no alternative. The National Assembly of Health Workers (*Asamblea Nacional de Trabajadores de la Salud*), which helped call the October 1 stoppage, began by petitioning Sheinbaum for talks in 2024, and on October 4 told its 31,000 Facebook followers, “We have the government and the public policies we deserve as Mexicans.” FINTRAS, a union registered with the federal labor tribunal, presents itself as the independent, anti-*charro* alternative, but it offers a new union certified by the same state.

In Matamoros in 2019, tens of thousands of maquiladora workers organized in mass assemblies, struck in defiance of their union and forced 89 plants to grant a 20 percent raise and a 32,000-peso bonus. The companies fired at least 4,000 workers. The lawyer Susana Prieto Terrazas, who told the strikers to support Morena, steered them into a new “independent” union, SNITIS, and by 2021 sat in Congress for Morena.

The way forward

The October 1 revolt has already forced the SNTSS to retreat on Article 136 Bis, a concession only as durable as the independent organization that enforces it. IMSS workers should form rank-and-file committees in every hospital, clinic and department, independent of the SNTSS, the SNTSA and every capitalist party, Morena and the PRI included, with delegates elected in workplace assemblies and subject to recall.

Their demands would include a raise above inflation and indexed to it, full staffing and supplies, the restoration of the defined-benefit pension for every worker, the repeal of Article 136 Bis and the opening of the union’s books. They would organize a NO vote on October 14 with their own observers at the polls, and unite IMSS workers with those of IMSS-Bienestar, the ISSSTE and the health ministry, active and retired.

Healthcare workers everywhere face wages eroded by inflation and wards short of staff. In New York, nurses built a rank-and-file committee because their union, NYSNA (New York State Nurses Association), like the SNTSS, exists to negotiate sellouts and police its members.

In Mexico, the fight for decent wages and safe hospitals runs directly against a government that answers to Washington and the financial markets. It requires a socialist program and the unity of healthcare workers across the border and internationally. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) was founded to build that unity.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges IMSS and IMSS-Bienestar workers who want to build these committees to contact us.



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